

## **CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND IDENTITY CRISES IN SAMUEL SELVON'S THE LONELY LONDONERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Culture and identity are two notions that are almost inseparable. Identity is embedded in culture and the latter reveals itself through identity. The idea of culture is more elusive than physical and so accompanies the individual regardless of his/her destination. Consequently, migrants encounter new cultures in their host land which in turn pushes them to be caught up in a web of cultural clash and identity. Usually, a cultural shock is better understood when one moves to a new cultural setting. It is within this framework that John Macionis and Linda Gerber in *Sociology* remarks that cultural shock is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life. This paper sets out to examine the clashes that come up as characters struggle to project their identities in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Informed by psychoanalysis and new historicism the study reveals that cultural relativism is a bridge towards other cultures and plays an important role in resolving culture clash.

**KEYWORDS:** racism, identity, blacks, white, immigrants

### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture and identity are two notions that are almost inseparable. Identity is embedded in culture and the latter reveals itself through identity. The idea of culture is more elusive than physical and so accompanies the individual regardless of his/her destination. Consequently, migrants encounter new cultures in their host land which in turn pushes them to be caught up in a web of cultural clash and identity. Usually, a cultural shock is better understood when one moves to a new cultural setting. It is within this framework that John Macionis and Linda Gerber in *Sociology* remarks that cultural shock is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life. This paper sets out to examine the clashes that come up as characters struggle to project their identities in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Informed by psychoanalysis and new historicism the study reveals that cultural relativism is a bridge towards other cultures and plays an important role in resolving culture clash.

Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* undoubtedly reveals a clash of culture due to the quest for identity. One of the areas where this phenomenon is clearly expressed is racism. In fact, Grazia Maria Sindoni in *Creolizing Culture: A Study on Sam Selvon's Work*, observes that racism in Selvon's world is a realistic one that of a city that induces "loneliness". It emerges as "a powerful antidote to British

ignorance". While this leaves the migrants worried and questions the communality of their new contexts, it equally suggests that there is something worse than being "black" (ibid). the immigration experience also meant Selvon had to renegotiate his identity, an identity that Selvon calls "East Indian Trinidadian West Indian". This identification recalls the ethnic complexities that are present in a West Indian. It is racial and national complexities of this nature that are experienced by the characters in *The Lonely Londoners*: Galahad wonders why the colour "black" is such pejorative, while Moses ponders how all West Indians are assumed to be Jamaicans.

### Racial order and the question of identity

Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* expresses racial binary oppositions in ways that reveal racial identity and to the extent that racial identity unavoidably means national identity. In the novel, there is a contrast presented between British and Caribbean life. Caribbean life consists of oral modes of communication such as calypso, Carnival and religious influences. British life, on the other hand, is associated with modern rituals, such as the reading of newspapers, which is in contrast with the West Indian everyday rites. England is linked with secondary literacy, which is a solitary practice needing no other human. West Indian standards of living are based on communal ties, geographical affiliations and language similarities. The two lifestyles are in opposition to each other. In Caribbean culture, identity formation is purported to be group-bound and not individualistic. These differences project the cultural variation that exist in the two communities and therefore give room for cultural shocks since both groups are bound to live together. The following passage from *The Lonely Londoners* highlights the contrasting attitudes of the British and the West Indians:

*While Moses smiling to see the test hustling tenants, a newspaper fella come up to him and say, "Excuse me sir, have you just arrived from Jamaica? And Moses don't know why but he tell the fella yes. "would you like to tell me what conditions there are like?" The fella take out notebook and pencil and look at Moses. Now Moses don't know a damn thing about Jamaica –Moses come from Trinidad, which is a thousand miles from Jamaica, but the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica. 'Ah,' Moses say, [...] 'And furthermore, let me give you my view of the situation in this country. We [West Indian immigrants] can't get no place to live, and we only getting the worse jobs it have- 'But by this time the infant feel that he get catch with Moses, and he say, "Thank you". And hurry off. (929)*

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the reporter assumes that Moses is from Jamaica. This is stereotyping, a very typical feature of Racism. The "black" West Indians are all grouped together as Jamaicans. There is not even an assumption of diversity. This is one of the problems that characterize migration in the post-colonial period. Susheila Nasta in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* remarks that "Moses is sorry, it is the first time he ever really gets a good chance to say his mind, and he has a lot of things to say" (4). Unfortunately, the stereotypes play negatively against Moses' freedom of expression.

Moses wants to take this opportunity to make a few things clear, but for the reporter, Moses is just the means to writing a particular kind of news. When he learns that Moses wants to speak of the appalling conditions in London instead of those in Jamaica, he deserts him. This passage in the beginning of the novel is an indicator to the white-black relations in the novel. Galahad, a primary character in *The Lonely Londoners*, is caught up in foreign culture. He thinks that being familiar with names associated with English culture gives him a sense of pride as the narrator explains in the novel:

*He [Gahalad] had a way, whenever he talking with the boys. He using the names of the places like they mean big romance, as if to say, I was in Oxford Street' have more prestige than if he just say 'I was up the road', and once he had a date with afrauline, and he make a big pint of saying he was meeting she by Charing Cross, because just to say 'Charing Cross' have a lot of romance in it, he remember it had a song called 'Roseann of Charing Cross.' [...]when he says 'Charing Cross'. When he realizes that it is he, sir Gahalad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about it (it even have the name in the dictionary), he feel like a new man. [...]. Even if he was just going to coast a lime, to stand up and watch the white people still, it would have been something. The same way with the big clock they have in Piccadilly. Tube Station, what does tell the time of places all over the world. (83-4)*

Selvon's immigrants also try to blend what is familiar with what is alien. They creolise in their own way. Sindoni Maria Grazia in *Creolizing Culture* maintains that Selvon's immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners*:

*Reduplicate patterns that were common at home and seek to recreate familiar models of behavior (with regards to sex, women, friendship and so on) that however alien may seem to the Western man, fully express the Caribbean (and diasporic) cultural identity. Conversely, despite the immigrants' efforts to maintain their lifestyle and values unchanged, the city rejects the existence of the black enclave inside the heart of the ex-empire. (34)*

Women are not a very important part of the immigrants' life, except as objects of sex, however, if there is one woman who succeeds in maintaining her identity, it is Tanty. Tanty manages to maintain her cultural identity defending it from external assaults. When she goes shopping, she manages to create a familiar atmosphere closer to her home in the Caribbean. She even manages to make the shopkeeper give goods on credit, something he has never done before.

The hostility that the Britons hold towards the black is highlighted throughout the novel. When Gahalad asks Moses the reason for this, Moses replies: "well, as far as I could figure, they frighten that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen. The other thing is that they just don't like black people, and don't ask me why, because that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find out from way back" (39). And as Galahad notes, the situation is bad in all "while" nations –England or America:

*Things as bad over here as in America?' Gahalad asks. That is a point the boys always debating', Moses say, 'Some say yes, and some say no, the things is, in America they don't like you. And they tell you so straight, so that you know how you stand. Over here is the old English diplomacy: "thank you sir," and "how do you do" and that sort of things. In America you see a sign telling you to keep off. But over here you don't see any, but when you go in the hotel or the restaurant, they will politely tell you to haul-or else give you the cold treatment'. (39-40)*

The hostile nature of the Britons is reflected in other forms, mainly through the ambient atmosphere the city of London presents:

*...this is London-hundreds thousands of white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike and stuck together the streets like smooth shut in ravines and the dark houses frowning down-oh I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place, (quoted in Kenneth Ramchand, Introduction to the Lonely Londoners, Selvon, 1956: 3)*

London is a city, where people have no identity. The huge population is measured in terms of like dirty dishes: “Only from the washing up Ma form an idea of the population of London: ‘I never see so much dirty wares in my life’, she tell Tanty, “it does have mountains of washing coming in. where all these people come from? (81).

The immigrants, who try to make sense of a bewildering milieu, such as Tiger in “A Brighter Sun”, asks questions about existence, identity and manhood. However, the “boys” as they are called, remain fragmental, partial personalities. One real good indicator of their fragmented existence, according to Gordon Roehler, is the fact that they have nicknames and not real names. As Baugh Roehler in *Critics on Caribbean Literature* writes, “perhaps nicknames are an acknowledgement of individual or richness of personality, but they are also suggestive of an incompleteness of self” (15). This is the case with V.S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street* as well, that seems to owe much to early Selvon.

The term “the boys” also begins to gain importance as the book proceeds. It is indicative of not just the strange pre-moral innocence that Selvon’s immigrants seem to preserve wherever they are, but also a kind of immaturity which is persistent because the immigrants do not wake up to responsibility, even under the weight of metropolitan pressures. It is reiterated throughout the novel that London is a lonely city that is hostile and unfriendly. The rush makes one feel insignificant as well. As Galahad realizes:

*[...] that here he is, in London, and he ain’t have money or work or place to sleep or any friend or anything, and he standing up here by the tube station watching people, and everybody look so busy he frighten to ask questions from any of them. You think any of them bothering with what going on in his mind? Or in anybody else mind but their own? He see a test come and take a newspaper and put down the money on a box-nobody there to watch the fellar and yet he put the money down. What sort of thing is that? Galahad wonder, they not afraid somebody thief the money? [...] everybody doing something or going somewhere, is only he who walking stupid. (42)*

Other scenes of racial disparity abound in the novel. While describing the reducing effects of the city, Ralph Singh, the protagonist of the Mimic men speaks of people being “trapped in fixed ceasing to feel myself as a whole person”. This passage describes a similar scene in Selvon’s text when the narrator says about London:

*it have people living in London who don’t know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divided up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don’t know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers [...] (74).*

While the characters might not experience the psychic crash that Ralph Singh suffers, they do experience hysteria, eccentricity and irresponsible behavior. Lewis, for instance, is obsessed with the idea that his wife is an entertaining lover when he goes to work. Harris dresses like the English and is always scared of being embarrassed by his countrymen. Bart wastes his life away looking for his lost love Beatrice. Cap’s carefree ways belie his tough interior that survives anything. Moses, by the end of the book, is weary and scared. Most of the characters in the novel are forever mimicking the white man. In this attempt, they also distance themselves from their own friends and country-men. They feel that being seen as one of the white men is a privilege. The feeling of inferiority that the white man instilled in the black man is intact. Bartholomew for instance remarks:

*Bart have light skin. That is to say, he neither here nor there, though he more here than there. When he first hit Brit'n. like a lot of other brown-skin fellars who frighten for that lash, he go around telling everybody that he is a Latin –American, that he comes from South America.[...] [Bart] get a clerical job and he hold on to it like if is gold, for he frighten if he have to go and work in factory-that is not for him at all. Many nights he think about how many West Indians coming, and it give him more fear than it give the Englishman, for Bart frighten if they make things hard in Brit'n. if a fellar too black, Bart not companying him much, and he don't like to be found in the company of the boys, he always have an embarrass air when he with them in public, he does look around as much as to say: ' I here with the boys, but I not one of them, look at the colour of my skin 'but a few door slam in Bart face, a few English people give him the old diplomacy, and Bart boil down and come like one of the boys.(61-3)*

All of Bart's attempts are bound to fail. Harris' introduction clearly highlights this fact as the narrator points out that:

*Harris is a fellar who like to play ladeda and, and he likes English customs and things, he dos be polite and say thank you and eh does get up in the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which a thing even them Englishmen don't do. And whenhe dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city. Bowler hat and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with the Times fold up in the pocket so the name would show, and he walking upright like if he alone who alive in the world. Only thing, Harris face black.(111)*

Harris is smitten with the idea of behaving like an Englishman. He does thinks that an Englishman has grown out of like being chivalrous. Harris is another character who wants to look dignified in front of the English. He is scared that his black friends will embarrass him in the parties he throws. In fact, the parties are for impressing his English friends. Towards the end of one such party, he tells his black friends:

*Another thing', Harris say, [...] forgetting to speak proper English for a minute, 'is when the fete finish and the band playing God Save the Queen, some of you have a habit of walking about as if the fete is still going on, and you. Five, the last time you come to one of my dances you was even jocking waist when everybody else standing at attention. Now it have decent people here tonight, and if you don't get onrespectable it will be a bad reflection not only on me but on all the boys, and you know how things already bad in Brit'n. the English people will say we are still uncivilized and don't know how behave properly. (122)*

The desire to look decent is predominant. But also, Harris wants to pay respect to all that the English claim to be sacred. He want everyone else to do so.

Even Tanty cannot be free of the desire to look decent. As she tells Ma minutes after arriving in London, "What happening to you?[...] You can't see this gentleman from the newspapers come to meet we by the station? We have to show that we have good manners, you know" (31). Racism puzzles people like Gahalad, and they try to find explanations for it. Gahalad finally vents out his anger at black, the colour, which he thinks is the culprit, as he ponders:

*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.' [...] and Galahad watch the colour of this hand, an talk to it, saying, Colour, is you that 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! Look at you, you so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world. (88)*

Galahad speaking to his hand might seem like humour when first read, but the passage is actually an introspective a sad one. Galahad cannot understand why the blacks are mistreated when all they ask for is food and shelter, and work to get both.

“we only want to get by, we don't even want to get on” (88) is a telling statement. The black immigrants have no sinister design of usurping the rights of the white people. They want to survive. But that is denied them. Galahad starts speaking with the colour black, in his hand, blaming it for all the misery in the world. It can be seen that all the characters, though hailing from different places in West Indies, some even from other places, like Cap from Nigeria, have a sense of belonging and unity. The sense of community comes through here. This phenomenon is explained by Samuel Selvon himself in an interview given to Susheila Nasta in which he says that:

*[...] You see when this immigration happened, for the first time the Trinidadian got to know the Jamaican or the Barbadian, because in the islands themselves the communications were so bad that they never really got to know what happened in other islands. And it was only when they all came to London that this turned out to be a kind of meeting places where the Jamaican met the Trinidadian and the Barbadian and they got to know one another, they got to identify in a way as a people coming from a certain part of the world. Not so much as islanders, no, but as black immigrants living in the city of London. And so they got together, and it's a very strange thing that they had to move out of their own part of the world, and it was only when they came to London that this kind of identity happened to them. (21)*

In line with this textual evidence, Susheila Nasta in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, remarks that:

*[...] all the blacks living in London were thrown together. For the first West Indians were in contact with people from Africa who were black like themselves, and it was a strange kind of experience [...] but it helped in a way to form a feeling of community and this is why they tended to get together and talk about their troubles and relate incidents that happened to them. (16)*

The concept of “nation” is very important for the understanding of citizenship, identity, and the socio-political modes of integration. In order to talk about the rights (civil, political, social) and the obligations that imply, people need to understand the foundational myths, invented traditions and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) that state dominant elites, dominant classes, and/or dominant racial/ ethnic groups construct. A boundary is drawn between those who make up the nation and those who are not part of the nation. The nation is often imagined in core zones as being equivalent to White middle-class values and behavior. The construction of national identity is entangled with racial categories. A common feature of the colonial Caribbean migrations is that each in its own way contributed to the emergence of a crisis in the metropolitan national identity, which in turn, is related to a shift in racial/ ethnic hierarchies in a postcolonial world. With the large post war colonial migrations, the coloniality of power is reproduced inside the metropolises.

No colonial Caribbean migration passed unnoticed in the European imaginary. These migrants are colonial not only due to their long colonial relationship with the metropole, but also due to their current stereotypical representation in the European imagination which is reflected in their

subordinated location in the metropolitan labor market. The representations of colonial subjects as lazy, criminals, dumb, inferior, stupid, untrustworthy, uncivilized, primitive and dirty opportunists have a long colonial history.

### Conclusion

This paper has focused on cultural encounters and the quest for self in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. The contrast of migrants' settings and their new sitting brings about certain cultural shocks which are visible in almost every aspects of social life. In this situation, race becomes particularly primordial, considering the seemingly glaring belief among both white and black characters that white race is superior to the black race. Basically, the analysis was particularly concentrated on the idea of race in both worlds and how the characters react to each racist situation.

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