



## Gender and Women Rights in Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*

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### Abstract

“The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.”

-Virginia Woolf

Human beings are born equal and are endowed with equal abilities, but still the cry of women for a rightful place in society continues throughout the world. Social system considers women weak, lacking in cognitive and decision-making abilities. They are not merely treated subordinate but

are also kept aside in the race so much so that at times they are not even counted as humans. The man-made laws deny women of even the basic freedom to live with human dignity. Equality is her cry, as she searches for her rightful place in the human society. Women continue to remain the most exploited owing to their emotional, economic and social dependence in spite of an array of rights that women's groups have been fighting for and in spite of having got every right legally and officially sanctioned signifying equal opportunities irrespective of class, gender, race and sex. The paper attempts to confront the travails of Annalukshmi, a spirited woman who succeeds in etching a life of her own in a domineering patriarchy in Shyam Selvadurai's second novel, Cinnamon Gardens, whose life is a saga of women's rights movement in Sri Lanka, referred to as Ceylon in the 1920s

**Key Words:** Rights of women, equality, subordinates, domineering patriarchy.

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The status of women all over the world is a cause for grave concern. Women in all societies experience various forms of discrimination and oppression. Women are singled out for one form of oppression or the other. The diversity of women's needs and interests vary from basic survival to aspirations of power and prestige. These diversities hinder the collective participation of women in public life. In spite of the few progress made towards the emancipation of women, power remains a male prerogative, with men retaining economic, political and religious control. Women's space is restricted to the spheres of reproduction and household tasks. The public space is still limited to men and a few elite women. Centuries have come, and centuries have gone, but the plight of women is not likely to change. Time has helplessly watched women suffering in the form of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression,

humiliation. In Indian society, woman occupies a vital position and esteemed place. The Vedas glorified women as the mother, the creator, one who gives life and worshipped her as a 'Devi' or Goddess. But their glorification was rather mythical for at the same time, in a country like India women finds herself totally suppressed and subjugated in a patriarchal society.

By and large human rights in particular--signs and symbols of holistic human development and peace--signify human values in an absolute sense. The advancement of women and their fight for an equal place in society also come under the purview of human rights. That is to say human rights aim at social justice irrespective of the gender. Empowerment of women and equality of sexes are pre-requisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples. Any violation of rights concerning women, whether in public or in private, would invoke community's responsibility and accountability, and it shall be the obligation of the human community at large to acknowledge the fact that women are equally entitled to all human rights and freedom, including the freedom to live with dignity and without fear.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1948 adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights containing 30 articles based on the natural law of equality, in particular the ethical concept of the dignity of the human person which implies that human beings must be treated as ends in themselves and not mere means to ends. Right to human dignity is the most important and indispensable one for the enjoyment of the other rights of human life. Dignity is attached to the identity of a human being as an individual. When a human being does not enjoy the right to be an individual, dignity does not exist. The two principles, which flow from this ethical norm of human dignity, are the principles of 'individual freedom' and the 'equality of all human beings.'

The term 'equality' means an "environment where every person can enjoy his/her rights on the principle of non-discrimination based on natural or social categories such as colour, race and sex which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits." All international documents of human rights stress gender equality. *The United Nations Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Conventions for the Protection of Women and Children, on Human Environment and on Right to Development* reiterate the principle of non-discrimination as the basis for the achievement of human rights, that is the right to live with human dignity whether in public or in private.

The present paper focuses on Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens* studied from this perspective of denial of human rights with regards to women living in a conservative patriarchy. The narrative is set in 1927-28 Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka during the royal Donoughmore Commission's inquiry into the possibility of Ceylon's self rule. Set in this post independent Sri Lanka, *Cinnamon Garden*, deals with issues of ethnicity and religion with the introduction of Western political ideology. The narrative also offers a reflection on the unevenness of minority identities within the national community be it ethnic minorities, women, religion or sexual minorities. The narrative evokes the multifaceted world of Ceylon from the perspective of the powerful upper class of Colombo's wealthy suburb, Cinnamon Gardens, during a period when the colonial power was shifting. It also focuses on a society ruled by etiquette, rituals and ancient traditions that prescribe the ways of doing things; the teas, the dinners, the parties, the daily meetings and weekly excursions with the members of the family, the supervision of servants, chauffeurs and gardeners. While the women in constant fear of their husband's unpredictable mood swings are trying to find suitable husbands for their daughters, the men of Cinnamon

Gardens with few exceptions of English University graduates and high ranking officials are mostly engaged in preserving their crumbling worlds.

Amidst this bitter-sweet tale of intertwined lives is woven the life of the female protagonist—Annalukshmi Kandaiah—whose life runs parallel to the political changes in the colonial Ceylon. Annalukashmi is a grand-niece of the family patriarch, the powerful Mudaliyar Navaratnam, whose job is to help the British Government agents to carry out the colonial policies. Her mother Louisa Barnett, a strong willed matriarch, is forced to raise her daughters alone while her husband enjoyed his life with a mistress abroad. Annalukshmi's dilemma in the narrative is similar to the problem faced by most career women of the present day. A highly intelligent woman she knows what exactly she wants--career, money, independence, beauty, love, sex but does not really know how to beat the order to get them all.

In Annalukashmi society a career for a woman is a stigma. If at all, it is limited to teaching, a profession mostly reserved for those girls who are either too poor or too ugly to get a husband. The year 1927 marks a significant turning point in the history of Sri Lankan women activism. Till 1927 the women of the bourgeois elite are involved in public life restricted only to religious activities or meetings on the needs of working girls like the Girls Friendly Society of 1904, of which Sonia, an aunt of Annalukshmi is an active member. Deviating from the elitist practice, the twenty two year old Annalukashmi goes on to consider herself a “new woman” (5) challenging the gender roles, given her education and unconventional behaviour that challenges her societal gender conventions. Exploring Annalukshmi's ‘constraints’ (3) and her choices, the narrative highlights the turn of events in Sri Lankan history in 1927. The events charter the protagonist's course of life further augmenting her decision concerning career and marriage much to the chagrin of the women in Sri Lankan society, including her own mother. Through

Annalukshmi's struggle, reflective of the state of women's fight for liberation in Ceylon, the novelist brings to light the marginal roles of women in the Ceylonese society of the 1920s. Annalukshmi is considered over-educated even by women of her own class and her career including her relatives who consider her teacher's job the "greatest crime," (3). Instead of going to work in a rickshaw shaded by an umbrella that protects her from turning dark, Annalukshmi prefers to have the pleasure of bicycle ride which is against the "ridiculous conventions of society,"(9). This bicycle is a gift from a departing British teacher, Miss Blake to Lukshmi. As a new woman she was not "ashamed or afraid to ask for her share of the world," (5) and finds nothing wrong with the vision of Ceylonese women on a bicycle. But the society including her mother Louisa does not approve of her actions and dictate that "decent respectable girls don't ride bicycles." (7)

In spite of the society, including the women of her elite class, considering Annalukshmi's activities unfeminine and objectionable, 'bicycle' for Annalukshmi stands for freedom that she thought only the western women enjoyed. This is made clear in her talk with her sister Kumudini where she questions the tradition:

How will the women of this country ever progress? European women can ride bicycle and do all sorts of things because a few brave women made a start. (8)

For Annalukshmi riding the bicycle showcases her desire to be on par with European women:

The deliciously cool wind flapped against her sari crept underneath it. She pulled off her hat threw it into the wicker basket and rose in her seat. (17)

Such a sight astonished many of the Ceylonese including her own family for whom she appears, as put by Lukshmi's sixteen year old sister Manohari, "She looks just like a monkey on a bicycle and I'm sure people will pay us a lot of money to see her do tricks," (7). But Annalukshmi motivated by the ideology of British women, transgresses the patriarchal norms and definitions of her community. Her acts of rebellion reflect in the description of the bicycle that acts as objective correlative in the characterization of Annalukshmi:

It really was a very folly bicycle, the frame a shiny red. There were red, white and blue streamers at the ends of the handle bar, with corresponding colours on the seat. The wicker basket attached to the handle bar proudly displayed a Union Jack. (9)

Much before the bicycle had been gifted to her, Lukshmi was seen resorting to the Tirukkural, 'a great work of Tamil philosophy' (3) in describing her condition, "I see the sea of love, but not the raft on which to cross it." (3)

But this fear of Annalukshmi that her 'raft fate' (3) is burdened with the mores of the world is soon suppressed with the coming of bicycle as a gift from Miss Blake, enabling her to sail through the sea of opposition and secure a place for herself among the ranks of 'new women.' (Wickramagange, 130-140) But her public bicycle ride culminates into her getting marked as 'fast.' The chances of a good marriage for Annu and her sisters rest on Annu's reputation and regulation of her sexuality and gendered behaviour. The educated elite class of Ceylon to which Annalukshmi belongs is concerned about maintaining the dignity and respect that might bring them the right to sovereignty.

Gender and women's rights as part of nation-building that we see in the narrative can be looked from the point of emancipation of women and their rights. In this context, Annalukshmi's character is reflective of the role played by women-groups during the Donoughmore Commission's hearing. Through a debate about the vote for women, the narrative showcases issues related to women's franchise. Annalukshmi attends a meeting with her aunt Philomena, where she listens to speeches made by historical figures like Mary Rutnam and Agnes de Silva in support of the vote for women. She even gets to hear of a Tamil nationalist leader, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanatham's reservations with regards to the vote for women and lower castes as: "against our great Tamil tradition. The purity, the nobility, the modesty of women would be ruined if they are given vote." (118)

Even Annalukshmi's aunt Philomena favours the opinion of this national leader who feels that Tamil reputation is at stake and regards that, "Only manly women get involved in men's affairs. Normal women think of their husbands and of their homes and nothing else." (117) The position of women in the narrative is quiet contrary to that stated by the 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the first world-wide international treaty in which State Parties have undertaken a legal obligation concerning the exercise of political rights by their citizens and in which the principle of equal rights of men and women has been emphasised. The Preamble to the Convention exposes the desire of the State Parties to implement the principles of equality of rights for men and women and further recognises that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country either directly or indirectly and has right to equal access to public services in their country. It is the stated intention of the Contracting Parties to equalise the status of men and women in the enjoyment and exercise of political rights, in accordance with the provisions of the Charter and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Under this, the substantive provisions of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women are to the following effect:

1. That women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination;
2. That women shall be eligible for election to all publicly elected positions, established by national law on equal terms with men, without any discrimination; and
3. That woman shall be entitled to hold public office and to exercise all public functions established by national law on equal terms with men, without any discrimination.

The General Assembly in 1963 extended the prohibition to discrimination with regard to political rights on the grounds of sex under Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states that every citizen should have the rights and the opportunities without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or status and without unreasonable restrictions (I) to take part in the conduct of public affairs either directly or indirectly (II) to vote and to be elected at periodic elections, which is by universal and equal suffrage and is held by secret ballot; and (III) to have access, on general terms of equality, in public service to his country.

It is the women's franchise union that highlighted the inequality between the gender in terms of voting rights and paved way between male leaders and their female counterparts in Ceylon, and for the first time gender is considered a factor that brought in difference between men and women of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie. Here it can be said that it is the vote that enabled

women to turn into active citizens of the country. Sonia, Annalukshmi's aunt observes, "Many laws relate to women and children and it is only rights that they should have some say in those laws." (117)

The position of women relegated to supporting roles in the narrative proves that gender has an important place in nation-building and that nation and nationalism can be thought of as a series of boundaries in time and space dividing people in nation-building on similar lines as ethnic groups and ethnicity.

However, there are many instances of patriarchal values influencing gender relations in the Ceylonese society and women in their central roles as mothers and economic producers often have to comply to the male dominance however impractical it may be. Murugasu's letter to his wife Louisa informing her of Annalukshmi's marriage in one such instance that speaks of subordinate gender roles as well the status of a girl-child in the Ceylonese society of the 1920s:

The way the letter begins--"*Wife*,"--makes Louisa frown at its peremptory tone. It reads:

Prepare Annalukshmi to get married. The young man in question is Muttiah, my nephew, Parvathy Akka's son." Louisa leant forward and went over this sentence again, unable to believe what she had just read. (41-42)

After reading the letter Louisa gasps in disbelief. The proposal she thinks is the final blow to their 'crumbling marriage' (42) for in deciding the daughters' marriages, Murugasu is demeaning her own marriage to him, "This is a slap in my face. He might as well take me out into the street by my hair and spit on me, such is the insult." (42)

In the father's treatment of Annalukshmi one finds the fate of a girl-child. The ruthlessness of the father towards the daughter makes Louisa flee to Malaya fearing the safety of the daughter. The physical violence meted out to the daughter is so harsh that even after Annalukshmi enters adulthood, Louisa still hears:

Annalukshmi's scream of pain when Murugasu pulled her by her hair and slapped her. All ostensibly because Annalukshmi had not swept the drawing room. Yet Louisa later found out that the real cause of violence was the severing of the bond between father and daughter ever since Annalukshmi had seen Murugasu coming out of a Hindu temple and known that her parent's marriage was falling apart.

(43)

Similarly women in Ceylon were also victims of covert gender based violence. Annalukshmi's struggle for independence and her resisting an arranged marriage by her father foregrounds what the General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence as an "act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts of coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in private or public life." Annu's father Murugesu tries to marry her off to his nephew in a traditional arranged marriage. His tone in the telegram, "Wife prepare Annalukshmi to get married...", (41) shows Murugesu's patriarchal dominance over the daughter and the mother. To the freedom loving Annalukshmi marriage is a difficult proposition because in the colonial Ceylon of this period, marriage meant giving up career which in turn would mean losing one's financial independence. Annu tells Nancy who feels no strong objection to marriage:

Think of how much one has to give up in marriage. Stuck at home all the time. No money of your own. Always having to ask your husband. And what if he is the jealous type forbids you to leave home or thrashes you? (95)

Despite such feminist analysis of marriage, Annalukshmi is seen driven by the desire for a companion within a heterosexual contest. Annu with her preference for freedom, as symbolised by the bicycle, is seen in search of an ideal partner of her choice. This desire of hers for anonymous young male suitors leaves Annu with three potential suitors Mr Jayaweera, Chandran Macintosh, and Dr Govind/ Seelan to choose from. Of these Annalukshmi rejects Mr Jayaweera, her school accountant who proposes to marry her, while with Chandran Macintosh though Annalukshmi was swept off her feet with:

...his thick, curly hair that made him look like he had just got out of bed, his rather large nose. He was not wearing a shirt under his smock and, through the white cotton, she could make out the hair on chest, the darkness of his nipples. (297)

His statement:

Marriage would mean family,” he said, leaning forward. “And family would mean I’d have to give up what I loved and get a proper job. Some boring appointment in the civil service. (298)

Wouldn’t allow her another step forward and, “She did not know which way to go.” (298). But at the same time we see Annalukshmi never giving up her desire to frame her life in terms of

romance and marriage. Annalukshmi shouts at her mother when she hears her photograph has been sent to the prospective groom's family:

I did not agree that a photograph be sent. What am I.... a piece of furniture? It is outrageous that a complete stranger should be looking at my photograph, passing it around to his friends and relatives as if I were some souvenir. (119)

Towards the end of the narrative Annalukshmi tentatively falls in love with a Bombay-based medical doctor Dr Govind/Seelan, who happens to be Balendran's nephew. Disapproval from family including her mother and the Mudaliyar looms large. Mudaliyar's words:

Thangachi," he cried to Annalukshmi and the other girls. "Do you realize this man is an imposter? This ... this man is no Dr Govind. He is Seelan, the son of my son Arulanandan. (361)

Louisa words to Seelan, "I must ask you to leave my house. Have you no decency coming to visit my daughters in my absence," (361). Shows her fear for her daughter's interest in a Hindu boy. Sri Lankan women be they Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim are considered the reproducers, nurtures and disseminators of 'tradition', 'culture', 'community' and 'nation,' as may be the case with women in most other countries. De Mel observes:

"The emerging nation" required women to be "guardians of its culture," demonstrating traditional cultural elements that Colonialism had de-emphasized, including but not limited to women's clothing.

Annalukshmi showcases the failure of even the anticolonial nationalist movements in placing gender in the concept of sovereignty:

The bid for self-rule did not promise to provide her with any greater freedom, an amelioration of her position as a woman they had not already been achieved under colonial rule. (115)

The Annalukshmi seen at the end of the narrative is still not decided what her role in history should be. She is doubtful of the varied options before her. This is made clear in her words to Balendran:

Everything is changing, Bala Maama, I don't really know what I'm going to do."

Her face became stern. "But when I do decide, I will do it. (383)

This statement shows her enthusiasm towards life and her yearning to tread new paths. Annalukshmi desires to take up a teaching appointment at a Hindu school in Jaffna, in spite of family opposition. This choice of her will enable her to move away from the bastion of affluence and social prestige that Cinnamon Gardens had become in colonial times, and she would be opting to teach at a Hindu school, not a Christian school, as she herself had suffered from the double standards of Christianity in her bid to go up the hierarchy of teaching. At the close of the narrative this is the Annalukshmi we find, confident to reject the old world and go her way.

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