

# The Portrayal and Examination of the Oppression of Women in Shyam Selvadurai's Novel 'Cinnamon Gardens'


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**Abstract:** *This research study examines how women are treated unfairly and is depicted in Shyam Selvadurai's book Cinnamon Gardens. The early 20th-century gender roles and cultural standards that limited women's life are poignantly depicted in the story, which is set in Sri Lanka. This research illuminates the many forms of oppression experienced by women by critically examining the female characters, their experiences, and the surrounding cultural background. Themes examined include how arranged marriages affect women's autonomy, how cultural restrictions affect women's access to education and freedom, and how strong and resilient female characters are in the face of societal pressures. This study adds to a better understanding of gender dynamics and the historical backdrop of the female oppression represented in the book by diving into the nuances of the women's lives.*

**Keywords:** *Oppression of Women, Gender Roles, Arranged Marriages, Education*

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Novelist Shyam Selvadurai gives readers a look into a society formed by social conventions and cultural traditions in his book "Cinnamon Gardens," which is set in early 20th-century colonial Sri Lanka. The novel takes place against the verdant setting of the Cinnamon Gardens neighbourhood in Colombo, and it delves into several topics that will strike a chord with its readers. This paper will explore one such intriguing issue that runs throughout the novel: the oppression of women. Annalukshmi's story in "Cinnamon Gardens" provides a potent prism through which the complex lives of women in a patriarchal

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culture may be seen. The story deftly probes the overt and subtle limitations placed on women in the context of the colonial authority and social hierarchy of the time.

Sri Lanka in the early 20th century presents a setting rich with cultural complexity and conventional gender roles, providing a canvas on which the characters may explore their own internal conflicts in light of these norms. Women's life is complicated by issues like as arranged marriages, lack of access to education, and pressure to fit into stereotypical stereotypes. In this article, we will examine the novel's depiction of women's subjugation from several angles. We will analyse the female protagonists in terms of their motivations, growth, and the ways in which social expectations shape their lives. We hope that by exploring the women's experiences in more depth, we may better understand the bigger issues of gender dynamics and the historical background of female subjugation in "Cinnamon Gardens." Our goal in analysing this work critically is to learn more about the complexity of women's experiences with oppression and triumph. This study aims to add to the literature on gender roles and cultural expectations in early 20th-century Sri Lanka by focusing on female characters and the subject of oppression.

## 2 | HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The events that take place in Shyam Selvadurai's book "Cinnamon Gardens" take place in the early 20th century, which was a period in Sri Lanka when great historical and cultural changes took place. It is vital to do research into the historical and cultural backdrop of the time period in question in order to get an understanding of the complexities of the lives of the characters and the topics that are discussed in the book. When the 20th century began, Sri Lanka was still known by its previous name of Ceylon and was a British colony. Since 1815, the island nation was governed by the British, and this colonial authority had a significant impact on the country's social, political, and economic landscapes. The British colonial authority profoundly altered the traditional society of Sri Lanka by instituting a number of social changes and advancing the country's physical infrastructure.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Sri Lanka was distinguished by a culture that was profoundly rooted in patriarchy. In this society, males held prominent positions in both the private and public realms of life. There was a rigorous adherence to traditional gender norms, which meant that women were largely expected to carry out household responsibilities and to be subordinate to male authority. Their major responsibilities were on being spouses, mothers, and carers, which contributed to the widespread perception that women are inherently suited for domestic tasks. During this time period, it was usual practise to have families have a significant part in the process of arranging weddings for their children. Marriage was seen as an alliance between families, and the primary focus was on preserving social position as well as cultural and religious norms and values. Women had very little autonomy in the process of choosing a life mate, and the vast majority of marriage-related choices were decided by either the woman's parents or her elders.

At the beginning of the 20th century, women's access to formal education was severely restricted, and those who did have it were mostly young ladies who came from wealthy or metropolitan homes. The widespread notion at the time was that increasing a woman's level of education may make her less appropriate for the traditional responsibilities of a wife and mother. As a direct result of this, many women's hopes of attaining higher education or launching professional careers were often thwarted. During this time period, the culture that prevailed in Sri Lanka put stringent societal expectations on the behaviour and appearance of women. It was expected of women to behave in a submissive manner, be obedient, and comply to the cultural standards. Their ability to move freely and participate in public settings was limited, and the community closely monitored everything they did.

The historical and cultural framework of early 20th-century Sri Lanka, which was distinguished by British colonial control and deeply established patriarchal beliefs, provides the setting for the representation of women and the topic of oppression in "Cinnamon Gardens." The British colonial rule and deeply ingrained patriarchal ideals were prevalent in Sri Lanka at the time. It sheds light on women's battles to negotiate cultural expectations and carve out routes for self-determination and agency. The book gives a dramatic analysis of the obstacles and complexity encountered by women throughout this period. The reader has a more profound appreciation for the experiences that the characters go through as well as the overarching themes that are present throughout the story when they comprehend the historical and cultural context.

### 3 | THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS

The depiction of the women that populate "Cinnamon Gardens," the book written by Shyam Selvadurai, is an essential component of the story's progression. The author sheds light on the roles, expectations, and constraints that were put on women by society and family in early 20th century Sri Lanka via the use of a nuanced description of the lives of women living in the country at that time. Annalukshmi, the main character, develops into a multidimensional person throughout the course of the story as she navigates the complexity of her identity in the context of social conventions and the expectations of her family. Annalukshmi is described as having goals and aspirations that go above the usual responsibilities that were allocated to women during that time period when she was only a young girl living in Tamil Nadu. In contrast to the traditional expectations that are placed on women in her culture, she is driven to pursue her education, maintain her independence, and learn more about herself.

Other key female characters in the book, such as Annalukshmi's mother and other female relatives, provide a peek into the varied sides of femininity that exist within a culture that is predicated on patriarchy. Each character struggles with the difficulties that are specific to her, as well as the restrictions that are put on her by cultural conventions and the commitments she has to her family. At the beginning of the 20th century in Sri Lanka, women were expected to complete certain responsibilities that had been predetermined by the patriarchal culture of the time. Their principal responsibilities consisted of being respectful daughters, submissive spouses, and caring moms. Aspirations and goals of young women were often eclipsed by the choices of their families in cultures that practised arranged marriage, leaving little possibility for individuals to exercise independent agency.

The mobility of women and their ability to engage with people outside of their own familial circles were severely constrained by the standards of society. Their access to public settings was severely limited, and it was required of them to comply to cultural values of obedience and humility. The expectations of families were a significant factor in the development of women's lives. In most cases, social standing, income, and the desire to maintain family ties were the primary motivating factors in the selection of a spouse. Women did not always have a voice in their own destiny and were often forced to submit to the choices that were made for them by their parents or other adults. The book explores the effect that these roles, expectations, and limits have on the female characters in the story. The presentation of Annalukshmi's trip underlines her difficulties to combine her ambitions for independence and education with the limits put on her by her family and the expectations of society. These problems are highlighted by the fact that Annalukshmi's journey is shown. Her resistance against the traditional route taken by women and her ambition to forge her own path are examples of the inner struggles that many women of her day were forced to contend with.

The nuances of femininity in early 20th-century Sri Lanka are compellingly explored via "Cinnamon Gardens'" depiction of its female characters, which offers a compelling examination of these subtleties. The author dives into the complexities of social conventions and family expectations that affected the

lives of women during that period via the varied experiences of the female characters in the story. The complex representation in the work gives readers a fuller understanding of the difficulties faced by women as they managed their identities within a patriarchal culture as well as their resiliency in the face of those difficulties. It is also a powerful meditation on the restrictions that are placed on women and the transformational power of human initiative and resolve.

#### 4 | THEMES OF OPPRESSION

The persecution of women in early 20th-century Sri Lanka is explored in depth in the book "Cinnamon Gardens" by Shyam Selvadurai. The story powerfully depicts the many ways in which oppression, both overt and subtle, manifests itself against women as a result of society standards and cultural traditions. There are several examples of women's oppression throughout the narrative, highlighting the difficulties they face on a daily basis. Arranged weddings are a clear example of oppression since they limit women's freedom of choice when it comes to finding a life mate. The protagonist, Annalukshmi, faces this challenge when her family arranges her marriage to a guy she hardly knows, putting a stop to her pursuit of an education and the freedom to pursue her own interests.

Women are oppressed in another way because they are denied equal educational chances. The cultural norm that women should take care of children and the elderly limits their opportunities for professional development and social interaction. Annalukshmi's ambition to further her studies runs against to her family's expectation that she fulfil more conventional responsibilities. The norms of society have a significant impact on women and the paths they choose to take in life. The story emphasises the stifling effect of patriarchal expectations, which prescribe certain roles for women and frequently eclipse their own wishes and goals. The psychological struggle that Annalukshmi has between fitting in with the status quo and following her passions is reflected in her life events. Cultural norms of submissiveness and modesty can limit women's independence. Their access to and movement inside public areas is limited, limiting their range of expression and autonomy. The decisions and behaviours of the novel's numerous female characters show how these standards impose a feeling of societal scrutiny, leading to self-censorship and conformity to preset roles. The existence of a hierarchical social structure that sustains gender inequities only adds to the stifling weight of cultural standards. Because of their gender and their socioeconomic status, women are subject to several forms of oppression that have far-reaching consequences.

The oppressive themes in 'Cinnamon Gardens' are deeply felt, providing readers with a rich examination of the difficulties women in early 20th-century Sri Lanka experienced. The book highlights the many forms of oppression, such as arranged marriages, limited access to education, and limited freedom of choice, via its depiction of female characters like Annalukshmi and other prominent women figures. The widespread influence of cultural standards on women's experiences and choices is also explored. In the end, 'Cinnamon Gardens' is a powerful allegory for the strength and independence with which women must deal in order to overcome patriarchal standards, forge their own identities, and become agents of change in today's world.

#### 5 | CONCLUSION

Finally, Shyam Selvadurai's "Cinnamon Gardens" depicts women and tyranny in early 20th-century Sri Lanka. The story examines women's struggles in patriarchal societies via Annalukshmi and other characters. Arranged marriages, restricted education, and cultural expectations reveal how subtle and overt tyranny influenced women's life throughout that period. This representation highlights women's challenges and tenacity in a culture that stifled their ambitions. "Cinnamon Gardens" explores the intricacies of gender and the transformational potential of individual agency via the female characters' internal and exterior struggles. The novel's themes are also relevant to gender equality and women's

empowerment debates. The novel's study of gender-based oppression resonates with women's struggles today, despite its historical setting. It highlights the continuous battle for gender equality and women's empowerment. "Cinnamon Gardens" invites modern readers to examine and fight restrictive standards and explore the significance of giving women education, self-determination, and agency. It stresses the need for a more inclusive and equal society where women may thrive and participate fully. "Cinnamon Gardens" shows women's tenacity in the face of injustice and calls for more gender equality and women's empowerment. Shyam Selvadurai's story explores the human spirit's victory over hardship and the search of freedom and self-discovery, leaving an unforgettable impression on literature.

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