

Sam Selvon, The Lonely Londoners



Sam Selvon, The Lonely Londoners



OpenLearn | Free learning from
The Open University

About this free course

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A230 *Reading and studying literature*: <http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/course/a230.htm>.

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/sam-selvon-the-lonely-londoners/content-section-0

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

The Open University

Walton Hall,

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Copyright © 2016 The Open University

Intellectual property

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way:

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn. Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can't afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

Contents

Introduction	5
Learning Outcomes	6
Background	7
Leaving home	8
Sam Selvon's <i>The Lonely Londoners</i>	10
Language and form in <i>The Lonely Londoners</i>	11
Characterisation, illusion and identity in <i>The Lonely Londoners</i>	14
Representations of women in <i>The Lonely Londoners</i>	17
Style and narrative techniques: London in summer	19
Memory in <i>The Lonely Londoners</i> : Moses and Galahad	20
Conclusion	23
Keep on learning	24
References	24
Further reading	25
Acknowledgements	25

Introduction

This course focuses on Sam Selvon (1923–1994) and his novel *The Lonely Londoners*, published in 1956. This text is looked at in relation to the themes of migration and memory.

The edition of *The Lonely Londoners* that is referred to in this course is the Penguin Modern Classics (2006) edition, with an introduction by Susheila Nasta. You should read the novel when instructed to do so in the course.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A230 :

[Reading and studying literature](#). It can also be found in the publication Sara Haslam and Sue Asbee (eds) (2012) *The Twentieth Century*, published by The Open University and Bloomsbury Academic.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand representations of the themes of migration and memory in Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners*
- relate this text to the context of Caribbean migrant experience
- carry out critical analysis of prose fiction
- discuss the novel in relation to the concept of literatures.

Background

In June 1948 the SS *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks in England at the end of a journey from Jamaica that brought around 500 West Indians to Britain. The British Nationality Act earlier that year had granted free entry to Britain for all Commonwealth citizens, as the government tried to recruit extra labour to help national reconstruction after the Second World War. This led to a large increase in the immigrant population of Britain, mostly from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan. Although the *Windrush* brought the first substantial migrant influx from the Caribbean, it was not until the mid-1950s that others followed in large numbers, with over 100,000 migrants arriving between 1954 and 1958.

During the war, some 10,000 West Indian servicemen were based in Britain. As Robert Winder has shown, the reception offered to these servicemen was generally hospitable; those West Indian soldiers posted to RAF bases, for example, 'were embraced as friends by their neighbours; some even resolved to come back once the fighting was over' (2004, p. 330). The story was very different, though, for many who did come back and others who made their first journey to Britain in the early post-war period. They experienced discrimination, and regular employment and decent housing were often hard to find. What, then, was the appeal of England for those Caribbean migrants who uprooted themselves from their homelands to travel thousands of miles to a country so different in terms of its social structure, cultural norms and values, and climate? The discussions of Selvon's novel in this course will offer some possible answers to this and other questions, through an emphasis on the themes of migration and memory.

Leaving home

The issue of finding a 'voice' for the articulation of West Indian migrant experience has preoccupied Caribbean writers in the post-war period, and, as you shall see, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* was significant in this respect, though its use of dialect was also one of the factors that led British critics to dismiss its literary credentials when it was first published. As Susheila Nasta points out in her introduction to your edition of the novel, many early reviewers dismissed it as 'an amusing social documentary of West Indian manners' (p. xii). The reaction of contemporary reviewers is instructive in relation to the concept of 'literatures', demonstrating the enduring potency of traditional distinctions between literary and non-literary writing, based on subject matter and linguistic register. In the 'Introduction' to *Windrush Songs*, the poet James Berry, born in Jamaica in 1924, describes the situation facing the people of the Caribbean in the late 1940s:

None of us wanted to grow up poverty stricken. We didn't want to grow up without knowledge of the world. We certainly didn't want to grow up like our fathers who were stuck there, with a few hills of yams, a banana field, and a few animals. That could not feed a family, let alone provide money for anything more. We were a generation without advanced education or training, anxious about our future. Some of us had shown great promise at school, but now we were stuck, most of our parents could not pay for our further education and there were no national projects to employ us. And here we were, hating the place we loved, because it was on the verge of choking us to death.

This was the state of the Caribbean at that time. The culture was suffering from its history. It was in a state of helplessness. In fact we had not emerged from slavery; the bonds were still around us.

(Berry, 2007, p. 9)

Berry alludes to a desire among young Caribbean men to widen their horizons, to see the world, and to gain educational opportunities unavailable at home. An ambivalent attitude towards the Caribbean on the part of this generation is also revealed, as the continuing impact of slavery left them 'hating the place we loved'. The prospect of migration evoked conflicting and contradictory emotions in many of those who decided to undertake the journey to what was perceived as a land of opportunity.

Berry goes on to reveal equally ambivalent attitudes towards England:

Despite the aftermath of slavery there was still a respect for England and a sense of belonging. ... We knew that in England you could continue education while you worked, you could go to evening school. But England was also the home of the slave masters, and we retained a general distrust of white men. However, England was the nearest thing we had to a mother country; we saw in it some aspect of hope.

(Berry, 2007, p. 10)

England was seen as a place of vocation, of education, a place to belong, as well as a place where white men had grown rich through slavery. The image of England Berry presents here had been inculcated into its colonised subjects over a long period, as Winder has explained: 'Years of missionary and educational propaganda, stunning feats

of engineering, impressive administrative efficiency, buckets of pageantry, and conspicuous displays of wealth and power had all left their mark. Britain seemed high and mighty, in every sense' (2004, p. 347).

It can be assumed that the troubled emotions towards their real and potential homelands felt by young Jamaicans were shared as well by inhabitants of other Caribbean islands, such as Trinidad, the birthplace of Sam Selvon. As you work through the course, keep in mind Berry's recollections of the hopes and fears of his Jamaican contemporaries and try to evaluate how far they are reflected in the experience of Selvon's characters.

Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

Sam Selvon came to Britain during the early days of post-war migration, unusually not for economic reasons. The son of an Indian father and a Scottish-Indian mother, Selvon had a relatively comfortable middle-class upbringing. After serving in the Trinidadian Navy, Selvon worked on newspapers and literary magazines in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He moved to England in 1950, to avoid 'being lulled into complacency and acceptance of the carefree and apathetic life around me' (Selvon in Nasta and Rutherford, 1995, p. 58).



Figure 1 Carnival spectators watching from the pavement, Trinidad, c.1940s–1950s. Photo: © Bradley Smith/Corbis.

Although Selvon had published short stories and poems in his native Trinidad, it was not until after he settled in London that his career as a writer began to flourish. His first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, a story of Trinidadian rural life, was published in 1952, followed by another Caribbean-themed novel, *An Island is a World* (1955). *The Lonely Londoners*, perhaps his best-known and commercially most successful novel, followed in 1956, and was his first to address the migrant experience. Trinidad and London continued to serve as the main settings for the majority of Selvon's fiction thereafter.

Selvon's early experiences in London became the foundations for *The Lonely Londoners*. His first home was the Balmoral Hotel in South Kensington, a hostel mostly populated by colonial students, but also housing various other kinds of immigrants. Many of the people Selvon came into contact with provided the raw material for the central characters in *The Lonely Londoners*. For Selvon, this period was significant for what it taught him about himself and other West Indians, as well as presenting him with some negative first impressions of England:

It was my first experience of living among other West Indian islanders, happening in the heart of London thousands of miles from our home territory, and I learned as much about them as I learned about the English, whose ignorance of black people shocked me.

(Selvon in Nasta and Rutherford, 1995, pp. 58–9)

It was as a consequence of encountering migrants from other West Indian islands that Selvon for the first time became 'aware of the richness and diversity of Caribbean speech' (Sandhu, 2003, p. 145), an important factor in the writing strategies adopted in *The Lonely Londoners*, enabling him to articulate experiences relatively new to literary fiction at the time.

Selvon was also instrumental in helping to establish a community of West Indian writers in London. It should be noted here that this community was at first overwhelmingly male. In the 1950s most West Indian migrants were men; only when they had settled did some bring their families to Britain. Almost inevitably, there is an emphasis on masculine perceptions in *The Lonely Londoners*. The impact of this on the novel's gender perspectives will be discussed later.

After almost thirty years, growing disillusionment with England led Selvon to emigrate to Canada in 1978. His literary fame brought him a number of awards and academic posts in Britain, the West Indies and Canada. Selvon returned to Trinidad in 1993, dying the following year of pneumonia and lung disease.

Language and form in *The Lonely Londoners*

The Lonely Londoners is regarded by many critics as a pioneering text in Caribbean migrant writing, not only because of its subject matter, but also because of its innovative use of literary form and technique. Before I ask you to read it in its entirety I'd like you to spend some time looking closely at the first few pages of the novel.

Activity 1

First, read from the beginning of the novel to the end of the second paragraph on p. 4 (which ends 'he wish he was back in bed') and then think about the following questions:

1. What type of narrative perspective is used here? Do you find anything immediately striking about the voice of the narrator?
How does the narrative perspective change in this extract?
2. What impression of London is given in this section?
3. How does Selvon develop the character of Moses?

Discussion

1. I hope you recognised this extract as an example of third-person narration. The first thing you probably noticed was that the narrative voice does not adopt a Standard English mode of expression: phrases such as 'when it had a kind of unrealness about London' and 'as if is not London at all' (p. 1) reflect the idioms and rhythms of Caribbean speech.
Although the narration remains in the third person, I think there are some subtle shifts within that perspective in this passage. Frequently, the narrator seems to represent Moses' consciousness. From describing his actions in the second paragraph – 'When Moses sit down and pay his fare he take out a white handkerchief and blow his nose' – the narrative shifts to describe Moses' feelings about the demands placed on him by others: 'That was the hurtful part of it – is not as if this fellar is his brother or cousin or even friend' (p. 1). It is as if we are reading Moses' thoughts, expressed in his own voice. The perspective remains in the third person, but I think our identification with Moses increases here.
2. The London setting seems to me shadowy and ambiguous, effects created by the references to the 'fog' and the 'blur' that makes the setting seem as unfamiliar to the reader as it would have been to new migrants at the time. Note the evasions and qualifications in the description: 'a kind of unrealness'; 'some strange place',

and the otherworldliness of the reference to 'another planet' (p. 1). This version of London seems a rather sinister place.

3. As this extract progresses, Selvon's narrative strategies give us a clearer impression of Moses and his status as a well-known figure in the migrant community, an authority on living in London. Moses seems to take on this role grudgingly, blaming himself for soft-heartedness and berating those who send new migrants to him, but the extract also shows him to have a sense of duty towards his compatriots, evidence of a strong community spirit that unites these migrants from all over the West Indies: 'But all the same he went out with them, because he used to remember how desperate he was when he was in London for the first time and didn't know anybody or anything' (p. 3).

The combination here of a non-standard voice and narrative techniques that render what for many readers would be a familiar setting in unfamiliar terms evokes sympathy, or at least empathy with the narrative voice. It seems that the reader is viewing the events and characters from a perspective within the community that is being described – the kind of community conventionally denied a literary voice.

In shifting the narrative focus to represent Moses' consciousness, Selvon adopts a technique called focalisation. Although the third-person narrator can still be described as the 'speaker' in the second paragraph, Moses becomes the 'focaliser': the character through whose eyes and perceptions the narrative is mediated:

He had was to get up from a nice warm bed and dress and come out in this nasty weather to go and meet a fellar that he didn't even know. That was the hurtful part of it – is not as if this fellar is his brother or cousin or even friend; he don't know the man from Adam.

(p. 1)

The level of exasperation in the narrative voice at this point seems to capture Moses' frustration, rather than reflecting the narrator's view. This kind of deep focalisation relies on the use of free indirect style. Moses is not speaking aloud here, but his consciousness is rendered as though he were speaking, though in the narrator's third-person, rather than in the first-person.

The close correlation between the narrative voice and the voices of the Caribbean migrant characters is for many critics one of the most innovative elements of Selvon's writing in *The Lonely Londoners*, having a crucial effect not only on form but also on subject matter. According to Kathie Birat: 'by placing his characters in an unfamiliar context, he makes language, and particularly the characters' search for a language capable of capturing their experience, the subject of the story' (2009, p. 19). As discussed above, the effect created – making the familiar seem unfamiliar – also impacts on the non-Caribbean reader, rendering the London environment strange even to those who know it.

Selvon was by no means the first writer to explore West Indian migrant experience: as early as 1934 Jean Rhys (1890–1979), in her novel *Voyage in the Dark*, focused on a young woman from the Caribbean struggling to come to terms with life in London. Nor was Selvon the first to adopt innovative uses of free indirect style, but his experimentation with the dialect voice in exploring his subject matter and deploying his narrative techniques was something new at the time: 'I think I can say without a trace of modesty that I was the first Caribbean writer to explore and employ dialect in a full-length novel where it was

used in both narrative and dialogue' (Selvon in Nasta and Rutherford, 1995, p. 74). In the opening pages of the novel, the key effect is to narrow the distance between narrator and character.

We will return to Selvon's literary style later, but now I want you to read the novel in its entirety. Don't worry too much about any unfamiliar terms or phrases, but aim for a general understanding of the content and structure of the narrative.

Activity 2

When you have completed your first reading, think about the following questions:

1. How would you describe the structure of the novel? What is Moses' function in the narrative?
2. What is your overriding impression of the characters' experience of London?

Discussion

1. I'd describe the structure of the novel as episodic, consisting of a succession of anecdotes, shifting from character to character, creating a complex web of interrelations between vividly drawn figures from different areas of the Caribbean: Moses, Galahad, Big City and Bart are all natives of Trinidad; Tolroy and his family originate from Jamaica, as does Harris; Five Past Twelve is from Barbados; and Cap is not from the Caribbean at all, but from Nigeria, though 'many times you would mistake him for a West Indian' (p. 35). From the white perspective glimpsed occasionally in the novel, migrants are reductively categorised as Jamaican, but Selvon is at pains to stress the variety of his characters' origins, often through their reminiscences about the lives they left behind. Formally, this is reflected in the use of a dialect voice that equates to no specific Caribbean location, but amalgamates different dialects. These characters are united by the language, which also forges a link between them and the narrative voice, and by their common struggle to survive in British society. They are also united by their shared connection to the figure of Moses, whose presence links the various narrative threads.
2. These characters' experience of London is largely negative, but the use of exaggeration and comic interludes offers a more life-affirming counterpoint to the recurring motifs of disillusionment and alienation in the novel. Despite their disparate backgrounds there is also a sense of kinship connecting these characters.

Critical discussions of the novel's structure have made comparisons that bear in different ways on our concept of 'literatures', relating *The Lonely Londoners* to other narrative forms, both literary and non-literary. For Nasta, in her introduction to your edition of the novel, the fragmentary structure offers evidence of the influence on Selvon's storytelling strategies of Trinidadian calypso, a musical form 'well-known for its wit, melodrama, licentiousness and sharp political satire' (p. xiii), in which, furthermore, as Donnell and Welsh have suggested, 'we can finally locate a working-class uneducated voice representing its own perception of cultural and social issues, as opposed to the conscious downward gaze of the intellectual and writer' (1996, p. 125). This gives the narrative a recognisable oral dimension that, in drawing on a non-Western and non-literary source, reinforces the challenge to conventions of literary language and form posed by the use of

a modified Caribbean dialect, and facilitates the articulation of a voice – that of the black working-class immigrant – that had hitherto been largely denied recognition in literary fiction.

Similarly, in his introduction to the 1985 edition of *The Lonely Londoners*, Kenneth Ramchand endorses the idea of a relationship between Selvon's approach and an oral storytelling tradition, prominent in societies that did not privilege the printed word. He also stresses the novel's status as a written text, seeing it as 'feed[ing] on oral literature and on the stuff that oral literature itself also draws upon without losing its identity as writing' (Ramchand, 1985 [1956], p. 10). The connection here with oral literature reflects a challenge to traditional conceptions of the literary that gives primacy to the printed over the spoken word. Despite its 'written' status the language of the text prioritises voices excluded from the literary mainstream at the time it was written.

Sukhdev Sandhu offers yet another slightly different view of the novel's structure, describing it as:

a series of loosely related sketches of metropolitan life. To read it is to undergo a series of jolts and tumbles as characters flit in and out of view; comic vignette rubs up against mordant reportage. The effect is rather akin to that of a whitewashed wall that, over time, has become a messy riot of colour as fly-posters, graffiti art and community news-sheets vie with each other to adorn it with newer and ever louder information.

(Sandhu, 2003, p. 167)

Sandhu's interpretation invokes a range of textual forms that do not fit into traditional definitions of the literary – 'reportage', 'fly-posters', 'graffiti art', 'community news-sheets', and so on – that further highlights the novel's somewhat problematic status as 'literature' when set against canonical expectations. As we shall see later, the novel also engages in subversive interactions with canonical models and references.

The critical perspectives outlined above may differ in emphasis, but the common thread that links them is the close relationship between form and language, subject matter and themes. I want now to explore this relationship further by considering Selvon's techniques of characterisation. *The Lonely Londoners* has a relatively large cast of characters, but there is not space here to discuss them all. Instead, I want to focus on how three characters are depicted: Moses, Bart and Galahad, comparing the representation of their migrant experiences: how they respond to the disillusionment that many critics have seen as central to the theme of migration in West Indian writing; the role that memory and reminiscence play in providing a contrast with their experiences in London; and how they are portrayed through Selvon's distinctive use of language and form.

Characterisation, illusion and identity in *The Lonely Londoners*

I have already referred to the disjunction between what Caribbean migrants expected to find in England and their actual experiences. For David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe:

The Lonely Londoners deals with the shattering of the illusion of belonging, the illusion of being English, and indeed the illusion about who the English are. The

journey to England is a journey to an illusion, and the sojourn in England is a shattering of that illusion. The illusion is, firstly, a material dream about the wealth of England – the streets are meant to be paved with gold, with work well-paid and readily available. Secondly, it is an illusion about the courtesy, hospitality and human warmth of the English. The illusory hospitality of the English involves an imagined willingness of their white women to readily accept black men. ...

Finally, the illusion of England involves a romantic sense of English history. Names like Charing Cross, Waterloo and Trafalgar Square are powerfully seductive. ... The seduction of England is the illusion of its romantic or fabulous history, and the illusion that the West Indian could participate in that history. It was a powerful dream especially since West Indians were taught, through colonial education, that there was no history or romance or fable in the islands; that all history resided in England.

In the novel, all the dreams are painfully destroyed by the reality of their encounter with the actual England.

(Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, 1988, pp. 144–5)

These illusions are explored in the novel, linking together the otherwise seemingly fragmented 'ballads', or anecdotes that relate the characters' exploits. However, the novel's treatment of these shattered illusions is not simply a case of recording examples of an idealised vision of England coming up hard against the reality of post-war life in London. Selvon presents this theme in a variety of ways.



Figure 2 Piccadilly Circus, London, c.1950s–1960s. Photo: Lightworks Media/Alamy.

Activity 3

First, reread the 'Bart' section (from 'During them first days' on p. 45 to 'in the world, too' on p. 52) of the novel.

1. How does Selvon present Bart and develop the reader's sense of his character? How would you describe the different moods and literary techniques used in this section?
2. To what extent is Bart shown to be a victim of the illusions described above by Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe?

Discussion

1. Bart is presented initially in comic terms, focusing on his almost pathological meanness with money, which leads him to deny himself food in order to avoid helping a friend in difficulties. Humour is the prevalent element in the first part of this section, with a characteristic anecdote involving Bart and Cap showing the quick, sly wit that Bart shares with a number of other characters – 'Come back by

the two and six ear' (p. 47) – rendering him a more sympathetic character than he first appears.

Bart also appears to be a reluctant member of the West Indian community, trying to pass himself off as 'Latin-American' (p. 46) because of his lighter skin, and avoiding the company of blacker members of the community: 'he always have an embarrass air when he with them in public, he does look around as much as to say: "I here with these boys, but I not one of them, look at the colour of my skin"' (p. 48).

The relatively humorous tone gives way to a darker mood as Bart encounters racial prejudice, ironically described as 'the old diplomacy' (p. 48). His increased exposure to discrimination is accompanied by a physical decline; the comic refusal to eat in case by doing so he will have to share his resources with a fellow sufferer gives way to a more psychologically troubling act of denial as he 'train himself to live only on tea for weeks' (p. 48).

There is another shift of mood once Bart recovers from his illness, and the focus of the narrative moves to his obsession with his white girlfriend, Beatrice. Pathos becomes the prevailing mood of the remainder of the extract as Bart loses the object of his affection. His fruitless search for her is rendered movingly, with heightened emotion and diction, while maintaining the Caribbean idiomatic narrative voice:

He must be comb the whole of London, looking in the millions of white faces walking down Oxford Street, peering into buses, taking tube ride on the Inner Circle just in the hope that he might see she. For weeks the old Bart hunt, until he become haggard and haunted.

(pp. 51–2)

The simple and reflective tone of the narrator's rueful observation – 'It have men like that in the world, too' (p. 52) – concludes this section with what Ramchand calls 'acceptance and a quiet awe' (1985, p. 11).

2. Clearly, Bart falls prey to the shattering of at least the first two of the illusions outlined by Dabydeen and Tagoe-Wilson. The falsity of the belief in plentiful work is implied firstly in Bart's reluctance to help his associates financially. On achieving the coveted security of regular work, Bart even seems to internalise English prejudices and reflect it back in his attitudes: 'Many nights he think about how so 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' (pp. 47–8). He also encounters the lack of 'courtesy, hospitality and human warmth', having doors slammed in his face and being ejected from Beatrice's house by her father. Furthermore, the 'imagined willingness of their white women to readily accept black men' is also brought into question by Beatrice's disappearance. Bart's ceaseless quest for Beatrice is in one sense heartbreakingly futile, but could also embody the resilience that many of these characters demonstrate as a response to the prejudice they face on a daily basis.

The character of Beatrice, perhaps, represents an example of the significance of naming in the novel in relation to the canonical literary tradition with which it engages, often subversively. Beatrice shares her name with Dante's (1265–1321) guide through Paradise in the last book of his epic poem *Divine Comedy* (1307–21). The impact on Bart of his

Beatrice's disappearance could be seen as a subversion of the role of Dante's Beatrice, in that Bart descends into a personal hell as a consequence of losing her. It is possible here to see Selvon's novel in a complex intertextual negotiation with more canonical forms of literature.

Skin colour is central to these characters' alienation. Bart's denial of the implications of his colour is symptomatic of a destabilising of identity resulting from the experience of racial prejudice, a disassociation by Bart from his own sense of self; his outward alienation is mirrored by an inner one. Bart is forced to recognise that this alienation is what connects him to the other West Indian migrants, forcing him eventually to 'boil down and come like one of the boys' (p. 48).

A disassociation from skin colour is also apparent in Galahad's attempts to come to terms with white attitudes to Caribbean immigrants, as he addresses his colour as though it were something separate from himself:

And Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and 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! 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!'

(p. 77)

This is a rare reflective moment for Galahad, a character with a surer sense of self than most in the novel. That even he is affected in such a way as to try to divorce himself from his colour is indicative of the insidious power of racism. Galahad's more usual way of defining himself is very different from Bart's, however, as is his attitude towards women, which is significant in relation to the novel's wider engagement with issues of gender, the subject of the next section of this course.

Representations of women in *The Lonely Londoners*

Activity 4

Reread the episode of Galahad's date with a white woman (from 'When that first London summer hit' on p. 71 to 'he tell Sir Galahad' on p. 83) and think about the following questions:

1. Looking back on the three types of illusions faced by Caribbean migrants according to Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe above, which are most applicable to Galahad's situation here?
2. Compare and contrast the depiction of Galahad's attitude towards women with that of Bart.

Discussion

1. Galahad seems to be still seduced by 'the romantic sense of English history'. His nickname, Sir Galahad, is taken from a character in Arthurian legend, and constitutes another example of the novel drawing on canonical literary and

mythical sources. It is also clear that London place names still carry a thrill for him – a thrill that is validated with reference to yet another kind of literary source:

Jesus Christ, when he say 'Charing Cross', when he realise that is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man.

(p. 72)

Galahad also still seems to take for granted the 'imagined willingness of their white women to readily accept black men', a belief that had been inculcated in Galahad when he was still in Trinidad: 'This was something he uses to dream about in Trinidad. The time when he was leaving, Frank tell him: "Boy, it have bags of white pussy in London, and you will eat till you tired"' (p. 79).

2. While Bart continually scours the metropolis hoping to see his lost Beatrice again, for Galahad, the pursuit of white women is a more casual affair, almost a 'game', to alleviate the hardship and misery of migrant life. Although he is on his way to meet Daisy, his 'first' white woman, he is distracted by what he perceives as the seeming availability of other women: 'He go into the gardens, and begin to walk down to the Arch, seeing so much cat about the place, laying down on the grass, sitting and talking, all of them in pretty summer colours' (p. 78).

The description of the prelude to Galahad's date is instructive in relation to the rather restricted gender perspectives the novel has to offer. As stated earlier, migration from the Caribbean was initially primarily a male phenomenon. It is male experience with which the novel is concerned; the demeaning and derogatory terms used by Galahad and other characters about women – 'white pussy', 'so much cat about the place', 'a first-class craft' (p. 78) – dehumanise the women with whom the men come into contact. Galahad is not alone in using women for his own ends and gratification. Bart is a rare example in this novel of a man demonstrating genuine emotional attachment to a woman, and his obsession evokes pity in the narrator that the reader is presumably expected to share.

Activity 5

Based on your reading of the novel, how would you describe the depiction of its few female characters?

Discussion

Mostly, representations of women in *The Lonely Londoners* tend towards the stereotypical, characteristically identified with domestic roles. Although Tolroy's mother, named only as 'Ma', does move beyond the family circle, finding work in London, that work is only a kind of domestic labour, washing up in a Lyons Corner House, where she is able to observe, but not participate directly in, London life: 'Ma work in the back, in the kitchen, but she was near enough to the front to see what happening outside of the kitchen' (p. 68).

Tanty, the only female character accorded extended focalisation, is for the most part similarly confined to the domestic sphere, though she is a disruptive force in the immediate environment of the working-class area around the Harrow Road where she lives, subverting cultural norms by forcefully persuading the white shopkeeper to give credit, and using her shopping expeditions to indulge in 'big oldtalk' (p. 67) with the shop assistants. Tanty's refusal to bow to the cultural and social mores of her adopted homeland offer an affirmative alternative to the struggles to conform undertaken by

characters like Bart. Her only real encounter with the world beyond the Harrow Road, a journey to Ma's workplace in the centre of London, serves, perhaps, as a parody of the migrant theme, and is presented in mock-epic terms as she overcomes her fears to take the underground to central London:

But was plenty different when she find sheself in the station, and the idea of going under the ground in this train nearly make she turn back. But the thought that she would never be able to say she went made her carry on.

(p. 70)

That Tanty is shown to exaggerate the perils attendant on her journey home by bus – 'She was so frighten that she didn't bother to look out of the window and see anything' (p. 71) – indicates that her role in the novel seems to be mainly to provide comic relief. This suggests a marginalisation of black female experience as her fearful progress across London and back contrasts with the confident ease with which characters such as Galahad move around the capital, often in predatory pursuit of white women.

To return to the earlier comparison of Galahad and Bart, Galahad's approach to London life is in direct contrast with Bart's desire to escape his own identity, but Galahad's main function in the novel is to present a life-affirming counterpoint to the world-weariness of the central character, Moses. The two have a symbiotic relationship that reaches a peak of formal complexity in the section of the novel depicting London in the summer.

Style and narrative techniques: London in summer

Activity 6

Now read the 'London in summer' section (from 'Oh what a time it is' on p. 92 to 'what it is all about' on p. 102).

1. How would you describe the differences in the style and narrative techniques used by Selvon in this section from the rest of the novel?
2. How does Selvon represent the characters of Moses and Galahad in this section?

Discussion

1. This section begins with a celebration of the effect of summer on black and white Londoners alike, a rare moment in the novel of communion across ethnic divides. This gives way to a rapid succession of episodes, similar in structure to the novel as a whole, though encapsulated here in a single, unpunctuated sentence running over ten pages. This device gives a more fluid rhythm and faster tempo to the writing here, blurring the individual anecdotes into an impressionistic summary of these characters' experiences. Nasta, drawing on other literary parallels, has described this section as a 'long prose poem to London, a painful and lyrical love song' (p. xv). You may have noticed the prevalence of poetic effects such as repetition – phrases such as 'coasting a lime' that have already become a part of the lexicon of the novel recur here frequently – and alliteration:

'see all them pretty pieces of skin taking suntan and how the old geezers like the sun they would sit on the benches and smile everywhere' (p. 92).

2. The narrative voice closely echoes the speech patterns of the main characters, particularly Moses and Galahad, taking Selvon's manipulation of narrative techniques to more subtle levels. Phrases associated with each of them are woven into the narrative voice. The references to 'a sort of fog' and 'the streets of London paved with gold' echo the opening pages of the novel, while the description of 'the sun in the sky like a forceripe orange' (p. 93) reminds us of Galahad's first reaction to the English climate (p. 23). The different perspectives of Galahad and Moses are invoked at the end of the section in a passage that, while maintaining the distance of the third-person narrator, also fuses their respective speech patterns:

all these things happen in the blazing summer under the trees ... and in the night the world turn upside down and everybody hustling that is life that is London oh lord Galahad say when the sweetness of summer get in him he say he would never leave the old Brit'n as long as he live and Moses sigh a long sigh like a man who live life and see nothing at all in it and who frighten as the years go by wondering what it is all about.

(pp. 101–2)

Although Moses is the linking factor between the main characters in the novel, the respective narratives of Moses and Galahad are the most closely interrelated, as the London summer section shows. In the later stages of the novel their connection is maintained. Reminiscence is a crucial component in their relationship; their first point of connection is to share recollections of characters and events from their Trinidadian past. Towards the end of the novel, in the midst of 'one bitter season' (p. 116) of scarce employment, they resort again to memories of the Caribbean to raise their spirits.

Memory in *The Lonely Londoners*: Moses and Galahad

In the later stages of the novel the theme of memory comes strongly to the fore, highlighting the stark contrast between these characters' past and present locations and the depths of their alienation. Recalling hardships suffered in his younger days in San Fernando, when his father was reduced to snatching pigeons for food, Galahad's desperation drives him to mimic his father's actions in the more rarefied surroundings of Kensington Gardens. The horrified reactions he provokes illustrate all too clearly the vast cultural differences in time and place between the migrants' homelands and 1950s London. Nevertheless, just as the stolen pigeon provides sustenance for Galahad and Moses, so their reminiscences offer them consolation and affirmation, before Moses lapses into the guilt and despair that increasingly characterise his mood:

'Boy,' Moses say, 'look how we sit down here happy, and things brown in general. I mean, sometimes when we oldtalking so I does wonder about the

boys, how all of we come up to the old Brit'n to make a living, and how years go by and we still here in this country. Things like that does bother me.'

(p. 124)

Unusually here, it is Moses who lapses into an idealised nostalgic reverie: 'I would get a old house and have some cattle and goat, and all day long sit down in the grass in the sun, and hit a good corn cuckoo and calaloo now and then' (p. 125). Although Moses projects into the future here, it is an idealised future vision of a Caribbean life at odds with the reality of rural poverty that provided the impetus for many to leave the Caribbean behind. Moses here is led by his physical displacement from his native land and his psychological alienation from his adopted city, to create an 'imaginary homeland', a Caribbean of the mind, to appropriate Salman Rushdie's perspective on the migrant experience (Rushdie, 1981, p. 10). By contrast, in a moment of role-reversal, Galahad becomes the hard-headed realist: 'It ain't have no prospects back home, boy' (p. 125). The imaginary homelands that live on in the memories of Moses and other devotees of 'oldtalk' like Tanty are, it could be argued, as illusory as the perceptions about the 'mother country' that many migrants held on arrival in Britain. Nevertheless, the significance of memory for these characters is evident throughout the novel and amply demonstrated by Moses: 'This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell' (p. 126).

Memories play a central role in strengthening the relationships between the central characters as the novel progresses. The overall mood becomes increasingly despairing, and is focalised even more deeply through Moses' jaundiced perspective in the final pages. Alongside this, however, there is also a greater sense of connection between Moses and his fellow migrants. Whereas at the start of the novel Moses seems to be a reluctant good Samaritan, here he shows deep insight into the pain of displacement that these characters feel, shifting between dialect voice and idiomatic expression to more heightened diction and elevated lyricism:

Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country.

(pp. 138–9)

The sense of community endures, however, as the characters assemble around Moses, penetrating so deep into his consciousness that he feels their presence even when they are not there:

Sometimes during the week, when he come home and he can't sleep, is as if he is hearing the voices in the room, all the moaning and groaning and sighing and crying, and he open his eyes expecting to see the boys sitting around.

(p. 135)

Activity 7

Read the extract below from the introduction to Onyekadu Wambu's *Empire Windrush: 50 Years of Writing About Black Britain* (1998) and then answer the following question:

How far is this a fair assessment of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and its representation of migrant experience?

Over the years the preoccupation of much of the literature has been with this troubled quest for identity and liberty, as men were wrenched away into a new world, and older notions of self collapsed. This is largely the world of the wretched, having to remake themselves constantly in a hostile world, with wretched tools. It is necessarily bleak, tragic and sad.

(Wambu, 1998, pp. 23–4)

Discussion

As some of the preceding discussions have demonstrated, the instability of identity and the struggle to create a new sense of self in different surroundings is a recurring theme in Selvon's novel, symbolised by Bart's attempts to exploit his lighter skin as a way of distancing himself from his fellow migrants; Galahad's emphasis on dressing sharply and smartly to bolster his sense of self; and Moses' increasingly unfocused yearning for a different way of life. Selvon's characters, ground down by prejudice, could indeed be seen as wretched, and clearly do exist in a 'hostile world'. But the novel also celebrates London, and the characters' determination to struggle on manifests itself through vivid and humorous episodes. 'Bleak, tragic and sad' the novel may be on occasion, but some of the characters, especially Galahad, show at times the positive side of living in London in a dark and often dreary period of English history.

Selvon's novel offers a perspective on the impact of Caribbean migration on its characters and on the 'mother country' in the early post-war era. As the novel draws to a close Moses' meditations add a distinctly self-referential dimension to the text:

Daniel was telling him how over in France all kinds of fellars writing books what turning out to be best-sellers. Taxi-driver, porter, road-sweeper – it didn't matter. One day you sweating in the factory and the next day all the newspapers have your name and photo, saying how you are a new literary giant.

He watch a tugboat on the Thames, wondering if he could ever write a book like that, what everybody would buy.

(p. 139)

This ending leads Ramchand to suggest that 'in a sense, *The Lonely Londoners* is the book Moses would have written' (1985 [1956], p. 21), a plausible idea that makes explicit the novel's questioning of traditional notions of what constitutes literature and the literary.

Conclusion

The Lonely Londoners details numerous examples of racial prejudice, a disturbing aspect of British society throughout the post-war period. Just two years after *The Lonely Londoners* first appeared, racial tensions erupted into violence in both Notting Hill in London, and Nottingham. While such violent manifestations of racial tensions have been relatively rare, immigrant communities have continued to face persecution in varying degrees; the rise of far-right racist parties such as the National Front in the 1970s and the British National Party in the early twenty-first century have fuelled racial discontent, and criminal cases such as the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993 have revealed the extent of racist attitudes in major British institutions such as the Metropolitan Police Force. Black British writers since Selvon have continued to explore migrant experience against this background, and over the same period black British literature has asserted itself in a more central position in relation to the established canon.

Keep on learning



Study another free course

There are more than **800 courses on OpenLearn** for you to choose from on a range of subjects.

Find out more about all our [free courses](#).

Take your studies further

Find out more about studying with The Open University by [visiting our online prospectus](#).

If you are new to university study, you may be interested in our [Access Courses](#) or [Certificates](#).

What's new from OpenLearn?

[Sign up to our newsletter](#) or view a sample.

For reference, full URLs to pages listed above:

OpenLearn – www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses

Visiting our online prospectus – www.open.ac.uk/courses

Access Courses – www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/access

Certificates – www.open.ac.uk/courses/certificates-he

Newsletter –

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/subscribe-the-openlearn-newsletter

References

Berry, J. (2007) *Windrush Songs*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Bloodaxe.

- Birat, K. (2009) 'Hearing voices in George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*', *Commonwealth*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 9–22.
- Dabydeen, D. and Wilson-Tagoe, N. (1988) *A Reader's Guide to Westindian and Black British Literature*, Hatfield, Hansib Publishing.
- Donnell, A. and Welsh, S.L. (eds) (1996) *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, London, Routledge.
- Nasta, S. and Rutherford, A. (eds) (1995) *Tiger's Triumph: Celebrating Sam Selvon*, Armidale, NSW, and Hebden Bridge, UK, Dangaroo Press.
- Ramchand, K. (1985 [1956]) 'Introduction' in Selvon, S., *The Lonely Londoners*, New York, Longman.
- Rushdie, S. (1981) *Imaginary Homelands*, London, Granta Books.
- Sandhu, S. (2003) *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City*, London, Harper Collins.
- Selvon, S. (2006 [1956]) *The Lonely Londoners*, London, Penguin.
- Wambu, O. (ed.) (1998) *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing About Black Britain*, London, Victor Gollancz.
- Winder, R. (2004) *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain*, London, Little, Brown.

Further reading

- Berry, J. (ed.) (1976) *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of West Indian Poets in Britain*, London, Limestone Publications.
- Berry, J. (1979) *Fractured Circles*, London, New Beacon Books.
- Berry, J. (1982) *Lucy's Letters and Loving*, London, New Beacon Books.
- Berry, J. (1985) *Chain of Days*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lamming, G. (1992 [1960]) *The Pleasures of Exile*, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press.
- Nasta, S. (ed.) (1988) *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, Washington, D.C., Three Continents Press.
- Phillips, M. and Phillips, T. (1998) *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, London, Harper Collins.
- Selvon, S. (1984 [1975]) *Moses Ascending*, Oxford, Heinemann.
- Selvon, S. (1991 [1983]) *Moses Migrating*, Washington, D.C., Three Continents Press.
- Selvon, S. (1997 [1952]) *A Brighter Sun*, Harlow, Longman.
- Wyke, C. (1991) *Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy*, Vancouver, BC, University of British Columbia Press.

Acknowledgements

This course was written by Steve Padley.

The material acknowledged below and within this course is Proprietary and used under permission (not subject to Creative Commons Licensing). See [terms and conditions](#).

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following:

Course image: [quattrostagioni](#)By: [quattrostagioni](#) in Flickr made available under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Licence](#).

Figure 1: Copyright ©: Bradley Smith/Corbis.

Figure 2: Copyright ©: Lightworks Media/Alamy.

Don't miss out:

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University - www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses