

# Conflict and the Trauma of Dislocation in Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*

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## Abstract

Shyam Selvadurai is an immigrant Canadian novelist whose family migrated to Canada in the wake of ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. Born to a Tamil father and a Sinhala mother, Selvadurai became aware of the ethnic tension in his country during his childhood only. As a growing child he could very well experience the bitterness and the consequences of ethnic hatred within his own family. His fiction is, therefore, a very meticulous amalgam of the vicissitudes of his own life and the gradual disintegration of his country due to incessant strife between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. His novel *Cinnamon Gardens* is a fine rendering of the causes which led to the situation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. This paper would attempt to critically explore the narrative of *Cinnamon Gardens* to understand the historical as well as socio-political causes which gradually lead to the situation of conflict in Sri Lanka resulting in the dislocation and mass migration of millions of people from the country.

**Keywords: Tamils, Sinhalese, Conflict, Dislocation, Migration.**

## Introduction

Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Cinnamon Gardens* is a fictional account of the historical as well as the socio-political events which gradually triggered the situation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. *Cinnamon Gardens* is a volatile narrative of crisis, conflict and ethnic tensions. Selvadurai depicts the situation of crisis at multiple levels—from personal and familial to socio-political and ethnic.

Set in 1920s, more specifically in the year 1927, *Cinnamon Gardens* is a story of two characters namely Annalukshmi and Balendran. The novel has two parallel narratives; one is about Annalukshmi and other about Balendran. Through their narratives the novelist reflects upon the political struggle of Sri Lanka to liberate itself from the shackles of British rule.

The novel deals alternatively with the characters of Annalukshmi and Balendran. Selvadurai has very effectively woven the theme of colonialism in the structure of the novel. The protagonists in *Cinnamon Gardens* are Annalukshmi Kandiah, a 22 year old independent girl and her middle aged uncle Balendran who is a gay. They live in an upper class region of Ceylon called Cinnamon Gardens which forms the title of the novel. Cinnamon Gardens refers to the colonial residential territory of the upper class Sri Lankans representing the complex social structure of the country.

Observing the relevance of the region portrayed in the novel, Minoli Salgado writes in his book *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*:

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 is a Tamil girl, with remarkable achievements. She completes her Senior Cambridge, stands first islandwide in English literature and goes to Teachers College and qualified as a teacher. However, as a girl with so many achievements and bold character, she becomes the subject of discussion and criticism in her society. Her mother Louisa also opposes her nature. She wants her to be a simple girl with no ambitions as it would hinder the possibilities of her marriage. Her mother's relatives consider her 'a criminal' for her qualifications and her profession:

Annalukshmi's qualification as a teacher was held to be her greatest crime by her mother's relatives, the Barnetts. A career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to even catch a husband. They saw it as a deliberate thumbing of her nose at the prospect of marriage. (3-4)

The only thing which was considered important was her marriage. Annalukshmi certainly had high ideals but her family opposes her. She is only being supported by a British lady called Miss Lawton, the principal of her school. Miss Lawton and her adopted daughter Nancy were the only source of encouragement for Annalukshmi.

As an educated girl, Annalukshmi was interested in the politics of the country and the changing socio-political scenario. Her aunt Sonia, wife of Balendran, also supported and shared the views of Annalukshmi. Both Annalukshmi and Sonia would attend the intellectual meetings and discuss certain important events like Donoughmore Commission. But as a hard core supporter of Patriarchal values, Aunt Philomela opposed Annalukshmi's views. "Only manly women get involved in men's affairs. Normal women think of their husbands and their homes and nothing else. (117)

Aunt Philomela and Louisa endorsed patriarchal beliefs and considered women fit for household work only. According to them women should struggle to become good mothers only. The novelist through the character of Louisa and Philomela exposes the deep rooted patriarchal beliefs in the Sri Lankan society. The novel depicts the oppression of women and characters like Annalukshmi and Sonia who fight for their rights and freedom are considered as outcasts in the society. They are fully aware of the importance of

education as well as the power of vote. Surrounded by the political struggle, Sonia and Annalukshmi consider the power of vote to be an important right of women.

“Ah, but how can women be better mothers when they don’t have the education to be able to provide the best care. To know what’s best for their children,” Sonia said gently. “And that is precisely why women are demanding the vote,” Sonia said with a smile. “So they can use the vote to ask-to get–men to provide better education, better health for them and their children.  
(118)

Through these minor incidents, the novelist depicts the condition of women in the Sri Lankan society.

The other important character of the novel is Balendran, a gay whose life is controlled by his father. His father, Mudaliyar Navaratnam, owns a high position in the family as well as in the whole of the region. Mudaliyar served as an interpreter to the British government agents in the different provinces of Ceylon. Balendran is an obedient son and considers his father as an unquestionable authority over him. Through the narrative of Balendran, the novelist exposes the hypocrisy of his father Mudaliyar Nvaratnam consider himself as a man of high esteem and looks down upon the people of so called lower castes. Mudaliyar was aware of the homosexual tendencies of his son and does every possible thing to suppress his son’s desires. He knows that his son’s homosexuality would be detrimental to his prestige in the society. Mudaliyar has an orthodox mind set. He even stands against his elder son Arul’s decision to marry a girl who happens to be from a so called lower caste. Through the character of Mr. Mudaliyar, Selvadurai depicts the evil of casteism prevalent in Sri Lankan society.

Balendran, a homosexual is forced to end his relationship with Richard Howland. They enter the relationship when Balendran was in London. His father, however, comes to know about this relationship. He goes to London and puts an end to their relationship. Balendran suffers from an inner conflict in the novel as he was being prevented from living a life which he had always wanted to live. Arul, the elder son is banished as he marries a girl belonging to the so called lower caste against the wishes of his father. Arul is forced to leave his mother country and migrate to India, where he suffers from the trauma of dislocation.

The two parallel stories of Annalukshmi and Balendran testify the societal compulsions prevalent in Sri Lanka. Both of them suffer at the hands of the society, societal suppression of women as well as homosexuality. Within their narrative, several other characters being the part of the story, reflects the various social evils prevalent in the Sri Lankan society.

The struggle of Balendran and Annalukshmi to liberate themselves from the shackles of orthodox beliefs of the society represents the struggle of Sri Lanka to liberate itself from the shackles of British control. The time in which the novel is set was a crucial period of the country when the seeds for future

ethnic strife were sown. Constructing a balanced nation becomes an irony as the fractures were inherent in the idea of a balanced nation itself.

The ethnic conflict is presented in the novel at various points. The period of British colonization shown in the novel reflects the roots of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The first instance of the conflict can be seen in the second chapter of the novel when Balendran goes to meet his father, Mudaliyar. Mudaliyar has his loyalty towards Britishers but he decides to join Ceylon Tamil Association and the reason he gives speaks volumes about the impending ethnic conflict:

the arrival of this Donoughmore Constitutional Commission in two weeks makes it necessary that we Tamils unite together, It is rumoured the commission will be granting greater self-government in the new constitution. This must be stopped. The governor must retain all the powers he possesses. Otherwise we will replace a British Raj with a Sinhala Raj and then we Tamils will be doomed. (29-30)

The reason for his decision was the arrival of Donoughmore Commission. As a Tamil and a minority community in the country he fears that the country will be governed by the majority community that is the Sinhala community. As written by Asoka Bandarage in her book *The Separatist Conflict In Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*: “Tamil separatist sentiments had first become evident when the majority status that the Ceylon Tamil enjoyed in the Legislative Council was threatened in 1920.” (38)

During the British rule, Tamils enjoyed their status in the country as they were not treated as minority but the Donoughmore Commission gave power to Sinhalese which marginalised the Tamils in the country.

The rise of the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka was due to the awareness of people about their numerical strength and due to the differences in their pursuits. Tamils as a minority had different pursuits and Sinhala as a majority had different aspirations and that difference heightens the tension in the country. Ho-Won Jeong in his book; *Understanding Conflict* and *Conflict Analysis* comments on the causes of ethnic tension as:

Goals and activities become incompatible when one's own interests are threatened by the actions of another. Parties to conflict make attempts to prevent each other from achieving desired objectives, in part, owing to perceptions of divergent interests. Tensions essentially emerge due to the pursuit of different outcomes or disagreement on the means to attain the same end. (5)

Selvadurai illustrates the conflict in the novel at certain points in context of historical events and the commissions which actually created havoc in the country. In an episode when everyone gathers at

Mudaliyar's birthday party, Balendran's discussion with F.C. Wijewardena is replete with references to the political crisis of in the country.

The Wijewardena family were regular guests at the Mudaliyar's house and F.C. Wijewardena, Mr. Wijewardena's son, was Balendran's best friend. They had studied together at the Colombo Academy. F.C. Wijewardena was a member of Ceylon National Congress which was actually an important political party during 1920s. The subject they choose for the discussion was the Donoughmore Commission and the new constitution.

He called the commission as gold rush as every group was after claiming its own piece of land in the country. The ethnic separation of the country is suggested when F.C. Wijewardena talks about the divisions: "Divisions are appearing where I didn't even know there were any" . . . "Up-country Sinhalese versus low-country Sinhalese, Karave caste versus Goyigama caste, Moors, Malaya, Christian Tamils, Hindu Tamils, Buddhists, and so on and so on." (68)

The new constitution aimed at dividing the country into small regions based on the numeric presence of Tamil, Sinhala and other ethnic entities. As a part of its imperial practice, this kind of division always suited the British Empire strengthening its hold over the enslaved nations.

Asoka Bandarage suggests the reason for incoherence in Sri Lanka in her book; *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*:

Introduction of territorially based representation signified the beginning of the island's movement toward political democracy. But, this shift aggravated the hitherto prevailing disjunction between numerical strength and political power and set the stage for the rise of the island's 'ethnic problems'. The first elections to the reformed Legislative Council based on territorial representation in 1921 changed the balance in the favour of the majority community. (34)

Through the narrative of *Cinnamon Gardens*, Selvadurai depicts as to how the inability of the ethnic leaders in handling the situation of crisis paved the way for the gradual disintegration of the country. The vested interests of different ethnic groups and the persistent intolerance for one another unleashed and new chapter of communal violence which actually took place in the colonial period, later led to Civil War and migration of thousands of people. The distorted sense of ethnic consciousness based on the idea of 'majority should rule' actually proved to be the cause of the devastation of the country.

Another important issue in the novel is the recommendations of Donoughmore Commission, Selvadurai in his last chapter 'the Finale', describes the commission in detail and the behaviour of the natives towards it. The arrival of Donoughmore Commission marks an important development in the political history of the country. This commission is believed to have accelerated the situation of conflict in

Sri Lanka. The Donoughmore commission does not bring the victory for a Ceylonese sovereignty, but instead recommends universal franchise which later would make Sinhalese the major and the authoritative group of the country suppressing the minor Tamils. This paves the way for the communal violence in the country eventually leading to the killings and mass migration of millions of people.

Earl Conteh-Morgan in his book; *Collective Political Violence: An Introduction to the theories and cases of Violent Conflict* writes:

Violent ethnic conflicts are being so widespread that they are now the direct cause of the external displacement of more than twenty millions persons. In these ethno nationalist conflicts, as in all conflicts, the source of dispute arises from at least one object of contention among two or more groups. (193)

*Cinnamon Gardens* is, therefore, a true depiction of Ceylon's struggle for freedom and it is in this struggle, one can find the roots of Ethnic conflict.

**Findings:** The following findings can be enumerated on the basis of this study;

1. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has its roots in the colonial period.
2. The British intervention, as evident in the role of Donoughmore Commission in the novel, speaks volumes about the role of British policy of 'divide and rule' and the price which Sri Lanka has been paying even till now.
3. The conflict in Sri Lanka was further accelerated by the power hungry leaders of both the ethnic groups as it suited their political interests.
4. Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Cinnamon Gardens* epitomizes the entire gamut of power politics which victimized the innocent people of Sri Lanka leading to their forced dislocation and migration from the country.

## Conclusion

Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens* very meticulously delineates the genesis of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. An attempt has been made in this paper to understand as to how Sri Lanka got victimized both by the imperial Britain as well as its own fighting ethnic groups. The paper has also attempted to bring out the role of Indian in the Sri Lankan conflict and its repercussions on both the countries. The vast canvas of *Cinnamon Gardens* exposes the entire gamut of the socio-political as well as historical factors, which led to ethnic tension in Sri Lanka, through the narratives of Annalukshmi and Balendran. The conflict and trauma suffered by Balendran and Annalukshmi represent the conflict and trauma suffered by the millions of people of Sri Lanka.

WORKSCITED

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