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The Theme of Oppression in Shyam Selvadurai's Cinnamon Gardens

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Abstract

Preamble: Oppression is one of the themes in all literatures. A vast majority of people are oppressed at home and in the public life in terms of gender, religion and caste and they become the victims of oppression of it. Many are oppressed by the people who hold authoritative position in the society. *The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* defines the word, "oppress" as "to govern with cruelty and injustice" (966). Oppression makes a person helpless in the society and it is an injustice to the entire humanity. Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*, set in Ceylon in the 1920s, deals with the story of Annalukshmi, the protagonist and Balendran, her uncle. This novel enumerates the themes of homosexuality and oppression. The theme of oppression is presented clearly by the author. The patriarchal set up of Ceylon makes Louisa, Annalukshmi's mother and her aunty Philomina Barnett traditionalists. They are highly reluctant to go beyond the expected norms of the patriarchal society. This paper traces out the theme of oppression in terms of patriarchy, caste and religion.

Key Words: patriarchy, homosexuality, oppression, injustice.

Teaching Career

A Crime The society, in Annalukshmi's time, denies certain rights to women. It curtails the freedom of women to do anything independently against the expectations of their parents. Against this backdrop, Annalukshmi goes to teachers' college and qualifies as a teacher. But "Annalukshmi's qualification as a teacher was held to be her greatest crime by her mother's relatives, the Barnetts" (3). Louisa, Annalukshmi's mother and her relatives resist Annalukshmi to be a teacher because "A career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to ever catch a husband" (3-4). Without any boy child Annalukshmi's father "had raised Annalukshmi as if she were a boy" (4). But, Louisa "had tried to curtail Annalukshmi's freedom, to inspire in her an understanding of the necessary restrictions that must be placed on a girl to protect her reputation and that of her family's" (4). The expectations her mother and relatives marginalize Annalukshmi initially and she overcomes all the marginalized tendencies at the end. Annalukshmi is discouraged a lot and her strong determination of becoming a teacher dismisses all the stingy laws that consider women as powerless creatures. Education is a tool which helps women to empower themselves and it also transforms the whole society. *Women's Link* (2010) brings out the values of education as, "Education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment as it enhances self-esteem and self-confidence of women. It builds positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to the society; polity and economy" (5). Annalukshmi gets an opportunity to study in Senior Cambridge and teachers' college. On seeing her strong will, her mother ". . . agreed to let Annalukshmi to go to college in the hope that the responsibility of teaching would finally settle her down" (4-5). Is Riding Bicycle a Sin? Miss Blake, the assistant headmistress, presents a bicycle to Annalukshmi as a gift on her returning day to Ceylon. She takes the bicycle home. Louisa, her mother, is shocked at seeing it and she asks Annalukshmi in astonishment, "What on earth is this?" "I can see a bicycle. But what is it doing here?" (6). Annalukshmi replies her mother casually, "It's Miss Blake's. She gave it to me as a going-away present" (6). Hearing the irresponsible reply, her mother bursts out in anger, "Don't talk rubbish, Annalukshmi. You know you can't go around on a bicycle" (6). But Annalukshmi is clear in her decision to ride it at any case. Kumudini, her sister, always acts as a peacemaker in the family, tries to make Annalukshmi as, "Anna, be reasonable . . . You can't. People will say all sorts of things" (6). Louisa justifies her opinion to stop Annalukshmi riding bicycle that ". . . decent, respectable girls don't ride bicycles" (7). Kumudini, on her part, also adds that "It's one thing for European ladies to ride bicycles. We can't" (8). Her mother strictly objects and dismisses Annalukshmi's idea that "You cannot ride that bicycle, Annalukshmi. It's simply out of the question" (8). The whole family blames her as if she has committed a sin. But she neglects all their discouragements and enjoys riding bicycle.

Oppression in terms of caste

Andeep Sen, in *Encyclopaedia of Sociology*, defines caste as, "a system of social differentiation and stratification in which one set of persons are defined as inferior or superior in some important respect" (40). The Mudaliyar is the father of Balendran, Annalukshmi's uncle. He is proud to be the member of the Mudaliyar community. Arulanandan, his first son, marries, Pakkiam. She is a Koviari, a low caste. She works as a servant in their house. Arulanandan marries her against the wishes of his father. His father is not happy with this inter-caste marriage. He is a rich landowner and enjoys a respectable

position in the society. He is a very strict man. He orders his wife, Nalamma and Balendran, his first son, to abandon their relationship with Arulanandan. He has made Pillai, the caretaker of his household shrine, not to have any contact with Arulanandan for his shameful deed of marrying a low-caste servant. Therefore, Arulanandan leaves Ceylon and settles down in Bombay, India, after the marriage. He loses his contact with his family due to his father's dictatorship as he thinks that his marriage with the low-caste woman is Arul's disrespectful act. He lives in India for twenty-eight years. His father hates Pakkiam as she belongs to different world. "She had never seen electricity or running water, never sat on a chair, never had more than a single change of clothing. She could not read or write" (230). As a traditionalist, Mudaliyar thinks that caste plays a vital role of giving one's identity. He holds that once inter-caste marriage is permitted, he would lose his fame and identity. He considers it as a great ignominy.

Religious Oppression

Annalukahmi is born in an orthodox family and her mother is separated from her father, Murugasu. He is a Hindu. He is converted to Christianity after the marriage. Her mother defies her family dictates and marries Murugasu. One day, Annalukshmi notices her father wiping the holy ash while coming out of a Hindu temple. On hearing Murugasu's liaison to Christianity, he is deserted by his family members and Louisa decides to live separate herself with the three daughters in Ceylon. Her husband moves to Malay and they never maintain any communication thereafter.

Conclusion

Oppression makes a person powerless and deprives his or her own rights. It also paves the way for humiliation. All the characters are oppressed in one way or the other. It makes Annalukshmi, Pakkiam and Murugasu powerless. Annalukshmi becomes rebellious and neglects the advices of her mother first and her aunty, Philomina Barnett, later and she becomes a teacher and rides bicycle. She is irritated initially and retains her freedom with the help of Miss Lawton, the headmistress. The Mudaliyar expects Arulanandan to confine within his community and forbids his marriage. He becomes adamant in isolating Arulanandan for marrying a Koviari. But he orders Balendran, his second son, to bring Arul's dead body to Ceylon. When Balendran brings Arul's ash, he is dejected. So, many characters become prey to different kinds of oppression.

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