

The Representation Of Caribbean Immigration In Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

Samuel Selvon'in The Lonely Londoners (1956) Eserinde Karayip Göçü

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Abstract

In his novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Samuel Selvon contextualises the lives of Caribbean and their descendants in Britain through his first-hand experiences during the 1950s. He pens the tension between great expectations and realities that West Indians experienced in post-war London, following the huge wave of migration, also known as Windrush in 1948. The aim of this paper is to explore the immigration of West Indians to the Motherland as represented in *Lonely Londoners*, and to discover how this work critically contributed to the promotion and development of Caribbean and black British writing. The first part of the study focuses on the socio-historical background of the novel, and the second part mainly deals with the representation of immigration and its effects on Caribbean community in the novel. Finally, in the last section I would argue that Selvon with his distinctive narrative style in *Lonely Londoners* contributes to the transformation of new British society, and to the negotiation of a subaltern identity in the Motherland.

Key Words: *Immigration, Black British Writing, Vernacular Dialect and the Motherland.*

Öz

Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) adlı romanında Jamaika (Batı Hint) ve ardından takip eden neslin yaşamlarını 1950'lerde doğrudan deneyimler aracılığı okuruna sunar. Selvon, 1948'de Windrush olarak da bilinen dev göç dalgasının ardından Karayipli göçmenlerin savaş sonrası Londra'da yaşadıkları büyük beklentiler ve gerçekler arasındaki gerilimi eleştirel bir açıdan işler. Bu makalenin amacı, *The Lonely Londoners*'da temsil edildiği gibi Batı Hintlilerin Anavatan'a göçünü araştırmak, ve bu eserin Karayipler ve siyahi İngiliz yazınının tanıtımına ve gelişimine olan katkısını ortaya koymaktır. Çalışmanın ilk kısmı romanın sosyo-tarihsel arka planına odaklanırken, ikinci kısmı esas olarak göçün temsili ve romandaki Karayip toplumu üzerindeki etkilerini ele almaktadır. Çalışmanın son kısmı ise, Selvon'un *The Lonely Londoners*'daki kendine özgü anlatı tarzı ile İngiliz toplumunun dönüşümüne ve Anavatan'daki alt kimliğin kabulüne olan katkısını tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Göç, Siyahi İngiliz Yazını, Yerel Ağız ve Anavatan*

Introduction

The Lonely Londoners (1956) focuses on the lives of West Indian immigrants from the perspective of two groups: those already living in Britain, and those who have just arrived in the Motherland. Following the World War II there was a demand for the rising labour in Britain due to the mobility and loss of its citizens. The prospect of employment was an important factor that attracted Caribbean citizens to make their way to the Motherland. Following World War II years, Britain was in short of workers with a weakened economy. Especially there was an urgent need of human labour in the sectors of manufacturing, construction, public transportation and National Health Service. The workers from Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica were recruited to rebuild Britain's declining economy.

The UK government enacted the British Nationality Act (1948), welcoming Caribbean citizens as 'British subjects' and offering them opportunities for better living and working conditions in the Motherland.¹ The arrival of *SS Empire Windrush* at Tilbury from the Caribbean in 1948 can be considered a milestone in the construction of new British identity, carrying around 500 hundred Jamaican citizens to the Motherland initially. The slow albeit increasing migration of colonial citizens living in England and Wales reached 161.000 by 1961². It was until 1962 that colonial citizens could enter the UK to work without any restrictions. However, the Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962) brought immigration controls for Caribbean. A further restriction was in effect by 1968 Immigration

¹ The first part of the act emphasises British nationality by virtue of citizenship, stating that "Every person who under this Act is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies or who under any enactment for the time being in force in any country mentioned in subsection (3) of this section is a citizen of that country shall by virtue of that citizenship have the status of a British subject."

² McDowell 2018.

Act, which requested immigrants to prove a close connection with the UK for entry. This restriction was further strengthened in 1972 when immigrants had to obtain compulsory working permits if their parents were not born in the UK. The slow changes in immigration acts signalled the initial steps of the segregation that would follow in amid of Caribbean settlement.

The encounter of two different cultures paved the way for the ways in which a new British identity would be negotiated. However, the lives of the immigrants in their new 'home' proved the otherwise, contrary to their expectations as represented in *The Lonely Londoners*. British citizens, mostly working-class, did not welcome the idea that they would have equal rights in both employment and housing with immigrants. This would mean compulsory but painful transformation years for the creation of new British society in which Caribbean citizens struggle to find a voice to speak out and a space to live in.

In *The Lonely Londoners* Sam Selvon creates a space for his characters to live in. In this space he conveys the migrant experience and the problems of the new-comers through a vernacular style, using creole, most of the time, changing standard English into a Caribbean dialect maintained through his third-person narrator. His technique can be read as a form of rebellion against the culture and the language that deny newcomers a space in the Motherland, and a way for a local community to recognise Caribbeans as British subjects in their own rights. In his interview with Micheal Fabre, Selvon states that "I wrote a modified dialect which could be understood by European readers, yet retain the flavour and essence of Trinidadian speech"³. The ways in which Selvon represents the city and his black characters therein earn London a new and authentic identity that would not be possible by Caribbean writers of his generations as Carly Phillips once commented:

if I were to point to a writer who captures the tone, rhythm and texture of London as the austere fifties were about to give way to the swinging sixties, I would not cite the plays of John Osborne or Arnold Wesker, or the prose of David Storey or John Braine. For acuity of vision, intellectual rigour and sheer beauty of the inventiveness of language it would have to be the works of Sam Selvon which would figure pre-eminently. He did not only know the Caribbean but also the pages of London's A to Z, and was able to capture these with a haunting lyricism which remains . . . with the growing influence of his work, imprinted on the imagination⁴.

The idea of immigration that carries negative images by its very nature was reinvented and formulated from the perspective of black working-class community in an authentic and humorous way. Selvon hints the message that London you know might be different from the one experienced by immigrants. In *The Lonely Londoners* readers are taken to inner worlds of immigrant characters to witness diverse forms of loneliness by first hand-experiences of the story teller.

The Loneliness

At the very beginning of the novel, Selvon depicts a gloomy atmosphere in London, alerting his readers that London that I will tell is not the one you know: "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 not London at all but some strange place on another planet"⁵. It is London where "the houses around the Harrow Road, old and gray and weather beaten, the walls cracking like the last day of Pompeii, it ain't have hot water, ...[and] none of the houses have bath"⁶. These quotations - like the title *The Lonely Londoners* - explicitly convey the idea that readers will be introduced an isolated immigrant group trying to negotiate between the realities and their expectations.

The novel unpacks with a scene in which Moses, the central protagonist waits in the train station, Waterloo for a new fellow to arrive. The fact that he has never known who is going to arrive in London is a typical image in migrate literature. Moses, as his name suggests is a prophetic figure, welcoming new immigrants and guiding them for their new life in London: "Because it look to Moses that he hardly have time to settle in the old Brit'n before all sorts of fellars start coming straight to his

³ Selvon 1988, 66.

⁴ Selvon 1956, 36.

⁵ Selvon 1956, 23.

⁶ Selvon 1956, 73.

room [...], from West Indies, saying that [...] he would help them get place and looks the problems universally: ‘...Moses used to think bout the money, how it would solve all the problems in the world’⁷. Although Moses seems to be dissatisfied with this situation, he actually reduces his homesick nostalgically through regular contacts with immigrants and with the news carry over the Motherland.

The first immigrant to arrive in is Henry Oliver Esquire, alias Sir Galahad, who surprises Moses with his summer clothes that he only brought with him. The fact that Galahad feels warm in winter and cold in summer is quite ironic and brilliantly chosen in that it stands for the cultural shock if not the trauma that most immigrants experience from the very first day of their arrival. Later, Tolroy’s family arrives with its all members even old Tanty: “All of we come, Tolroy, Ma say”. This is how happen: when you write home to say you getting five pounds a week Lewis say, ‘Oh God, I going England tomorrow’⁸. This situation is actually what annoys British working class as a fifty-year-old white explains in his interview with Cottle during that period:

It is a crime, all of it. First they come here where they don't belong and they know it. Then they want their relatives and their relatives’ relatives. And would you believe, the government lets them have anything they wish, at any time they wish. But help those of us already here?⁹

Within the novel, Selvon portrays three groups that distinctively represent different aspects of the immigrant community. The first group is the one, in which characters like Tanty and Galahad try to negotiate their customs and identity so as to both stay in touch with migrated society, and yet mingle with the British community. The actions of this group can be traced in a couple of scenes. On the very first day of her arrival, a reporter asks Tanty whether this is her first trip to England, which Tolroy avoids confronting, saying that “[t]he gentleman ask me a good question, why I shouldn’t answer?”¹⁰. It is again Tanty “who cause[s] the shop – keeper to give people credit”, and who tactfully carries her native customs to Motherland: “Where I come from Tanty tell the bakery people, they don’t hand you bread like that. You better put it in a paper bag for me, please.”¹¹. This suggests that some immigrant groups try keeping their habits while at the same time trying the ways of integrating themselves into the mainstream society.

The second group is of Harris and Bart as immigrants trying every possible way and medium for upward social mobility. This group functions as the opposite of the first one, as they try to guise their native identities and customs. For instance, Bart has a lighter skin, so “he go around telling everybody that he is Latin – American, that he come form South America”¹². Or “If a fellar too black, Bart not accompanying him much”¹³. Again his wish to marry an English, which he could not succeed can regarded as an indication of his desire for upward social mobility: “‘You!’ the father shouted, pointing a finger at Bart, you! What are you doing in my house? Get out! Get out this minute!”¹⁴. Though being a step further than Bart in terms of his relations with British people, Harris feels a sense of inferiority when he is together with his own native community as depicted in the famous party: “See and behave yourself like proper gentlemen, there are a lot of English people here tonight so don’t make a disgrace of yourself”¹⁵. He again repeatedly says “[y]ou boys always make a disgrace of yourselves, and make me ashamed of myself”¹⁶. Other than behaving as he is or enjoying his time with his fellers, his sense of inferiority or his demand for upward mobility alienates him from his own community: “English people will say we are still uncivilized and don’t know how to behave properly. So please boys, do me a favour, and when the band play God Save The Queen, stand up to attention”¹⁷. Here, Harris relies on mimicry to negotiate his subaltern identity without losing the tie with his native community. This suggests the transformation of New British society undergoes different stages experienced by diverse immigrant groups.

⁷ Selvon 1956, 98.

⁸ Selvon 1956, 29.

⁹ Marwick 2003, 1819.

¹⁰ Selvon 1956, 31.

¹¹ Selvon 1956, 78-80.

¹² Selvon 1956, 61.

¹³ Selvon 1956, 63.

¹⁴ Selvon 1956, 65.

¹⁵ Selvon 1956, 112.

¹⁶ Selvon 1956, 118.

¹⁷ Selvon 1956, 122.

The third group is represented by the character called Big City, protesting white segregationist statements such as: “keep the Water White”¹⁸. Big City stands for those immigrants who counter against white racism. He repeats the humorous and thought-provoking slogan “Keep the Water Coloured, No Rooms For Whites’, forming an anti-discourse against racism”¹⁹. Indeed, Selvon hints the idea that racism either explicitly or implicitly is experienced by Caribbean at different levels, each denying them their basic rights to live such as working, housing, marriage and communication. For example, in a scene Galahad is disappointed, as he could not communicate even with a child due to his colour of skin. That moment can be considered as one of the best examples to illustrate the extent of racism that black British are exposed to in Motherland:

Mummy, look at that black man! A little child, holding on to the mother hand, look up at Sir Galahad. ‘You musn’t say that, dear!’ The mother chide the child. What a sweet child!’ Galahad say, putting on the old English accent, ‘What’s your name? But the child mother uneasy as they stand up there on the pavement with so many white people around: if they was alone she might have talked a little, ask Galahad what part of the world he come from, but instead she pull the child along and she look at Galahad and give a sickly sort of simile, and the old Galahad, knowing how it is, smile back and walk on. What it is we want that the white people and them find it so hard to give?²⁰.

Galahad is aware of the fact that all the troubles stem not from the way his community behaves or speaks but from the colour of their skin. Selvon hints that immigrants might change everything to integrate themselves into the society except for the colour of their skin, causing them to lead a lonely and isolated life eventually:

And Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, ‘Colour, is you causing all this, you know. 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. Is not me, you know, is you! I ain’t do anything to infuriate the people and them, is you! Look at you, you so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world!²¹.

The difficulty of finding a job is another problem shared by the Caribbean community. Even Moses, though living in London for at least nine years faces the danger of losing his job. However, if they have any job, it will probably be the “worse jobs it have”²². Again racism shows itself when Galahad and Moses go for a job application, and they witness prejudice towards black community from a white man who regards all black people coming from Jamaica:

Now, on all the records of the boys, you will see mark on the top in red ink. J – A, Col. That mean you from Jamaica and you black. Suppose a vacancy come and they want to send a fellar, first they will find out if the firm want coloured fellars before they send you²³.

British working class opposes the idea of Caribbean immigration to their country, as they think that the opportunities Britain offer is hardly enough for the already existing population:

You are unwanted. You are here because some higher order official let you stay, not because I want you... You only create problems. You want my job, you want my food, you want to live in my home, you want use my school, my hospital, my stores. But don’t take it personally; I have no quarrel with you as a person. It is immigration I cannot tolerate²⁴.

Being unemployed causes a kind of inner trauma for the characters, so it is not surprising that some of them chase after pigeons to survive. Galahad compares attitudes of British to animals and to black community, and he understands that they even are not protected and valued as little as animals:

... [H]im that he had was to try and catch a pigeon in the park to eat. It does have a lot them

¹⁸ Selvon 1956, 89.

¹⁹ Selvon 1956, 97.

²⁰ Selvon 1956, 87-88.

²¹ Selvon 1956, 88.

²² Selvon, 1956, 29.

²³ Selvon 1956, 46.

²⁴ Selvon 1956, 181.

flying about, and the people does feed them with bits of bread. Sometimes they get so much bread that they pick and choosing, and Galahad watching with envy. In this country, people prefer to see man starve than a cat or dog want something to eat²⁵.

This scene is quite ironic in that Galahad put the rule he learned from British into practice by eating the pigeons like Cap: 'survival of the fittest in the struggle for the life.' In this sense, it is not surprising that the racism comes from the white working class, who are afraid of losing their job, since newcomers work more for less in line with the theory of 'the survival of the fittest.' Moreover, racism evokes the feelings inferiority and guilt for some characters. For instance, police can be regarded as one of the symbols of oppression in causing groundless fears to Caribbean community. Encountering with them: "... Galahad see a policeman near him. Again he panic, though he ain't do anything against the law"²⁶. Strange enough, the image of police comes into effect among immigrants as a way of controlling each other. It is only after Moses threatens Cap with police to bring his coat, which he borrowed, and then he immediately returns it.

However, it was not only British citizens who were dissatisfied with the problem, but also new immigrants after settling into the Motherland were exposed to extreme racism, which even restricted their right to live. As the novel suggests, other minority groups in Britain like Polish, who are not black are not treated as second citizens. However, what immigrants want is "[a] little work, a little food, a little place to sleep"²⁷. In this sense, fears on immigrants seem to be groundless, as Selvon points out. Similarly, Arthur Marwick in his book *British Society since 1945* quotes an interview done by American sociologist Thomas J. Cottle with a Caribbean:

You think a white man's going to lose his job before a black one? Not in a lifetime. Immigrants come last and go first, man.... They want to arrest me for thinking they are all bunch of racists? Hell, they might just as well go arrest every black man and woman in Britain, child too²⁸.

As a result of being excluded from mainstream society, some black characters also nursed a grievance for especially racist whites in order to lessen the feeling of segregation and inferiority. The only time the male characters feel at ease and relatively equal is when they date with white women. Because, far away from the racism they have a chance to experience the feeling of being accepted by a member of white society: "...that evening people in the tube station must be bawl to see black man so familiar with white girl"²⁹. "Galahad feeling good with this piece of skin walking with him"³⁰. Frantz Fanon explains the underpinning factor behind the situation, citing the words of a man in a similar position:

By loving me (the white woman) proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto noble road that leads to total realization. I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine³¹.

As the quotation suggests, being with a white woman gives the black man a victory and sense of ownership. Therefore, Selvon represents black man and white women as mingled in some incidents, especially employing women having sympathy for the black community such as the English girl whom Bart plans to marry, her mother, and the mother of the child whom Galahad tries to communicate.

The newly migrated men also face the accent barrier that discourages them from communicating with the British people. Some of his characters like Tanty, Galahad and Big City, especially while asking addresses or addressing people are misunderstood. Also, Harris using a proper accent of English finds himself a step further than others, which shows how important it is for immigrants to have a compressible accent: "What did you say? You know it will take time me some time to understand

²⁵ Selvon 1956, 123.

²⁶ Selvo 1956, 43.

²⁷ Selvon 1956, 88.

²⁸ Selvon 1956, 179.

²⁹ Selvon 1956, 90

³⁰ Selvon 1956, 91.

³¹ Frantz 1960, 63.

everything you say. The way you West Indians speak!”³². In this way, Selvon transforms what is experienced to be a problem in real life into a solution in his fiction by using a vernacular style.

Conclusion

In *The Lonely Londoners* Samuel Selvon embodies a black British community resisting against the imperial remnants in the Motherland. He brings the Caribbean characters from different walks of life, which separately stand for different dynamics of immigration. The novel can be read as an historical account of the huge wave of migration from former colonies of the United Kingdom to the Motherland. Selvon’s idiomatic West Indian style creates a solidarity among the migrate community, and opens a potential way to communicate the challenges of immigration and settlement in the Motherland collectively. This is quite evident when he uses all verbs in the third person singular like “he don’t and “she have” especially when the speaker is from the Caribbean. This may be an indication of collectiveness in that though the person doing the action is singular, he does it on behalf of the community like Selvon himself. In this sense, this novel represents the shift if not the negotiation in the literary and artistic productions of Black British community namely from assertion that ‘England is bitch, dere is no escaping it’³³ to that of Lord Kicher, saying “London is the place for me”³⁴. This shift hints the ways in which British identity is further negotiated.

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³² Selvon 1956, 93.

³³ Linton Kwesi Johnson’s 1991, 13.

³⁴ Spencer, 2011.