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## A Critical Analysis of Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*

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### Abstract

Shyam Selvadurai, who was born to a Tamil father and a Sinhala mother, was exposed to the ethnic tension in Sri Lanka from a young age and witnessed the effects of ethnic hatred within his own family. His fiction is a skilful combination of his personal experiences and the gradual deterioration of his country due to constant conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese. In particular, his novel *Cinnamon Gardens* provides a nuanced portrayal of the factors that led to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. This paper aims to critically examine the narrative of *Cinnamon Gardens* in order to gain insight into the historical and socio-political reasons for the displacement and mass migration of Sri Lanka's people, particularly the Tamils.

**Key words:** Sri Lanka, Tamil, Sinhala, ethnic conflict, *Cinnamon Gardens*, displacement, mass migration, historical, socio-political.

### Introduction

In 1998, Shyam Selvadurai published *Cinnamon Gardens*, a novel that encompasses a myriad of themes, including personal and political relationships, class and gender discrimination, suppression of females and homosexuals, and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Ceylon under British rule. Selvadurai is known for integrating historical facts into his narratives, and in *Cinnamon Gardens*, he explores the historical background of Sri Lanka in the 1920s, a time when the country was still under British rule. The novel follows the stories of Annalukshmi and Balendran, two characters who represent different aspects of Sri Lankan society. Through their parallel narratives, Selvadurai reflects on Sri Lanka's political struggle to liberate itself from colonial influence, and effectively weaves the theme of colonialism into the structure of the novel. Set in the upper-class region of Cinnamon Gardens, the novel's title refers to the complex social hierarchy of the country. Selvadurai's volatile narrative of crisis, conflict, and ethnic tensions captures the multi-level impact of the colonial experience in Sri Lanka.

In Minoli Salgado's book *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*, she writes about the characters of Shyam Selvadurai:

Selvadurai's characters are complex, flawed, and often bewildered by their own desires and impulses. They are frequently caught between cultures, struggling to reconcile their Sri Lankan heritage with their Canadian identities, and grappling with issues of sexuality, family, and belonging. (144)

She highlights Selvadurai's skilful portrayal of characters who navigate the complexities of identity, culture, and personal desire, often against a backdrop of political and social upheaval. She further writes:

The central characters of the novel are all urban, anglicised comprador Tamils who live in the most affluent residential part of Colombo. Selvadurai's meticulous mapping of the area and his careful historicisation reveal not only that this novel is intended to inform and elucidate those who are unfamiliar with this region and period of Sri Lanka (making it readily accessible to western readers), but also that it is intended to be in alignment with realist perspective. (124)

Annalukshmi, a Tamil girl, has accomplished notable feats. She has attained Senior Cambridge certification, topped the island in English literature, and even pursued a degree in teaching. Despite her impressive achievements and courageous personality, her community views her with scrutiny. Her mother, Louisa, also disapproves of her nature, preferring Annalukshmi to be a modest girl without aspirations that could potentially impede her prospects of marriage.

Annalukshmi's marriage was the sole concern deemed significant by her family. Despite her elevated aspirations, she faced opposition from her relatives, save for Miss Lawton, the headmistress at her school, and her adopted daughter Nancy. Annalukshmi, an educated woman, held an interest in the political landscape of the country and attended intellectual meetings alongside her aunt Sonia, Balendran's wife. However, Aunt Philomela, a representative of the patriarchal society, disapproved of Annalukshmi's nature and believed that women should focus solely on their domestic duties and be good mothers. This attitude was shared by Louisa, and both women upheld patriarchal beliefs that women had no place in men's affairs. Through the characters of Louisa and Philomela, the author highlights the societal issues of oppression against women, and characters like Annalukshmi and Sonia, who fought for their rights and freedom, were considered outcasts in society.

Sonia and Annalukshmi were well-informed about the significance of education and the power of voting. Amidst the political turmoil, they recognized that women's right to vote held great importance. "In a time of political upheaval, the vote became more than just a right; it was a tool of power, a means of making oneself heard above the din of conflict."(118-19)

The novelist highlights the past conditions of women through the portrayal of minor incidents. One of the significant characters in the novel is Balendran, who is gay and controlled by his father, Mudaliyar Navaratnam. Mudaliyar holds a high position in the family and region, and he looks down upon the lower caste. Balendran's obedience to his father and his homosexuality are not acceptable in their society. Mudaliyar represents an orthodox old man who does not welcome change and suppresses the poor through his dominance. Balendran's relationship with Richard Howland is ended by his father, causing inner conflict for Balendran. Arul, Balendran's elder brother, is banished as he marries a low-caste girl and suffers trauma from dislocation. The stories of Annalukshmi and Balendran depict societal compulsions prevalent in Sri Lanka, such as societal bondage of women and homosexuals, respectively. The political struggle of Sri Lanka to liberate itself from British control is embedded in the two narratives, along with the roots of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka during the period of British colonization. The novel reflects the various social evils of Sri Lanka through its characters and plot. The idea of a balanced nation becomes an irony as fractures were inherent in it.

The conflict in the novel initially arises in chapter two when Balendran visits his father, Mudaliyar, who despite his loyalty towards the British, decides to join the Ceylon Tamil Association. Mudaliyar's reasoning for this decision becomes apparent with the impending arrival of the Donoughmore Constitutional Commission, which is rumoured to grant greater self-government and potentially marginalize the Tamil community. He believes that if the British relinquish their power, the Sinhala community, being the majority, will take control, leading to the demise of the Tamil community. As Asoka Bandarage highlights in her book, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*:

Tamil separatist sentiments were first evident in 1920 when their majority status in the Legislative Council was threatened. Under British rule, Tamils were not treated as a minority, but the Donoughmore Commission's decision to give power to the Sinhalese marginalized the Tamil community. Ultimately, the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka stemmed from a combination of numerical strength and differences in pursuits among the population.(38)

In his novel, *Selvadurai* portrays the conflict through historical events and commissions that caused chaos in the country. During a scene at Mudaliyar's birthday party, Balendran discusses the political crisis with F.C. Wijewardena, who was a member of the Ceylon National Congress and Balendran's best friend from their school days. The topic of their conversation was the Donoughmore Commission and the new constitution, which aimed to divide the country into smaller regions based on ethnicity. F.C. Wijewardena notes the ethnic divisions that are emerging, including up-country Sinhalese versus low-country Sinhalese, different castes, and various religions. (68)

Asoka Bandarage explains in her book *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka* that the introduction of territorially based representation marked a shift toward political democracy but also exacerbated the disjunction between numerical strength and political power, leading to the rise of the country's ethnic problems. (34)

*Selvadurai's* novel depicts the failure of ethnic leaders to handle the crisis, leading to the gradual disintegration of the country and unleashing communal violence. The distorted sense of ethnic consciousness that favoured the majority and caused devastation in the colonial period later led to a civil war and mass migration.

In the last chapter of his novel, 'the Finale', *Selvadurai* describes the Donoughmore Commission and its recommendations, which marked an important turning point in Sri Lanka's political history. According to *Selvadurai*, the Commission's recommendation of universal franchise, while not achieving Ceylonese sovereignty, ultimately led to the suppression of minority Tamils by the majority Sinhalese, paving the way for communal violence and mass migration. Earl Conteh-Morgan, in his book *Collective Political Violence: An Introduction to the theories and cases of Violent Conflict*, notes that violent ethnic conflicts have led to the displacement of over twenty million people, and that such conflicts typically arise from one or more objects of contention among different groups. (193)

Against this backdrop, *Cinnamon Gardens* portrays the interconnectedness of sexuality and nation-building in 1920s Sri Lanka, depicting the subjugation of women, the poor, lower castes, and homosexuals. The struggles of the novel's protagonists, Annalukshmi and Balendran, reflect the political condition of Sri Lanka, and provide a glimpse into the roots of ethnic conflict in the country.

### **Conclusion**

The root cause of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the colonial period and the British policy of 'divide and rule' as evident in the Donoughmore Commission's role.

The conflict was further fuelled by power-hungry leaders of both ethnic groups. Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Cinnamon Gardens* provides a meticulous portrayal of this conflict, which victimized innocent people and led to forced dislocation and migration. The novel presents a vast canvas of historical and socio-political factors that led to the ethnic tension in Sri Lanka. Balendran and Annalukshmi's experiences of conflict and trauma in the novel represent the suffering of millions of people in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the paper has attempted to explore the role of India in the Sri Lankan conflict and its repercussions on both countries.

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