

World of Authority in Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*

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Abstract

The present paper aims at how Selvadurai portrays of traditional authority through his characters in *Cinnamon Gardens*. The educated elite class of Ceylonese is highly invested in maintaining a bourgeois respectability that earn them power. The rebellion and the acceptance of such characters are focused. Selvadurai's insights into the mechanics of authority depicted in the novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* are equally sharp and complex. He never ceases to poke through the authoritarians' polished and cold appearances. He reads the secrets of the tormented hearts of the characters who suffered on the strict norms of traditional authority which is explicated through parental authority. The life of the ordinary poor world, which is beyond the luxury of Cinnamon gardens, is given prominence.

KEYWORDS: Tradition, Education, Class, Life, People.

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist is a reputed writer who concentrates on issues related to ethnic riots, politics, family scandals, gay relations and finally how they are emancipated. He has recounted his experiences of discomfort during his stay in Sri Lanka in 1920s in his novels. His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, drawn closely from the author's life and personality, is set among the upper classes in the gracious, repressive and complex world of 1920s Ceylon. It is not only about the past of an individual, but also about the history of Sri Lanka. It depicts two people who try to pursue personal happiness by means of traditional authority without compromising the happiness of others.

The present paper aims at how Selvadurai portrays of traditional authority through his characters in *Cinnamon Gardens*. The educated elite class of Ceylonese is highly invested in maintaining a bourgeois respectability that earn them power. The rebellion and the acceptance of such characters are focused. Selvadurai's insights into the mechanics of authority depicted in the novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* are equally sharp and complex. He never ceases to poke through the authoritarians' polished and cold appearances. He reads the secrets of the tormented hearts of the characters who suffered on the strict norms of traditional authority which is explicated through parental authority. The life of the ordinary poor world, which is beyond the luxury of Cinnamon gardens, is given prominence.

The postcolonial country Sri Lanka has moved from colonialism to post-colonial sovereignty, and now to self-assertion. Colonial powers exerted the influence of their culture and language on colonized people through both forceful and artful transmission.

Tyson has rightly pointed out “The most damaging effects of colonial domination were experienced by non-white populations, whose own cultures were completely or almost completely destroyed as British government officials and British settlers imposed their own language, religion, government, education, codes of behaviour, and definitions of intelligence and beauty on the conquered peoples”(245).

The multi-faceted world of 1920s Ceylon is seen from the perspective of the powerful upper classes of Colombo’s wealthy suburb, Cinnamon Gardens. The most prominent character in this bitter-sweet tale is Annalukshmi, grand-niece of a patriarchal family, the powerful Mudaliyar Navaratnam, whose job is to help the British government agents to carry out colonial policy. She is the daughter of Louisa Barnett, a strong-willed matriarch and is forced to raise her daughters alone while her husband enjoys a life with his mistress abroad. Annalukshmi is a highly intelligent, well-educated, and wealthy young woman who knows exactly what she wants to have a good career, money, independence, beauty, love, sex, etc., but she does not really know how to beat the odds to get it all. She fights for independence and in the end she achieves it in a society where a woman’s career is a stigma limited to everything. She wants to be a teacher, but due to the rules of her time and society, she must relinquish that work if she marries. “The tension between cultures was often, perhaps unavoidably given the state of things, placed within the larger discourse of religious tradition”(Alami 199).

The postcolonial influence among the Tamil families of Ceylon is hinted at. Annalukshmi’s father, Murugasu has run away to Malaya and converts himself to a Christian. His wife Louisa has defied the dictates of her family to marry Murugasu. Annalukshmi’s qualification as a teacher is considered to be the greatest crime by her mother’s relatives, the Barnetts, one of the oldest Christian Tamil families of Ceylon. According to them “A career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to ever catch a husband. They see it as a deliberate thumbing of her nose at the prospect of marriage”(3, 4). Long established customs, habits and social structures of Ceylon torture her. Her mother tries “to curtail Annalukshmi’s freedom, to inspire in her an understanding of the necessary restriction that must be placed on a girl to protect her reputation and that of her family’s”(4). Having an intention of changing Annalukshmi towards her desire, Louisa allows her daughter to join teachers college that “responsibility of teaching would finally settle her down”(5).

Negotiating the often illusory pathways of romantic hopefulness, Annalukshmi ultimately makes some surprisingly mature choices by attempting to free herself from the pressures of society. In order to assert her individuality, she takes her bicycle, but her mother gets annoyed and says “Don’t talk rubbish, Annalukshmi. You know you can’t go around on a bicycle. . . . Excuse me for pointing out the obvious, but decent, respectable girls don’t ride bicycles”(6, 7). Adding fuel to it, her sister Kumudini says “You can’t. People will say all sorts of things. . . . Akka, be sensible, It’s one thing for European ladies to ride bicycles. We can’t”(6-8). As a spirited lady, Annalukshmi determines that she is not going to let herself be stopped by the ridiculous conventions of society. She convinces herself that it is the fear of authority that makes her mother forbid her and there is no personal repugnance on her part.

The next morning Annalukshmi goes with her sisters in the rickshaw and gets down on the way and rides to school in her bicycle. Filled with elation, “she looked up at the canopy of leaves created by the huge trees on either side of Green Path and she smiled. Her plan had succeeded. . . . She began to pedal faster, blissfully unaware of the looks she was getting from pedestrians and motorists”(17). When days go by, her relatives insist on marriage and she finds that “her family sat heavily on her”(330). Annalukshmi felt an unsettled yearning for something, some sense that her life was not confined to a repetition of the same things. In the end, she reveals her determination to Balendran, her uncle: “I am considering many possibilities. I might go to Jaffna, I might go somewhere else, perhaps even Malaya with Kumudini . . . Or I might just stay right here. After all, it’s not such a bad life, is it? And I am beginning to meet new people . . . interesting people”(383). She longs to escape the traditional authority of arranged marriages and be an obedient wife.

Selvadurai lights up the oppression experienced by the constructed norms of masculine authority, through MudaliyarNavaratnam, an over bearing land owner, who serves as a representative of the kingin the days before European domination. MudaliyarNavaratnamtries to make people live in the constraints and dictates of their culture and tradition. Balendran his second son struggles both on the personal level and on the nation-wide and whose role towards sexual transgressions becomes the effective plot in this novel. “The post-colonial is also the decolonizing process that rewrites history from other underprivileged sites and contests the European constructions”(Alami 202).

Similarly, V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr.Biswas* focuses the authority of Mrs.Tulsi who is the mother-in-law of the protagonist, Mr.Biswas. Mrs.Tulsicontrols all the members of the family. Once she insults Biswas by notifying his poor birth and says, “What is for you is for you. What is not for you is not for you”(170). She raises her voice when he tries to overcome her. Biswas tells Tulsi, “I curse the day I step into your house. Man, man”(589). She recalls his past pathetic condition, the day he comes to them with no more clothes than he could hang on a nail. Wounded by this he replies “I am giving you notice”. With a thundering voice Tulsirepeats “I am giving you notice”(589). He wants to free from the shackles and searches for his individuality. Finally out of trials, travails and tribulations, he owns a house to prove his manliness. Even though he has come from a poor background, he never misses the chance of ill-treating Shama, his wife by saying that she has no reason to feel proud of her family because, in his opinion, it is no family at all.

Selvadurai’s characters navigate an uncertain world armed only with their own insecurities.Balendran loves his wife and his son but continues to struggle with his homosexuality and is thrown into a crisis when his old lover, Richard Howard has come from London and arrives in Colombo.He has chosen marriage and respectability rather than following Richard Howard, the true love of his life. He searches of his individuality when his father uses his authoritative power over others. In the grand celebration of Navaratnam’s birthday, every one expects Balendran.

The members of the family remember a day tinged with sorrow which happened twenty eight years ago. Navaratnam’s elder son, Arulanandan, has stabbed his father in the arm because of his father’s resistance to his affair with a low caste woman who

works as a servant at Brighton. This incident has forced Mudaliyar to banish his son and the woman to India. After years have gone, the father is stubborn in accepting him. When he comes to know that he is dead the father's heart melts and he is stubborn to get his body, but Arul's wife Pakkiam and his son Seelan never allowed anyone else to light the funeral pyre. "The Mudaliyar was determined to see his beloved son, even if only in his death, determined to give him the honours he deserved as a member of their family"(244).

Unlike the elder son of Mudaliyar, Balendran was a respectful son and hence had never expressed his views to his father. He felt sympathy towards his father who belonged to the old breed of statesman and had "come of age at a time when even the mention of self-government would bring the mighty fist of the British Empire down on them"(30). Though Balendran disagrees with the political views of his father, he patiently listens to him out of respect. When his father tells him to receive Richard Howard who comes to Ceylon, Balendran feels like "his blood thud against his temples"(36). There had been no communication between them for more than twenty years.

Selvadurai is careful not to form alliances where none can exist. Sri Lanka, despite its cultural Westernization, does not favour the liberating sexual alternates. Balendran recalls how his father destroyed his friendship with Richard during the stay in London. Passing of twenty years with his wife and son has filled him with happiness. He has accepted the type of love he had with Richard is part of his nature. "His disposition, like a harsh word spoken, a cruel act done, was regrettably irreversible. Just something he had learnt to live with, a daily impediment, like a pair of spectacles or a badly set fracture"(38).

Selvadurai has created an insulated world of quiet racism and respectable oppression, where members of the Ceylonese upper class employ the same condescension as their British rulers. He never ceases to poke through their polished, cold appearances to read the secrets of their tormented hearts. While Selvadurai is far from painting a balanced picture of Ceylonese society of the twenties, he is not entirely indifferent to the plights of those who are less fortunate and politically oppressed. Through the words of Miss Lawton one comes to know the pathetic situation of Vijith Jayaweera who is the poor clerk at Colombo's school for wealthy young women: "He was fired through no fault of his own"(98). His older brother is a notorious troublemaker and he tries to unionize the estate workers in the Labour Union. Finally a strike is called off and he was put in jail for a month. The innocent Vijith Jayaweera lost his job. He was not interested in unions as he was "A very decent man, really. Supports his widowed mother and two unmarried sisters at great sacrifice to himself"(99).

Selvadurai's characters, too, are depicted with touching clarity, allowing the reader to glimpse at least briefly at the uglier ordinary world that lies beyond the fragrant hedges of Cinnamon Gardens and even beyond the limits of Colombo, where a faceless, silent majority seems to vegetate in poverty. He is apt in presenting an epigraph from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, ". . . for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs"(np).

Selvadurai cautions that although inequalities are rampant, it is important first to describe how such inequalities play out in relation of one identity to another. Annalukshmi, Balendran and Vijith Jayaweera have come to terms with traditional authority and the sacrifices necessary to find the freedom they desperately desire. Annalukshmi wants to be different from the other Sri Lankan Tamil women who lead a conformist life of marriage and household. Balendran, a clandestine homosexual who consents to lead a hidden life has ultimately sacrificed self-desire for the good of the family. Selvadurai points out that the traditional authority, present in *Cinnamon Gardens*, has splintered the family relationships and the peace of an individual and it is very much necessary to be aware of the consequences and change accordingly.

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