



SAMUEL SELVON AS A POSTCOLONIAL NOVELIST

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Selvon is one of the most popular and internationally acclaimed contemporary postcolonial Caribbean writers. He is placed apart by the sheer range and variety of his published works, which include ten novels and a collection of short stories (*Ways of Sunlight*), a great number of short stories, poems and essays to newspapers and magazines and several plays for radio and television. He is also renowned because he became one of the founding fathers of the Caribbean literacy renaissance of the 1950s. As a postcolonial writer, Selvon seeks to illustrate the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Homi K Bhabha, a contemporary postcolonial critic, employs some postcolonial notions like 'hybridity,' 'unhomeliness,' 'creolization,' 'mimicry,' and 'ambivalence' to depicts this relationship between the colonizer and colonized. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to identify the postcolonial problems like 'stereotyping,' 'mimicry,' 'hybridity' and 'creolization' in Selvon's novels. The characters in Selvon novels are best example of postcoloniality, they are away from their 'homes' and have to accept the rules and customs of the dominant 'white' culture in which they find themselves 'unhomed'. As Bhabha opines, the immigrant characters are 'psychological refugees' who do not know to which culture they belong, to their West Indian culture or to the British culture. They do not know which culture should be of value to them as a result of which their characters and personalities become ambivalent. Their identities are floating, hovering between the dominant culture and their own cultures.

Key Words: Samuel Selvon, Caribbean, Postcolonialism, Creole and Hybridity

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INTRODUCTION

Samuel Dickson Selvon, the son of an Indian father and a half-Indian, half-Scottish mother, was born in 1923 in South Trinidad. He graduated from San Fernando's Naparima College in 1938. Selvon grew up in Trinidad's multi-racial society, and considers himself as a creolized West Indian. After a brief career in

journalism in Trinidad, he migrated to the United Kingdom in 1950 and two years later he gained renown attention with the publication of *A Brighter Sun*. Selvon began writing while he was performing his military service in the Royal Navy Reserve during the World War II, and became the fiction editor for the newspaper, *Trinidad Guardian*, after the war. He

worked with the BBC in England during the 1960s and 1970s, and produced many radio programs and a film version of his book, *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon's lifetime works include the following books: *A Brighter Sun* (1952), *An Island is a World* (1955), *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Ways of Sunlight* (1957), *Turn Again Tiger* (1958), *I Hear Thunder* (1963), *The Housing Lark* (1965), *A Drink of Water* (1968), *The Plains of Caroni* (1970), *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972), *Moses Ascending* (1975), *Moses Migrating* (1983), and *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose* (1989), a collection of selected prose written between 1946-1986.

Samuel Selvon is counted as one of the literary giants in the English speaking Caribbean, and his works form an integral part of the Caribbean diasporic literature. His works are studied by researchers and integral students at both secondary and tertiary levels. Salick, Royndon (2001) correctly argues that "the bulk of Selvon criticism focuses primarily and generally on his style, too often emphasizing style and neglecting all other aspects of his fiction" (*The Novels of Samuel Selvon: A Critical Study*). The exploration of themes such as colonialism, independence, migration, racial identity, hybrid identity, Caribbean language (Creole), and community life have resonated with those who read his works. Looker, Mark (1996) states that in "Selvon's fiction various histories collide; local and imperial, rural, urban, popular and elite" (*Atlantic Passages: History, Community, and Language in the Fiction of Sam Selvon*, 2).

The eloquence and charm of Selvon's work provoke an ongoing curiosity among scholarly critics and reviewers. Selvon's novels capture various aspects of the historical and social experiences of the people of his native land; in addition, he is a very creative writer in Caribbean literature. Indeed, Kenneth Ramchand in one of his essays examines Selvon as a revolutionary writer who is concerned more with social, cultural and political issues in his writings. Kenneth Ramchand also describes Selvon's creative writing and his uniqueness:

Selvon was a revolutionary in form and style, as well as in a social sense. The social and the

writing stance are inseparable. He engaged not with the economic and political powers, not with the military or the police, but with the very source of our strength and creativity: he was one of the first writers in the region to take it for granted in his fictions and thus make it natural for his readers to do so both in life and in fiction that the ordinary person in the Caribbean is not an object or tool, but a human being. (JSTORE: "Celebrating Selvon", 49)

Selvon's writings transcend cultural borders at a time when West Indians had little or no channel to express their unique speech patterns; he captured the migrant's sense of humor. James, Louis (1999) confirms and supports the pioneering role that Selvon played in the Anglo-Caribbean diasporic movement with the admission that "the first major novel of Trinidad development was Sam Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*" (*Caribbean Literature in English*, 70).

Salvon as Postcolonial Novelist: The objectives of Samuel Selvon works focus on the postcolonial processes and concepts, including colonialism, hybridity, migration, diaspora, creolization and colonial discourse. His novels highlight the Caribbean historical background and Caribbean culture in the postcolonial context. His works exposes and argues the existence of postcolonial identities in Caribbean cultural life. The aim of his works attempt to analyze the effects of the change, differences, development and the emergence of creole and hybrid identities during as well as in the aftermath of colonialism in the Caribbean society.

The Caribbean lives under the postcolonial countries. It has all the aspects and themes of postcolonial literature like 'colonization,' 'decolonization,' 'oppressed,' 'the native,' 'hybridity,' 'creolization,' 'diaspora,' 'multiethnic,' 'race,' 'trans-culture,' 'trans-nationalism,' and so on. All these themes are supported by almost all the postcolonial theories. In *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors seek to broaden the scope of the term 'postcolonial' and include all English literary productions by societies affected by colonialism:

We use the term 'post-colonial,' however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present study...So the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all post-colonial literatures. (*The Empire Writes Back*, 2)

The main Caribbean literary figures such as C. L. R. James, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and others focus on colonization, ethnicity, hybridity, creolization, racial trauma, gender identity, mixed blood, and other key concepts of postcolonial studies. Postcolonial theory studies the process and the effects of cultural displacement and the ways in which the displaced culturally defended themselves (Bertens; 2001: 200). Once culturally uprooted and displaced people are inclined to display anomalies stemming that they are difficult to classify whether they belong to 'Old' and 'New' world from the fact, that the adaptation process to the 'new' cultural atmosphere has taken some considerable time. Here, 'adaptation' implies the existence of a stage of being 'in-between' two spheres, without aligning with any of the sides. This state of being 'in-between' two, or at times multiple, spheres in the postcolonial context is most efficiently defined by the term 'creole' and 'hybridity' which are directly related to the cultural self-definition of an individual or an ethnic group. Most of the postcolonial writers like Selvon and Naipaul undergo a kind of cultural and linguistic translation. This 'translational' characteristic feature and identity have placed them in the position of 'not quite' or 'in-between'. Bhabha observes that the postcolonial migrant writing is the writing of 'not quite' and 'in-between'. 'Creolization' and 'hybridity' arise due to cultural and linguistic translation and transformation to the 'new world'.

V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Derek Walcott and other writers of similar persuasion defined the use of 'Western' intellectual paradigm-

postmodernism, feminism and even postcolonial- in the reading of their works. From their writings and from the real experience of the 'New World' they created their own paradigms. Many writers from the region challenge Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban as bestial and brutal, and reclaim his image as an icon of Caribbean self-assertion although Shakespeare did not explicitly state that the setting of *The Tempest* is the Caribbean. The power relations between Prospero and Caliban are suggestive of the master-slave relationship found on the plantation. In this context, the Caliban-Prospero relationship leads to the larger issue of language. Caliban is Prospero's slave. Prospero also claims that Caliban did not know the use of language until he was taught by his master. Thus, the only way Caliban can express himself is within the parameters of his master's tongue. Miranda obviously believes it to be a great honour and reminds Caliban how she "took pains to make thee [him] speak" (*The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, 16) and dismisses Caliban's previous way of speaking as sheer 'gabble'. However, Caliban himself obviously takes a very different view and in a memorable quote that is often cited by anti-colonialist critics he tells them: "You taught me language; and my profit on't is I know how to curse" (*The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, 16). He goes on further to wish "the red plague rid you for teaching me your language!" (*The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, 16) clearly not sharing Miranda's view that she has done him a great service. George Lamming, in his collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), argues for this reason that Caliban is imprisoned in Prospero's language: "There is no escape from the prison of Prospero's gift. This is the first important achievement of the colonizing process" (*The Pleasures of Exile*, 109). He claims that Caliban is a metaphor for the enslaved.

The rewriting of the master narratives of English literature is a common practice among postcolonial writers— *The Tempest* being just another case in point. The telling of a story from another perspective can be seen as an attempt to explore the gaps and silences in a text. Writing as an extension of language use, is one of the strongest forms of cultural hegemony and the rewriting of the colonial canon

becomes a subversive and liberating act for the colonized. Hence, the postcolonial view of *The Tempest* is through the character of Caliban, seen not as the 'deformed slave' of the dramatis personae but as a native of the island over whom Prospero has imposed an obnoxious form of colonial domination. The following speech by Caliban shows the postcolonial reading of *The Tempest*:

I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou
cam'st first
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me;
would'st give me
Water with berries in't; and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd
thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th'isle,

The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and feretile:

Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own King: and here you
sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th'island. (*The Tempest*. Act I Scene
II, 16)

Many writers from the Caribbean now live in other parts of the world, ranging from the old colonial centers such as France and Britain to the other parts of the Americas, such as the USA and Canada. These writers often thematize the experience of exile and diaspora and of adapting their Caribbean (creole) heritage to the new environment. Among the most prominent of these writers are Caryl Phillips and the Trinidadians, V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon, who are of East Indian descent.

As a postcolonial writer, Selvon works look at or address the following:

- a. Colonial representation of the native,
- b. The epistemological underpinnings (colonial histories, cartography, anthropology, area studies),

- c. The feminization, marginalization and dehumanization of the 'native,'
- d. The rise of nationalist and/or nativist discourse that resisted colonialism, and other forms of resistance,
- e. The psychological impact of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized,
- f. Re-visioning of the tragic history like slave trade and indentured labourers, and
- g. Transition of 'new society,' 'new identity,' and 'new world' (creole and hybrid).

Very basically, and in a literary context, postcolonialism involves one or more of the following. John McLeod in his work *Beginning of Postcolonialism* explains the three elements that postcolonialism entails:

- a. Reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, primarily, those texts which are concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in the past or the present.
- b. Reading texts produced by those who have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences.
- c. In the light of theories of colonial discourse, re-reading texts produced during colonialism; both those that directly address the experiences of empire, and those that seem not to. (*Beginning of Postcolonialism*, 33)

As per the above three concepts of 'postcolonialism,' the Caribbean society and history can be examined in the writings of V S Naipaul, Sam Selvon, George Lamming, C.L.R James, Edward Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and Carly Phillips. Their writings concentrate on the above three elements, especially in novels of Selvon. His peasant novels—*A Brighter Sun*, *Turn Again Tiger* and *Those who Eat the Cascadura* deal with colonialism, hybridity, creolization and experience of the 'New World'. In his Moses trilogy—*The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*—diaspora and migration play an important role and they directly address the experience of the Empire.

Selvon's novels are studied as postcolonial novels, for they deal with the problems of post-emancipation of slavery, colonialism, indentured labour and the process of creolization of the respective society, Trinidad, during the 1980s. Selvon, viewed generally as a postcolonial writer, subverts the imperial perspective created from the tension of colonial legacy. He creates new fictions which generate new ways of perceiving human relationships between different races. The challenge for them as postcolonial writers is to strip the implicit class and racial biases, de-mythologise the stereotyped notions that threaten to define them:

Selvon, in particular, has made a sincere attempt in his novels to rehabilitate and restructure the fractured relationship between Africans, Caribbeans, and Indians by contemplating an alternative vision of creolization. In his view, a postcolonial writer has many responsibilities.

- a) Rehabilitation of the fragmented relationships between races in the Caribbean context.
- b) Reconstruction of a new perspective preceded by deconstruction of the old myths.
- c) Mythopoeia- the necessity to create myths. All this is possible if as Derek Walcott says "history is seen as an amnesiac blow" (Walcott *Laventille*, 35).

Selvon's peasant novels are set in Trinidad in which a majority of East Indians are found interacting with the descendants of Europe and West Africa. In Trinidad, people are closer, more intimate, and the inter-communication with the different sections of society is more rapid. Geographically speaking, the Indian settlement is found to a great extent inhabiting the countryside, whereas the African settlement is found in the city. It is this factor which is instrumental in providing the details necessary for an appreciation of the peculiar conditions of life the novel focuses upon.

Selvon's novels portray a new perspective on Caribbean literature by linking the celebration of carnival to broader racial, ethnic, political, creole and hybrid issues. In this context, Lovelace, in his lecture to the sixth Annual Conference of the *Association for the*

Teaching of Caribbean, African, and Asian Literature (ATCAL), says:

The colonized must accept some of the responsibility for the persistence of colonialism, for their role as 'victims'. Therefore we should look critically at the process by which cultures are created. If we are adopting a moral relativism we are forced to ensure that we agree with our collaborators on the premises and these premises should be stated as a kind of prolegomena to multi-cultural education. One of the questions it must ask concerns what these collaborators regard as 'primitive,' as 'pagan,' what kinds of behavior for example: would they like to see confined to carnival time when the untamed animals in us are let out of their cages? (12)

Writers like Selvon, Lamming, Harris, Naipaul and Lovelace from the Caribbean are portrayed as "being torn between two languages" (Hall, 111). The roots of myth went much deeper and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is one of the major literary works the West Indian authors had to contend with. To deconstruct the myth about their homeland and their languages, the writers from the Caribbean had to confront the imposed English language, as well as the established literary canon, especially in the 19th century European realistic novel. In the creole speaking Caribbean islands, both oral and written texts came to represent forms of resistance to colonial cultural dependence in the crucial period of transition from British imperialism to the postcolonial age. Another important characteristic of these writers is the fact that they are often in a state of exile from their home country. Creole language is considered as 'low' being that of the colonized people, and English, obviously, is considered 'high' being the language of colonizers, labels such as 'high' and 'low' clearly represent the attitudes of both the colonizers and the colonized. During the age of transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, the Caribbean writers were torn between these two languages in a complex political and linguistic situation. Writers such as Selvon settled

for a linguistic compromise, using Standard English to represent the voice of the narrator and creole for the dialogues.

Selvon uses creole dialect in his writings. Creole language is considered as a primitive language. To decolonize the myth of the primitive from the colonizers, Selvon uses creole language in his works. The myth pervasive among the Caribbean people gave the impression of their language originating from the colonizer, like the relation between Shakespeare's characters Caliban and Prospero. To deconstruct their myth, the Caribbean writers use creole language as the concept of decolonization in both language and culture. So the Caribbean identities triggered as creole and the whole society undergoes the process of creolization which can be seen clearly in the novels of Selvon, Earl Lovelace and Naipaul.

Postcolonial writers are ambivalent regarding their attitude to English. The postcolonial writers appropriated the English language for various reasons. For them, English no longer remains the colonizer's language, for it becomes a tool to be used 'creatively' in the process of decolonization. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, the authors view that:

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre- whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as impurities' or by planting the language of Empire in a new place- remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. (283)

Thus, the postcolonial writer like Selvon uses the medium of English language in their writings and they incorporate their indigenous language forms (creole dialect form) into the English language on an experimental basis.

Samuel Selvon, as a postcolonial novelist, uses a language to suit his style by subverting the language of the colonizer. In the Caribbean, language and culture are intertwined. The Africans were transported and transplanted in the Caribbean Islands

and Asians came there as indentured labourers. The Africans and the Asians were inherently resistant to the colonizers and their systems and manifest them to take up writing of the masters' language. In recognition of a language as an instrument of the power politics, Derek Attridge points out:

Why does the culture privilege certain kinds of language and certain modes of reading? Such a question can receive an answer only when we reach the realm of political and economic relations, the structures of power, dominance, and resistance which determine the patterns and privileges of cultural formations. (*Peculiar Language*, 1988; 15)

The use of Creole by Selvon is a classic example of postcoloniality in which the concept of language and practice take centre stage as opposed to the concept of 'centre' and 'marginal'. In this context, it is pertinent to consider what the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* say:

The theory of the Creole Continuum, undermining, at it does, the static models of language formation, overturns 'Ecocentric' notions of language which regard 'Standard English' as a core. Creole needs no longer to be seen as a peripheral narration of English. (*The Empire Writes Back*, 47)

Therefore, Selvon writes in the 'Creole Continuum' to give voice to the suppressed thoughts, feelings and emotions of which had been silenced for ages.

Conclusion

Many writers and critics acclaimed Selvon's qualities of warmth and generosity and the depth of his vision as a natural philosopher. In the words of Kenneth Ramchand, Selvon is "a believer fighting off unbelief" (in "Play it Again Sam: Remembering Sam Selvon" <http://caribbean-beat.com>) and is strongly attached to his native land, Trinidad, even though he spent many years in places like London and Canada. Selvon himself confessed: "this island is my shadow and I carry it with me wherever I go" (*World Literature in English*, 427). The critical assessment of Selvon's work has centered around the 'Tiger' and 'Moses' books. Selvon shows the compelling issues of West

Indian postcolonial themes: 'diaspora' 'hybridity' 'identity,' 'self-awareness,' 'creolization,' 'racism' and 'wholeness' in colonial and ethnically plural societies that still bear the psychic scars of slavery and the equally dehumanizing system of indentured labour in his peasant novels.

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