From: A Passage Back Home (1994): A Personal Reminiscence of Samuel Selvon

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Abstract

I cannot remember how old those Sundays were and if the sun had travelled already over the Observation Post in Clapham, and was running over Britton's Hill, down into the Garrison Pasture, before night caught it, to plunge for that day, into Gravesend Beach, and end the light of Sunday. I cannot remember what time it was, when I first heard, either his voice or the magnificent acquainted language of his stories, sent back to us from overseas; and I did not, like all of us, consider it strange or characteristic of our cultural status, that our words spoken amongst us, in fragments and with no force of appeal, would be golden and acceptable portraits of our lives, because they were coming to us on these Sunday nights, from overseas: on the BBC's radio programme, Caribbean Voices.
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My step-father, Police Constable Fitz Herbert Luke, controlled the 'private set,' as he probably controlled the irascible men he had to arrest, with a wrist-lock, making their movements conform to his own obsessive views of obedience and order and lawfulness. And even if he could not precisely define these characteristics he had learned in the Barbados Police Force, (not yet 'Royal'!), and in his own upbringing, I was not too small not to know that he meant those criminals were lacking in 'Christian-mindedness.' And this could be achieved only by listening to the sermons that came all day long, every Sunday, over the 'private set,' from the Andes Mountains. Luckily, we had passed that chapter that dealt with South American geography in the text-book written by Dudely Stampp, at Combermere School. I would be entranced as he was, sitting in the front house, with the cold glass of lemonade, in a color I still cannot describe, with the chipped ice and the pith of the limes, swirling in it, as I listened to the voice and the chastisements and the thunder that summoned Sodom and Gomorrah, that gripped all of us into shuddering submission to those strange voices, those strange arguments, those strange men who through this mechanical device, the 'private set,' were able to enter our houses and occupy our minds, and scold us into this Christian-mindedness. My step-father listened to these
sermons on Sundays for more hours than I would spend any day at Combermere School.

But luckily for me, a message would come from the Married Women's Quarters, near the Garrison, from Captain Farmer, the Commissioner of Police, that something was wrong, and that 'Mr. Luke was wanted.' There was one telephone in our neighbourhood, the Yarde's; and one of the Yarde-boys would have to walk the message from the Front Road, which all the boys journeyed, to Flagstaff Road.

And I would rejoice. The 'private set' would be mine, after all. My mother's own feeling that we had been remanded from the onslaught of these religious sermons, from ten o'clock until the last leghorn fowl was on her roost, came out like mild blasphemy. 'Praise God! He out o' the house!' She would have had her eyes on the part of the dial which brought Auntie Kay from Trinidad's Golden Network, with its own version of blasphemy over the seas to the sensibilities of Barbadians washed in Sunday properness of behavior. 'Playing tuk! And on a Sunday, to-boot?'; but it was time of year when the new tunes were being tried by the talent of children; and we might be in for some musical wonder. But before the 'tuk, and on a Sunday!' I would be permitted to roll the heavy knob of the ball-bearing tuning button along the waves of miles of the dial, passing countries in Latin America, moving over Holland (the 'private set' was made in Holland!), through Europe's intractable languages, until by accident, I was plunged into the Mother Country. Inglann!

And a different kind of 'tuk' would take possession of the air-waves. Caribbean Voices! And this is when I first heard the name, Samuel Selvon of Trinidad. It was, as Oliver Jackman would put it, a literary 'federation' taking place. Our culture of Sundays, regular as our bowels on a first-Sunday; regimented as the dry-peas and rice and baked chicken, sweet potatoes, pear, lemonade and rum-punch, was Rediffusion's recorded church services of ponderous, sonorous sermons delivered by Inglish vicars whose language was not the language of our miseries, and could not determine nor define what was contained in our hearts. They did not even know our sins. Or it would be choirs from Westminster Abbey, with which we joined in, demonstrating our own arrogant belief that Barbadians sang Hymns Ancient and Modern more better than anybody born. Or a chanced taped version of the same hymns, delivered by the men in the neighbourhood, at a Wake or a Sunday 'service o' song.' And of course, the interminable foreign-affairs chastisement coming from over the Andes Mountains, out of foreign mouths.

But to hear, all of a sudden about the breadfruit tree; the casaurinas; the names of flowers we had passed earlier that very Sunday, to and from Sin-Matthias or Sin-Barnabas, or even the Cathedral - those of us who travelled through the Pine, when it still had canes and was a
plantation; through Government Hill, and saw them growing over the wall of the Convent - the Kiskides, Couva, Port of Spain, Gravesend Beach and 'Trumper': to hear these symbols of words, greater than words; greater than our recognition of them in everyday life, all this was to make us feel 'we was people, too.'

I cannot say that I understand all, or even most, of what was being transmitted back to me. I cannot say that I understand each poem about Sin-Lucia, Barbados, Guyana and Trinidad, written by men of those 'unknown' lands, who were so similar to me, and others who had passed these monuments in our respective neighbourhoods; the casaurina, the blue seas, the Sea Wall. I could not receive this 'literary tuk' with an easy appetite because I had not been trained with tools that were Barbadian, to criticise it, or what is worse, to appreciate it. But I knew that something revolutionary, some 'damn federation' was happening on those Sunday nights, when my mother and I, leaned close to the magnificent speaker of the linen-clothed mouth of the 'private set' in the front house.

Samuel Selvon of Trinidad was one voice I heard over the radio. His works had appeared earlier, I am sure, in the small, tidy, impressive and clairvoyant pages of Bim Literary Quarterly, assembled against greatest odds, money and energy, by Mr Frank Collymore, who taught me English more successfully than he could French, at Combermere School. But apart from that, apart from the privileged peeping into those pages, illustrated sometimes by gargoyles and monsters and 'colly-beases,' we would know of his existence in a more magnified romantic way, in the weekly injections of 'Caribbean Voices.'

My little world of no more than thirty houses on either side of Flagstaff Road, stretching from the Corner where the Kendal Hill bus stopped, to the top of the hill leading down into the Saturday iniquity, as my mother would say, of Club Morgan, a club which catered to the tastes of white people only, and foreigners, and with a view of the commanding sea and ocean, over which earlier Samuel Selvon, along with George Lamming and Derek Walcott, A.N. Forde and others had crossed in this new revolutionary and reversed 'Middle Passage.' There were the thirty or so houses perched on foundations of precarious blocks of coral stone mined by men from the same neighbourhood, with their sleepy windows adorned with rich window blinds of gold and silver, white and pink; this world which before these 'voices,' were littled in their Inglanned sensibilities regarding self, regarding dignity, regarding blackness and the variations of that blackness - lightness considered beyond the meaning of 'lectricity - regarding nationality and nationhood, regarding the new raging men, Cox and Adams; Barrow and Walcott; Mapp and Allder; Mottley and Talma, and others, many others; my world received the injection of those 'voices' which in turn made sense of the diagnosis and the bitter medicine of ex-colonialism that these great men were
ranting about, on the political platforms, and in rum shops throughout
the island which was no longer small.

How could such magnificent, powerful brains be contained in only
one hundred and sixty-six square miles? How could we have amongst
us, such big-brained men in various professions and vocations, the law,
medicine, education, philanthropy - and women too - Henderson
Clarke, Chris Springer, Mervyn Campbell, Beckles and Madame Ifill, and
not wonder at their presence in our midst, and not bestow upon them,
the glory and appreciation for this level of achievement measured, not in
our own terms, (for we had no way of measuring; we did not measure,
but in Inglann's terms? Did not the BBC tell us, even if we were hard-mou unh about accepting this 'federation' truth, that our 'voices' were on
the same level as those nurtured in the same Inglann; and that our
apprehension of 'fair daffodils,' of Browning's 'In a Gondola,' and
Tennyson's 'In Memoriam,' were now so aesthetically special and
superior to George Lamming's early poems, (some say he is a better poet
than novelist!), and now, for all to see and hear, 'Omeros' by Derek
Walcott who does not, thank God, need that validation from the BBC or
the Times Literary Supplement? And did we not, on the pastures, on the
beaches, the playing fields of Combermere, Harrison College, Lodge and
Foundation; roads rutted with rock-stone, and any available space, on
Sundays, banks holidays and 'in tesse's,' see, before anyone else, Foffie
Williams, Griff the fass-bowler, numerous Williamses, Smiths of two
distinct tribes; Walcotts, Weekes and Worrell, and many others; and
many others, still to come - with Sobers, Hall, Hunte, to name a few?
And did we not applaud them on Saturday afternoon, forget them on
Monday, put them in curing moth-balled neglect and ignoring, until the
Inglish came down, and their writers told us in the language of Oxford
and reality, that this was another aspect of our greatness?

Why did we not, until these cricketing 'voices,' bestow upon our
greatness our own acclamation? Is it because there are so many great
ones that our conservative exuberance for praise was not generous
enough to go around? I do not know the answer. But I do know, that the
calypsonian, that sharp-eyed historian of our greatness and our
weakness understood first, before any Tourist Authority, before any
awakened Prime Minister to these axioms of greatness, before any struck
committee, the calypsonians our living poets, with their apprehension of
contemporary affairs, took notice of the enormity of the event. It
happened at Lord's, didn't it? Could there be any other stage on earth, on
which this dramatization of the battle between a known giant, and a
contestant, not unlike the mythical Samson, could be more splendidly
acted out? 'Cricket, lovely cricket!' It was spoken, with more literary
poignancy than the languorous and sometimes dulcet tone of John
Arlott, himself a poet of some consideration. But it remained for our
cultural historian, the caisoman, himself a 'Lord,' Lord Kitchener, to
draw its historical, its social and its cultural importance to our attention. This, in another way, is what our 'voices,' pelted back to us on the BBC, and amongst which was Sam's, this is what Sam's voice did to me. The dramatization of ex-colonialism and the building of a new sensibility, nationalism in its best sense; the disabusing of our minds from the position we had been schooled in: that we had no culture; that we had no models from amongst us, all this was vouchsafed in the language of Samuel Selvon.

There was no way, no fantasy large enough, no expectation that Sam would come into my life as literary model, as literary companion and travelling companion, and as friend, from the first journey of his 'voice' over the BBC.

He had gone, like many immigrants in the fifties, to Inglann, not to be a writer, as most of the commentaries on West Indian writing argue. He had gone to Inglann to make a living, in circumstances perhaps more endurable and sympathetic than he felt he could live with in his Trinidad. He had gone with the grand emigration of men and women looking for work. And if, as he discovered, he was able to work on London's Transport system, in hospitals as an orderly, at the Exchange, and still have time and money to indulge his desire to be a writer; to have the time to dream, and to capture with hair-splitting accuracy the voice of Trinidadians and West Indians and in a language which today, is being encouraged by academicians in Amurca, in various programmes of Black Studies, and African-American Studies; to put into that language he had heard on the streets throughout Trinidad the ethnocultural etymology and raise it to a level of beauty, then his emigration was a blessing.

It was a Thursday in 1965, in London, in the Bible of literary justice, the Times Literary Supplement, (TLS). On the front page. I can still remember the headline which spanned the breadth of the page, like a panoply over an artist's drawing of a typewriter. New wine in old Bottles.

The 'old bottles' was the metaphor for the English language: tired, worn out, stiff, unable to cope with the changing realities of strangers upon the English landscape and their insistence, like the cricketers of Lord Kitchener's 'at Lords,' that there was a new kid on the block, so to say.

The 'new wine' was the literary assault that was being made against the bastion of a 'canon' that had been our measurement, before one brave Englishman, Swanzy brought about this 'federation' of new writing on the BBC's 'Caribbean Voices.' The article praised the contribution of these new batsmen with words, who had injected into a tired way of saying things, the breath of the spice, the glitter and flash of a willow pointing a new ball, or an old ball, through covers; and as John Arlott said many times, about Worrell, about Weekes, about Walcott - and John Goddard - the beauty was in the speed with which the shot had been made, its
execution like laser, and 'not a man moved.' Or as Shell Harris, in his own beautiful cultural vernacular described it, 'Jesus Christ! Another four!'

The TLS article singled out the new great literature batsmen: stroke players of 'Jesus Christ, prettiness!' There were stylists and magicians with the pen, as Ramadhin and Valentine 'those two lil pals of mine,' had done with the little red ball. It singled out Sam Selvon, it singled out George Lamming, it singled out V.S. Naipaul, it singled out Austin Clarke, and it singled out Dylan Thomas. But Sam's identification with this 'new wine,' is what concerns me here. It concerns me now, because, all we have left, after his sudden passing away in the land he loved, in which he was raised, and which he himself raised to an international symbol, through the language he used to describe it, through Trinidad's language, all we have left to do, is sit and read those words that are as invaluable as the calypsoes by Sparrow or Lord Kitchener. I shall not recite any of his words here. I shall not compare any of his stories to those of any other authors. This is not intended to be a comparative criticism. It is simply a personal reminiscence, an appreciation of the wealth he has left behind. The wealth of words heard in the jammed streets of Trinidad, words that paint action, feeling, emotion, death and above all, life. Words that I hear all the time: and heard even before I came face to face with him during this trip to Inglann in 1965.

I was there for the launching of my second novel, Amongst Thistles and Thorns; and my publishers, Heinemann, were putting on a party for the occasion. It was a Thursday. The TLS had just come out, and we were being praised. I was there also, because I was still a freelance radio broadcaster with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; and I had been commissioned to do a three-part radio series on West Indian immigrants in London.

Knowing the role of the artist in the defining of the people from which the artist has come, and among whom he lives, and taking the example of Lord Kitchener, I knew I would have to talk with writers, if I was going to understand the essence of the existence of these West Indians, newcomers, new batsmen upon the severe, grey inhospitable landscape of Inglann and Lords, and London.

Had I not read, 'Waiting for Auntie to Cough,' and pictured myself, through Sam's words palpable as taste, following and imitating the most minute movement of these men through the labyrinths of London and Inglann? It was not difficult to see the improvisation of that immigrant man, whether Trinidadian, Jamaican or Barbadian, who through the exigency of racism or scarce employment opportunity, realising that his own national culture did not put the same emotional value upon the life of a pigeon, flitting over Times Square in droves, and in eaves in greater droves, and spluttering the carefully laundered white shirt - perhaps, the only one - with shit; and knowing that if one was gone, it could not be
missed in such great tragedy as the Inglish are wont to bestow upon the
death of one of their pets. And who, in his right senses, would call a
blasted stray pigeon, a pet! And feed him? And starve?

To put it into a 'luminium saucepan, and drop in some lard oil,
pepper, salt and curry - the bane to Inglish noses in the fifties! - and
some rice, and have dinner! And who is more useful, more important, a
West Indian evading death from hunger: or an Inglish pigeon!

In Sam's intention there was not supposed to be this severe, psycho-
literary interpretation, riddled with symbolism. It was the mastery of the
man's usage of language that through its easy comprehension, we, the
reader, the critic and the academician, were able to understand clearly
what he was saying. We read into his words, so clear and single-
minded, all the underlying serious implications that they suggested.

The Lonely Londoners is my favorite among Sam's books. In it I can
smell the perspiration of the labouring West Indians. Can feel their
resentment to their treatment at the hands of the 'Mother.' Can follow
them through the dark, cold, dreary and debilitating alleys on the way to
their ambitions: a Barrister-at-law, a supervisor on London's Transport,
a qualified teacher. And I can hear their pain. And most of all, sense their
nostalgia, and their ambivalence about the wisdom of leaving
Bridgetown or Port of Spain for Inglann. Sam gave me the blue print to
that 'exile,' 'exile' not always so pleasurable as George Lamming
contended it to be in his personal brilliant commentary, The Pleasures of
Exile, which dealt with his own life in Inglann.

When I arrived there, armed with a Nagra tape recorder and a huge
per diem account, I was both prepared and unprepared for the blight I
was to live with and in, during those two weeks in Inglann's 'summer.'

But the TLS had extolled beforehand, the excellence of this renaissance
of writing, this West Indian literary force that dared to demonstrate the
working-out of the 'new wine' in Inglann's back-yards. George
Lamming was at the height of his fame. V.S. Naipaul has just begun to
court the Inglish and massage them into believing in his own nihilistic
attitude. Jan Carew, living in a large house somewhere near Wimbledon,
clothed in the huge skins of animals slaughtered or found dead,
somewhere on the Steppes of Europe or the Latin American Pampas of
boar-hunting, seal-hunting, or mink-hunting; and flitting from London
to Moscow, and back many times, before the term 'jet-setter' was
invented and thrown into our lexicon. Andrew Salkey, whom I have
christened 'Handrew' in memory of his Jamaican Creole roots, buried
amongst shelves and shelves of books reaching to the heavens in his
prodigious study. Michael Anthony whose hands were calloused, and
made harder, not from the solitary pounding on his manual typewriter,
but from the laborer's job he held, for years, to put bread and butter on
his table for wife and child. James Berry who persevered with poetry.

Sam had captured even the smell of London's winter in his brilliant
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novel, *The Lonely Londoners*. And he had done something else. He had stripped them of the alienating hyphenation so common these days in the way we describe ourselves as minority ethnic groups living in a land other than our own. He christened them *Londoners*. Not black Londoners. Not Trinidadian-Londoners. Not Black West Indians in London. Just Londoners. And he left it to the other tribes inhabiting that inhospitable landscape, to like it, or lump it. This distinction of definition is significant: for it describes not only the disposition of those brave men and women to the reversed direction of the 'journey,' but more than that, it expresses the ethno-cultural philosophy of the man. Never once, during countless meetings, from 1965 until two years ago when we met at Brock University in St. Catharines, Canada, have I heard, even in jest, a word of implicit racialism come from this man's lips. And in hundreds of letters we exchanged between London and Toronto (Toronto); and later on, between Calgary, Alberta and Toronto, there is no trace of enmity caused by his encounters with racism, (and he had many), that colored his behavior, his life, or his writing.

The House in which Sam lived at this time, was an ordinary house. Not outstanding in any of its dimensions. A house in which the Inglish put its under-class to live. I remember he was wearing a sweater. And smoking. There might have been whiskey. But his circumstances tell me that whiskey could possibly not have been served. I do not remember eating lunch, or being offered any. The starkness of his surroundings and environment was not what I had imagined from his lively fiction in his short stories. This home was more in keeping with the lugubriousness of the life Edgar Mittelholzer wrote about in his autobiography. I could imagine the heavy strains of Wagner, which Edgar liked and listened to without taking a breath. I could imagine the locus of many of Charles Dickens' novels, except that this encounter was in the suburbs. I could imagine the garret and the woolened writer in darkness, no food, and the romantic prop of bottles of red wine, and burning candles drooping from a Chianti bottle whose mouth and basketed sides are drenched in dried tallowed sculptures. Not so this house.

But there was dignity. And humanness. Sam had lots of that. The dignity of simplicity. His words exemplified that. I sat with him, in this minimalized surroundings, there was no music, no oil paintings, and we talked about London and Ingann for hours; and we talked not too successfully about his work and its place in the sphere of the 'new-wined' renaissance of West Indian letters. And his self-effacing nature was the ethic, the nature and the essence of the interview. I think I asked Sam about his colleagues. Especially Naipaul, who had just made a mark for himself in world literature, if we may describe his success, in those terms. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, perhaps his best novel, had just been published to great acclaim. But there was a problem. Was Naipaul really the son of a bitch that Handrew had hinted at? It was Handrew, after all,
who had introduced Naipaul to his publishers André Deutsch. And it was Naipaul, with the large publisher’s cheque against advanced royalties, who could no longer remember Handrew’s address on Moscow Road, London. Was all the rumor I was hearing, true? Were the recriminations about V.S. Naipaul, his nihilistic attitude towards black people, spread by his former friends, justified? I was convinced of his tremendous technical ability with the novel. I had not been able to separate this genius with structure, from the contents of his non-fiction, in particular, *The Middle Passage*. And years later, when he gave us the big book on his return to India, with the motto of Indian personality, “The Indian defecates everywhere. He defecates on the street, in his temples...” I asked Sam what he felt about *An Area of Darkness*, in which this nihilistic brand of satire appeared. I was expecting a personal commentary from a fellow Trinidadian. Something, though not so spiteful as the censure I had met, when the same question had been asked of other West Indian writers, the young nationalist intellectuals, and university students who did not necessarily read nor study Naipaul in their English curriculums – but something spicy. Perhaps, I was waiting to hear the latest personal gossip, to be able to bury this out-standing, money-making fellow author. Perhaps, it was too, nothing but plain envy and jealousy. For none of us had had Naipaul’s wide and international attention. Not even George Lamming. Not Eddie Brathwaite. And not, most certainly at that time, Derek Walcott.

I sat back, rubbing my two palms together, sipping the rum – or was it beer served too warm, which I do not like – waiting for the avalanche of what I felt would be justified disapprobrium.

Sam sipped his drink. Took a pull on the cigarette which was always in his mouth. And he said, in his voice that was so comforting in its soothing quality, like the voice of a dramatic actor who loves comedy; in a voice like a clown’s, and the best of classical clowns, filled with wisdom beneath the humor; Sam said, “Boy, Vidia is Vidia, yuh know. Vidia does-do his thing and thing, and that is Vidia. I ain’t know nothing, eh boy. I does-do my thing, and Vidia does-do his thing. Is so, yuh know, boy...”

There was no enmity, no jealousy, no recrimination. There was no hint of wanting to be in Vidia’s shoes, and share in the enormous advances and prize money he had been having, no regret that he was not on the BBC television shows which lionized his countryman; no word of censure against the recognition given to Naipaul, in such large measure that it was felt in Inglann at the time, that Vidia was the only author worth noticing.

It taught me the essence about Sam, this great man, ‘no longer whinnying with us,’ as Dylan Thomas would have couched the words of his panegyric, had he too been alive, and had he not succumbed to the record-breaking transitory fame of drinking scotches. ‘I think this is a record,’ Dylan is supposed to have said, when he drank others under the
table, and himself, into the lamented coffin. 'Do not go gentle into that good night.' It could have been said about Sam's passing in Trinidad on the 17th of April, as it was said about the passing of Dylan's own father. I did not expect to see Sam in this state and status. Meeting him, there was not the same dignity and magnificence that his prose had portrayed for me all those years before; his home was not distinguished in the way that his fiction's language had succeeded in distinguishing the English language. And I knew that the time he had taken away from his typewriter to talk to me, was golden. There was no wife at home. I do not know if I knew he had a wife in those days. But he probably had. For I think I remember there was a child, an infant. The voice was coming from a room I could not see. I knew, from what my eyes passed over, in his castle, that there were no T-bone steaks on Fridays, and roast beef and Yorkshire puddings on Sundays. That sherry was not served at five in the afternoon. That the car was not taken out in the Sunday evening dying sun, and driven into the country. I know that that time, all the time available, had to be spent over the laboring Underwood typewriter, and that late into the night, at the hour when even graveyards are quiet, that the working wife, and the infant, would hear the clacking-out of words in the new language he was fashioning into the 'new wine' of the English canon that determined the modern novel.