Battle of the “Species” to play the Role of “National bourgeoisie”:
A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai’s Cinnamon Gardens and Funny Boy

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Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain “species” of men by another “species” of men. (Fanon, 1963)

Fanon had quite rightly pointed out in his work, The Wretched of the Earth (1961) that during the colonial and post-colonial period, the battle for dominating, suppressing and subjugating certain groups of people by a superior class never ceases to exist. He explains that there are two species- “Colonisers” and “National bourgeoisie” of the colonised- who seeks to rule the country after independence. Though he places his ideas in an African context, his arguments seems valid even for a South-East Asian country like Sri Lanka. After colonisers left the nation, there emerged a pertinent question - Who would play the role of national bourgeoisie? The struggle to play the coveted role drives Sri Lanka through ethnic conflicts and prejudices among them. The two dominant “species” battling for the position are: Tamils and Sinhalese. Considering the Marxist model of society, Althusser in work On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses claims that the social structure is composed of Base and Superstructure. The productive forces (labour forces/working class) and relations of production forms the Base while religious ideology, ethics, politics, family, identity and politico-legal (law and state) forms the superstructure (237). The National bourgeoisie exists in the superstructure. Both the groups try to survive in the superstructure. The objective of this paper is to study Shyam Selvadurai’s Cinnamon Gardens and Funny Boy and excavate the diverse ways in which these two mammoth ethnic groups struggle to oust one another and form the “national bourgeoisie”.

Bourgeoisie and National Bourgeoisie:

In the history of class struggle, Marxists perceive “bourgeoisie” as the oppressive class which exploits the proletariat for its own profits. They are the owners of the means of the social
production and employers of wage labour. As the industrial sector took over the preceding feudal world, this class showed its competence to keep the social structure intact. Service offered by any discipline is sought in terms of paid wage labourers. The “bourgeoisie has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science” into wage earners who yields and contributes to society (Marx 16). In order to operate smoothly, it concentrated its power in a specified area. This led to the growth of cities and proliferation of urban population. They are instrumental in creating laws and governments by violently juxtaposing independent or loosely connected provinces (Marx 17). This class of society existed during the colonial rule itself. However, it was difficult for them to gather wealth in the presence of their colonial masters. When a country gains independence, this group of people start exploiting the country in the way their colonisers did. Frantz Fanon rightly points out that the psychology of the “national bourgeoisie” is that of a businessman (150). He has the greed akin to the colonisers. The potential bourgeoisie during the post-independence period seeks for “nationalisation” of economy and trading sectors. Fanon feels that they fail to view “nationalisation” as a means of exploiting all the resources for the benefit of the country (152). Rather they try to emulate and practice the unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period. This post of “national bourgeoisie” is competed by two dominant groups in Sri Lanka-Tamils and Sinhalese. Each of the groups feels that they are the “potential bourgeoisie”. By the term “potential bourgeoisie”, I am referring to a class of people who feel that they may occupy the post of bourgeoisie in the post-colonial period.

History and Conflicts:

The relationship between Tamils and Sinhalese has always been an apple of discord. This comes to the fore as we find Tamils being wary about their lives after independence. Taking ethnic differences into consideration and age long rivalry Tamils wanted a policy that would help them safeguard their identity. Though Tamils and Sinhalese swept their ethnic differences under the carpet as they prepared themselves to fight the British, the peace did not last for long. The Ceylon National Congress was formed by both- Tamils and Sinhalese to force the British out of their nation. However the party got divided along ethnic lines. In the novel Cinnamon Gardens, F. C Wijewardena feels that the Donoughmore Commission will be a “gold rush” where everyone would try to claim and carve out their piece of land. He is content with the proposal for self rule as Sinhalese have an edge over minority Tamils because of numerical superiority. However, Mudaliyar Navaratnam, in a correspondence with his son Balendran expresses his insecurity that independence would bring to Tamil people. Despite
being a member of Queen’s House who owes everything to British Empire, he endorses the norms of Ceylon Tamil Association. The Donoughmore Commission rumours to leave Sri Lanka with self government which may be fatal to minorities. A wary Mudaliyar says:

I hold my post because I am nominated by the governor and I intend to stay in the legislative council on so long as I am nominated. However, the arrival of this Donoughmore Constitutional Commission in two weeks makes it necessary that we Tamils unite together. It is rumoured that the commission will be granting greater self government in the new constitution. This must be stopped. The governor must retain all the power he possesses. Otherwise we will replace a British Raj with a Sinhala Raj and then we Tamils will be doomed (Cinnamon Gardens 29).

The two ethnic groups have been indulged in conflicts against one another since their arrival into the island nation. Anshuman Rawat in his essay, “Civil War in Sri Lanka” traces the origins of the divided groups. He claims that the Sinhalese are documented to have arrived in the island back in 5th Century BC from the present day Indian state of Orissa. On the other hand, the Tamils arrived around 3rd Century BC from present day Indian state of Tamil Nadu (14). Since then they have fought against each other for the land. However, the island faced colonial oppression as early as 16th century. Since then, several colonial powers have ruled the island country. As Rawat notes that in 1505, the Portuguese arrived, established a fort in Colombo and took over the entire coastal areas. They were forced out by the Dutch in 1658. The last phase of colonial rule was marked by the British as they ruled from 1796 to 1948 when they attained independence (14). Despite being exploited by colonialists for nearly four centuries, the two groups have failed to make reconciliation between them. The ethnic differences come to the fore with the Cleghorn report. The solitary right of the Sinhalese on the nation has always been questioned by the Tamils. It is reported that Sir Hugh Cleghorn in 1799, the first British Colonial secretary of Ceylon, in a letter to the British Government wrote:

Two different nations, from a very ancient period, have divided between them possession of the island. First the Cingalese inhabiting the interior of the country, in its Southern and Western parts, from the river Vallouwe to that of Chilow, and secondly the Malabars (Tamils), who possess the northern and eastern districts. These two nations differ entirely in their religion, language and manners. (Encyclopaedia 78)

**Battle for educational sector:**

The ethnic rivalry between the two groups gave the colonisers to take advantage of this weakness and enhance their smooth governance over the colonized. Nanayakkara in his essay
“Post-Colonial Violence in Sri Lanka: A Narrative of Historical Evolutions and Contemporary Trends” states that the British, after their arrival in 1796, soon realised that the Sinhalese were opposed to their rule. Therefore, they adopted a decisive policy which was instrumental in favouring Tamils over the Sinhalese in educational spheres. Majority of schools were established in Jaffna which was a Tamil dominated area. Educated Tamils dominated in military and civil services too. Despite being a minority they enjoyed the favour of the colonialists. They felt that Tamils would be the potential “national bourgeoisie” of the newly independent country. The reason for Tamils to believe in their right to rule the country is obvious due to the power over the educational sector which Marxists believe to be an important weapon of the bourgeoisie. Education has the power to shape the society. It is an ideological apparatus which the bourgeoisie use to propagate a false consciousness in the minds of the proletariat so that the social structure remains intact. “Ideology” as Apple puts it his work Ideology and Curriculum, is a form of “false consciousness which distorts one’s picture of social reality and serves the interests of dominant classes in a society” (41). Even Neo-Marxists, who have adopted their theory from Marxism, believes educational institutions are carriers of bourgeoisie ideology. The curriculum of the schools teaches to develop a sense of regard for private property, knowledge about the sanctity of contracts, respect for law and order. This creates a sense of security among the bourgeoisie class. The potential Tamils and Sinhalese are aware about the hazards it would be exposed to if this sector is monitored by its foe leading to a hullabaloo to have power over it. Moreover, the educational institutions create a platform to propagate language which is influential in shaping a particular society. The Sinhalese schools create a threat to the Tamil minorities. This is evident as we find references to the killings in the chapter “Radha Aunty”. Arjie is informed that his grandfather was killed during the language riots. This ethnic troubles experienced by Ammachi had compelled her to be antagonistic about the relationship between Radha Aunty (Tamil) and Anil (a Sinhalese). Language is a more than a medium of communication. The national language adopted for a particular nation is also the language of the bourgeoisie. When Sinhala Only Official languages Act was passed, the Sinhalese found themselves in an advantageous position. During this time four day riot took place which left more than a hundred Tamils dead. The Victoria academy serves as a microcosm of the linguistic battle of Sri Lanka. We witness battles between Salgado and Cheliah, Lokubandara and Back Tie. Salgado is a Sinhala student who fights against Cheliah (a Tamil). Each of them has their own area of dominance. The Sinhala and Tamil classes are separated from one another. Their animosity extends to the higher authorities as well. Soyza claims that even teachers and clerks are divided into two factions of Black Tie and
Lokubandara. The latter wants the school to be named after a Buddhist monk; which would convert the school into a Sinhala one and there would be no place for Tamils. Both the groups want to monitor the educational sector, which would help them to be the national bourgeoisie.

**Social position and bourgeoisie residence:**

As British were about to leave the nation, the Tamils felt insecure because of numerical disadvantage. The Tamils who were educated enough and held high government posts felt themselves as “potential bourgeoisie” but soon realised the uncertainty for being a minority. This is evident in Cinnamon Gardens where were find Mudaliar Navaratnam, who is a Tamil, leading a comfortable and luxurious life under British rule. The Mudaliars are interpreters of British government agents in the diverse provinces of Ceylon. He is a member of Legislative Council and help in executing colonial policy. Franz Fanon in the chapter “Concerning Violence” elucidates rules of “reciprocal exclusivity” followed by colonisers (39). The space natives inhabit in the colonial countries are brightly lit with good sanitation facilities; well built roads. The space is akin to a belly full of "good things" (39). However, the place inhabited by the settlers is a world without spaciousness where people starve and live in darkness. Fanon rightly observes that the colonised man is an envious man. He seeks to climb in the social ladder which is possible only when he can walk abreast the coloniser. Fanon says:

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession- all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. (39)

Selvadurai’s Cinnamon Gardens is a representation of the upper Ceylonese society that brings along the rich colonial heritage. The Kandiah family of Cinnamon Gardens lives in a suburb of Colombo. The colonisers protected the cinnamon estate as they cultivated the land for gain. The streets boasted many grand mansions. These were homes of the best of Ceylonese society whose members have thrived under the British Empire and colonial economy. The affluence of this group of people has come from trade in rubber, coconut, plums and arrack. In sharp contrast to this elite group, Mr Jayaweera, a school teacher coming from a remote village called Weeragama, explains that it’s a place where people are poor, face scarcity of water. Balendran lets Richard Howland know about the crippling poverty, illiteracy that exists in the countryside. People suffer and die due to the lack of proper medical facilities. The bourgeoisie always try to establish themselves in towns and cities. As Marx claims, that bourgeoisie has “created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural” for their own benefits (17). It becomes an absolute imperative for the potential bourgeoisie to
occupy this urban sphere. In the novel *Funny Boy*, we find Arjie’s father struggling to establish his business. His Tamil origin becomes an obstacle as it clashes with the Sinhalese potential bourgeoisie who are equally interested in dominating this urban area.

The fight for rights was not confined to these two mammoth groups. The plantation workers who form a minority in Sri Lanka also raised their voices. They even launched a political party called Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). In the novel Cinnamon Gardens, Mr Jayaweera, a teacher at Miss Lawton’s school confides in Annalukshmi that he encouraged workers to fight for their rights as they work hard, living as one family in one room with no toilet. Their lives are like slaves. (156)

**Repressive State Apparatus:**

Louis Althusser claims that “the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, the prisons, etc” form the repressive state apparatuses (243). These institutions operate by violence or force. The bourgeoisie would definitely keep an eye on it to control the state. The “potential bourgeoisie”- Tamils and Sinhalese- are seen to be grappling to take hold of the repressive state apparatuses. This becomes evident in *Cinnamon Gardens* as we find questions being raised regarding the granting of Universal franchise. Ceylon National Congress argues that the nation would be left in ruins as it would allow people who are not responsible enough. As Donoughmore Commission granted Universal franchise, we find none of the groups being content with the decision. The British Empire allowed Sri Lanka to have general elections along with adult universal suffrage. However this was criticised by All Ceylon Tamil Congress claiming that the constitution is a death to the minorities. It demanded a 50-50 representation (equality for both Tamils and Sinhalese) in State council. The Sinhalese too were not content with the Donoughmore Constitution as it was framed in a way that no single ethnic community could dominate the political system. The diverse departments of government were to be monitored by a committee of parliamentarians coming from all ethnic communities. That repressive state apparatus plays a crucial role in functioning of the bourgeoisie becomes evident as we find the first State council of Ceylon largely run by a Sinhalese led cabinet. This proved devastating as the potential Tamils are seen to be subjugated and oppressed by the Sinhalese in the post colonial period. In *Funny Boy*, Amma informs Arjie about the government plights to stay in power by placing a referendum and skipping elections. The government was sticking posters everywhere to influence people’s minds. The ideology of the ruling class (Sinhalese) was deliberately imposed on others. The Sinhala bourgeoisie makes attempts to erase Tamil bourgeoisie from the entire political frame. The referendum took place and Arjie’s parents
could not even cast their vote. This shows the cementing of Sinhalese being successful in posting themselves in the role of national bourgeoisie. In the chapter, “Small Choices”, Selvadurai shows that the Tamils actually have little choice. The restrictions imposed upon Tamils by the Sinhala bourgeoisie led to the formation of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) who fought against the atrocities of Sinhalese against Tamils. The LTTE sought to create an independent state for Tamil people. The battle between Tamils and Sinhalas to play the role of national bourgeoisie comes to the fore when we find Jegan and Mr. Chelvaratnam facing difficulty in establishing their business as they are constantly reminded of Sinhala rivalry. Banduratne Mudalali, a Sinhala business rival, has vandalised and killed many Tamils during the ethnic riots. He is a man backed by a Cabinet minister and wants the area to be free of Tamils. Towards the end of the novel, Selvadurai brings in an idea that the Sinhalas are the national bourgeoisie as we find Arjie and his family members struggling to save their life. Their business establishments are attacked, houses looted. Arjie’s wish to leave the country for his safety is an indication of his failure to become a part of national bourgeoisie.

Selvadurai’s two novels- *Cinnamon Gardens* and *Funny Boy*- clearly show the battle between Tamils and Sinhalese to become the potential bourgeoisie. The pre-colonial privileged minority Tamils are seen to be pushed to the periphery by the post-colonial dominant Sinhalese in diverse spheres. In the post-colonial Sri Lanka, the emergence of a national bourgeoisie is evident and it is because of the interests of two potential bourgeoisies to become national bourgeoisie, the country is afflicted by incessant ethnic conflicts.
Works cited


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