

# CONFORMITY AND CONFLICT: READING IDENTITY IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY AND CINNAMON GARDENS

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## Abstract

The pressure to conform to the needs of the majority has a profound impact on the identity of an individual. Individuals are often forced to conform to behavioral codes that are deemed 'right' or 'acceptable' by the majority. This often results in conflict. Failure to conform, on the other hand, would result in the victimization and the ostracization of an individual by the group. This article focuses on Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* and his projection of identity. Selvadurai's books project the effects of forced conformity on the identity of an individual and the damage that can result from it.

**Keywords:** Conformity, Conflict, Identity, Sri Lankan Literature, Shyam Selvadurai

## Introduction

Home, for many Sri Lankans, is no longer their country of origin. To flee the political, religious and racial aggressions that have consumed their home country, many Sri Lankans have migrated to countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.<sup>11</sup> Among these are writers who now find themselves in the distinctive position of being able to write about their original homeland, Sri Lanka, from an external perspective while being very much Sri Lankan in identity. Writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunsekera are two such well-known Sri Lankan writers who have carved out esteemed positions for themselves within the world of letters. Joining this league of prestigious expatriate writers is a new, brilliant writer called Shyam Selvadurai.

Shyam Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He spent most of his adolescence there and is familiar with the cultural and personal conflicts plaguing Sri Lanka till today. He is of mixed Tamil and Sinhalese background, is a Christian, and is also, openly, gay. All of these could pose problems for any individual let alone a Sri Lankan resident. In Sri Lanka, same-sex relationships are a criminal offence punishable by 12 years imprisonment. Although cultural and legal sanctions are still in place against homosexuality in Sri Lanka, Selvadurai's liberal family accepted his "coming out" with equanimity. He moved to Toronto, Canada with his family at the age of nineteen after the 1983 riots in Colombo. The 1983 riots often referred to as 'Black July'<sup>2</sup>, provides the historical and personal background for his first novel *Funny Boy*. Selvadurai, who has studied creative writing and journalism, has a B.F.A. from York University, Toronto.

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*Funny Boy*, published to immediate acclaim in 1994, won the W.H. Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award. Apart from the United States and the United Kingdom, *Funny Boy* has also been published in India, and in numerous countries in Europe. His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* (2000), was also published internationally with editions in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Europe, and was also translated into six languages. It was short-listed for Canada's Trillium Award, the Aloa Literary Award in Denmark, and the Premio Internazionale Riccardo Bacchelli in Italy. *Cinnamon Gardens* examines the conflicting ideals of two generations within two Tamil families against a backdrop of shifting colonial influence and the ebbing of the British Empire in 1920s Ceylon. The narrative also examines issues of coming to terms with one's self and culture. The story is set in Cinnamon Gardens, a comfortable enclave of gentility and colonial wealth in Colombo, Sri Lanka (formerly the Crown Colony of Ceylon). Selvadurai is also the editor of an anthology entitled *Story-wallah: A Celebration of South Asian Fiction* (2004). His last published work to date, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2001), is a novel for young adults. Like most Asian-Canadian writers<sup>3</sup> Selvadurai positions himself outside his adopted country. His work does not deal with questions of identity and assimilation of the Asian subject in Canada but, instead, looks back to his original country as a location for his fictional works. Selvadurai acknowledges that as a writer, this distance from Sri Lanka is a gift. "Like a lot of immigrant writers I find that a homeward pull inhabits my creative mind, that it is the capturing of the world I left behind that haunts my imagination. Yet, without the isolation from that world, without the act of migration, I wonder if *Funny Boy* would have ever been written" (Smith). His works are often set in the past and frequently deal with elements of history and political crisis in Sri Lanka. *Funny Boy* is set in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, in the seven years leading up to the bloody riots that erupted in 1983 between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Hindu minority Tamils. It was because of these very riots that Selvadurai's parents decided that there was no future for the family in their home country and relocated to Canada.<sup>4</sup> Like his own family, the characters in *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* are from upper middle class families – highly educated people who were property owners and held positions of importance in their society. This group of people who left their homeland also left behind their wealth and status for an unknown future, very similar to the writer's own experience: "It was hard for us to leave Sri Lanka, hard to leave the place that has always been, in our hearts, home" (Smith) asserts Selvadurai, who was 19 when he emigrated.

In his writings Selvadurai pushes the West to the periphery and focuses on what he sees as the more important story of Sri Lanka. We encounter the many conflicts faced by the protagonists as they struggle with their gender, sexual and cultural identities, and illusions of romance. Together with the characters we are swept into the social and racial tensions between different groups of people, the Burghers and the Sri Lankans, and the Tamils and the Sinhalese. As the plots unfold we are held privy to the social and political realities of those specific times. The issues in focus are the unique notions of history, culture, heritage and identity among the different groups of people who lived in Sri Lanka and called it home. The recounting of the lives of the Ceylonese<sup>5</sup> communities before they left their homeland is pushed to the forefront as a truly special period of their lives; of a space in a past, of home, with all that it stands for and all that it lacks – a place that holds a very specific meaning to them. To further emphasize the reality of his plots, Selvadurai uses

authentic historical events as a backdrop in both his texts. In *Funny Boy* for example, his portrayal of Arjie Chelvaratnam's growing up years in Colombo is set against the political tensions leading up to the 1983 riots. Almost all the action takes place in Sri Lanka, with Canada being mentioned briefly at the beginning and at the end of the novel and referred to as a place of refuge for the Tamils who were being driven out of the country. Yet Arjie, the narrator, looks back fondly at his childhood:

Those spend-the days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada. (*FB*<sup>6</sup> 5)

By focusing on Sri Lanka, and in the process relocating centres and redrawing boundaries in his novels, Selvadurai images his homeland, Sri Lanka, beyond the narrow perimeters of a poor third world country from which the protagonist must flee in order to have a better life. Sri Lanka, instead, becomes a site of intrigue, fantasy, and desire; a location that evokes pleasant memories and warmth in contrast to the more prevalent images of a war torn country in conflict. This offers readers other insights into the cultural space and history of Sri Lanka and thus brings a global perspective to the otherwise narrowly defined parameters of hyphenated identities of Asian-Canadians. This hyphenated status is seen as a marker of one's belonging to two worlds, of one's hybrid identity, and also as a marker of non-belonging to the mainstream culture.

The richness and potential of being in this unique hyphenated space of the hybrid identity of belonging to none and yet belonging to all is a theme that runs through Selvadurai's works. For him, this hyphenated space holds a special significance: "that marvelous open space represented by the hyphen, in which the two parts of my identity jostle and rub against each other like tectonic plates, pushing upwards the eruption that is my work. ... from a double-visionness, a biculturalism" (*SW 2*).<sup>7</sup> He goes on to assert, "biculturalism becomes the site of great excitement, of great marvel, the very source of my creativity. It is from this space in-between, represented by the hyphen, that I have written Canadian novels set exclusively in Sri Lanka. For though the material may be Sri Lankan, the shaping of that material and the inclusion, for example, of themes of gay liberation or feminism are drawn from the life I have lived in Canada. It is from the clash of these cultures, which occurs in the space between, that the conflicts of my plot arise" (*SW 2*).

The general premise in Selvadurai's novels is how individuals negotiate differences. These include issues of conflict and conformity that result from these differences and their effect on the individuals' identities. Selvadurai's novels explore how individuals from the majority groups perceive those who are different and who do not conform to their ways and beliefs and how these individuals who do not conform to group expectations cope with their position in these in-between spaces. Selvadurai's position on these issues is prevalent in both of his novels in the manner in which his characters are positioned and the discourse that runs through his work. Selvadurai perceives the in-between space as "a marvellous open space" (*SW 2*) and he presents it as an independent space to be recognised and acknowledged, a third space<sup>8</sup> that is distinguished as a location for opportunity that opens up and broadens horizons. To him, it is not merely a marginal

space in the periphery, but a space that is central and this, to Selvadurai, is a strategic vantage point.

Selvadurai decentralizes the stereotypic and monolithic representations of homosexuals in Sri Lanka, making us aware of their identity as separate and in “a space of always becoming” (Hall 393). His novels are an exemplar of how the identities of individuals are negotiated daily as being not fully male, female or Sri Lankan. Their identities are constantly shifting, contradictory, and dynamic as opposed to being in a state that is static and permanent. Selvadurai evokes descriptions of a space in which there is an exchange and relentless mixing between roles and rules. His characters in the in-between spaces are often able to move deftly and tacitly from one position to the other, negotiating ambivalence and challenge as they encounter them, finding refuge, however briefly, in one space or the other. Their location is unique as they do not hold on to one position for long and this allows for the constant ebb and flow of identity. In both *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* this third space is both distinctive and workable.

The third space for Selvadurai, hence, is not solely an in-between space, but one where there is a constant intermingling between spaces — not a totally separate sphere but one that embraces both sides. Selvadurai portrays identity as something that is fluid and ever changing, which cannot be categorised according to rigid lines of demarcation. Hence, it is not “pure, eternal and fixed” (SW 3) but is one which constantly grows and evolves. In other words this third space is not merely a marginal space set apart from the centre but rather a space that creates opportunities, which promote something different, new and previously unidentified. This idea helps define the identity of those individuals in the middle spaces and gives voice to their being. His characters that are wedged in the middle space have identities that are ever changing, flexible, complicated, and paradoxical. The result is characters who have identities that are at once simple and complex, lucid and dense.

Both *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* are a study of behavioural patterns of individuals and how they are influenced by those around them. This in turn affects the identity of these individuals. The change in behavioural patterns of an individual in accordance to that of the group which the individual belongs to can be viewed in two very distinct ways: that of private acceptance and that of compliance. In Selvadurai’s novels private acceptance is most apparent in the female characters who accept their position and role within the family and society without question. This category of individuals accept and acknowledge the social roles and behaviour expected of them however unfair or inferior these roles may be. In fact, it is these very women who take on the role of agents of society and exert the most pressure on those women who are seen not to conform to the principles of their social groups. In his novels we see mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and even the neighbourhood ladies taking on the role of social watchdogs.

Group pressure is something Selvadurai is very familiar with. As a homosexual living in a society like Sri Lanka that has zero tolerance for same sex relations and considers homosexuality as an abnormality, the pressure to conform was always there for Selvadurai. In such a conservative society, the social stigma attached to being a homosexual intensifies the feeling of fear, guilt and shame in the individual although Selvadurai was lucky enough to have supportive parents who acknowledged and accepted him for who he

was, thus reducing the pressure to conform from within the family although the pressure from society was always prevalent. His move to Toronto, Canada also provided him with the freedom to live his life as he wanted to without being judged as an outcast or a social pariah. As he states in an article from the August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003 issue of the *Time* magazine, he and his partner, Andrew, bought a house in Toronto that to him was "an abiding physical symbol of our relationship." The social scene and acceptance of sexual minorities in Toronto was a vast contrast to the holiday Selvadurai and Andrew took in Sri Lanka where they were interrogated and even had their house searched by the army. At the end of this particular episode, Selvadurai declares in the same article, "What I was raging against was a notion that had been coming to me for a while. In this country that I still considered my home, I could never be at home. Andrew and I were never again completely at ease in our own house."

Compliance, on the other hand, is manifested in Selvadurai's novels by characters who fulfil the demands of society at the expense of their personal desires and ambitions. From the social psychological perspective, individuals who find themselves in the in-between spaces feel acute anxiety and stress due to the existence of distinct boundaries or other markers of separation. The dire effects of boundaries and the demands they place on individuals are also explored in Selvadurai's novels. The fear of being labelled as deviant and victimised by the group is an ever-looming threat and the need to comply in order to be accepted often ends with these individuals not really being true to themselves. These individuals experience pain, self-doubt and, for some, shame for their true identity. As seen in his novels, the pain and misery experienced by the characters is enough to show the destructive nature of segregation. Not only do borders keep individuals within the confines of a particular social and cultural space, they thwart any outside influence from penetrating their confines. The identity of an individual is hence moulded by the expected codes of behaviour and social norms within that limited space. In both *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* the influence of family in getting its members to conform to its principles is striking. Individuals' behaviour and attitudes change as they interact with other individuals within that group and the tactics used to achieve conformity range from gentle words of persuasion to outright threats.

For Selvadurai, although this manner of polarization is not something new it is, nevertheless, deeply flawed. Having borders means having distinct markers of separation. Those who are similar group together and construct borders around themselves. These similarities can be seen in many aspects be it place of origin, race, religion, gender or ideologies. The question Selvadurai demands to be addressed though is the status of individuals who do not belong to any particular group. In the process of exploring the identities of those in the third space and the conflicts faced by individuals trying to fit into the expected norms of society and culture, both *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* tackle issues of racial conflict (both Tamil/Sinhalese and Ceylonese/British) and the trials of being a homosexual in conservative Sri Lanka. In Selvadurai's novels we journey with the characters as they face the turmoil and confusion of their complex identities. Balendran in *Cinnamon Gardens* is one such individual. He complies with his father's wishes but steals out to indulge in homosexual activities in the middle of the night. Arjie in *Funny Boy* is no different. He is pressured to comply with manners deemed suitable for a male in the games he plays and the company he keeps. Just like Balendran and Arjie, the characters of the Mudaliyar and Annalukshmi in *Cinnamon Gardens* and Radha and Jegan in *Funny Boy* belong to this group of troubled individuals who form the core of Selvadurai's novels.

It is against this social psychological strain mentioned above that Selvadurai invites us to explore the position of these individuals, not simply as people who do not belong to any group but as individuals who are able to transgress boundaries and who ultimately are able to move freely and, hence, be their true selves.

Selvadurai attempts to shift the focus from identity politics that necessitate group formations such as being male, Sri Lankan, or Christians towards principles of difference and individuality where differences are celebrated and acknowledged and, as such, moves away from a static and dualistic worldview. Rigid borders and boundaries within families, societies and the nation are revealed in both texts. These borders and boundaries are seen to be set with the intention of confining and developing exclusive groups of race, status or gender. The quest to attain exclusivity is not simple. It demands conformity from its members; failure of which would result in victimization and expulsion from that particular group. In both texts we see how characters who do not conform are victimised and in the worst scenario expelled from the group as in the case of Arul, the Mudaliyar Navaratman's<sup>9</sup> eldest son. Nevertheless, they survive and find a space for themselves even in their state of in-betweenness. For Selvadurai, this idea of grouping and forming boundaries is very limiting and problematic. It requires inflexible labelling, rejecting and putting down others in the process of elevating oneself. As he puts it,

All colonial societies, in their struggle for independence and the forming of a new nation, reshape and redefine their identity. This drive for a cultural identity involves the establishment of a collective, essential self that is shared by people with a common ancestry and common history. This essential identity is seen to be unchanging, eternal; it provides a common frame of reference to a newly emerged nation. The goal of these new nations, released from colonialism, is to bring to light this identity that has been suppressed and distorted and disfigured by the colonial masters, to express this identity through a retelling of the past. At the core of this restored identity lies the idea that, beyond the mess and contradictions of today, is a resplendent past whose existence, when it is discovered, will restore a people as a culture, as a society. ...My problem in embracing this notion of an essential, pure cultural identity was that its contradictions almost immediately bedeviled me. Where does someone like me .....fit in? My opposition ... is against the notion of a pure, eternal, fixed Sri Lankan identity. The very idea of a pure essential culture that had led to the rise of both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism and violence – the inability of both communities to accept that they shared a crossbred culture where there was more in common than different; the insistence by each that their culture was superior; the refusal by each to acknowledge that we are a little nation to whose shores, over the centuries, have come the winds of other cultures that have been integrated into what was now being hailed as a pure culture. I could not ignore that it was this notion of purity that had ultimately brought such violence to my family and forced us out of Sri Lanka. (SW 3)

It is this demand for purity and exclusiveness for group membership that Selvadurai challenges in his work. There is enough evidence in his novels to show that he finds this need as a source of destruction and misery as opposed to that of the hyphenated space which he is so articulate about and sees as a position of growth and potential. Selvadurai asserts his standpoint on these issues by not portraying the sexuality and gender of his characters in the in-between spaces in a negative manner but by depicting it as a natural state of evolving. Even though non-heteronormative<sup>10</sup> sexualities are alluded to in both of Selvadurai's work,

in neither novel is this sexuality explicitly named. He does not use phrases like "gay," "homosexual," or "transgender" in reference to the main characters or to categorize and label their sexual tendencies and preferences. By freeing his characters of these limiting, descriptive tags, Selvadurai appeals for alternative implications of the situation, often representing his characters as excluded and beyond the categories of merely male or female. His penchant to place his main characters in a nameless middle space, wedged in between demarcated sexual and gender boundaries, very much mirrors his own cultural and ethnic location. Just like him, Arjie in *Funny Boy* and Balendran and Annalukkshmi in *Cinnamon Gardens* inhabit an exclusive space outside the 'normal' gender and sexual location in their societies. In this aspect it would be useful to locate Selvadurai's work within a postcolonial perspective.

In his introduction in *Story-Wallah*, Selvadurai stresses that the rise of both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism and the subsequent violence in the country is due to the idea and need for a pure, essential Sri Lankan culture and identity. It is the obsession in trying to retain this form of purity and the insistence by each party that their culture is superior that prevent both communities from accepting the fact that they share a crossbred culture. In an interview in *Quill and Quire*, Selvadurai states that,

In the 1920s people were saying, okay, Ceylon is a multicultural society, a mosaic, and we can't use a British system, a Whitehall<sup>11</sup> system here. Even the British were saying this. The Donoughmore Commission, from outside, was saying this. They said, we have to come up with a different system. And they did. It's the refusal to understand the complexity of a society that causes it to fall apart. Today in Sri Lanka, people know this is a fact, but they're unable to resolve things, they're unable to find a political system that reflects this (Stephen).

On a more personal level, Selvadurai emphasizes that he has come to realize that the pure sense of being Sri Lankan is 'based on rigid heterosexual and gender roles' (SW 4), a site which offers him no space. Hence, the conflict of being both gay and Sri Lankan and living out this combination of identities is important to him. It is a theme that is explored in all his novels.

Both Selvadurai's novels, *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens*, are set in his native Sri Lanka where the focus on group happiness and harmony is given priority over the needs of the self or the individual. An examination of the history of conformity in America and Asian cultures over the past few decades reveals that the extent to which an individual is willing to conform is determined, largely, by the culture that the individual belongs to. Selvadurai himself has stressed that his move to Canada has brought him freedom such as he could never have experienced had he stayed on in Sri Lanka. Being gay in Toronto does not hold the same negative connotations as it does in an Eastern country like Sri Lanka. Selvadurai explains the difference:

You see when you're living in the West, you don't really understand the enormous courage it takes somebody like Balendran to live the life he lives. They don't win battles, or court cases, or anything like that. I think *Cinnamon Gardens*

is about personal courage and liberation. But I couldn't really understand that courage until I was in Sri Lanka with my partner, trying to live as a gay couple in a society like that. The enormous cost, the enormous energy, the day-to-day fear, the problems (Stephen).

In Asian cultures, conformity is associated with the positive outcomes of harmony, connectedness and collective living while in Western culture it is often associated with the positive outcomes of freedom, independence and individuality. Hence, conformity is represented as an outcome most preferred by Asians unlike uniqueness, which is the preferred goal by Americans (Kim & Markus 786). In 'individualistic focused' countries like the United States, personal goals are regarded of higher importance and priority than group goals whereas the opposite is true of collectivistic countries (Bond & Smith 113). This tendency of focusing on group goals above individual wants and needs in order to attain group harmony and collective happiness in Asian societies, for all its benefits, can be fatal for those who are different from the collective norm. As Selvadurai himself, has experienced during his visit to Sri Lanka, the deviant has to change or move away and find a place in a more tolerant community.

Both Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* show how characters are forced to conform, to fit in and follow the norms and unwritten rules of the society that they are members of. We see characters struggling to find their place and the conflicts they experience and the sacrifices that they make in order to be accepted. In both novels we see issues of conformity dictated by various aspects. Characters are expected to conform to gender roles and codes of behaviour. Expected male and female behaviour traits and codes of conduct form rigid guidelines for members of society to adhere to. Conformity in society is also demanded in the areas of sex and marriage where heteronormative male-female relationships, marriage and children are seen as right and normal while same sex relationships are seen as deviant and a sickness that needs to be cured. A third aspect of conformity in Selvadurai's novel deals with issues of race and the idea of conformity to maintain the purity of race. Issues of race relations can be looked at from two distinct aspects of purity. Firstly, conformity is demanded to maintain purity within the race, that is, purity of a particular class and caste. Issues deal with conformity in areas of marriage to members within one's own caste or social group in order to maintain purity and, consequently, the status quo of that particular group. Secondly, conformity is essential to achieve purity of that whole race, thus inter-racial relationships are discouraged. We see characters from different races, mainly the Ceylon Tamils and the Sinhalese, who are romantically involved in the novels and the reaction of their communities to these relationships. Each group shows its superiority and condemns the other as being inferior.

### **Funny Boy**

Selvadurai weaves an intricate web of a narrative in *Funny Boy*, his delicate yet potent first novel that concerns itself with issues of innocence lost, family conflict, political realities, racial hatred, and sexual identity. *Funny Boy* directly addresses the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka by setting its story in the events leading up to the 1983 riots. Conflicts targeting Tamils broke out in Sri Lanka in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, but the most serious attack began in July of 1983 after the Tamil Tigers<sup>12</sup> killed thirteen soldiers in Jaffna, in the north of the

island. *Funny Boy* is also an extraordinarily powerful and compassionate tale of a boy's coming-of-age that confounds expectations of love, family, society and country. It deals with ideas of conformity and identity in a profound way. The novel follows the life of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a sensitive boy growing up in a typical upper-middle-class Tamil family in Colombo, from the late 1960s to the 1983 riots. The escalating political tensions on the island impinge on the young boy as he struggles with his sexuality, authoritative structures, and his relationship with his family.

In *Funny Boy*, Arjie Chelvaratnam's fresh, exuberant voice carries us along to idyllic Sundays where his vivid imagination wins him the honour of playing the main character in his female cousins' game called *bride-bride*. It is during these childish games that Arjie experiences feelings of total happiness and of being completely elevated, as he puts it, "by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full-length mirror — by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rogue put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, khol around my eyes — I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (4). This sets him off on his journey of trying to understand his identity of 'difference', of looking for answers and trying to understand the conflicts within him when forced to adhere to societal expectations. In *Funny Boy* too, we share the experiences of Arjie during the hellish Sinhalese-Tamil riots of 1983, when Arjie and his family sleep in their shoes so they can swiftly flee their homes and we share their terror when they hear knocks on their door at night. It is through his eyes that the story unfolds and we meet a delightful and sometimes eccentric cast of characters. Arjie's journey from the luminous simplicity of childhood days into the more intricately shaded world of adults, with its secrets, its injustices, and its capacity for violence, is a memorable one. Time and time again the true longings of the human heart are held back because of the way things are. We encounter characters like Radha Aunty, who has to give up love due to societal prejudices and even Arjie's mother who has to hide her feelings for Daryl Uncle due to society's disapproval towards such friendships. The novel follows the progress of Arjie from childhood through adolescence in six chapters that work like interrelated stories. In the early chapters of *Funny Boy*, Arjie is obsessed by ideas of romance, love, and marriage. This interest, which governs most of his childhood, leads him to discover and understand more serious aspects of his life, such as his homosexuality and the political tension in his homeland, as he grows older and becomes more mature.

### **Cinnamon Gardens**

Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*, on the other hand, is set in the gracious, repressive, patrician world of upper class Sri Lankan Tamils of the 1920s; a period of political struggles for the Sri Lankan people as they sought independence from the British. The title of the novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*<sup>13</sup>, refers to the residential enclave of the wealthy, upper class Ceylonese. This is a world where a young woman's destiny is a good marriage and a man's private desires are suppressed, held secret so as to preserve the appearance of the status quo and to honour his wife and child, however high the personal stakes. Two characters in the novel parallel each other. Annalukshmi, a young school teacher and the daughter in a middle-class Christian Tamil family and her uncle, Balendran, the obedient son of an aristocratic and wealthy landowner, the domineering patriarch Mudaliyar Navaratam. Both Annalukshmi and Balendran, strive to conform to the society that they belong to at the expense of their personal wants and needs.

able to rectify. As the Mudaliyar puts it in reference to his son, Arul and his grandson, "they were irrevocably lost to him, his son by his marriage, his grandson by the blood he carried in him" (CG 218). Thus, Seelan becomes an outsider. To emphasise this point, Selvadurai places the character of Seelan lurking on the fringes of the family estate and at the entrances and near "the gates of the family home, Brighton, looking in" (CG 307).

From a wider perspective, Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* can be seen as a microscopic view of the island nation of Sri Lanka. The conflicts faced by individuals who are deemed the minority and the manner in which they are victimized is reflective of Sri Lanka as a whole. In a multi-ethnic country like Sri Lanka where racial and political tensions run high, problems arise in the refusal of the various groups to acknowledge others and their differences. Through his novels, Selvadurai demonstrates the importance of acknowledging differences without suspicion and hostility. His novels are realistic in their portrayal of the suffering of individuals who are rejected simply for being different from the majority. The 1983 riots in *Funny Boy* and the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission in *Cinnamon Gardens* provide an effective backdrop for Selvadurai's ideas. Hybridity, voids, and in-betweenness — all of these have to be acknowledged and accepted in order for peace to prevail. Selvadurai's message is clear, closures and classifications have to be rejected in favour of a more 'open' society where every individual has to be given the space to be what he or she is. "(Sri Lanka) is already in a thousand pieces," Balendran said. "Like an Arabian mosaic. Take one tile out and you might ruin the entire design." (CG 63)

His work puts forward a growing perception that in this global era, identity has acquired a fluidity attained from free movement that no longer can be harnessed to a specific location. Selvadurai's work on hyphenated identities, interrupted identities and multiculturalism, in essence, queries the concept of a fixed, essential identity. He has repeatedly stressed 'in betweenness' as a 'marvellous open space' (SW 1) that provides a platform for growth and enrichment of the self. It is this unique space that provides opportunities for growth, for freedom in development and movement. By not being a member of any one group, one, ironically, is a member of every group. In *Funny Boy*, we see how the character of Arjie, while not able to conform to group demands, develops a fluidity of character that enables him to move across boundaries and be taken into confidence by the different groups of people around him i.e. Radha Aunty, Daryl Uncle, Jegan, Shehan and even his own mother. His young aunt Radha always allows him to go with her when she meets her Sinhalese boyfriend, Anil. He is also privy to all that goes on between his mother and her former lover, Daryl, even to the point of accompanying her to look for Daryl when he goes missing. The young Tamil rebel, Jegan, also shares his thoughts with Arjie although this would put himself at risk of exposure. Hence, although lacking in pure group traits, Arjie possesses traits that are more universal and an openness that is refreshing unlike the suffocating and stifling demands of group conformity. He is neither judgmental nor condemnatory and accepts people for what they are.

## Conclusion

For Selvadurai, the identity of an individual cannot be tailored and fashioned according to the needs of the majority. The catastrophic consequence of doing so is shown over and over again in his novels. We are what we are. This needs to be understood and acknowledged. People have to realize that to force compliance would only bring about one of two things,

In this novel, we witness how Annalukshmi and Balendran transgress sexual norms of the day and the resulting consequences of their actions. Annalukshmi goes against the norm when she refuses to be married off easily and Balendran earns the wrath of his father when he is discovered in a homosexual relationship with an Englishman during his student days in England. The novel runs through the course of a year during which time Annalukshmi finds herself caught between her family's pressures that she should marry and her own desire for a more independent life — a life she sees reflected in her mentor, Miss Lawton, a progressive headmistress. She discovers, however, that Miss Lawson's life is fraught with complexities and rigid rules. Balendran, on the other hand, is aware of the consequences of conforming and also of breaking away from the clutches of social expectations. His life is thrown into turmoil when he learns that Richard Howland, a former lover from his university days in London, will be coming to Colombo for the Donoughmore Commission<sup>14</sup> hearings. Balendran's encounter with Richard throws open the secrets of Balendran's past. Balendran begins to re-examine his life and his identity and this reignites tensions with his father as it threatens to destroy everything on which he had built his present life: his marriage, his status and his position as heir to his father's empire. As Balendran's relationship with Richard plays itself out, heightened tensions and conflict lead to one confrontation after another. Apart from this, Balendran also witnesses the effect of his brothers' decision of breaking away from social conformity and the consequence of this decision on those who love him.

The stories of Annalukshmi and Balendran are similar in that they both explore issues of conformity and identity development. Apart from the fact that both characters have family homes in the posh residential area of Cinnamon Gardens and are related to each other as most upper-caste wealthy Tamil families are, both characters are faced with social pressures to conform. However, as seen in the text, both Annalukshmi and Balendran deal with the social pressures that follow their transgressions quite differently. Unlike Balendran, Annalukshmi displays tremendous strength of character in her ploys and determination to stave off a fate as a domesticated wife. Much of the comic irony in the novel comes from her efforts to thwart the elaborate plans of her mother, Louisa and her aunt, Philomena. Balendran, unlike Annalukshmi, adheres to his father's wishes and conforms to the social norms of the day and breaks off his relationship with Richard Howland, whom he loves. He marries his cousin Sonia and returns to Ceylon and his family inheritance. Balendran is also a foil to his elder brother, Arul, who is disowned by their father when he decides to marry Pakkiam, the daughter of the maid. The Mudaliyar's double standards are exposed when Arul tells Balendran of their father's lust for Pakkiam. Arul then leaves with Pakkiam and lives in exile in Bombay. Thrown out of the family for his deed and denied his inheritance except for a monthly allowance his father sends him, Arul lives in a squalid neighbourhood, but he is happy with his family. They have a son, Seelan, who is a doctor. Seelan is often pictured on the perimeters of the family circle, looking in, an outsider facing the consequences of his father's decision.

The character of Seelan is vital in examining the effects of non-conformity on the next generation. Although Arul breaks away and leaves the confines of his family and the pressures of conformity voluntarily, it is his son who feels acutely the consequences of his rash actions. Seelan is forced to find his place on the perimeters of his father's previous social circle for he is no longer considered a 'pure' member of that society. His mother is merely the daughter of a low caste servant and hence in the eyes of his grandfather and his social group, Seelan is impure and thus an outcast — a situation that he will never be

a tormented individual or retaliation. In his novels, Selvadurai poses thought-provoking views on authority and ambiguity. With identity proven to be constantly in the process of evolving, truth has become subjective while authority can no longer be said to hold the way to what is true. On a macroscopic level, Selvadurai's uses his novels as a platform to showcase the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Acceptance of differences is the key factor to progress as it removes insecurity and distrust about others. It allows for the respect and appreciation of the rich variety of differences among us – our forms of expression and our ways of being human. Above all, it recognizes the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. These are the issues stressed by Selvadurai in his novels. People are naturally diverse; only acceptance can ensure the survival of mixed communities in every region of the globe. Injustice and violence lead to discrimination and marginalization. Only education on acceptance can counter influences that lead to fear and exclusion of others and help people develop capacities for independent judgment, critical thinking and ethical reasoning. The diversity of our world's many religions, languages, cultures and ethnicities is not a pretext for conflict, but is a treasure that enriches us all. Multiculturalism must be practiced based on acceptance as in acknowledgement of another's way of life. Only then can one openly learn from another's experiences, an approach most beautifully expounded by Mohandas Gandhi,

I do not want my house to be filled in on all sides and my windows to be stifled.  
I want all the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> After Sri Lanka's independence, between 4th February, 1948 and July 1983, there was very little migration of Tamils from Sri Lanka. Up until 1956, they were proportionately well represented in the civil service because of their competency

and proficiency in the English language, which was their passport to government employment. Meanwhile, unemployment among the majority Sinhala youth generated considerable political pressure for the government to act. In 1956, the government of Sri Lanka, which is controlled by Sinhalese, started introducing policies, such as the 'Sinhala Only Act', which mandated Sinhala as the sole official language of Sri Lanka. This curtailed opportunities for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Many Tamil professionals started migrating to foreign lands where opportunities were abundant. In 1983, the eruption of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, saw mass migrations of Tamils trying to escape the hardships of a country torn by war. The migration of the professionals was followed by the poorer segments of the community who sold everything they had, to be able to get a passport and ticket to seek asylum in foreign lands. Many of these migrations were to countries such as Canada, UK, India, Australia, Germany and other European countries. According to the Association of Tamils of Sri Lanka in the USA, the migrated Tamil population post-1983 is said to be above 800,000.

- 2 Black July is the commonly used name of the pogroms which started in Sri Lanka on July 23, 1983. Between 1,000 - 3,000 Tamils were killed, tens of thousands of houses were destroyed, and a wave of Sri Lankan Tamils sought refuge in other countries. Black July is also generally seen as the start of full-scale armed struggles between Tamil militants and the Sinhalese-dominated government of Sri Lanka.
- 3 Philip Marchand in his article in the *Toronto Star* Nov. 5, 2006, laments that despite some of the best novelists living in the city (Toronto), not many of them actually write about the city itself but rather their native countries. "Our city awaits its great novelist. We sense the lack, even in the midst of the Giller Prize hoopla ... Is there something about the Toronto landscape, or the Toronto soul, or lack of soul that discourages writers from fully engaging this city in their fiction?"
- 4 According to the 2001 census there are 92,010 Tamil Canadians. This number is considered as accurate because it gives the number of Canadians who claim Tamil as their mother tongue. This would include all first generation and most second generation Tamil Canadians. Source: Ryerson University School of Journalism – Diversity Watch.
- 5 The term "Ceylonese" is derived from "Ceylon", the British name for Sri Lanka. Jaffnese refers those people from the Jaffna region and most people from the diaspora tend to be from this region. The term "Jaffnese" is said to also refer to the ancient Jaffna to which all Sri Lankan Tamils claim cultural lineage. It is often referred to as an ancient site of religion, education and the arts.
- 6 I will use the abbreviation *FB* for all subsequent references to quotes from *Funny Boy*, *CG* for references to quotes from *Cinnamon Gardens* and *SW* for all subsequent references to quotes from *Story-wallah*.
- 7 *Story-wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* is an anthology of short stories by some of the finest South Asian writers in diaspora. These stories explore universal themes of identity, culture, and home. Shyam Selvadurai, as editor of this collection, gives an excellent introduction to the anthology.
- 8 'Third' refers to the constructing and re-constructing of identity, to the fluidity of space, to the space where identity is not fixed. In cultural studies, the term third space has gained prominence, primarily through the work of Homi Bhabha, who addresses the notion of identity. To Bhabha, "hybridity is the third space that enables other positions to emerge. It displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new

structures of authority, new political initiatives which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford, Johnson 1990). The third space is used to denote the place where negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and re-constructed, where life in all its ambiguity is played out. This term serves as a rebuttal or corrective to regulating views, and highlights a new way of seeing.

<sup>9</sup> When the British first arrived in Sri Lanka, they were forced by circumstances to rely heavily on certain segments of the indigenous population. The Mudaliyar class, who were the feudal aristocrats, were the first Sri Lankans to enter political service under the British. Their feudal family status and their local political power, and their English education made them the elite of the new era.

<sup>10</sup> In gender theory and queer theory, heteronormativity is the perceived reinforcement of certain beliefs by many social institutions and social policies. These beliefs include the belief that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories, male and female; that sexual and marital relations are normal only when between people of different sexes; and that each sex has certain natural roles in life. Thus, physical sex, gender identity, and gender roles should in any given person align to either all-male or all-female norms, and heterosexuality is considered to be the only normal sexual orientation. Anyone falling outside the "norms" characterised by a generalised view of heterosexual society would be considered non-heteronormative.

<sup>11</sup> Whitehall is a road in Westminster in London, England. It is the main artery running north from Parliament Square, centre of national government, towards traditional Charing Cross, now at the southern end of Trafalgar Square and marked by the statue of Charles I, which is often regarded as the heart of London. The road is lined with government ministries; "Whitehall" is therefore also frequently used as a metonym for British governmental administration, as well as being a geographic name for the surrounding district.

<sup>12</sup> The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a separatist terrorist group that was seeking an independent state in areas in Sri Lanka inhabited by ethnic Tamils. Eelam means homeland in Tamil. The LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers, used conventional, guerrilla, and terror tactics, including some 200 suicide bombings, in a bloody, two-decade-old civil war that had claimed more than 70,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans.

<sup>13</sup> In 1878, Cinnamon Gardens was a fast-growing residential suburb of Colombo and housed many important officials and businessmen. With its wide tree-lined roads it became the most fashionable area of Colombo to live in and was home to a great number of English families as well as to many educated and affluent Ceylonese families. Today, Cinnamon Gardens is the most prestigious residential area in Sri Lanka.

<sup>14</sup> The Donoughmore Commissioners were appointed in 1927 to draft a new constitution for Sri Lanka that would not only satisfy the aspirations of all the groups within the island, including British plantation owners, but also enable Sri Lanka to take its place as a partner in the British Empire. The Commissioners granted suffrage to all women aged 21 in Sri Lanka. These Commissioners finally came up with a Constitutional arrangement for Sri Lanka that would ensure that every community in the island had a chance for power and prosperity. The resulting Donoughmore Constitution, which served Sri Lanka Ceylon from 1931 to 1947 to accommodate these new proposals in government, was a unique document that provided Sri Lankans with training for self-government. It also created a committee system of government specifically to address the multi-ethnic problems of Sri Lanka whereby

no one ethnic community could dominate the political arena. This created a built-in series of checks and balances, in which every ethnic group however small, gained something. Sri Lanka hence, remained virtually independent, with full control over domestic affairs and continued its passage to relative prosperity without any major ethnic clashes for 16 years. Under the island's subsequent constitutions, where tolerance and acceptance of minority was lacking, Sri Lanka has suffered communal violence.