



## “Genderless Love”: A Study of Same-Sex Friendship in Romesh Gunesequera’s *Suncatcher*

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**Abstract:** Set in the 1960s, Romesh Gunesequera's *Suncatcher* (2019) depicts the friendship between Kairo, the adolescent narrator, and Jay. The purpose of this paper is to examine their friendship within the conceptual framework of "sex" and "gender". This paper aims to analyse the homosexual undertones of their friendship and how it becomes "genderless love". The novel depicts a friendship that can be termed "genderless love" as it violates the conventional gender-norms that are followed in a relationship. The conventional norms regarding gender and sexuality delimit and affect the relationship between two boys. But Kairo's psychological connection with Jay and his desire for Jay subvert the established supremacy of heterosexual relationships. However, the triangular relationship among Kairo, Jay and Niromi, a girl who likes Jay, makes defining Kairo's sexuality difficult as he finds interest both in Jay and Niromi.

**Keywords:** Genderless love, gender, sexuality, same-sex friendship, homosexuality, Romesh Gunesequera.

### Introduction

The relation between "sex" and "gender" becomes important when we examine the practice of labelling someone as "male" or "female". These identity-markers influence the relationship between individuals. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler challenges the established concepts that "gender" is a socially determined category and "sex" is anatomically defined. Butler argues that "sex" is also constructed like "gender"; it is not "natural" or "biological". Butlers says that the anatomical differences can be experienced by a person only by the categories and expectations created by society. And the anatomical differences are subject to society's "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1999, 30). If one fails to conform to the institutionalised heterosexuality, one cannot exercise one's sexual autonomy in the society. Therefore, often a homosexual person fears expressing homosexual desire and tries to conform to the established forms of heterosexuality.

Historically, same-sex friendship between men and "manly love" is not rare (Hammaren and Johansson 2020, 213), and this kind of friendship has also been represented in many literary works. Set in the 1960s, Romesh Gunesequera's *Suncatcher* (2019) depicts the friendship between Kairo, the adolescent narrator, and Jay. The purpose of this paper is to examine their friendship within the conceptual framework of "sex" and "gender". This paper aims to analyse the homosexual undertones of their friendship and how it becomes "genderless love" (Gunesequera 2019, 307). This paper interprets how the conventional norms regarding gender and sexuality delimit and affect the relationship between two boys. Moreover, this paper attempts to decipher the complexity of the triangular relationship among Kairo, Jay and Niromi, a girl who likes Jay.

### “Genderless love”

Romesh Gunesequera's *Suncatcher* (2019) depicts a few months in the life of Kairo, its boy-protagonist. The focus of the novel is on the friendship between Kairo and Jay, his friend. The whole narrative of the novel moves around their friendship, their adventures, and the growing complexities in their relationship. The nature of their relationship is itself complex, specifically from Kairo's point of view. Kairo often describes his friendship with Jay in gendered terms, and at the end of the novel, the mature Kairo who narrates the story, indirectly refers to their friendship as "genderless love" (Gunesequera 2019, 307). At the very beginning of the novel, Kairo makes it clear that his understanding of love is not limited within the relationship between a girl and a boy: "I yearned for adventure, far from my ma and pa, even though I loved them – if love was what I believed it was and had nothing to do with girls and boys" (6). In the context of a same-sex relation, the word "love" itself becomes significant. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick differentiates between "love" and "desire": according to her, the word "desire" marks an "erotic emphasis", whereas "love" signifies "a particular emotion" (2016, 2). In the relationship between Kairo and Jay, Kairo feels that particular emotion that can be called "love", but there are also erotic undertones.

Jay, who is taller and older than him by a couple of years, is a "hero" for Kairo, and he wants to be his "acolyte" (Gunesequera 2019, 4). Masculine features are projected in Jay: he is tall, courageous, and protective. And it appears that Kairo begins to like him because of his masculine features. But it is not only the physical characteristics that attract Kairo, he is also moved by Jay's attitude and aura. When Jay asks him to accompany, he is enthralled by the invitation. He feels, "No one had ever spoken to me so easily, with such an open heart; the invitation kept ringing in my head" (7). After the initial meeting, Kairo realises that Jay is going to be special in his life: he feels that he has been "[w]aiting for someone like Jay to turn up and switch on the lights" (8). As days pass, Kairo feels that he wants Jay to be "close" (20). But he does not want Jay inside his house because he fears that the "ordinariness" of the interior will create a gap between them. He is cautious about every kind of obstacle in their "blameless companionship" (20).

Kairo observes Jay's physical movements very carefully: he looks at Jay's "uncoiling" muscles at the time of riding (16) and at "the small muscle curling at the edge of his mouth" when he speaks (82). Jay's touch is also special for Kairo. The mature narrator, who is reminiscing about the past, recollects the first touch of Jay: "Near the top, Jay reached out and hauled me up – the first time, almost the only time, I felt his hand on me (81). The narrator uses the verb "felt" to express his sensation, and in his expression there is an implied regret of not being able to feel the touch a few more times. Kairo thinks that his friendship with Jay should go beyond their cycle ridings and discussions on pets because he can be complementary to Jay: "I could make amends for Jay's faults: his abruptness, scorn, temper, unexpected weaknesses" (80). It seems that through emphasising his complementary role he wants to project himself as Jay's alter-ego or the second half. He loves Jay's company and feels lonely when Jay leaves.

Kairo says that Jay is Batman for him, and he is Robin. This reference has a subtext of homosexuality. In *Seduction of the Innocents* (1954), Fredric Wertham, an American psychiatrist, identifies homoeroticism in the relationship between Batman and Robin. He accuses that this kind of comics "helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zues type of love-relationship" (1954, 190). It is evident that Kairo identifies Jay with an adult or grown-up, and he, like Robin, plays the role of a sidekick to Jay. But, following Werthem's argument, it cannot be claimed that Kairo's feelings towards Jay is a result of reading the comics that have homoerotic undertones; rather it can be possible that Kairo refers to an existing narrative to validate his own feelings. Even when Uncle Elvin sees Jay and Kairo together for the first time he addresses Jay as "Batman" and asks, "But isn't that Robin with you?" (Gunesequera 2019, 32). And Kairo observes, "A dry laughter as if from a puncture in his throat" as he says that (32). It seems that Elvin has noticed the quality of Robin in Kairo in the very first meeting and Kairo feels quite uneasy about that. Perhaps, it is Kairo's figure and his attitude towards Jay that project him as Robin in contrast with Jay when he stays beside Jay.

Kairo gradually becomes possessive about Jay. When he, for the first time, sees Jay with Niromi, a female friend of Jay, he not only feels lonely but also jealous. He fears that the girl has taken his place in Jay's life and has destroyed "the secret bliss" that he has experienced so far with Jay (88). The phrase "the secret bliss" implies that he does not want to express all the feelings that he nurtures for Jay overtly. The idea of secrecy might have come in his mind because he thinks that his every feeling is not acceptable to society. The rivalry between Kairo and Niromi becomes more apparent when they engage in a conversation for the first time. Niromi, after recognising Kairo as the friend of Jay, asks him what he has been saying to Jay about her. Kairo, being nervous, says that he has done nothing and that he is "only a friend" (212). As if he tries to assure himself, not Niromi, that he is only a friend of Jay, nothing more. There is an implication that he does not want to be "only a friend", he desires something more. Niromi's reply to Kairo is also relevant as she

reminds him that he is not a girl. Her reply implies that a boy cannot be more than a friend to another boy. But, Kairo thinks differently: he wants to be more than just a friend to Jay, but the gender norms of the society remind him that he cannot be as he is a boy. In this context, the narrator, who is the mature Kairo, emphatically says, "I did not want to be a girl. I wanted to be a man; a hero..." (212). This assertion of manhood is actually the result of his insecurity: he wants to affirm his masculinity because he feels that otherwise he will have an identity crisis. When Niromi says that Jay loves her and will marry her, Kairo mocks the concept of marriage. Kairo thinks that marriage is "an instrument of a retarded state" (213). Obviously, this thought is about heterosexual marriage. This view of marriage underpins that heterosexual marriage does not guarantee a true companionship which already exists in the relationship between Jay and Kairo.

Kairo's perception of heterosexual marriage can be explained further with reference to the relationship between Jay's father, Marty, and mother, Sonya. Kairo observes that they "have no real need of each other" (230). He thinks that because he finds nothing except the burden of a forced relationship; there is no love and cooperation between them. The reason for which Marty has left Sonya is uncertain. But, Jay accuses his mother for the familial crisis: "My father's gone because of you...He's left you for another woman... Because he could not stand it anymore. Your gallivanting, your boozing, your heartlessness" (234). Jay's accusation indicates that he, like his father, treats Sonya as a worthless woman—one who does not have any potential and therefore enjoys life in trifling things like drinking and travelling. Sonya is hurt both by his husband and son. Kairo witnesses how "Jay unleashed a daily barrage of verbal rockets at his mother" (235). Kairo, unlike Jay, is compassionate towards Sonya as he realises that what is happening with her is wrong.

In a heterosexual marriage, a woman is always considered inferior to a man, and her potential is undervalued as she is expected to do only domestic work. And, though the traditional roles played by a woman are also important, she is never given the due credit. Sonya expresses how difficult a mother's life is: "You must understand a mother may have faults but we have an impossible job trying to keep a sieve afloat" (245). However, it is not only Jay's family that makes Kairo notice the shortcomings of marriage but also his own family. A verbal battle always goes on between Kairo's mother and father. He sees how his mother verbally attacks his father because of "his moral disarmament, his gambling and his politics" (35). Kairo fears that what has happened to Jay's parents can also happen to his parents. Moreover, his observation of families has made him aware of the importance of freedom, and that is why he doubts that Niromi can become Jay's wife: "Jay was a free spirit and would only tolerate another free spirit with him" (213). Therefore, Kairo thinks that it is only him who can be Jay's companion.

However, the triangular relationship among Kairo, Jay and Niromi is a complex one. After meeting Niromi, Kairo soon finds that he is jealous of Jay, not of Niromi (222). That brings a new dimension in defining Kairo's character. Now, as the second half of Jay, Kairo imagines himself in Jay's place to have the opportunity to develop friendship with Niromi. When three of them take a trip to the sea, Kairo feels attracted towards Niromi. He wants to hold Niromi's hand but he is doubtful whether it will be right or not: "Me, unsure if I should hold her hand. Not for her sake, but for mine" (276). As the atmosphere makes him more excited, he fears that he will be "on the verge of too much yearning" (277). Moved by his desire he follows Niromi putting his hands and feet on the spots made by her steps and "matching her every move" (277). He feels a sensation when Niromi's body touches his: "Niromi's bare knee touched mine, scalding me. The new faint hairs on my leg strayed and lifted, whetted by the sea breeze" (277). These sensations make him sexually aroused, and he feels, "Jeans would have been safer than shorts" (277).

When Kairo looks at the details of the bodies of Jay and Niromi, he finds that Niromi's body resembles Jay's figure "in every curve and flourish" (278). Suddenly, a desire strikes him; he thinks, "Could they both be the other half of mine?" (278). This question of Kairo implies that he not only wants Niromi but also Jay. Till now, it appears that his interest has shifted from Jay to Niromi, but in this question it is evident that his desire surrounds both Niromi and Jay. At the beginning, he wished to be the second half of Jay, but now he longs for both of them. He now finds himself confused: "Jay confused me, and Niromi confused me" (280). When he is asked to swim naked with Niromi in the sea, he feels worried. He questions himself, "Could I undress in front of Niromi? What does one do with a girl?" (280). Kairo takes a drink from Jay to get courage and to prove that he is not a young boy. He feels that he could kiss Niromi like Jay did if he had taken another sip of drink. He confesses that he wanted to kiss her. The mature Kairo says, "If Jay could [kiss], I could too. We were the same" (281). Kairo constantly shifts between Jay and Niromi. He himself also realises it after a few days of the trip when he finds himself engulfed by thoughts of Niromi: "Every time I tried to make up with Jay in my mind, she would eclipse him and leave me in a kind of limbo that resolved nothing" (282). This proves his duality in sexual orientation and makes his relationship to Jay and Niromi complicated.

Therefore, it is a matter of debate whether Kairo's erotic feeling is directed only towards Niromi or he fears to express his desire for Jay equally in explicit terms.

## Conclusion

Therefore, the novel depicts a friendship that can be termed "genderless love" as it violates the conventional gender-norms that are followed in a relationship. Kairo's psychological connection with Jay and his desire for Jay subvert the established supremacy of heterosexual relationships. Though the novel focuses on the same-sex bonding between Kairo and Jay, it has several homosexual undertones. To conclude, Kairo's "love" for Jay, his other half, transcends the boundaries that are imposed on individuals by the conventional gender-norms.

## References

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