



# English Lifestyle in the Ceylonese society: An analytical study of Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*.

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to bring out the adoption of the English Lifestyle by the characters in the novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*. Lifestyle is the way one chooses to live, which includes their attitudes, style and material possessions of the individual or the society. It may be social, political or cultural acceptance by a group or individuals. The aspects include material possessions, language, reading, education. The social acceptance includes the dinners, parties and the material possessions in the households. Only a particular group or the characters agree to the higher education of the female characters in the novel. Each individual character acknowledges certain characteristics as per their interests and opinions. The past has its influence over the present. The past incidents in the lives of the characters helped them to understand and analyse the situation which enabled them to adopt to the English education. This is evident through their explicit acknowledgement of names of the streets and the properties owned by the wealthy families. The conventional part is never forbidden, it is just the emergence of the acceptance among the characters which would result in the evolution process. The several different interpretations about the aspects of reading are given significance in this paper. Reading does not stop with the expansion of knowledge but also provides the mental stimulation and improves the analytical thought process in the readers. These aspects are elucidated through events from the novel. A detailed analysis of the views of the Ceylonese society, a particular group and also the opinions of the individuals with respect to the acceptance of the English lifestyle is explored in this paper.

**Key Words:** Social acceptance, Individual opinions, Ceylonese society, Education, Evolution.

Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1965. He migrated to Canada and has studied creative writing and theatre from New York University. *Funny Boy* was his first novel which won many awards: W.H. Smith Books in Canada, First Novel Award and the Lambda Literary Award in the US. His second novel is *Cinnamon Gardens* written in 1998, has been published in the US, the UK, India and in number of

countries in Europe. Some of his other works include *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, *The Hungry Ghosts*, *Mansion of the Moon*. He has also edited the anthology; *Story-wallah! A Celebration of South Asian Fiction*. Most common themes in his novels are queerness, ethnic conflicts, homosexuality, immigration, nationalism, power, politics, justice, violence, forbidden love, family and moral awakening.

*Cinnamon Gardens* captures the Sri Lankan high society morality and hypocrisy among some characters. The setting of the novel is in the suburb of Sri Lanka in 1920s. The country is still under the British rule, however there are also stirrings for independence. The novel has a resemblance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century British family drama through its themes and the characteristics of the characters in the novel, especially the female ones. The novel has two parallel and interconnected stories: one is about Annalukshmi, who wishes to be an independent woman and also resists the conventional practices; the other story is about Balendran, the son of a wealthy and hypocritical man, Mudaliyar. Arul is the elder son of the Mudaliyar who marries a low caste girl and was banished by his father. Both stories move alternatively with the interference of Sri Lankan politics of the time. The Tamil Ceylonese wanted the British to rule, which provided them the patronage they needed. The elite Ceylonese claimed right of self-rule from the British. Selvadurai depicts it at multiple levels from familial and personal to socio-political and ethnic.

The acceptance of English lifestyle is predominant in the novel through various instances. Religion also plays an important role in the attitudes of the characters. The verse from the great work of Tamil philosophy, the *Tirukkural* is brought at times for reference and for moral purpose to be applied and practiced in one's own life. Though traditional customs and practices remain unchanged, there are evidences of the acceptance to the English lifestyle among the characters in the novel.

Lifestyle is the typical way of life of an individual, group, or culture. ("Lifestyle") Interests, opinions, work, patterns of behaviour and the way they spend their time will be included in lifestyle. The Sinhalese are believed to have a particular set of issues in relation to their background and class. (Lau) The acceptance of English lifestyle is seen even the conventional families of the period.

The acceptance begins with the main character, Annalukshmi and her eagerness to learn. As a woman of twenty-two from a good Tamil family during the 1920s, her achievement was remarkable. She has come out of the constraints of the society of the period. Her educational qualification was always a dream for most of the girls of the time. Her qualification as a teacher is similar to that of the characters of Jane Austen's novels. The aspiration to learn and to be independent enabled her to achieve this which were considered to be the greatest crime for her relatives.

She had completed her Senior Cambridge, an accomplishment fairly rare in that time for a girl; she had stood first island wide in English literature, much to the discomfiture of every boys' school. Then she had gone on to teacher's college and qualified as a teacher. Annalukshmi's qualification as a teacher was held to be her greatest crime by her mother's relatives, the Barnetts. (Selvadurai 13)

Despite Murugasu's firm opinion about his religion and traditional practices, he taught Annalukshmi swimming, tennis and took her to inspections to the rubber estate. The conventional part of him was on one

side, on the other he accepted the English lifestyle in upbringing his daughter, Annalukshmi. “Yet her attempts were useless, with her husband taking Annalukshmi of to the family rubber estate on inspections, teaching her tennis and swimming” (Selvadurai 14).

The general assumption is that teachers teach and students learn. In the same way, Miss. Lawton, the missionary headmistress at the school is responsible for the decision of Annalukshmi to be a teacher. Annalukshmi learnt about the struggles for women’s rights in England. Miss. Lawton is a representation of an empowered woman. She encouraged Annalukshmi to be an independent and strong woman.

It was through Miss Lawton that she learnt about the struggles for women’s rights in England and Miss Lawton’s own small part in them during her college days. It was Miss Lawton who had encouraged her reading habit, which, she knew, had led to her standing first in English literature. It was the headmistress who had truly supported her in the decision to be a teacher. (Selvadurai 15)

Miss. Blake gifted a bicycle to Annalukshmi on the day of her return to England. Miss. Lawton and Nancy did not express any indifference for Annalukshmi. They nodded in approval to it owing to the acceptance of the English lifestyle. Annalukshmi also considered it to be a very normal thing for a girl to ride a bicycle.

When Miss Blake, the assistant headmistress, presented Annalukshmi with a gift of her bicycle on the day Miss Blake returned to England, Annalukshmi was spurred on to accept because of the smiling faces of Miss Lawton and Nancy, standing on the verandah steps above Miss Blake, nodding their approval. (Selvadurai 15)

She did not adhere to the family’s resistance. The prejudice that Kumudini had was that it was normal for European girls to ride the bicycle and an unusual thing for woman like her. Though Kumudini and Annalukshmi were brought up in the same situation, the former was conservative than the latter.

The progression begins in any field with the evolution of ideas and thoughts and through the acceptance of the process. The start should be made by someone for others to follow. Acceptance of English lifestyle is reflected both internally and externally. Internal transformation is through the character’s way of thinking and ideas. The external is the streets, residences which reflect the British names.

The change in the Ceylonese society is because of the members who thrived under the British Empire. The names of the main residential streets are after the former British governors. The parts of the British are considered to be the best for the Ceylonese society, as its members believed.

Ward Place, Rosmead Place, Barnes Place, and Horton Place, most of them named after former British governors of the Crown colony of Ceylon. These streets contained within them many grand mansions, situated well away from the road, some barely visible for the greenery that surrounded them. They were the homes of the best of Ceylonese society, whose members had thrived under the British Empire and colonial economy. (Selvadurai 20)

The past does not pass away; it has its influence in the present. It may take any form such as texts, memories and monuments. In the Ceylonese society it took the form of the streets and their names. Another instance which proves this is the Mudaliyar’s property named after his visit to the Brighton Pavilion long ago. “His property on Horton Place was named “Brighton” after the Brighton Pavilion, which the Mudaliyar had visited as a young man” (Selvadurai 20).

Language is believed to have made the growth of civilizations possible. There is always a relationship between language and society. The regional and social distributions, its relationship to ideas, events and the speakers and listeners. It is a means of conveying ideas to others.

Mudaliyar, a wealthy patriarch is conservative in many of his ideas and also wanted to be modern in certain things. When there was the dinner at his home, he wanted Sonia to receive the guests, as his wife does not speak English. Also the head servant of the Mudaliyar family spoke English through which he held a superior position among the other servants. His behaviour also possessed the English manners. “The Mudaliyar liked to have Sonia receive the guests with him as his wife did not speak English and was usually too busy with the preparations in the kitchen” (Selvadurai 61).

Appearances always reflect one’s way of life. Sonia, a woman of mixed blood was allowed to be the way she wished. There were no restrictions from the Mudaliyar and his family. Food is an approach to life and slowly the media has turned it into a lifestyle topic. (Heidelberg). As Nalamma was not proficient in cooking European dishes, the supervision was given to Philomena.

Nalamma was not proficient when it came to European cooking. The task of planning and supervising the dinner thus always fell on Philomena, who had turned up this morning with her culinary bible, *Mrs. Beeton’s Cookery Book*, tucked under her arm. (Selvadurai 63,64)

With this the slow emergence of the English lifestyle in the Sinhalese family is evident. Another such instance in the novel is where the Mudaliyar visits the Grand Oriental Hotel every Wednesday for lunch. The significant is the appointment to the dining room with the European Chef. This exhibits their acceptance of the English lifestyle. This practice does not stop with the Mudaliyar but moves on to the next generation to Balendran and Sonia. They were also guests on occasions.

Grand Oriental Hotel in the commercial district of the Fort, a popular haunt for affluent Ceylonese... It had a palm court where a band played and a beautifully appointed dining room with a European chef. For his weekly luncheons, the Mudaliyar engaged a private dining room upstairs... Balendran and Sonia were always his guests on these occasions. (Selvadurai 122)

Reading helps a person to expand the knowledge, mental stimulation with stronger analytical thinking skills. It also mirrors the lifestyle. There were many references to the British novels by the characters in *Cinnamon Gardens*. For instance, Kumudini’s ability to associate the life happenings to the events in *Pride and Prejudice*. “This is not *Pride and Prejudice*, akka,” Kumudini said, making crushing use of her knowledge of literature. “Your Mr. Darcy isn’t going to ride up on a horse.” (Selvadurai 83)

There are also instances which serves as the best example to their reading habit. Manohari brought in the reference from *Jane Eyre* in their discussion.

Consistent reading is evident through Seelan and his interest in reading George Eliot’s novels. The important thing to notice in the characters is that they not only read for pleasure but to associate to their life. Both the male and female characters in the *Cinnamon Gardens* express it. This is obvious when Seelan went on to describe the generous nature of the heroine and her sufferings in *Mansfield Park*.

“One of my favourite writers is George Eliot. Have you ever read her?”

“Of course, I’ve read every single one of her books,” she said, sitting back in her chair.

“*Mill on the Floss* is quite the finest novel I have ever read,” he said. He began to describe what he found so compelling about the book, the generous nature of the heroine, her terrible suffering. (Selvadurai 314)

Annalukshmi spent her Sundays reading under the flamboyant tree in front of her house. Reading and using certain instances has become a part of their everyday activities.

A multi-cultural thought prevails among the characters in the novel. Their conservation is not affected by the acceptance of the English lifestyle. In most of his novels, family is considered a contested site. (Kaustav 171) It can be viewed as deliberate and a steady growth among the individual characters in particular and the Ceylonese society in general.

As an educated girl, Annalukshmi was interested in the politics of the country and maintained attentiveness towards the changing socio-political scenario. She had a good relationship with her aunt Sonia, wife of Balendran, who supported her views. Both Sonia and Annalukshmi would attend the intellectual meetings and discuss certain important events like Donoughmore Commission. On the other hand, Aunt Philomela opposed their views. She adhered to the patriarchal values of the society and believed that only manly women get involved in such affairs whereas normal women take care of their husbands and their homes. “Only manly women get involved in men’s affairs. Normal women think of their husbands and their homes and nothing else” (Selvadurai 117).

The adoption of English Life style by the characters in the novel on various levels: social, political and cultural. These are interpreted and analysed by examining various instances from the novel.

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