

# The constraints of conformity



The choice between conforming to societal standards and pursuing a personal desire is a conflict many youth must face. Arjie, in Shyam Selvadurai's "Pigs Can't Fly," initially experiences the joys of living a carefree childhood life through his imagination and playing bride-ride. The story traces Arjie's path to becoming a subject of envy for his cousin Tanuja, being pressured to conform to social norms by his parents, and finally, his acceptance of the loss of what was his childhood due to conformity. With the sari as a recurring motif, the ideas through the use of symbolism illustrate the effects of conformity on Arjie's life. Selvadurai suggests that conformity leads to the loss of Arjie's childhood innocence and freedom.

Arjie is an innocent boy with the freedom to play to his heart's content. This liberty comes in the form of the monthly spend-the-days, during which Arjie can "leave the constraints of [himself] and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self," by playing bride-ride. Arjie is happy to be not only a part of, but the leader of the girls' territory, compared to the "incomprehensible" boys' side and ideas of fun. Being considered someone of importance by other members of the girls' side, Arjie is able to fully realize his full "force of imagination" through these games, as well as "[his] ultimate moment of joy," without restriction. Such innocence allows Arjie to turn a childish game of dress up into becoming "a graceful, benevolent, perfect being," and "the personification of all that was good and perfect in the world," to him and his cousins. By doing this, Arjie is also able to emulate his mother, who he holds in high regard. He feels "a joy akin to ecstasy" while watching her dress in a sari. and so while playing bride-ride he wears his own sari, and is free to pretend to be like a person in his life he believes

to be beautiful, and in doing so feel beautiful himself. This gives great significance to an item as simple as the sari as it symbolizes his innocence and freedom of imagination to play as, and believe can be, anything he desires. However, similar to Arjie's freedom that would not last much longer as he grew to be older, the sari is old and "lightly yellow with age," with "its border torn," not requiring much to damage either beyond repair.

This freedom, however, is put at risk by Arjie's cousin, Tanuja. Tanuja deliberately sabotages Arjie out of jealousy, as she herself wants to be leader of the girls' world, believing it to be "unfair" that the position always belongs to Arjie. Arjie's freedom within this world that was once essentially boundless is being challenged for the first time, and the sari that symbolizes his freedom is fought over, as his freedom now seemingly has to be shared. Both Arjie and the girls, however, are not accepting of Tanuja performing the main role. Because Arjie's role as the bride is a tradition that has been in place for a considerable amount of time, they do not wish for it to be put in jeopardy and Tanuja is rejected, which in turn pushes Tanuja to expose to the adults Arjie's actions that are unbeknownst to them. It was only at this point that Arjie realized his being a part of the girls' side is perceived as wrong. The adults, save for Arjie's parents, laugh at and ridicule him for the first time because of his appearance before them while wearing the sari, a stark contrast to being previously revered by the members of the girls' side. The sari that was once able to turn him into a thing of beauty and a being "larger than life," became shameful to him, and "suffocating around [his] body." If not for Tanuja, Arjie's parents would not have discovered his

passion for bride-ride, allowing him to continue to enjoy the “ most looked forward to,” spend-the-days.

As a result, Arjie is subject to the desires of others to conform. Arjie’s actions are now brought to light to his parents, and his parents pressure him to conform. His father does not wish for Arjie to turn out “ funny” and humiliate his family, while Arjie’s mother pushes him to conform in order to avoid blame as problems with children are seen as “ the Mother’s fault.” Both parents aim to prevent their family, and by extension themselves, from being viewed negatively by other members of society. Arjie dressing like a girl is seen as wrong, and is looked down on by his extended family, and his parents attempt to stop him in order to avoid this. To discourage Arjie, he is forbidden from playing on the girls’ side and watching his mother dress, effectively taking two of the joys of his life away from him. The sari, a symbol of Arjie’s innocence and freedom of childhood, his “ most prized possession,” has to be hidden from view from his parents, as it has come to be used against him. This is a parallel to his childhood innocence, as it has to be at this point hidden away, for it has become unacceptable in the eyes of others. Arjie does hold onto the sari and the hope of returning to the girls’ world that he so loves, up until the point of being discovered for a second time doing the opposite of what conformity demanded.

Arjie has given up hope on escaping into this world of freedom again, at the hands of conformity. The story’s shift happens when Arjie sits on the beach with the torn sari. The sari is a symbol of his childhood innocence and freedom that is likewise torn to pieces. While Arjie had previously resisted the urges of others to conform, on the beach he is overcome with “[his]

despair,” as he eventually decides “ it [is] time to return to [his] grandparents’ house,” accepting his fate of being unable to continue his games that were not aligned with what others saw as conformity. After seeing his family not accept him for who he is, despite his efforts, Arjie knows his life will “ never be the same,” and accepts the fact that he will no longer be able to maintain the life he always had during the spend-the-days. Arjie previously resisted and defied his mother’s order to play on the boys’ side and devised a plan to escape, whereas he has now given up and decides to return to the house by his own will. He possesses the knowledge that he will receive a punishment for his actions in the form of being struck with his grandmother’s cane, which is painful like the loss of his childhood innocence. The hot sand of the beach and the bright reflection of the ocean symbolize the painful changes of Arjie’s life, such as the uncertainty of “ the future that awaited him,” and the knowledge of the loneliness he would have to bear during the future spend-the-days, no longer belonging in the girls’ or the boys’ worlds. The scenery that was “ once so familiar,” is not unlike Arjie’s lost innocence and freedom, as these aspects of childhood were far off, seemingly “ shimmering in the distance like a mirage.” Arjie, no longer in an “ act of defiance,” is forced to cross the railway tracks back towards the house, a metaphor of how he is at a crossroads in his own life, where only one path can be taken. Conformity allows no room for Arjie’s acceptance, and he finally is to conform as his parents wished.

Shyam Selvadurai’s “ Pigs Can’t Fly” supports the idea of conformity being the cause of lost childhood innocence and freedom. Arjie was once an innocent boy content with life before being ripped of his freedoms by the

conformity that was forced upon him by his parents, for the sake of his and his family's appearance to others. Arjie's parents do not allow him to play where he desires, the members of the boys' side do not welcome him, and the only group that does is the girls' side, the one group he forbidden to be a part of. Losing not only his innocence, his life and happiness from that point on was limited by conformity, while gaining nothing in return. Arjie's personal desires are ultimately overshadowed by the desires of others for him to conform, showing that the desires of many people are stronger than that of just one person.