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Idealism to Realism- Representing London in Black British Writing: Reading Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

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Abstract

Black British Literature is the by product of the struggles and dislocations witnessed by the black immigrants who invaded Britain in search of greener pasture and in the pursuit of the Golden Fleece. It comprises of the literature written in English by Caribbean, African and Asian writers emanating from immigrants from colonies formerly colonized by Britain. These writers have something in common which is their disillusionment with Britain, especially London and what it has to offer. Also is their bitter anger and expression of the hardship, brutality, molestation, oppression, self denigration, exploitation and discrimination meted on them by the British as well as their feeling of alienation, cultural dislocation and their struggle for self identity, discovery and survival. This literature captures Britain in its transformational stages and could pass for social documents from which the history of Britain, the

*society that gave birth to the future which today has become present, could be obtained. Samuel Selvon is one of the Caribbean writers who devoted a greater time of his life writing about the injustices, hardships, inhumanity, discriminations and agonies which characterize the life of an average immigrant in London. The novel under study, *The Lonely Londoners* echoes with sadness but controlled anger with which Selvon expressed their disappointment with London and its suburbs as a result of discrimination and unjust practices meted on his fellow mulattos. This paper examined how Selvon portrayed the disillusionment that followed the 'idealised' London to the 'real' London he writes about. On another level, the paper argues that despite the tone of disenchantment and despair that pervade the novel, it ushers in a way of acceptance and adaptation through which these immigrants will make the best out of London and his optimism on the social changes and reformation which he foresees London will undergo to better the lots of all and sundry, a situation that gives hope in the reconstructive and reformative London he presented.*

Introduction

Twentieth Century Black British literature by West Indian authors has its beginnings with the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1945. With a small immigrant population agreeing to work menial jobs, Britain witnessed a phenomenal growth of a first generation West Indian population. It is the children of these immigrants that we refer to as the Black British generation. Black British writing was then born out of the struggles and dislocation of these new generations of Black citizens. Black British literature, better called the literature written in English by Caribbean, African and Asian writers and their descendant, comprises of the literary aesthetics produced by successive generations from ex-British colonies in Britain.

This literature is a representation of this generation's overall experiences in Britain, London in particular. According to Stein, their writing addresses the iconography of Britain as well as the exertion of cultural power. He regards the writing of this people as novel, and by extension, a literature of transformation which does not only portray changing Britain but, crucially, is partly responsible for the changes witnessed today. One black British writer, who concerns himself with the literature of transformation, while exposing the ill treatment by London society towards black immigrants, is Samuel Selvon. Selvon's literature is known for its often dismal exemplification of London. Ranging from his *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Moses Ascending* (1975), *Moses Migrating* (1983), *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972), *Turn*

Again Tiger (1958), and his short stories, 'Brackley and the Bed' and 'Calypso in London' among other works, he systematically and methodologically represents the life of black immigrants in London. As an acclaimed writer who is praised for his clear historical account of London in virtually all his writings, Selvon takes delight in exposing the difficulties faced by black immigrants in London, whom he calls his people. However, he focuses his London novels and stories to accommodate black immigrants' struggles against colour discrimination in housing and jobs in London, as well as their battle against the London weather. In fact, to say the least, his writings constitute a representation of experiences of economic hardship, racism and boredom, of the marginalised in London. In support of Selvon, Jeremy White says:

I think I can justify giving space to those more 'marginal' Londoners who have eked a living in the byways of London life, on its streets, in its clubs and outside the law, for I believe their significance to be an abiding truth about London and Londoners (31).

Based on historical perspective, London has always been one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities. In the post World war 1 years, it experienced such an increase in the number of immigrants from across Europe that, by the mid-1920s, there was an agreement to half -close her doors to foreigners (white immigrants) arriving as a result of what White terms 'an anti-alien (mostly anti-Semitic) agitation' (31). One may draw the conclusion that London's attitude concerning the late 20th century's immigrants from her former colonies was only a reaction from the lesson she learnt from the white immigrants who stormed London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To avoid a repetition of history, her government adopted austerity measures with regards to these immigrants. Hence, they were confined to menial jobs by both the public and private sectors. For housing, the government instituted certain measures such as 'property values', 'colour premium', and 'social and cultural differences', before granting accommodation to any Londoner. These measures are calculated plans to displace these immigrants to 'the tube' and onto 'the streets'. To cap it all, the police were let loose on the streets to chase and give discomfort to these people. Ruth Glass reads this action as paying obeisance to the instruction of the White Defence League to 'send the coloured immigrants home.' In this essay, however, our concern is on the representation of the London of the immigrants from former colonies of

Britain, and not the London of the white immigrants across Europe because they never had the same share of experience. Glass illustrates:

And while it may be true that, as some people argue, the difficulties of all newcomers to Britain are alike, it is also true that coloured people meet these difficulties in an accentuated form. They are not simply migrants: they are coloured migrants. A white newcomer can hide, or eventually lose, the obvious signs of his foreignness; a dark skinned man cannot wash off his colour (1).

To this end, this essay reads and studies Selvon's exemplification of London in *The Lonely Londoners* as a text that facilitates and promotes the emancipatory narrative of black immigrants in London. We shall also see how it intends to generate the idea of social change through a subtle but sensitive tone. Also, this essay will capture Selvon's London as it affects black immigrants in their experiences of housing in London, employment opportunities in London, the London police, and worst still, their battle with the weather in London. McLeod opines:

The writing of these and other Londoners often bears stark witness to the subaltern lives and fortunes of those rendered other or marginal in a frequently hostile and unwelcoming city where prejudices towards newcomers have been, and still can be, found within employment, housing, government and the Metropolitan Police (4).

Constructive and Reformative Image of London in Samuel Selvon's *the Lonely Londoners*

The Lonely Londoners (1956) is Selvon's first London novel and conspicuously exposes the predicament of black immigrants in London. It is a factual retelling of the segregation and dislocation of the black immigrants in London, which acknowledges the need for resistance through independent struggles and mutual help amongst the displaced. According to Procter, it is pivotal in 'charting' the black metropolis, providing a discursive knowledge of the metropolis which opens London up and makes it susceptible to a rewriting, to alternative signifying process (52). Selvon as a one-time Londoner has seen the need to reflect the hidden knowledge of the metropolis in his writing. While reflecting on the 'true' city of London, *The Lonely Londoners* progresses to a constructive analysis of the London metropolis. Its

reflection of the London metropolis is its representation of London, while its construction of London as would be discussed later, is a message of regeneration, hope and social change, made possible through the dualities of Selvon's characters: Galahad and Harris. The tone adopted by Selvon in his representation of London is mild and subtle. His diction is well selected with the intention to evoke sympathy for the Caribbeans in London, while exposing the egregious acts of the London government towards the blacks. Whereas Selvon is mild in his tone, Johnson, Kincaid and a few black British writers burn in acute anger.

Selvon's reflective novel presents two different images of London. On the one hand, he presents the London of the mind- 'ideal London'- and on another hand, the London of the sight- 'real London'. The London of the Caribbean when seen at home (the ideal London) differs from the London of the Caribbean immigrants in London (the real London). As soon as the immigrants migrate to London, their ideal magnificent London turns devilish in reality. According to McLeod, it is a 'journey from idealism to disillusionment' and to Philips, 'a myth...entirely destroyed by the 'different elements' which constitute the city's uninviting reality.' McLeod quotes a statement by Mike Philips:

I had always possessed a mental map of the city which sketched out an outline of its institution- Buckingham Palace. The British Museum. The LSE. The MCC. Parliament. The Foreign Office. Scotland Yard... All these were landmarks in the London I knew before I set foot in its streets, but during my initial encounter with the city, they might as well have been operating on the moon. The London I lived in seemed to have a different history, and to be organised around different elements (29).

The true image Philips got of London on his arrival disillusioned him. As the novel shows, to the Caribbean at home, London is perceived as a perfect place with its streets paved with gold: '...one of those black Jamaicans who coming to London thinking that the streets paved with gold.' But when witnessed, it turns to 'a lonely miserable city' (10). A proper illustration would be to examine the intentions of Tanty and Galahad on arrival to London. In an interview, Tanty has this to say as her intention for coming to England: 'But they say that it has more work in England, and better

pay.’(11). Galahad, who is full of dreams of London as a place where he would get satisfied, puts it in this form: ‘what luggage? I ain’t have any... When I start a work I will buy some things.’(29). Galahad, like Tanty, arrives London with the dream of furnishing himself with a good life. His intention is represented when he says to Moses in confidence: ‘Don’t worry, I will get fix up as soon as I start to work.’(14). After a few days spent in London, his confidence to survive dwindles. In fear, he asks Moses: ‘You think I will get a work?’(29). Galahad’s and Tanty’s London is just a dream. Even as Tanty fails to fulfil her dream, Galahad on the other hand, gets no regular job and becomes more frustrated and disillusioned:

[...] Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so? What it is we want that the white people and them find it so hard to give? A little work, a little food, a little place to sleep. We not asking for the sun, or the moon. We only want to get by, we don’t even want to get on (76).

One might think that these immigrants are asking for too much, but in all fairness they were not. They were only asking for a little means of surviving, a way to exemplify and apply their innate abilities as human beings alive and breathing. They only wish for shelter and refuge from their desolate and hunger-stricken Caribbean islands from which they sought escape. These immigrants were void of patriotism, ready to bleed and sweat for London but London from the expositions of Samuel Selvon had a different plan for these people, a situation that robbed them of their humanities and turned them into different beings which invariably often lead them to an undesired end in their bid to survive and bring the two ends of their lives together. But they were greeted with suffering, oppression and molestation in place of peace, comfort and idyllic life which they sought. Their extended arms of friendship and partnership were out- rightly rejected by the British who only look at them from an economic view and not humanistic view. This is the clear situation for Galahad as his London turns from ‘gold’ to ‘grey’. His situation degenerates to the point that he tries to ‘catch a pigeon in the park to eat’ (117). To this end, Selvon suggests that London is only made perfect by the mind’s construction. In reality, it becomes what Maclnnes considers ‘a largely shameless shambles...a place in which men may freely dream...’(xviii). As the London dream of Tanty and Galahad turns an illusion, Selvon paints the extinction of idealism and replaces it with realism.

Since realism is a truthful treatment of material, Selvon shows that the mind's construction of a place is never the true picture of that place.

Housing is one poignant issue which Selvon illustrates in his text. The black immigrants witness a terrible housing experience in London. Many who cannot afford the means to rent an apartment are left on the streets as homeless and placeless people, while a few who are fortunate to get an apartment are confined to the worst of all buildings:

The houses around here old and grey and weather-beaten, the walls cracking like the last days of Pompeii, it ain't have no hot water, and in the whole street that Tolroy and them living in, none of the houses have bath...Some of the houses still had gas light, which is to tell you how old they was (59).

We know who lives in a particular building by the look of the building. Glass observes: 'The faces of the building tell whether they are the ones in which the migrants are concentrated.' (50). In *Newcomers: The West Indians in London*, Glass presents an image of the houses of black immigrants in London:

The tall houses, structurally similar to those of the south... are badly in need of repair: the woodwork is unpainted; window frames are rotten; plaster has fallen away from the outside walls, showing patched of bare brick. Occasionally, there is a gap in a long parade of terrace houses: the missing house seems to have fallen down. These are the streets of transition where a considerable number of West Indians have found rooms (50).

What this suggests is that the worst buildings are reserved for the black immigrants, while the 'Whites' are accommodated in the best buildings. Patterson's *Dark Strangers* highlights racial discrimination and prejudice as a possible factor that influenced the processes of accommodation among migrants in the receiving society. Selvon's text also represents racial discrimination of black immigrants in London. In page 77 of *The Lonely Londoners*, it is fascinating how Selvon presents this segregation: '... rooms to let... Keep the Water White,' This use of euphemism to mean

“keep the house colourless’ or ‘blacks, keep off’ reminds us of Selvon’s subtle use of language without altering his intended message.

In explaining this discrimination, prejudice and dislocation of black settlers in London, Patterson, like Glass, describes in her own way, the look of the ‘black house’:

The houses in these roads are large, ugly, dilapidated... semi-detached...The exteriors are for the most part dingy, unpainted, and crumbling...Many front doors have lost their knockers and bells, and their wooden or glass panels are broken or cracked... There is also a vague, all pervading smell of ancient dirt, of inefficient and overworked plumbing, unaired rooms, cooking, paraffin stoves, sometimes of mice, and always of many people congregated together (182).

Selvon on the other hand, lends his voice to emphasize housing in London as a key signifier in racial discourse in an interview conducted by Peter Nazareth:

The question of having a roof overhead becomes very important in a cold country... From my observation of the immigrants in London, these are the things they strive for most desperately. It also becomes very difficult for them to even get a room to stay in because of social pressure... That is the sort of situation that exists, the type of building that a black immigrant gets to buy is one that is about to be demolished. He hasn’t got a great deal of choice of houses. He has to take what he gets... (86).

There is a continuous emphasis on the homestead of blacks in London. They are usually found in jam-packed, crammed and congregated tiny rooms as well as hopping from one ‘feller’s house to another when homeless (a good example is Cap who hops from house to house when displaced). In *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses’s room becomes the refuge for other ‘fellers’: ‘Nearly every Sunday morning,...the boys liming in Moses room, coming together for old talk...’ (134). The gathering and convergence in Moses’s room signifies how they ‘domesticate and make themselves at home within a

wider urban environment beyond the basement' (46). It becomes a forum for regeneration, hope and positivity.

In addition to the problem of housing which black immigrants face in London, the policing of the London police, particularly on the black settlers, pose a verisimilitude account of London. Although *The Lonely Londoners* did not present any racial activity of the London police but a legitimate duty, - "Can I help you to get some place?" the policeman say.'(24) - It does not in any way dismiss the fact that police hostility on black immigrants in London is a predominant phenomenon in black British literature. Rather, it shows Selvon's construction of a new London and a hope for a social change which will be discussed shortly. Unlike Selvon, Linton Kwesi Johnson's dub poems are known for narrating the racist activities of the London police. In 'Sonny's Lettah', Sonny tells his mama how the police humiliate him and little Jim on the streets in London, while in 'Street 66', the personae speaks of the police raid action in the houses of black immigrants. What might be deduced as the reason for the rampant insurgence and raid by the London police at any gathering of black settlers- at home or on the streets- is to call a stop to the unity that exists among the blacks, since their gathering on the streets 'facilitates the formation of territories and communities' (77), while their cramped gathering at home promotes a space for regeneration and hope to combat the ills of the society.

The unemployed condition of black immigrants in London and the terrifying heavy jobs which are reserved for them is another aspect of Selvon's representative account of London in *The Lonely Londoners*. Just as Patterson did state the working conditions of coloured immigrants in Britain who are 'forced to take low wages for long hours' and 'are the first to be laid off' (69), Selvon's Moses laments on the condition of blacks in London: ' and we only getting the worse jobs it have.' (8). However, Moses who has the right feeling- the feeling of pain and bitterness- but lacks the right word to express his pain, manages to narrate the kind of work which blacks are forced to do, while the White takes the easiest jobs:

They send you for a storekeeper work and they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think that is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the clerical jobs for them white fellars (35).

This is pure injustice and discrimination in such an alarming rate that Selvon could no longer fold his arms and watch in silence. Just like any other

genuine artist, he used the weapon of writing to address these crimes on humanity and individuals and to express unequivocally his disillusionment on the level of discrimination, suffering and indecent practices meted on these immigrants by their white counterparts as they were restricted to befitting jobs expect hard and life threatening ones. Brackley, the main character in Selvon's short story 'Brackley and the Bed' published in *Concert of Voices*, suffers the same hardship to get a decent job in London. He could only get a menial job to 'wash(ing) dishes in a café' (9376). Selvon states how easy it is for blacks to get temporary jobs in London, since their kind of jobs are specifically tedious and menial: 'It wasn't so hard to do that, for the work is a hard work and mostly is spades they have working in the factory, paying lower wages than they would have to pay white fellars'(52).

Even after securing jobs and putting in so many overtime hours to earn a living, the black immigrants never make any progress at all. Moses who has spent 10 years in London has nothing to show for it (124). He could 'see a great aimlessness, a great restless (ness), swaying movement that leaves him standing in the same spot' (139). They are left in their miserable situation with their fate on posterity. Rather than their industrious effort changing their fortunes in London, these people work and 'bleed' for the growth of England while they themselves perish in penury. Moses tells Galahad: '... is we who bleed to make this country prosperous'(21) while Linton kwesi Johnson speaks to his audience in 'Inglan is A Bitch': ' Mi know dem have work, work in abundant/ Yet still, dem make mi redundant'(49-50).

Just as Selvon's characters struggle against the man-made ills in London of their time, the weather turns into another battle for them. In the very beginning of the novel, the London weather is qualified as 'nasty weather' (1). Subsequently, we see how Moses stamps his feet to ward off the cold as he waits to receive Galahad at the station in Waterloo: 'getting colder and colder and Moses stamping he foot as he stand up there.'(12). In this act, Moses struggles to overcome the London cold which affects the newcomers. Not only do the newcomers wish to go back home because of the societal discrimination and prejudice in London, the cold in London makes them think of going home: 'Cold today, isn't it? I bet you wish you were back home now.'(127). Even in Selvon's short story 'Calypso in London', Mangohead, just like Moses, struggles to survive the London cold. He quits a digging job after his hands freeze.

In contrast, there is something striking about Galahad's insensitivity to the London winter. Galahad is presented as a dual personality. His insensitivity to the biting cold of the London winter presents him as a 'White man' who is used to the cold weather. But his black colour on the other hand, gives him another personality. His duality cuts across his appreciation of the things in London, and his condemnation of the attitude of his black fellows about London. In page 72 when Galahad declares that Charing Cross makes him feel like a new man, Selvon advocates the need for love and appreciation of a given city even when it hurts our race and does not meet our expectations. Galahad loves London and defends it at all costs. His statements to Moses on different occasions- 'I know fellars like you,' 'You all live in a place for some time and think you know all about it, and when any green fellars turn up you try to frighten them. If things bad like that how come you still holding on in Brit'n?' (21) and 'If you ain't do well is nobody fault but your own. (128). - show how he refuses to allow his hope and believe of London to be contaminated. Hence, his replies signify the love of, not contempt for, London upon which his fellows place their misfortunes. Harris, another counterpart of Galahad who dresses and speaks like the 'true English' (103), is breaking away from the attitude of his fellows in London, is Selvon's account of duality.

However, one could conceptualise the attitude of Galahad and Harris as a sustained reading of a 'doubleness of self'. Indeed, it would be argued that it is only through this duality of persons-half-Caribbean, half-British- that Selvon is able to peel away the ideological perspective of black immigrants in London which Procter qualifies as 'transforming its alien landscape into familiar dwelling places' (50) to make sense of the future. As a reformative novel, Selvon is not just interested in viewing London as a destructive city but a city which could be constructively remapped as a homely city. By the continuous use of the phrase 'the old Brit'n' in the novel, Selvon foresees the New Britain of equality, love and oneness. In the scene where Half Past Five and Big City dance with White girls at the fete dance, one can give in that the scene suggest the reunion and merging into two, the two elements of the two sides of the world in such a way that both could co-exist harmoniously without tension or friction but with merriment and laughter, the kind that characterized that party scene. This essay suggests Selvon's confidence in the extinction of colour discrimination in London. Selvon is acknowledged for his ability to recreate and his confidence in change. McLeod clearly illustrates this point:

Selvon's confidence in change as both necessary and possible: in cruel, unwelcoming city, the ability to imagine the metropolis otherwise is a daring and vital act which keeps faith with the transformative propensity of migration as well as the initial hope and optimism which encouraged newcomers to travel (39).

One may wonder why this essay contains so many notes from texts of non-literature. It is because the representation of London is an historical study. And as such, there is need for a proper connection of a facsimile representation of London from both the literary and non-literary texts. By this, we generate a balance between fiction and non-fiction as well as showing how fictions could embed history. This view is well expressed in the words of David I. Ker while writing on the African novels and what they have come to represent:

It is interesting to access the validity of ... novels as social documents, for if literature is relevant at all it is because we can obtain some picture of society and of life from it. However in order to determine how accurately certain social types and their behaviours are reproduced in a work of fiction, we must have knowledge of the structure of the society gleaned from other sources than purely literary ones (26).

One may argue also that Selvon exemplifies and reflects London through the character of Moses Aloetta:

[...] Ah in you I see myself, how I was when I was new to London. All them places is like nothing to me now. Is like when you back home and you hear fellars talk about Times Square and Fifth Avenue, and Charing Cross and gay Parea. You say to yourself, 'Lord, them places must be sharp.' Then you get a chance and see them for yourself, and is like nothing (73).

Moses sees emptiness and nothingness in London, and sees London as a place filled with moral decadence of prostitution which he describes extensively in pages 95-100. But this also connotes total resignation and

acceptance of London and these are part of the things that are sine qua non in the reformatory stance of Selvon through which the interweaving of both cultures could be done, a task one can argue he sets out to do and reconcile in his novel. Selvon constructs and creates London in the character of Galahad who loves what he sees in London: 'seeing so much cat about the place, laying down on the grass, sitting and talking, all of them in pretty summer colours, the grass green, the sky blue, sun shining, flower growing, the fountains sprouting water, Galahad Esquire strolling through all of this,' (78). He sees London as life with hopes: 'this is London, this is life oh lord...' For this reason, he declares he will never leave London as long as he lives. (101)

Although this novel ends in a state of despair, confusion and weariness, the dual personality of some of Selvon's characters gives a face of hope to this novel. Since most of the boys have the opportunity to go back home but refuse to go, instead sending for their families, one might seem to believe that they are still optimistic about the social change which Selvon foresees. Here rests the message of hope in *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon did not only represent London, rather, he presents a constructive view of London. He is hopeful that clemency would find London and make his lonely Londoners, licensed legal Londoners who would have equal rights and privileges as their White counterparts.

Conclusion

From the foregoing and the bulk of literature reviewed in this paper, one can see how literature functions as a social document which has greater powers of changing and reforming society. Samuel Selvon in his novel *The Lonely Londoners* presented the agonies, woes and failures of his fellow immigrants who came to London in search of greener pasture and means of survival, a situation that is to them the best escape route from the darkness, backwardness and poverty in their homes. But these immigrants were disillusioned by the level of harshness, violence, discrimination, insecurity, homelessness and hardship they suffered in London. These immigrants came to London as a city of hope only to have their hopes dashed by the level of discrimination meted on them in a place where it is obvious that they were not wanted. The discrimination was glaring and made more manifest in the type of odd, heavy and at times life threatening jobs which these immigrants were only allowed to do. Also in the houses which they were allowed to live as well as places they are meant to be seen. The policemen were often on the streets to make life miserable for these immigrants and in the place of solace and refuge they met loneliness, coldness and cruelty and these were among

the thing that made them lonely and depressed them. Thus the title- 'Lonely Londoners.' But in all these, there are more to the novel to the tone of despair, sadness and disillusionment that pervade the work and it is the idea of total resignation and acceptance of London and all it has to offer as part of the inevitable as well as a reformative way of reconciling the oppressive manners of London to a more cohesive means of adaptation. This will elicit more patriotism and in turn engineer London into acceptance of these immigrants men and women as part of her people, her history, her economy which will work hand in hand, collectively to make her that city of gold and fulfilled dreams not for one but for all citizens both natives and immigrants in many if not all ramifications. This is the deeper meaning of Samuel Selvon work, a perspective from which more insights will be gained and the novel more readily appreciated as a timeless classic work of art.

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www.mp3lyrics.org/1/linton-kwesi-johnson.com

¹ Cesar and Sharon Meraz, *Black British Literature*.

www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/E388M2/students/.../bbpage.html (online page)