

THE REPRESENTATION OF ETHNICITY IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SHYAM SELVADAI

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Abstract

The purpose of writing this paper is to deal with the major concept of ethnicity through its relevant parts like- race, ethnic identity, ethnic conflict, nationality and so on. In this paper, I want to represent the ethnicity of Sri Lanka through the novels of Shyam Selvadurai. Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan writer and currently living in Canada. He describes the two major ethnic groups of Sri Lanka and presents a clear picture of the ethnicity of post-colonial people. His first novel is *Funny Boy* which published in 1994. This novel is best known for gay literature and it won the W H Smith/ Books in Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's fiction. His second novel is *Cinnamon Gardens* published in 1998. *Funny Boy* is the story of a boy who is barely six or seven years old. The subtitle of this novel is *A Novel in Six Stories*. The whole story of the novel revolves around Arjun Chelvaratnam also known as Arjie. The second novel is about a young girl Annalukshmi, who is a teacher. This novel has two plots. The second plot discusses the story of Annalukshmi's uncle. Both of these novels are located in Sri Lanka. *Cinnamon Garden* is the suburb area of Sri Lanka and only elite groups of Sri Lanka lives there.

Keyword: Ethnicity, Ethnic riot, Race, Immigration, marriage, symbols.

According to Online Etymology Dictionary, the word 'Ethnicity' is derived from various languages. First, this word came into the Greek language as *ethnikos*, which means 'nation' or 'national'. The other word is *ethnos* which means, 'band of people living together, nation, people, tribe, cast.' The other meaning of ethnicity is derived from Late Latin word *ethnics* which means heathen or pagan. In English, ethnicity defines as, 'a heathen, pagan, one who is not a Christian or Jew.'(Etymology online dictionary web page) Ethnicity is a new term in

English literature. Sometimes, it is considered that very term ethnicity is not different from race. But both these two terms 'ethnicity' and 'race' has their own existence in literature. Ethnicity is related to society and nowadays it is treating as a social phenomenon. On the other hand, the race is described as an individual fact which implies a person's physical traits. W. Gibbert says,

...ethnicity is an historically derived lumping of sets of diacritics at varying distances outward from the person, so that each of these lumping acts as a potential boundary or nameable grouping that can be identified or referred to in ethnic terms, given the proper conditions...the division into an exclusive group is always done in relation to significant others whose exclusion at any particular level or scale creates the we/they dichotomy. (W. Gibbert 91)

Ethnicity plays an important role in literature. Literature is the reflection of society and society has many different cultures. The people of different cultures include different ethnicities in it. In literature, the writers come from different cultures and different ethnicities. Their ethnicity reflects in their writing style and language. In the modern age, the concept of ethnicity is on fire and it is one of the high rated subjects for contemporary writers. They illustrate the term of ethnicity in their ways. Generally, it is considered equal to race but the ethnicity is much wider than race. Many critics define ethnicity as a social phenomenon. The race is all about the physical traits of a person like- the color of eyes, the color of hair, the color of skin and much other physical significance. On the other hand, ethnicity is considered as a social phenomenon in which a group of people shares the same tradition, same rituals, the same language even their food is also the same.

Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan writer who immigrated to Canada after the major ethnic riot of 1983. He becomes famous with his first novel *Funny Boy*. It published in 1994 and also translated into many other languages. He has a great contribution in English literature and his literary works are- *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), *The Hungry Ghost* (2013). He also edited an essay in which he describes his feeling of alienation when he returns from Canada with his spouse Andrew Chapman to spend a little time in Sri Lanka. The writer's fictional novels present the two major ethnic communities and mostly his literary works are best examples of ethnic attitude. Shyam Selvadurai is a fictional writer and he has written the story of these novels in the historical genre. The writer examines the condition of Sri Lanka during the major riots between Sinhalese and Tamils. Through this critical situation between these two ethnic groups, he developed the main concept of ethnicity.

His first novel *Funny Boy* (1994) is the story of a little boy, barely six or seven years old. He faces many problems in Sri Lanka only because of that he belongs to Tamil minority while Sinhalese were dominating in Sri Lanka with the majority of Sinhala people. Arjun

Chelvaratnam narrates the whole story of the novel. This novel includes six stories in it. This novel is a bildungsroman. The novel starts with the simplicity of innocent Arjie and ends with the complicated self-identity of Arjie as a teen. The theme of ethnicity is beautifully analyzed through a different point of views. There are several sections in the novel where the examination of ethnicity and aspects related to ethnicity are given through many events. Shyam Selvadurai is a fictional writer and he has written the story of this novel in the historical genre. The writer examines the condition of Sri Lanka during the major riots between Sinhalese and Tamils. Through this critical situation between both these groups, he developed the main concept of ethnicity.

The novel starts with spend-the-day and Arjie (Arjun Chelvaratnam) and all their cousin brothers and sisters arrive to spend their holidays at their grandparents' house. As the novel begins, the narrator gives the description of their grandparents' house which divided into two parts. These two parts recognized as the playgrounds for girls and boys. The narrator describes the area around their grandparents' as;

The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my female cousin Meena. In this territory, two factions struggled for power, one led by Meena, the other by my brother, Varuna, who, because of a prevailing habit, had been renamed Diggy -Nose and then simply Diggy. The second territory was called "the girls'," included in which, however, myself, a boy. It was to this territory of "the girls" confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have gravitated naturally, my earliest memories of those spend-the-days always belonging in the back garden of my grandparents' home. The pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease to crease, was incomprehensible to me. (FB, 3)

In this description of territories, Arjie signifies his internal ethnicity because he tells the readers about his interest in playing with girls and the important thing is that he includes himself in the group of his cousin sisters which he called "the girls". The impact of Arjie's internal ethnicity can be seen on his external ethnic identity. When his Kanthy Aunty reveals the real identity of Arjie in front of his family and other uncles and aunts, he feels like a loss of existence. He becomes the funny one among them and not getting the things around him. It does not comprehend Arjie to find out his real identity. After this confrontation, Arjie's mother's attitude changes and she forced him to play cricket with "the boy". When Arjie tells her mother that he is not interested in playing this stupid game with boys his mother replied him by saying in life we have to do many stupid things whether we want to do it or not. His real ethnic identity makes him different from his family because internally his behavior and language and his gestures reflect his different ethnic identity.

The language used by Shyam Selvadurai and the phrases in his novel's characters beautifully describes ethnicity in the novel. For example, Shyam Selvadurai used many Tamil words in the novel which shows his ethnicity. Through these words, the writer can get the idea that the writer is a Sri Lankan and he fit in Tamil ethnicity. He used Thatha for father, Akka for older sister; Mudalali for merchant and many others describes the writer's ethnicity. And the phrases used by characters show their ethnicity. At one point in the novel, Mr. Jayasinghe tells Radha in a threatening way that, "Be careful. We Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance" (66). In this line, the very word "We Sinhalese" signifies the whole Sinhalese community. Here, Anil's father does not use this phrase for particular in fact he describes the whole group of Sinhala ethnicity belongs to him.

In the first story of the novel, Shyam Selvadurai explains the exile of Arjie both from his internal and external ethnicity. The second story is about Radha and Anil who loves each other. Both are from different ethnicity one is Tamil and another is a Sinhalese. As the story comes to its end both sacrifice their love for the sake of their families because their parents do not want to see the marriage of their children with the person who belongs to different ethnic group. The third story talks about Mr. Daryl who returns from Australia in Colombo to find the truth of the Sri Lankan government and the torture of this government on Tamil people. It also describes LTTE (Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam) fights for their separate state in Sri Lanka. The fourth story starts with the arrival of Jagan Parameswaran. The story ends with a conflict between Sinhala mobs and Tamils. In this section, it can be seen that Jagan gets disappointed with the people of his ethnic groups. In the fifth story, political issues become more powerful and impact of political powers on Sri Lankan schools. It also deals with the recognition of Arjie's real sexual identity. The final chapter is an epilogue and the whole incidents in the last section present by the narrator through his diary. His examination of things happened in Sri Lanka is in written form.

A widely description of ethnic conflict in the novel is the main source of ethnicity because the description of ethnic riots between Sinhalese and Tamils again and again is the strong evidence of the existence of their ethnicity. There is one more thing which cannot be neglected through the reading of this novel is that both Sinhalese and Tamils try to prove they are the real ancestor of Sri Lanka in their way.

The second novel of Shyam Selvadurai Cinnamon Gardens published in 1998. It is a historical novel and it talks about the elite groups of Cinnamon Gardens, a rich and suburb place in Sri Lanka. The writer presents the period around 1927 or 1928. The theme of this novel is not so different from his first novel. He introduced with the Tamil classic philosophical book named Tirrukural. The novel starts with the young lady named Annalukshmi Kandiah Who is from a good Tamil family and living in 1927. The writer describes the concept of ethnicity by using different ideas in his novel. He also examines the very concept through religion, language, imagery, political issues and so on. The writer also

works in favor of women' rights in society. Cinnamon Gardens is a parallel story of Annalukshmi and his uncle Balendran Navaratnam.

Annalukshmi is a young lady of twenty-two years old and works as a teacher in The Colpetty Mission School. She is well qualified and loves to live like a free woman but she always restricted by her mother and her relatives. Her qualification is just like a serious crime done by her. In their views, a teaching certificate is beneficial for those girls who look ugly or poor and hardly able to find a good husband for them. Annalukshmi's mother (Louisa Barnett) and her family follow Christian religion and they are the oldest Christian Tamil in Ceylon (an old name of Sri Lanka). Shyam Selvadurai presents ethnicity through religion. He explains that,

Her father, Murugasu, had gained notoriety in his village in Jaffna for beheaded the Gods in the household shrine during a quarrel with his father, running away to Malaya, and converting to Christianity. Louisa, her mother, had defied family dictates and married Murugasu. The Barnetts were one of the oldest Christian Tamil families of Ceylon. Murugasu was too recent a convert to have, like them, generations of the civilizing influence of Christianity behind him. (CG, 4)

The political powers like the Ceylon National Congress and Ceylon Tamil Association play a vital role to describe ethnicity. It has been discussed above that the novel presents the elite groups of Sri Lanka at the time of colonialism. Sinhalese and Tamils are the two main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Tamil group lives as a minority community and Sinhalese ethnic community as a dominant group. Here, the Ceylon National Congress is presented with the great support of Sinhalese people. On the other hand, Ceylon Tamil association is supported by the Tamil minority. Mudaliyar Navaratnam is a rich, hypocrite man who belongs to the upper Tamil class. On Mudaliyar's birthday, he invites the members of both political parties. Mudaliyar himself is a member of Ceylon Tamil Association and he also does not in the support of the self-government. An argument between the two members one is from Ceylon National Congress and another from Ceylon Tamil Association show their belongingness to their ethnic community. Here, the writer mentions a bitter conversation between them where the member of Tamil Association asks a question to the member of National Congress and says,

"Why should we support Congress on self-rule when you are going to ask the commission to abolish communal representation?"

"Communal representation simply forces people to think in terms of their race and not as a nation," the congress man replied.

"We are proud to take a stance for territorial representation."

"And that is why we will never support your claim for self government." (CG, 70)

The writer uses political issues to define the concept of ethnicity. Ceylon Tamil Association is not in the support of the self government. Mudaliyar Navaratnam is also a member of Tamil Association and does not want self-government rule like the other members of Tamil Association. He is a self-important person and afraid of the commission's allowance for the universal franchise. On the day of his birthday when he sees an uneasy situation between Sinhalese and Tamil members he comes to them and says, "Gentlemen, whatever our differences, we are agreed on one thing. Universal franchise would be the ruin of our nation" (CG, 70). He thinks that if Donoughmore commission comes with a report in favor of universal franchise it would not be good for them. He does not want the people from the lower class to get the right of voting. He explains;

People like Dr. Shields do not understand what it would mean to an oriental society like ours. It would put the vote in the hands of servants in our kitchen, labourers, the beggar on the street. Illetrate beings to whom the sophistication of politics is an incomprehensible as advanced mathematics to a child. It would lead to mob rule. (CG, 70)

The writer tries to explore the connection between nation and ethnicity both on the individual and social level. He shows that how society forces a person to hide his/her internal ethnicity. Shyam Selvadurai deals with different themes at one time in the novel. He tries to explain the things in Sri Lanka before independence and the effect of political issues on the elites group of Cinnamon Gardens through its characters. He also connected sexuality and ethnicity on a personal level and social level. Balendran, the younger son of Mudaliyar Navratnam suffers a lot because of his father. He keeps him away from his love Richard Howland during his schooldays in London. When Mudaliyar comes to know that Donoughmore Commission is arriving in Colombo and Richard Howland (Assistant of Dr. Shields) is coming in Colombo to make a report on the state after observation, he insists Balendran fix a meeting with him and to do the things in favor of Mudaliyar. Through this, it can be said that Mudaliyar is a self-important person who does not care about Balendran and uses him for his advantages and ignores his internal ethnicity.

Shyam Selvadurai tires to present the concept of ethnicity by providing different variations throughout the novel. In his novel ethnicity can be seen through the discussion of political parties and the efforts of dominance both by Sinhalese and Tamils. He also uses different religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Non-Christianity and so on. The writer also mentioned ethnicity through the upper and lower class. He examines that upper Tamil class does not want to see the lower Tamil class equal to them. For example,

Mudaliyar and the other members of Tamil Association who belongs to the elite group do not want a universal franchise because they think that it will provide the right of vote to the lower class like them.

The novel ends with the unrest and disappointment because the Donoughmore Commission arrives in Colombo with some unexpected decisions and it disappoints the Ceylon National Congress and Ceylon Tamil Association. This commission rejects the approach of self-government and mentioned the allowance of universal franchise in the report. On the other hand, Balendran feels a kind of relaxation in his personal life. He becomes more confident and confronts his father when he gets to know the wrong deeds done by his father. In the other parallel story, Annalukshmi also refuses the marriage proposal of his cousin, Seelan. The second thing which lets Annalukshmi down is her failure to be a successful headmistress of Missionary School.

To conclude, Shyam Selvadurai tries to explore the concept of ethnicity through different mediums. He discussed many political issues and religions which portrait a remarkable image of different ethnic groups. He both novels *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* is a source of different themes which are discussed by Shyam Selvadurai in a well recognized manner. He chose the real incident of ethnic riots in *Funny Boy* and a suburb area of elite groups in *Cinnamon Gardens* to highlight his very concept of ethnicity.

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