



Racial segregation and uninhabitable isolation in Samuel Selvon's *the Lonely londoners*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the issue of racial discrimination and isolation experienced by the immigrants of Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon interprets the pros and cons of living in London, as it is a city where many religion, races, cultures and ethnicities can be seen. He delineates the problems, dilemma and plight of Trinidadian immigrants in a rapidly changing metropolitan world. Moreover, the problems faced by the immigrants and the obstacles which do not allow them to integrate with Anglo-saxon culture are highlighted in this study. The paper also centers on how racial discrimination culminate and intensified their feeling of isolation and exile.

Keywords: isolation, immigration, racism, exile, postcolonial

Introduction

Samuel Selvon belongs to the Windrush generation i.e. migrants named after the Empire Windrush ship which first brought Caribbean over to help rebuild post-war Britain. He left his respective place of birth, a former colony 'Trinidad', for "better break" and opportunity. Selvon's literature falls under the category of migrant and postcolonial literature, in which he deals with the themes of displacement, cereolization, migration, isolation, identity, racial trauma, slavery and emancipation, and their impact on West Indians' sensibility. Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* provides a glimpse of West Indian Immigrants and their living conditions in London. It is a crowded canvas where Selvon portrays all the characters in a humanistic way. The novel is filtered through the consciousness of Moses Aloetta, who has been presented as a 'veteran', 'father figure' and moral centre of the novel. The novel opens up with a description of London at night, when Moses Aloetta is going to Waterloo Station to receive Henry Oliver alias Sir Galahad, who is coming from Trinidad:

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet. Moses Aloetta hopon a number 46bus to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. (Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 27).

Fog, as Salick Roydon in *The Novels of Samuel Selvon: A Critical Study* argues, symbolises the tone of the novel from the beginning: "So markedly different is London in water from the accustomed, remembered Caribbean reality Moreover, the fog becomes a central metaphor in the novel for the immigrants' inability to see clearly, to maintain an unclouded focus, to envision a particular course of action leading to a specific goal." (Roydon, *The Novel of Samuel Selvon*, 122).

Moses in a conversation with Galahad, makes a striking statement about life and trauma of black immigrants in London: "this city powerfully lonely when you on your own" (47). This deeply rooted feeling of alienation describes, not

only the early London days of Trinidadian immigrants, but also Moses' desire to find a place where he can foster and meet a sense of community among his own people. His knowledge of life in London allows him to indulge in a superior irony over Galahad as he has seen, experienced and suffered almost everything in his time: "Ah, in you I see myself, how I was when I was new to London. All them places is like nothing to me now" (85).

Selvon's *Londoners*, as the title itself indicates are lonely and miserable. One of the reason, that they feel alienated from society is racism that keeps them segregated from the major white population. On the other hand, these immigrants have to negotiate two cultures, one of their own (the old one) and the other (the new one). These black immigrants have no white friends except some poor white girls that they occasionally date. The white people do not communicate with them more than is absolutely necessary. Several examples in the novel demonstrate that these black immigrants are not desired and welcomed in London. The explanation of the problem of why Britishers openly show their dislike for black immigrants is simple: it is all about their 'colour'. It is evident that race is a vary crucial factor in determining one's place in the British society. For instance, once Galahad wanted to talk with a child, but her mother reveals that she would speak with him if only the street were empty. This case leads Galahad to question race discrimination, and illustrates white people's attitude towards the black people. Galahad becomes a mouthpiece of all black people who just want to live like ordinary human beings and have the human dignity. Galahad is not guilty of any crime, he is only guilty of being 'black'. In a powerful monologue, he blames his black colour for all the problems, he is experiencing in Britain:

... Colour is you that causing all this. Why the hell you can't be blue or red or green; if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world Look at you, you so black and innocent and this time so you causing misery all over the world! (72).

Bart is another victim of racial discrimination. He is ashamed of his colour and national identity as well: "he

nither here nor there, he go around telling everybody that he is a Latin- American"(45). Bart's colour consciousness makes him miserable. In order to escape his realities he makes an attempt to marry a white girl, but is thrown out by her father because they don't want any " ... curly-haired children in the family"(65).

Another important aspect that intensifies their feeling of alienation is that, they are aware of the fact that although they are no longer slaves, yet they are made cheap labourers. They are offered with worst jobs. They pay high price for insecure tenancy. They are treated as pirates or parasites on the fringe of a host society which regard them with hostility and indifference, Moses affirms: "they just do not like black people and do not ask me why, because that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find out from way back"(39). In this concern, Maria Grazia Sindoni, in *Creolizing Culture* quotes Rushdie: "Despite the need for workers, there was public outcry that eventually led to legislation restricting the entrance in England of "undesirable" citizen, as Rushdie puts it. He claims that racism "is not a side-issue in contemporary Britain". (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*,129).Sindoni further elaborates:

The organization of labour, and consequently of social dynamics, seems to work across racial lines. Black workers were systematically pushed to the borders of society, they were exploited and manipulated economically, not only by being relegated to the margins of society through low paid jobs, but also by being giving the worst houses and worst education opportunities for their children. (Sindoni, *Creolizing Culture*, 22).

These immigrants feel lonelier in London, as its climate, people, culture, pubs, shops, everything is totally different from that of Caribbean Nation. The constant feeling of homesickness and rootlessness also makes them feel alienated. Moses, who is living in London for more than ten years still feels homesick: "...and he have no doubts that when the time comes, if it ever come, it would be here he would say goodbye to the big city. Perhaps he was thinking is time to go back to the tropics, that why he feeling sort of lonely and miserable"(26). Moreover, their loneliness and alienation is accelerated because their community doesn't hold strongly together, though they seek company and help from their countrymen when they arrive in London. Some of them meet regularly, however, their first priority is their own well-being. Moses puts the same notion: "...life really hard for the boys in London. This is a lonely, miserable city. If it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things. We would suffer like hell"(126). Moses is the only one who is always there to help them, as Susheila Nasta affirms: "his [Moses'] sense of victimization is enhanced by his sense of being emotionally entrapped by "this group of picturesque rogues[who] circle like vultures around the generous figure of Moses Aloetta".(Nasta, *Samuel Selvon: The lonely Londoners*,26). So, Selvon has aptly portrayed his characters as victim of metropolitan city and a moribund society, having exposed to the British way of life these immigrants suffered a great sense of unbelongingness and alienation.

Conclusion

The Lonely Londoners thus, depicts a complex relationship between white Britishers and black immigrants. It also denotes the discrimination that there immigrants

experienced in many fields. Racism, prejudices, stereotypes, socio- political condition as well as their own perception regarding their identity fortified their sense of uninhabitable isolation in their promised land 'London'. Selvon, aptly has termed these Londoners as 'Lonely'. To conclude with the words of Erin James:"Selvon contributes to a well-worn modernist tradition of depicting London as alien and alienating - the city alienation encodes a specific experience of environmental racism and prejudice as it reflects the way in which Selvon's characters are denied access to their new urban "Home". (James, *The Story world Accord*, 81)

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