

Negotiating Identity, Power, and Colonial Modernity in *Cinnamon Gardens*: A Postcolonial and Intersectional Feminist Study

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<p>Received: 26 May 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Jun 2025; Accepted: 25 Jun 2025; Available online: 30 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— identity, power, modernity, social expectations.</p>	<p><i>Shyam Selvadurai's Cinnamon Gardens (1998) reconstructs colonial Ceylon as a site of layered tensions where modernity, reform, and tradition coexist uneasily. This paper re-examines the novel through postcolonial and intersectional feminist frameworks, arguing that Selvadurai exposes colonial modernity as structurally contradictory: while it promises progress, it simultaneously sustains hierarchies of class, gender, and sexuality. By focusing on Annalukshmi's pursuit of autonomy and Balendran's repression of queer desire, the novel foregrounds the lived realities of individuals negotiating rigid social expectations. Incorporating textual analysis, this study demonstrates how Selvadurai destabilizes dominant historical narratives and re-centers marginalized experiences. Ultimately, the novel reveals that modernity under colonial rule produces not liberation, but reconfigured forms of constraint.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Set in 1920s Colombo, *Cinnamon Gardens* captures a society in transition, shaped by colonial governance and emergent nationalist discourse. The narrative unfolds within an elite social enclave, symbolizing privilege and exclusion, where reformist aspirations coexist with deep-seated conservatism.

Rather than presenting history as a narrative of inevitable progress, Selvadurai complicates the idea of modernization. The novel illustrates that institutional reforms do not necessarily dismantle social inequalities. As one observes in the text, elite characters often “spoke of progress while clinging to privilege,” revealing the

selective nature of reform.

The central characters – Annalukshmi and Balendran – embody different forms of resistance and constraint. Their personal dilemmas illuminate how identity is shaped within intersecting structures of power. This paper argues that *Cinnamon Gardens* critiques colonial modernity by exposing its exclusions and by foregrounding voices that are often silenced within official histories.

II. COLONIAL MODERNITY AND ELITE CONTRADICTIONS

Selvadurai's portrayal of colonial modernity resists

celebratory interpretations. While Western education and political reform introduce new possibilities, they remain accessible primarily to the elite. The Mudaliyar class, positioned as intermediaries between colonial rulers and local populations, benefits disproportionately from these changes. The novel reveals the hypocrisy of this class through its resistance to universal franchise. Although advocating reform, elite figures fear the democratizing potential of mass participation. This contradiction is evident when political discussions are framed less as ethical commitments and more as strategies for maintaining influence.

Selvadurai subtly exposes this tension through narrative detail. The elite inhabit spaces marked by comfort and exclusivity, yet their conversations betray anxiety about losing control. The description of *Cinnamon Gardens* as a “world apart, insulated from the realities beyond its borders” underscores this separation.

Thus, colonial modernity emerges not as a transformative force, but as a system that reorganizes inequality. Reform becomes a means of preserving power rather than redistributing it.

III. GENDER AND THE LIMITS OF FEMALE AGENCY

Annalukshmi’s narrative arc foregrounds the constraints placed upon women within both colonial and indigenous patriarchal systems. Despite her education and aspirations, she is repeatedly reminded of her prescribed role within the domestic sphere. Her ambition to become a school principal challenges societal expectations. At one point, her determination is articulated through her quiet defiance: she “refused to imagine her life confined within the narrow walls of marriage.” This moment encapsulates her resistance to normative femininity. However, Selvadurai avoids portraying this resistance as uncomplicated. Annalukshmi’s choices are shaped by familial obligations and social pressures. Her agency is therefore negotiated rather than absolute.

The novel also highlights how patriarchy is internalized.

Female characters themselves sometimes reinforce restrictive norms, illustrating that oppression operates through cultural conditioning as well as institutional structures. Miss Lawton, as a progressive figure, offers an alternative vision of womanhood rooted in independence and education. Yet even this model is limited by the broader social context, which remains resistant to change. Through these layered portrayals, Selvadurai demonstrates that feminist resistance in colonial contexts is both necessary and constrained.

IV. QUEER IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CONFORMITY

Balendran’s storyline introduces a deeply significant exploration of queer identity within a historical South Asian setting. His relationship with Richard Howland represents a space of emotional authenticity that stands in stark contrast to societal expectations. Yet this authenticity cannot be sustained. Balendran’s internal conflict is poignantly captured in moments where he recognizes that his desires must remain hidden. He reflects on the impossibility of living openly, acknowledging that “certain truths could not be spoken without consequence.”

This silence is not merely personal but structural. Social norms dictate what can and cannot be expressed, effectively rendering queer identities invisible. Balendran’s eventual decision to conform to heterosexual expectations illustrates the cost of this repression.

Importantly, Selvadurai does not frame this as individual failure. Instead, it is presented as the inevitable outcome of a society that prioritizes conformity over authenticity. The tragedy lies not in Balendran’s choices, but in the conditions that constrain them.

By situating queer identity within colonial history, the novel challenges the notion that such identities are modern or external to South Asian contexts. It reveals a history of presence and suppression that complicates dominant narratives.

V. INTERSECTIONALITY: CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND POWER

The experiences of Annalukshmi and Balendran are shaped not only by gender and sexuality but also by class and ethnicity. Selvadurai's narrative demonstrates how these factors intersect to produce complex forms of privilege and marginalization.

Annalukshmi's position as a Tamil woman within a stratified society highlights this intersection. While she benefits from education, she is also subject to ethnic and gender-based limitations. Her mobility is thus simultaneously enabled and restricted.

Similarly, Balendran's elite status does not grant him freedom from social expectations. On the contrary, it intensifies the pressure to conform, as his behavior is closely tied to family reputation.

The novel also gestures toward broader social inequalities, particularly in its depiction of labor unrest and class divisions. The struggles of the working class remain largely invisible to the elite, reinforcing the idea that privilege often entails a lack of awareness.

Through this intersectional lens, *Cinnamon Gardens* reveals that oppression operates through interconnected systems rather than isolated categories.

Nationalism and Political Ambiguity

The political context of the novel is marked by debates surrounding constitutional reform. While these debates signal a move toward self-governance, Selvadurai complicates their significance. The elite's ambivalence toward universal franchise reflects a broader tension within nationalist movements. Their desire for autonomy is tempered by a reluctance to relinquish control.

This contradiction is evident in the selective nature of reformist discourse. Political leaders emphasize progress while resisting measures that would democratize power. As a result, nationalism appears less as a unified movement and more as a contested process shaped by competing interests.

Selvadurai also hints at emerging ethnic tensions, suggesting that the roots of later conflicts lie in this

period of uneven reform. By embedding these tensions within the narrative, the novel offers a historically grounded critique of nationalism.**6. Narrative Strategy and Historical Rewriting**

Selvadurai's narrative approach combines realism with critical reinterpretation. By focusing on individual experiences, he challenges the abstraction of historical discourse.

The use of multiple perspectives allows for a more inclusive representation of society. Rather than privileging a single viewpoint, the novel presents a mosaic of experiences that reflect the complexity of colonial life.

This strategy aligns with postcolonial efforts to recover marginalized voices. By centering characters like Annalukshmi and Balendran, Selvadurai reorients historical narrative away from elite dominance.

The integration of personal and political dimensions further enhances this effect. The novel demonstrates that history is not merely a sequence of events but a lived experience shaped by power relations.

VI. CRITICAL EVALUATION

One of the notable strengths of *Cinnamon Gardens* is its ability to engage with multiple themes without reducing them to simplistic narratives. While some critics argue that this breadth dilutes the novel's focus, it can also be interpreted as a reflection of historical complexity.

Selvadurai's nuanced characterization ensures that no single perspective dominates the narrative. This multiplicity enriches the text, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of colonial society.

Moreover, the novel's emphasis on marginalized identities represents a significant contribution to postcolonial literature. By foregrounding voices that are often excluded, it expands the scope of historical fiction.

VII. CONCLUSION

Cinnamon Gardens offers a profound critique of colonial modernity, revealing its contradictions and exclusions. Through its exploration of gender, sexuality, class, and

nationalism, the novel demonstrates that progress is neither uniform nor universally accessible.

Annalukshmi's and Balendran's narratives illustrate the complexities of negotiating identity within restrictive frameworks. Their experiences highlight both the possibilities and limitations of resistance.

Ultimately, Selvadurai's work challenges readers to reconsider dominant narratives of history and to recognize the enduring impact of colonial structures. By foregrounding marginalized voices, *Cinnamon Gardens* transforms historical fiction into a space of critical engagement and reinterpretation.

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