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**Foreign in London: Diaspora as a traumatic experience in Samuel Selvon's
*The Lonely Londoners***

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Abstract:

Stuart Hall in Black Britain claims that “the experience of black settlement has been a long, difficult, sometimes bitterly contested and unfinished story.” Such is the case in Samuel Selvon’s 1956 novel The Lonely Londoners, which depicts the trauma of diaspora for West Indian newcomers. People from the Caribbean who settle in the “mother country” experience total disillusion because they are not welcomed by the white British. The paper focuses on the influence British politics has had upon the Windrush generation of immigrants. It shows how the characters cope with animosity, loneliness and the sense of failed promise that all lead to the traumatic experience of living in total isolation in a foreign city far from their native islands. The immigrants face xenophobia, suffer from being the “other”, invisible and segregated. They try to cope with the trauma of “not belonging anywhere”, i.e. being uprooted from their homes in the West Indies. In the aftermath of the decolonization process they fail to come to terms with their new living conditions, and as there is no return ticket to the Caribbean, they experience the ever-growing trauma of unsuccessful resettlement.

Post-war Britain faced a severe lack of labour that would help to reconstruct the economy destroyed by the Second World War. However, the white British did not particularly fancy menial jobs. The main character Moses Aloetto explains, “It had a time when I was first here, when it only had a few West Indians in London, and things used to go good enough. These days, spades all over the place, and every shipload is big new, and the English people don’t like the boys coming to England to work and live. . . . Well, as far as I could figure, they frightened that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen” (Selvon, 2009, p. 39). Consequently, people from the former British colonies were invited on a semi-official basis to

come to Britain and to help the “mother country”. It is interesting that whenever Britain needed the support of its citizens from the colonies, the state always appealed to the concept of Britain being the mother country. However, the immigration wave of the 1950s, called the Windrush generation, experienced deep disillusion upon their arrival in the United Kingdom. Fatma Kalpakli claims the immigrants were “excluded from the mainstream society to the peripheries to lead an isolated life in ghettos and they become lonely” (2008, p. 246). Such disillusion often grew into the trauma of being uprooted from one’s country of birth and at the same time not belonging or not being accepted by the country that called itself the “motherland”. Therefore, the immigrants often lived in a state of inbetweenness that meant a lack of security, and as a consequence their trauma of diasporic resettlement and the failed dream of living a better life in Britain deepened.

Samuel Selvon in his *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) draws very much on his own experience. In the novel, he repeatedly points out how segregated London is becoming. As Hiro documents, the situation escalates in the 1960s when not only are signs reading “No blacks, No Irish, No dogs” part of local folklore, but new signs such as “Europeans Only” or “Keep the water clean” appear (1973, p. 215). As an act resulting from the traumatic despair at the white public prejudice that blacks are spoiling the water, one character, Big City, turns the logic upside down and proclaims an alternative motto, “Keep the water coloured, no rooms for whites” (Selvon, 2009, p. 97). The motif of blacks representing a threat to mainstream white society permeates the story. Selvon depicts the blacks in London and as Bentley argues, “this process inevitably involves the negotiation of pre-conceived images of black identity and practices that reproduce, rather than challenge, many of the stereotypes present in mainstream white culture” (2005, p. 42). The negotiation process here is an opportunity for blacks to persuade whites of their merits and of the benefits which they can contribute to white British society. As Sy emphasizes, “life in London is a perpetual struggle for sheer survival for the several emigrants who reach England in the same ship. None really succeeds; some flop utterly, while many wear out in the struggle” (2016, p. 847). However, as nobody wants to listen to the black immigrants, their activities are doomed to fail and it becomes more and more clear that they will continue to play only a secondary role at the margins of British society.

The migrants in their desperate housing situation seek refuge in the areas of Bayswater and Notting Hill and along the Edgware Road in very bad conditions. Selvon describes them thus, “the houses around the Harrow Road, old and gray and weather beaten, the walls cracking like the last days of Pompei, it ain’t have no hot water, and in the whole street that Tolroy and them living in, no of the houses have bath” (2009, p. 73). Moreover, not only are the houses

dilapidated but also the street itself is in bad condition. Such living conditions might be even worse than those that the immigrants had back home in the Caribbean. Selvon describes, “some of the houses still had gas light, which is to tell you how old they was. . . . The street does be always dirty except if rain fall” (2009, p. 73). The gap between the black and the white, thus the trauma of not belonging experienced on an everyday basis, becomes more apparent when compared to the housing situation of the whites.

It have people living in London who don’t know what happened in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don’t know anything what happppening in the other ones except what you read in the papers. Them rich people who does live in Belgravia and Knightsbridge and up in Hampstead and them other plush places, they would never believe what it like in a trim place like Harrow Road or Notting Hill. Them people who have car, who going to theatre and ballet in the West End, who attending premiere with the royal family, they don’t know nothing about hustling two pound of brussel sprout and half-pound potato, or queuing up for fish and chips in the smog. (2009, p. 74).

Although the situation of the Caribbean immigrants might seem very desperate, they do not give up. They fight and find various means of surviving even under the harshest circumstances. Rebecca Dyer postulates that “Selvon’s portrayal of London and of black migrant characters’ urban survival methods illustrate the everyday adjustments and improvisations that were necessary for his generation of colonial migrants” (2002, p. 110). It is remarkable that it isn’t Caribbean women who come first to earn a living in Britain but rather men that try to adjust to the British way of life and are not opposed to assimilation.

The Caribbean immigrants survive on very low wages for hard work; they can barely understand why they are not wanted in the country. Some of them have reached such a level of traumatic experience that they do not even attempt to search for an explanation, “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” (2009, p. 39). The lack of logic behind racial prejudice and discrimination only deepens the trauma of the failed dream and invokes the idea of neo-slavery in the postcolonial era. There is an ever-growing tension between the white and the black inhabitants:

... a time when the English people starting to make rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country: this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact, the boys all over London, it ain't have a place where you wouldn't find them, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or to do anything drastic like stop them coming to the Mother Country. But big headlines in the papers every day, and whatever the newspaper and the radio say in this country, this is the people Bible [. . .] Newspapers and radio rule this country". (2009, p. 24)

The attitude of the mass media widens the gap between the communities and stimulates ghettoization. The feeling of traumatic exclusion becomes worse when the Caribbean migrants realize that not all immigrants are treated in the same way. For example, in Ipswich there is "a restaurant run by a Pole call the Rendezvous Restaurant. Go there and see if they will serve you. And you know the hurtful part of it? The Pole who have that restaurant, he ain't have no more right in this country than we. In fact, we is British subjects and he is only a foreigner, we have more right than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country, and enjoy what this country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous" (2009, p. 40). As a consequence, the black migrants feel a double trauma: one, of being exploited and not recognized as British subjects by the dominant society, and, second, of being second-class immigrants based simply on the colour of their skin. The theory of inferiority based on race went far back into the colonial era when the argument of racial hierarchy was grounded on the principle of blood heritage and the colour of skin – the darker you were, the less worthy you were.

Some of the Caribbean men when they were more or less settled in England were joined by their families. Historically, Caribbean society is very matriarchal. Women were often left with children on the islands whereas men would have migrated either to the States or to Britain in search of better jobs. As Salick postulates, the novel "establishes the need to leave the land of one's birth in the hope of finding a different and better life in London . . . [it] may be seen as a sort of inverse quest for El Dorado: the putative, visionary, gold-paved streets of the city, an emblem for the imagined opulence of the life therein" (2001, p. 119). Caribbean women are the guardians of the family and they pass down national cultural heritage which they treasure. That is why when they arrive in Britain they refuse to accept that the society operates on different, i.e. patriarchal, principles and they are not willing to assimilate. That is one of the reasons that they, unlike Caribbean male immigrants, do not seem to suffer so from the trauma of diaspora,

because they continue to live in accordance to their Caribbean way of life. Such a posture is best exemplified by Tanty who refuses to accept the local rules and therefore, “everybody in the district get to know Tanty so well that she doing as she like” (2009, p. 79). Potentially, she does not follow the local customs because she is ignorant of them. Salick similarly argues that “Tanty’s subversive action asserts the need for reciprocal adjustment in a new environment: significantly, the immigrant woman courageously initiates an action that proves mutually beneficial to immigrant and shopkeeper” (2001, p. 125). She puts her case when shopping at the local grocery shop. The shop is owned by a Jew. Interestingly, the two characters, i.e. Tanty as a Caribbean immigrant and a shopkeeper as a Jew, a refugee, from two different but ostracized communities within WASP society, debate the way business should be conducted. Tanty is surprised that the Jewish shopkeeper does not let people buy on credit. Tanty simply claims that “where [she] come[s] from you take what you want and you pay every Friday” (2009, p. 73). Tanty is not dissuaded by the arguments put forward by the shopkeeper and puts her idea into practice when she advises him to keep a record of the items she has taken throughout the week: “‘You see that exercise books you have in the glasscase? Take one out and put my name in it and keep under the counter with how much I owe you. Mark the things I take and I will pay you on Friday please God.’ And Tanty walk out the white people shop brazen as ever. When Friday come, she pay what she owe” (2009, p. 79). Moreover, she always chooses the better products from the front of the counter and selects them herself, whereas the white customers do not find it appropriate to argue with the seller about the rotten vegetables that he gives them from the back of the counter. Tanty’s fearless behaviour makes Caribbean women stand out in the crowd and they are “visible” unlike Caribbean men who due to their willingness to assimilate become “invisible” and therefore never make their voice heard and, as a consequence, always suffer. Tanty as a stereotype of the strong-willed Caribbean woman manages to persuade the Jewish shopkeeper to change his business strategy: “‘I will only give you credit’, the shopkeeper say, to humour Tanty, but before long she spread the ballad all about that anybody could trust if they want, and the fellar get a list of creditors on his hands. However, every Friday evening religiously they all paying up, and as business going on all right he decide to give in” (2009, 79). He abandons his habits and paradoxically, he settles the accounts on Friday evening when the Sabbath starts and observant Jews are meant to set aside the day for rest and worship. Tanty exemplifies the Caribbean woman who does not suffer from apparent trauma because of diaspora. She survives because she adapts her environment to suit her and her values, which remain Caribbean – for example, she always talks while shopping, or, when a picture of her is to be taken by a journalist, she insists on the whole family gathering for the

photo; she still cooks traditional rice and pea instead of dining out and she does not trust London transportation, i.e. the double-deckers and the tube, which she does not have experience with from the Caribbean. Her survival skills prove to be necessary for the survival of her large family and thus she is the proverbial Caribbean mother keeping the family tradition alive.

Kalpakli proposes that within the novel in the eyes of the white people, “[the] black people are the ones to put blame on for the unemployment and for the unhappiness of the white people. They reflect these ideas into their behaviours and they cause the black man to have the inferiority complex” (2008, p. 248). There is no easy cure of this inferiority complex because the black immigrants are treated as a homogenous group and as such are excluded from white society. As Liu advocates, “the West Indian people ... are circumscribed by the structure of London society but they are not part of this structure” (2016, p. 1007). Whereas the immigrants among themselves distinguish the individual islands of the Caribbean they come from, the white British society does not see any difference between them: “Moses don't know a damn thing about Jamaica—Moses come from Trinidad, which is thousand miles from Jamaica, but the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica” (2009, p. 28); and, moreover, the white British do not even realize that some black people came to Britain directly from Africa. Another aspect that the existential life on the edge of society brings is the exclusion from politics. What also contributes to the deepening trauma of the West-Indian immigrants is language. They insist on using Caribbean creolized varieties of English which are incomprehensible to the white British. The language issue keeps the two communities apart. In Dyer's view, Selvon purposefully chooses a “Caribbean narrative voice both to describe the effects of the majority race's perceptions on individual ‘immigrants’ and to transform written English by committing to paper a language that was being spoken in the London of the 1950s” (2002, p. 119). Thus, language becomes the evident channel through which the richness and value of diversity is to be communicated.

Samuel Selvon in his novel demonstrates that you can evaluate your own culture better from the outside, “more than anything else, my life in London taught me about the people from the Caribbean . . . I was discovering a pride, a national pride, in being what I am, that I never felt at home. That was one of the things that immigration meant to me” (1995, p. 60). Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners* manifests that the Caribbean community is homogenous in relation to the white community, yet within itself, it is hierarchized and structured. Moses plays the role of “welfare officer” (Selvon, 2009, p. 25) who helps new arrivals settle into London. Although he does not like this role very much, he continues to organize life for Caribbean migrants in order to overcome the trauma of being lonely in a foreign city far from their homeland. He

exemplifies the Caribbean immigrant who upon arrival to the mother country has to give up his dreams in order to survive in the harsh conditions of a hostile society that is racially prejudiced.

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