

POST-COLONIAL POLITICS AND GENDER: CRITICAL READING OF SELVADURAI'S NOVELS – *FUNNY BOY* AND *CINNAMON GARDENS*

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Abstract

Shyam Selvadurai is an emerging voice in Sri Lankan fiction, who also belongs to Tamil minority. His novels such as *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* are loaded with images of colonial experiences. Further in these novels the plot spins around families and thereby Selvadurai tries to combine the post-colonial politics, historical material and personal experiences, the projected paper is an attempt to examine Shyam Selvadurai's second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998) to see how the novelist works towards post-colonial and anti-patriarchal vision in it.

Cinnamon Gardens has a female protagonist, Annalukshmi as the central character who represents the early women's movement in Ceylon. The paper will try to inspect how Selvadurai grills colonial canons in this novel ranging from Jane Austen to George Eliot to suggest the presence of a third world female sensibility that keeps critical equidistance from the colonial culture and the tyrannical patriarchy.

Key Words: Ethnicity, Hegemony, Gender Politics, Colonialism, Queer Voices, Nationality

Cinnamon Gardens of Shyam Selvadurai is concerned with ethnicity, nationality, and identity. This novel deals with the ethnic oppression that Sri Lankan Tamils face though it is set in a much earlier time frame. This novel also traces the migration of Sri Lankan Tamil subjects such as Balendran and Annalukshmi as they flee the political, religious and racial aggressions. *Cinnamon Gardens* is set in the world of upper class Sri Lankan Tamils of the 1920s – a period of political struggles for the Sri Lankan as they fought for independence from the British. The title of the novel itself refers to the colonial residential enclave of the upper class Sri Lankans. Operating within this world, Annalukshmi, a young school teacher and the daughter of a middle class Tamil Christian parents, has to suppress her private desires in honoring the social compulsions. Within the narrative of Annalukshmi is the story of her uncle, Balendran, the son of an aristocratic landowner who has homosexual desires. The novel is largely about the disappointments and experiences of these two lead characters who nourish desires contrary to the social norms. However, both Annalukshmi and Balendran are forced to conform to the society that they start denying, to some extent, their personal needs and desires.

The readers find that both Annalukshmi and Balendran transgress sexual norms of their respective times and they face bitter consequences of their actions. Annalukshmi resists to be married off easily, while Balendran becomes the victim of his father's rage, when the later finds out that his son had homosexual relationship with an Englishman, Richard Howland, during his student days in England. The novel depicts the span of one year during which Annalukshmi is caught between her family's pressure that she should marry and her own desire for an independent life. She discovers through a progressive headmistress, Miss Lawson that life is made of complications and rigid rules. Balendran, on the other hand, becomes aware of the consequences of breaking away from social expectations. He faces troubles when he learns that his former lover, Howland, will be visiting Colombo as a part of Donoughmore Commission hearings. His meetings with Howland bears open the secrets of his past and he begins to re-examine his life and identity. He also faces many tensions and conflicts as his relationship with Howland is revived. Both the stories of Annalukshmi and Balendran deal with the complex link between identity formation and conformity. Their situation, in trying to come to terms with their 'impossible desires', is similar to that of Arjie who stands confused in his family, school and community which demand high degree of conformity. In addition to these themes, *Cinnamon Gardens* is also a portrayal of the ethnicity of Sri Lankan Tamil Christians as a minority in terms of the linguistic and religious identity; the family members of Annalukshmi and Balendran show minimal tolerance to transgressions. As Fugulrud observes that ethnic affinity and social norms including mercenary marriages, is commonly noticed among the Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka, the lives of Annalukshmi and Balendran testify this point. For instance, both Annalukshmi and Balendran are forced to fulfill their Father's wishes. However, Annalukshmi and Balendran respond to such pressures differently. Balendran is forced to break up his relationship with Richard Howland as his father threatens of dispossession. He marries his cousin Sonia and returns to Ceylon to manage his family inheritance. Annalukshmi on the other hand, shows great strength and she mobilizes many strategies to undermine the plans of her mother and her Aunt, Philomena.

The novel also is a depiction of the double standards of the Mudaliyar community represented by Balendran's father. Arul, Balendran's brother, is another rebel who dares to fall in love with Pakkiam, the daughter of the maid. His father opposes this relation for three reasons — she is of a different religion, of an inferior class, and the fact he himself has a lust for her. Arul, unlike Balendran shows tremendous courage when he leaves home and property with Pakkiam to live in an exile in Bombay. Though he lives in a dirty neighborhood in Bombay, he is happy with his personal life. His son Seelan, who becomes a doctor, is shown in the novel as one who examines his father's family circle, as an outsider. Seelan provides the outsider's perspective on the family saga of Arul, Balendran, and Annalukshmi. He also represents the third generation in the novel who like Arul and Annalukshmi, feels the pressure of conformity. He learns that he will never be considered as a 'pure' member of his father's community as his mother is a low caste servant. In the context of Sri Lankan Tamil Christian community (Mudaliyar), Seelan is impure and hence and outcaste. This sense of intra-ethnic intolerance and exclusion in terms of caste and class is clearly articulated by the Mudaliyar, Seelan's grandfather, who refers to his son and grandson- "they were irrevocably lost to him, his son by his marriage, his grandson by the blood he carried in him"(Selvadurai: 2000: 218). Thus Seelan is already an outsider and in Exile Diaspora and he is always at the fringes of the family estate.

Like *Funny Boy*, from a broader perspective, *Cinnamon Gardens* can be read as an allegory of Sri Lanka, the island nation. The problems faced by Annalukshmi, Balendran, Arul and Seelan are representational of the Tamil minority and their victimization reflects the forces of oppression, ethnic intolerance and patriarchy that operate in Sri Lanka. Despite being multiethnic country, Sri Lanka was a site of many political and racial tensions caused by the refusal of the majority to accept others and their differences. These ‘others’, as the novel suggests, could be Sri Lankan Tamils, homosexuals, lower caste subjects, and the people of mixed blood. If 1983 Riots becomes the moving force in *Funny Boy*, the arrival of Donoughmore Commission provides the political backdrop in *Cinnamon Gardens*. The Mudaliyar family, with its rigid norms also represents a closed Sri Lankan society that is plagued by closures and classifications along the lines of language, religion, and caste. Annalukshmi, Balendran, Arul, and Seelan are victims of such a society and by extension, of a nation that does not accept alternate desires, hybridity, and in betweenness. The novel is also a strong case for the multiethnic fabric of Sri Lanka, articulated clearly by Balendran. At one point, he says that Sri Lanka “is already in a thousand pieces...like an Arabian mosaic. Take one tile out and you might ruin the entire design” (Selvadurai: 2000:63).

The cases of Annalukshmi, Balendran, Arul, and Seelan are the identities formed upon fluidity, free movements, multiculturalism, and Diaspora. For instance, Seelan is at once a hybrid mongrelized Sri Lankan Tamil subject and an individual in Exile Diaspora. His is not only a hyphenated identity but also an interrupted identity—the hyphenation caused by the different religions of his parents and his father’s migration to Bombay and the interruption caused by his father’s dispossession by his grandfather. However, all these characters who gain fluid identities, like Arjie in *Funny Boy* who enjoys the space and freedom of cross-dressing, develop and utilize this space of indeterminacy for better opportunities, freedom, and mobility. Further, they also establish a point while defying the dictates of the patriarchy, imperialism, and compulsory heterosexuality that an identity cannot be fashioned according to the needs of the majority. Like in *Funny Boy*, sexuality and national citizenship are interlinked in Selvadurai’s *Cinnamon Gardens*. The novel routes the interconnectedness of gendering sexuality and nation-building.

The novel, as Heather Smith points out implicates in both concrete and symbolic ways how women reproduce ethnicity. Biologically and in a concrete way, women in the novel reproduce ethnicity by bearing children within the norms of marriage and ethnic identification. Annalukshmi’s mother and her grandmother are the examples of such women. Symbolically these women reproduce ethnicity by representing the cultural practices and by reproducing the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality. Selvadurai reveals clearly how women such as Annalukshmi’s mother and Aunts confirm to the notion of gender, sexuality, class, and respectability. Selvadurai also questions the very roles of gender norms and policed sexuality—two significant aspects of Sri Lankan national discourse. These nuances are accomplished in the novel by cross-weaving nationalism, ethnic conflict, and women’s emancipation. For instance, Sri Lankan freedom struggle coincides with Balendran’s awareness of his homosexuality and Annalukshmi’s desire to live outside the norms of marriage.

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