

Marriage, Family, and Social Expectations in Shyam Selvadurai's Cinnamon Gardens: Domestic Institutions and the Making of Colonial Identity

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received in revised form: 17 Jul 2023; Accepted: 22 Aug 2023; Available online: 27 Aug 2023 ©2023 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/).  Keywords— Marriage, Family, Colonial Modernity, Postcolonial Feminism, Gender, Identity, Patriarchy.	<i>Shyam Selvadurai's Cinnamon Gardens (1998) interrogates the relationship between private life and public ideology by presenting marriage and family as institutions through which colonial society organizes power, gender, and identity. Set in Colombo during 1927–1928, the novel depicts a historical moment in which British colonial modernity intersects with indigenous traditions, producing tensions between individual aspirations and communal expectations. This paper argues that Selvadurai relocates the politics of colonialism from governmental institutions to the domestic sphere, where marriage, kinship, and family honour become mechanisms for regulating women's autonomy, masculine identity, and social mobility. Rather than treating marriage as a romantic union, the novel exposes it as a cultural practice that preserves class privilege, ethnic respectability, and patriarchal authority. Through a close reading of Annalukshmi's educational aspirations and Balendran Navaratnam's concealed sexuality, this study demonstrates that personal relationships function as sites where competing ideas of tradition, modernity, and selfhood are negotiated. The article further contends that Selvadurai neither idealizes tradition nor celebrates colonial modernity; instead, he reveals the contradictions embedded within both systems. By foregrounding the everyday negotiations of domestic life, Cinnamon Gardens offers a subtle yet powerful critique of colonial social structures and redefines the family as a contested space in which resistance emerges through education, ethical choice, and emotional honesty. The novel ultimately suggests that lasting social transformation begins not in political institutions alone but within the intimate relationships that shape individual identity.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Historical fiction frequently reconstructs political events, wars, and nationalist movements to explain the making of colonial societies. Shyam Selvadurai adopts a markedly different strategy in *Cinnamon Gardens*. Instead of placing governors, political leaders, or constitutional reforms at the centre of the narrative, he turns to drawing rooms, family conversations, marriage negotiations, and private conflicts. In doing so, he demonstrates that colonial power is sustained not only through political institutions but also through everyday domestic practices. The household becomes a political space where authority is exercised, identities are shaped, and social hierarchies are reproduced.

Set in Colombo during the late 1920s, *Cinnamon Gardens* captures Ceylon at a moment of profound transition. Expanding educational opportunities, debates about women's rights, constitutional reforms, and the emergence of nationalist consciousness challenge inherited assumptions regarding gender, family, and social status. Yet these changes do not dismantle existing structures of authority. Instead, Selvadurai portrays a society negotiating competing value systems in which Victorian morality, colonial administration, indigenous customs, and elite social ambitions coexist in uneasy balance.

The title of the novel itself is significant. *Cinnamon Gardens* is more than an affluent residential district; it symbolizes the social world inhabited by the English-educated elite whose lives appear orderly and respectable but are sustained by strict codes of conduct. Behind carefully maintained appearances lie conflicts over sexuality, education, marriage, and personal freedom. Selvadurai repeatedly exposes the distance between public respectability and private desire, suggesting that social stability often depends upon silence rather than harmony.

Marriage occupies a central place within this carefully regulated society. It is not represented primarily as a union based upon emotional compatibility but as a cultural institution that protects lineage, property, class prestige, and communal identity. Families evaluate prospective marriages according to education,

wealth, ethnicity, and social reputation, revealing that matrimonial alliances function as instruments of collective rather than individual interest. The novel therefore questions the assumption that marriage is an exclusively private matter. Instead, it becomes a mechanism through which society disciplines both women and men.

Women experience these expectations most visibly. Their education, mobility, friendships, and public behaviour are measured against their perceived suitability for marriage. Annalukshmi's determination to pursue higher education unsettles this logic because it proposes a model of womanhood that cannot be fully contained within domestic expectations. Her intellectual ambition does not reject family life; rather, it questions why marriage should determine the limits of female identity. Selvadurai's treatment of her character demonstrates that resistance often begins with the refusal to accept inherited definitions of fulfillment.

Male identity is likewise subjected to powerful forms of regulation. Through Balendran Navaratnam, the novel reveals that patriarchal culture also imposes restrictive expectations upon men. His concealed homosexuality illustrates how masculinity is defined through marriage, professional success, and public respectability. Balendran's emotional conflict is not simply psychological; it exposes the social costs of maintaining an identity constructed for the approval of others. His silence reflects the pressure exerted by family honour and elite respectability, demonstrating that domestic institutions regulate masculine identity as rigorously as they regulate women's lives.

What distinguishes *Cinnamon Gardens* from many postcolonial novels is its refusal to construct a simple opposition between colonial modernity and indigenous tradition. English education offers opportunities for intellectual growth while simultaneously reinforcing colonial cultural authority. Traditional family structures provide emotional continuity but also reproduce patriarchal inequality. Selvadurai therefore presents history as a process of negotiation rather than replacement. His characters inhabit

overlapping cultural worlds in which modern aspirations coexist with inherited obligations.

II. RESEARCH GAP AND CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Critical studies of *Cinnamon Gardens* have predominantly examined the novel through the frameworks of postcolonial nationalism, queer identity, and gender politics. Scholars have demonstrated how Selvadurai interrogates colonial masculinity, sexuality, and ethnic identity, making the novel an important contribution to Sri Lankan English literature. While these studies illuminate crucial aspects of the text, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the institutional role of marriage and family in organizing colonial social life.

This article addresses that gap by arguing that marriage and family constitute the primary ideological structures through which colonial society reproduces authority. Rather than treating domestic life as merely the background for political events, Selvadurai presents the household itself as the place where colonial power acquires everyday legitimacy. Marriage regulates inheritance, sexuality, education, and communal identity, while family honour transforms personal decisions into matters of collective concern.

Accordingly, this paper advances three interconnected arguments. First, marriage in *Cinnamon Gardens* functions as a cultural institution that safeguards patriarchal authority rather than individual happiness. Second, family relationships operate as mechanisms through which class privilege, ethnic respectability, and gender norms are reproduced across generations. Third, acts of resistance emerge not through dramatic political rebellion but through intimate decisions concerning education, emotional integrity, and personal identity.

Reading the novel from this perspective reveals that Selvadurai's critique extends beyond colonial government to the domestic institutions that sustain unequal social relations. *Cinnamon Gardens* ultimately suggests that meaningful social transformation begins when individuals renegotiate the values governing marriage, family, and everyday human relationships.

III. MARRIAGE AS COLONIAL DISCIPLINE

One of the most striking features of *Cinnamon Gardens* is Selvadurai's refusal to portray marriage as a purely private or emotional relationship. Instead, marriage operates as a disciplinary institution through which colonial society preserves its social order. Decisions concerning marriage are rarely left to the individuals directly involved; they are negotiated by families seeking to protect reputation, wealth, and communal identity. In this sense, marriage functions as a public institution disguised as a private union.

The elite families of *Cinnamon Gardens* regard marriage as an investment in social continuity. A suitable marriage reinforces family prestige, safeguards property, and maintains carefully constructed class boundaries. Emotional compatibility receives little attention because the success of a marriage is measured by its contribution to family honour rather than individual happiness. Selvadurai thereby exposes the economic and political dimensions of domestic life, revealing that matrimonial alliances often reproduce the very inequalities that colonial society claims to civilize.

The novel repeatedly demonstrates that women bear the greatest burden of this institutional logic. Their conduct is monitored from childhood, and their education is valued only insofar as it improves their marriage prospects. Intellectual curiosity becomes acceptable when it enhances refinement but unacceptable when it encourages independence. Selvadurai subtly critiques this contradiction by showing that education is welcomed as a symbol of prestige while intellectual autonomy is perceived as a threat to patriarchal authority.

This tension becomes particularly evident through Annalukshmi. Unlike many young women around her, she refuses to regard marriage as the only meaningful future available to her. Her aspiration for higher education is significant because it challenges the assumption that female fulfilment is inseparable from domestic responsibility. Importantly, Selvadurai does not present her ambition as a rejection of family values. Instead, she seeks the freedom to define herself beyond the narrow expectations imposed upon women of her class. Her struggle

therefore questions the social purpose of marriage rather than the institution itself.

Selvadurai also illustrates how marriage serves as a means of preserving ethnic and class identities. Families evaluate prospective spouses according to education, lineage, religion, and reputation, transforming marriage into a mechanism for maintaining communal boundaries. Individual desire is repeatedly subordinated to collective expectations, suggesting that the family functions as an extension of the wider colonial order. Marriage therefore becomes one of the principal ways through which privilege is inherited and social difference is reproduced.

By shifting attention from romance to institutional power, Selvadurai invites readers to reconsider the meaning of marriage itself. The novel suggests that domestic relationships cannot be understood independently of the political and cultural structures that shape them. Marriage becomes a site where colonial authority, patriarchy, and social ambition intersect, revealing how power is sustained through everyday practices rather than extraordinary acts of domination.

IV. FAMILY HONOUR AND THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

Closely connected to marriage is the concept of family honour, which governs nearly every significant decision within the novel. Honour is presented not as an abstract moral principle but as a social currency that determines status, acceptance, and influence within the elite community of *Cinnamon Gardens*. Every member of the household is expected to contribute to the preservation of this collective reputation.

Selvadurai demonstrates that family honour operates through constant observation rather than overt force. Parents, relatives, and members of the community monitor behaviour, conversation, friendships, education, and marriage choices. The fear of public judgment becomes a powerful means of regulation because individuals internalize these expectations long before they openly challenge them. Surveillance is therefore embedded within ordinary family life,

making control appear natural rather than oppressive.

Women's lives are particularly shaped by this culture of respectability. Their movements, ambitions, and relationships are evaluated according to their potential effect on family reputation. Annalukshmi repeatedly encounters expectations that require obedience, modesty, and self-sacrifice. What makes her character remarkable is not open rebellion but her quiet refusal to allow these expectations to determine the limits of her future. Her resistance is expressed through persistence rather than confrontation, illustrating that social change often begins through gradual acts of self-assertion.

At the same time, Selvadurai avoids depicting older family members simply as authoritarian figures. Many sincerely believe that preserving family honour is essential for protecting cultural continuity in an uncertain colonial world. Their conservatism emerges partly from anxiety rather than cruelty. By presenting these motivations sympathetically, Selvadurai complicates conventional binaries between oppressors and victims. Patriarchy appears not merely as an external system imposed upon individuals but as a deeply internalized cultural practice reproduced through affection, duty, and fear of social exclusion.

Family honour also shapes masculine identity. Men are expected to become successful professionals, respectable husbands, and responsible heads of households. Their value is measured through public achievement and their ability to uphold family prestige. Consequently, patriarchal expectations discipline men as well as women, although the forms of regulation differ. This broader understanding allows Selvadurai to portray patriarchy as a comprehensive social system rather than a structure affecting only female experience.

The novel therefore reveals that respectability functions as an invisible form of power. Individuals regulate themselves because they fear disappointing their families or losing social acceptance. By exposing these subtle mechanisms of control, Selvadurai demonstrates that domination often survives through consent rather than coercion.

V. ANNALUKSHMI AND THE REIMAGINING OF FEMALE AGENCY

Among the novel's central achievements is its portrayal of female agency as a process of negotiation rather than outright rebellion. Annalukshmi represents a generation of women who inherit traditional expectations yet imagine possibilities beyond them. Her character embodies the tension between filial responsibility and personal aspiration, making her one of the novel's most significant figures of social transformation.

Education occupies the centre of Annalukshmi's struggle. She views learning not merely as preparation for marriage but as a means of developing intellectual independence. Her desire to continue her education reflects a broader search for selfhood. Selvadurai carefully avoids presenting education as a simple rejection of cultural tradition. Instead, it becomes a space where inherited beliefs may be questioned, refined, and reinterpreted.

Several conversations involving Annalukshmi reveal this evolving consciousness. Rather than openly rejecting marriage, she repeatedly asks whether marriage should define the entirety of a woman's existence. These moments shift the debate from individual preference to social expectation. The issue is no longer whether she will marry but whether marriage should determine the boundaries of female identity. By framing the conflict in this manner, Selvadurai transforms a domestic disagreement into a broader critique of patriarchal culture.

Equally important is Annalukshmi's relationship with other women. Female conversations within the novel frequently create spaces where experiences, frustrations, and aspirations can be shared more openly than in mixed company. These exchanges generate forms of solidarity that challenge patriarchal authority without requiring dramatic confrontation. Selvadurai suggests that collective reflection among women constitutes an important source of social change because it enables alternative understandings of family, education, and fulfillment to emerge.

Annalukshmi's agency is therefore ethical as much as political. She neither abandons her family nor embraces an idealized Western individualism. Instead, she seeks to redefine

family relationships through mutual respect, education, and dialogue. This nuanced position distinguishes Selvadurai's feminism from narratives that equate liberation solely with rejection of tradition. His emphasis lies instead on transforming domestic relationships from within.

Through Annalukshmi, *Cinnamon Gardens* proposes that resistance is often gradual and deeply personal. Small acts of questioning established expectations can initiate broader cultural change because they challenge the assumptions upon which patriarchal authority depends. Her journey demonstrates that education is valuable not simply because it provides knowledge but because it enables individuals to imagine lives beyond inherited social scripts.

Consequently, female agency in the novel is neither absolute nor complete. It remains a continuous process of negotiation between personal desire, family responsibility, and social expectation. By portraying this complexity, Selvadurai offers a realistic vision of women's lives in colonial Ceylon while affirming their capacity to reshape the institutions that seek to define them.

VI. BALENDRAN AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

If Annalukshmi represents the novel's interrogation of patriarchal expectations imposed upon women, Balendran Navaratnam reveals the pressures that colonial society places upon masculine identity. Selvadurai uses Balendran not merely to represent homosexuality but to expose the emotional cost of a social order that measures a man's worth through marriage, public respectability, and professional success. His struggle demonstrates that patriarchy disciplines men as rigorously as it disciplines women, although it does so through different expectations.

Balendran's silence is one of the novel's most significant narrative strategies. Rather than openly expressing his desires, he performs the role expected of him by his family and society. This silence is neither accidental nor purely personal; it is produced by a culture in which

deviation from heterosexual norms threatens family honour and social acceptance. Selvadurai therefore transforms silence into a political language. What remains unspoken reveals as much about colonial society as what is openly articulated.

The pressure upon Balendran originates not simply from external authority but from the internalization of social expectations. Marriage represents stability, adulthood, and masculine success, making refusal or deviation appear morally unacceptable. Consequently, Balendran experiences his identity as a continuous negotiation between private truth and public performance. His emotional conflict illustrates how respectability often demands self-denial rather than self-expression.

Through Balendran, Selvadurai also questions conventional definitions of masculinity. The ideal colonial gentleman is expected to be educated, professionally accomplished, emotionally controlled, and devoted to family life. These expectations leave little space for emotional vulnerability or alternative forms of intimacy. The novel therefore suggests that patriarchal culture impoverishes masculine identity by reducing it to performance and social approval.

Balendran's predicament should not be interpreted merely as an individual tragedy. Instead, it exposes the limitations of a society that values conformity more highly than authenticity. His inability to articulate his desires reflects the broader inability of colonial society to accommodate identities that challenge established norms. In this respect, Selvadurai broadens the scope of postcolonial fiction by demonstrating that liberation must include freedom within personal relationships as well as freedom from colonial rule.

VII. COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF DOMESTIC LIFE

The historical setting of *Cinnamon Gardens* is crucial to understanding its representation of marriage and family. The novel unfolds during a period when Ceylon was experiencing significant constitutional, educational, and cultural change. Rather than portraying these developments as a

straightforward transition from tradition to modernity, Selvadurai emphasizes their contradictions. Colonial modernity expands opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing existing hierarchies.

English education provides the clearest example of this paradox. It introduces liberal ideas concerning reason, self-development, and public participation, yet it also functions as a marker of elite privilege and colonial prestige. Families enthusiastically support education when it enhances social status, but they become apprehensive when education encourages independent thinking that challenges patriarchal authority.

Annalukshmi's educational aspirations illuminate this contradiction. Her desire to continue her studies is welcomed only to the extent that it enhances her marriage prospects. Once education begins to redefine her understanding of female identity, it becomes a source of anxiety for her family. Selvadurai thus demonstrates that education possesses transformative potential precisely because it encourages critical reflection rather than passive acceptance.

Colonial modernity also reshapes family relationships by introducing competing systems of value. Traditional obligations remain influential, while new ideals of personal freedom and individual choice gradually emerge. Characters find themselves negotiating between these competing moral frameworks rather than choosing one over the other. This historical complexity distinguishes the novel from narratives that celebrate modernization as inevitable progress.

Selvadurai's treatment of colonial modernity is therefore remarkably balanced. He neither romanticizes indigenous traditions nor idealizes Western liberalism. Instead, he reveals how both systems contain possibilities for liberation as well as mechanisms of exclusion. This nuanced perspective allows the novel to explore historical change without reducing it to simplistic oppositions.

VIII. CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND THE DOMESTIC PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

Marriage in *Cinnamon Gardens* cannot be understood independently of class and ethnicity. Domestic relationships become the means through which elite families preserve not only wealth but also social distinction and communal identity. Matrimonial alliances are carefully negotiated because they determine the future stability of the family as a social institution.

Class privilege shapes nearly every significant decision within the novel. Education, occupation, manners, and lineage all influence the selection of marriage partners. Romantic attachment remains secondary to considerations of reputation and status. Selvadurai therefore reveals that marriage functions as an institutional strategy through which privilege is transferred from one generation to the next.

Ethnic identity similarly influences family decisions. Colonial Ceylon consisted of multiple linguistic, religious, and cultural communities whose boundaries became increasingly important during the nationalist period. Marriage acquires symbolic significance because it preserves these communal distinctions. Families fear that unsuitable marriages will weaken inherited identities and diminish collective respectability.

Importantly, Selvadurai demonstrates that these hierarchies are maintained not only by colonial administration but also by the local elite. The residents of *Cinnamon Gardens* adopt colonial ideals of refinement while simultaneously preserving indigenous forms of patriarchy and social exclusion. Colonial power therefore operates through cooperation as much as domination. Families become active participants in sustaining unequal structures because social prestige depends upon preserving established distinctions.

The experiences of Annalukshmi and Balendran reveal the human consequences of these institutional practices. Both characters seek forms of selfhood that exceed the expectations assigned to them by family and society. Annalukshmi questions the assumption that female identity culminates in marriage, while Balendran exposes the inadequacy of definitions

of masculinity founded upon compulsory heterosexuality. Although their struggles differ, both demonstrate that identity cannot be reduced to the social roles imposed by domestic institutions.

By linking marriage with class, ethnicity, and sexuality, Selvadurai expands the significance of domestic life beyond the household. Family relationships become the foundation upon which broader political and cultural structures are built. The novel therefore argues that genuine social transformation requires not only constitutional reform but also a reconsideration of the values governing everyday human relationships.

Ultimately, *Cinnamon Gardens* suggests that colonial society reproduces itself through ordinary domestic practices rather than extraordinary political events. Marriage negotiations, family conversations, educational choices, and emotional silences collectively sustain systems of power that appear natural precisely because they are embedded within daily life. Selvadurai's achievement lies in revealing that the private sphere is never isolated from history; instead, it is the place where history is continually lived, contested, and transformed.

IX. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND SYMBOLISM

A significant strength of *Cinnamon Gardens* lies in Selvadurai's narrative method, which transforms domestic life into a lens through which larger historical processes become visible. Rather than following a single protagonist, the novel interweaves multiple narrative strands, allowing readers to observe colonial society from different social and emotional perspectives. This polyphonic structure reinforces the central idea that marriage, family, sexuality, and education are interconnected rather than isolated concerns.

The setting of *Cinnamon Gardens* itself functions as an important symbol. As Colombo's most prestigious residential neighbourhood, it represents privilege, refinement, and colonial respectability. Yet beneath its carefully ordered exterior lie emotional repression, unequal power

relations, and unspoken anxieties. The neighbourhood therefore becomes a metaphor for colonial society: outwardly stable and civilized, but internally sustained by silence, conformity, and rigid social hierarchies.

Selvadurai also employs silence as a recurring narrative motif. Characters frequently suppress their emotions in order to preserve family honour or social acceptance. Balendran's inability to articulate his desires and Annalukshmi's cautious negotiation of her ambitions illustrate how silence becomes a strategy of survival within patriarchal society. These moments reveal that power often operates not through explicit commands but through the internalization of social expectations.

Education carries equally rich symbolic significance. For the younger generation, it represents intellectual freedom and the possibility of imagining alternative futures. Yet it also reflects the influence of colonial institutions that privilege English culture and values. Selvadurai deliberately preserves this ambiguity, suggesting that education can both challenge and reproduce structures of authority. Its meaning depends upon how individuals choose to employ the opportunities it provides.

The restrained narrative voice further strengthens the novel's realism. Selvadurai avoids simplistic moral judgments, presenting even conservative characters with empathy and psychological complexity. Older family members are shown as products of their historical circumstances rather than one-dimensional representatives of patriarchy. This balanced characterization encourages readers to understand social institutions as historically produced systems rather than the result of individual malice alone.

Through these narrative strategies, *Cinnamon Gardens* transcends the conventions of historical fiction. The novel demonstrates that private relationships are inseparable from political history and that the most enduring forms of power frequently operate through ordinary domestic practices.

X. CONCLUSION

Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens* reimagines colonial history by shifting attention from public institutions to the intimate world of marriage and family. Rather than treating domestic life as separate from politics, the novel reveals that the household is one of the principal sites through which colonial authority, patriarchy, class privilege, and ethnic identity are reproduced. Marriage emerges as a cultural institution that regulates desire, inheritance, education, and social mobility, while family becomes the mechanism through which these values acquire legitimacy across generations.

This study has argued that Selvadurai's most significant intervention lies in exposing the political character of everyday domestic relationships. Annalukshmi's pursuit of education and Balendran's struggle with his concealed sexuality demonstrate that individual identity is continuously negotiated within structures of family obligation and social expectation. Their experiences reveal that resistance does not necessarily take the form of open rebellion; it may also emerge through intellectual aspiration, ethical self-awareness, emotional honesty, and the refusal to accept inherited definitions of gender and fulfillment.

The analysis further suggests that colonial modernity in *Cinnamon Gardens* is neither wholly liberating nor entirely oppressive. English education, legal reform, and new social ideas create opportunities for personal growth, yet these developments coexist with enduring structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and communal respectability. Selvadurai therefore resists simplistic narratives of progress, presenting history instead as a process of negotiation in which competing value systems intersect within everyday life.

By foregrounding marriage and family as ideological institutions, this article offers a perspective that complements existing scholarship on gender, sexuality, and postcolonial identity. It demonstrates that domestic life is central to understanding how colonial societies maintain authority and how individuals begin to challenge it. In Selvadurai's fictional world, meaningful transformation originates not only in constitutional reform or

nationalist politics but also in the quiet reconfiguration of human relationships.

More than two decades after its publication, Cinnamon Gardens continues to resonate because it addresses questions that remain relevant across many societies: the relationship between personal freedom and family obligation, the negotiation of cultural identity in changing social contexts, and the continuing struggle to reconcile tradition with equality. Selvadurai's novel ultimately affirms that the transformation of society begins with the transformation of the values governing everyday life, making Cinnamon Gardens an enduring contribution to postcolonial literature and contemporary debates on gender, family, and identity.

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