



Redefining the Institutions of Marriage and Family in Shyam Selvadurai's Novel *Cinnamon Gardens*

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Abstract— *The fact is that Shyam Selvadurai's Cinnamon Gardens (1998) revolves around marriage and family as mechanisms through which colonial society controls gender relations and identities. The novel unfolds in Colombo in 1927-1928 during the time of British colonial modernity versus the native traditions which leads to a conflict of personal desires against collective aspirations. As the novel advances, the novelist Shyam Selvadurai moves colonial politics from the public sphere into the private sphere, where marriage, kinship, and family honour act as devices of controlling women's liberation, masculinity, and social life on the whole. In the novel Cinnamon Gardens, the novelist rather than perceiving marriage as a relationship of romantic interests, it demonstrates it as an institution that benefits classes, ethnic groups, and men. The author investigates Annalukshmi's learning ambitions and Balendran Navaratnam's concealed sexual orientation to prove that personal relationships are sites of tension between traditionalism and modernity as such. However, Cinnamon Gardens emphasizes the ordinary discussions of the domestic sphere such as marriage and family, while also depicting a strong critique of colonial social institutions. In this context, the family is depicted as a space of friction in which resistance occurs in the form of education, moral choice, and emotional sincerity. The author seems to show that social change is possible not just in the political sphere, but also in the private sphere where identity-building takes place. The present research paper perceives the institutions of marriage and family in a more effective way in the colonial era and also identifies these institutions as a tool of social stability.*



Keywords— *marriage, family, social stability, gender identity, patriarchy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The author of *Cinnamon Gardens*, Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo in 1965, but he went to Canada with his family at the age of nineteen. His first novel *Funny Boy* was published in 1994, and it was shortlisted for the prestigious Giller Award, which also gave a name and fame to him. Then in the year of 1998, his second novel *Cinnamon Gardens* was published in Canada. Set in Colombo in the late 1920s, *Cinnamon Gardens* shows Ceylon (Sri Lanka) at an unstable time of change with the expansion of education, debates over women's rights, constitutional amendments, and the emergence of national consciousness causing serious challenges to traditional ideas about gender, family, and social categories. On the whole, Shyam Selvadurai presents a society with a mixture of conflicting

value systems. However, most of the historical fiction often reconstructs the political events, military conflicts, or nationalist struggles to show how colonial societies came about. But, the novelist, Shyam Selvadurai, adopts a very different method in his novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*; he chooses to describe drawing rooms, family conversations, matrimonial arrangements, and personal disagreements. In this way, it demonstrates that colonial control is not only offered by political order but daily family life as well. The house becomes a political place where power is exercised in addition to building identity and social categories.

II. MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

The most important thing about *Cinnamon Gardens* is the fact that the author of this novel does not portray marriage as simply a private or sentimental connection between those involved. Marriage is presented instead as an institution that assists colonial society in preserving its social order, rather couples do not usually take decisions about their marriage on their own, as their families arrange it in order to protect their dignity, wealth, and sense of belonging. Shyam Selvadurai remarks: "I saw it as a deliberate thumbing of her nose at the prospect of marriage. She might as well have joined a convent. They blamed her wilful, careless nature on both parents (*Cinnamon Gardens*, p.4). Therefore, marriage is shown just as a social institution that disguises itself as a private relationship. The wealthy families having ties with *Cinnamon Gardens* adopt marriage as a vehicle of their social stability. A successful marriage helps families improve their image and protect their property. The marital happiness of couples matters little because successful marriages are judged by their contribution to family reputation rather than happiness.

The author demonstrates that women are the primary victims of the institutionalized thinking presented in the novel *Cinnamon Gardens*. From a young age, they are raised in a way, in which their education is deemed necessary if it could help them find a husband. Their intellectual curiosity is only appreciated if it increases their social status, while any efforts aimed at establishing independence are regarded as unacceptable. This sense of conflict is demonstrated particularly through Annalukshmi's character. Unlike many young women around her, the idea of marriage is not her only significant future choice. The factor of education is an important part of her effort as it opposes the view that women's happiness is closely connected with household chores. Some of the scholars point out that Shyam Selvadurai's aspiration for education is not understood as any denial of family values, rather the author aims to gain the right to express herself outside the limits imposed on women of her position in the society. Accordingly, the critical question revolves around the meaning of marriage in society rather than the very institution of marriage.

Here Shyam Selvadurai explains how marriage serves as a way to preserve ethnic and class identities. Families look for partners with regard to such characteristics as education, background, religion, and position of a person in the hierarchy of society. Thus, family aspirations remain secondary to communal needs, which allows saying that family is an extension of the general colonial system. Marriage becomes a tool for transmitting privileges through generations and creating social boundaries. In shifting the

focus from the aspect of love to that of institutional authority, the novelist invites the reader to reconsider the concept of marriage. The work implies that the understanding of interpersonal affairs is impossible without acknowledgement of the political and cultural milieu. In this way, marriage emerges as a place where colonial power, patriarchy, and social ambitions meet, showing that the constant use of power by means of unnoticeable actions is preferred to overt acts of power.

III. MARRIAGE AS THE FAMILY HONOUR

A concept inextricably linked to marriage is family honor, which influences almost every crucial decision presented in the novel. Honor is portrayed not just as a conceptual moral idea but as a social quality that gives rank, approval, and authority in the elite circle existing in *Cinnamon Gardens*. It is expected that each member of the family will contribute to preserving this common reputation. Selvadurai demonstrates that family honor operates by means of constant supervision instead of direct coercion. Parents and other family members, as well as society members, watch the behavior of others, their conversations, their relationships, their education, and marital choice. Thus, the anxiety that roots from social judgment acts as a powerful mechanism of pressure, since people become aware of these expectations long before they meet them directly. Hence, monitoring becomes a part of everyday family life.

This culture of respectability is especially influential when it comes to women. Their behavior, hopes, and relationships are always judged with respect to their effect on the family's honour. Annalukshmi has to endure many requests that require her to be obedient, modest, and selfless. What is particular about her character is that she does not at all rebel against this situation but rather refuses to allow it to restrict her future. Her refusal to succumb to this culture is shown by her perseverance rather than open rebellion and is evidence of the fact that social change comes from little acts of selfishness. At the same time Selvadurai goes beyond portraying old family members as simply tyrants. Many believe that family reputation is important in order for family customs to survive in a hazardous colonial situation. Therefore, family conservatism stems from fear rather than evil. Through skillfully capturing these motivations Shyam Selvadurai blurs the traditional boundaries between oppressors and victims. Meanwhile, the patriarchy appears not only as an external system forced on people but as a deeply-rooted practice derived from love and fear of social exclusion.

Moreover, family reputation is yet another component of masculinity. Men are expected to be successful professionals, respectable husbands, and responsible family

leaders. Their social value may be assessed through their success in public life and their ability to maintain family reputation. Herewith, patriarchal norms work for both men and women, though the means of influence are different. The author indicates that being respectable is an invisible way of exerting power. Individuals control their actions because they fear they may disappoint their families and be excluded from society. By unveiling these subtle ways of domination, Selvadurai shows that oppression often happens not through force but on agreed assumptions also.

IV. MARRIAGE: A TOOL OF SOCIAL STABILITY

As the novel progresses, Annalukshmi symbolizes the pressure of patriarchy upon women, Balendran Navaratnam illustrates the pressure colonial society imposes on masculinity. That is why the author uses his character not only to emphasize his homosexuality but to show the psychological price one has to pay living in a society where a man's worth is determined by his marriage, social standing, and professional success. The struggle of Balendran illustrates the fact that patriarchy influences men as severely as it does women, albeit by means of different criteria. Shyam Selvadurai writes: "Her movements restricted, her thoughts and opinion suppressed in favour of her husband. Then there was the groom himself. His physical attributes were not wholly unpleasant (*Cinnamon Gardens*, p.43.).

The silence of Balendran constitutes an important technique of narration in the novel. Rather than openly stating his wishes, he serves the purpose which is expected from him by society and his family. His silence is not a coincidence and does not derive from individual motives, but comes from the cultural background where non-adherence to heterosexual norms threatens familial honor and approval in society. Therefore, Selvadurai manages to play with the notion of silence in a political sense, which makes what is left unsaid as meaningful as what is explicitly said in the work. A pressure is exerted not only from outside society but from the process of internalization of social expectations. After all marriage is seen as a symbol of stability and adulthood and personal achievement, which makes the refusal to marry morally wrong.

It is the reason, Balendran views the formation of his identity as an ongoing process of balancing between the truth concerning himself and social performance. His battles with himself show clearly that social acceptability often requires self-sacrifice rather than self-expression. Selvadurai also questions traditional masculinity through the character of Balendran. According to the profile of an ideal colonial gentleman, he has to be educated, successful,

emotionally balanced, and devoted to family life. These expectations preclude adequate emotional vulnerability or different sorts of closeness. Thus, the author suggests that patriarchal society undermines masculine identity by restricting it to gender roles that include socially approved practices. Balendran's case cannot be perceived as a mere misfortune for one individual. On the contrary, it demonstrates imperfections of a society that values conformity over authenticity. The inability of one person to state his needs mirrors the failure of colonial society to embrace identities that oppose established norms. Thus, through the analysis of masculinity, Selvadurai broadens the themes of postcolonial literature by showing that freedom means personal freedom in relationships as well as freedom from colonization.

V. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY AS CULTURAL IDENTITY

We know that Clarabella's marriage in *Cinnamon Gardens* does not take place independently of class and ethnicity. The elite families keep their riches as well as reputation and identity through familial ties. Marriages are arranged very carefully because they affect the family's future as a social category. In the text, class privilege is the basis for most crucial decisions. Education, occupation, mannerisms, and heritage affect the choice of a marriage partner. In this context, there is little place for love. Thus, Selvadurai shows that marriage is simply a means of passing privilege to the next generations.

Marriage is also shaped by the families' cultural aspect. In colonized Ceylon, there were numerous languages, religions, and cultures which gained their importance during the nationalist period. The marriage itself becomes a sign, which allows to keep the distinctions between those groups alive. In this regard, the great significance is Selvadurai's observation that colonial governance does not solely operate through the principles of power and control, as the indigenous elite are equally responsible for upholding such hierarchies. The residents of *Cinnamon Gardens* accept the colonial definition of sophistication while still fostering local traditions of patriarchy and exclusion. This indicates that colonial power is the result of cooperation and not only control.

Therefore, Annalukshmi and Balendran exemplify how such institutional actions influence human lives. The two characters express identities that transcend the ones constructed by their families and society as a whole. Annalukshmi's actions undermine the concept of the female identity, which is believed to culminate in marriage, while Balendran reveals the limitations of concepts of masculinity based on compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, despite

the differences between their rebellions, both characters highlight the impossibility of reducing identity to social roles imposed by patriarchal systems. Selvadurai emphasizes that the significance of domesticity includes marriage, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, thus spreading its importance beyond the domestic realm itself. Shyam Selvadurai remarks: "My mother has had such misery in her marriage because of religious differences (*Cinnamon Gardens*, p.74). Family relationships become the basis for the creation of more global offered societal structures. Basically, the author thinks that true social change means not only changing the constitution but also reexamination of the principles of daily life.

In the end, *Cinnamon Gardens* suggests that colonial societies sustain themselves through daily domestic activities rather than extraordinary political events. Marriage dialogue, family discussions, choices in education and unexpressed feelings together support power structure, which exists exactly because of its incorporation into their daily lives. The success of Selvadurai is that he shows that the private sphere is not outside of history.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The remarkable narrative style of Selvadurai in *Cinnamon Gardens* has to be accounted among its main merits. It constitutes a new way of looking at domestic life and is seen as a lens through which large-scale historical processes are examined. Instead of showing one main character, the novel presents a great number of overlapping stories that make it possible for the readers to see colonial society through several social and emotional perspectives. This multiplicity of perspectives shows that marriage, family, sexuality, and education are not separate things but rather interrelated spheres.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens* reinterprets colonial history and highlights the importance of marriage and family over public institutions. Contrary to the idea of having home life separate from politics, the text proves that home is one of the most central places for the colonial institution besides class privilege and gender discrimination. Marriage represents a cultural concept that regulates the notions of sexual attraction, inheritance, education, and mobility, and family is the institution which makes these concepts valid across generations.

This research considers marriage and family as ideological subjects, which extends the understanding of gender, sexuality, and postcolonial identity in contemporary research. It postulates that domestic life is key to understanding how, in colonial societies, people manage to remain in power and how they later start resisting it. In Selvadurai's fantasy, big changes do not happen because of

constitutional amendments or national strategies, but rather through changing relations between individuals.

Thus, *Cinnamon Gardens* continues to be relevant even now, twenty years after its publication, as it addresses the questions crucial for so many societies. The novel speaks about the necessity of finding a proper balance between individual freedom and family obligations as well as cultural identification in modern situations and the constant pursuit of balancing tradition and equality.

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