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Abstract

Although a sense of the need to migrate clearly affected early writers born in the Caribbean such as the Jamaican, Claude McKay who left in 1912 for the United States, the period immediately following the Second World War was particularly important for the arrival in London of a number of talented young West Indians artists. London, as Henry Swanzy the producer of the influential BBC Radio programme Caribbean Voices once aptly observed, had become a 'literary headquarters'. It had become a centre where writers from the various islands were meeting for the first time and attempted paradoxically perhaps after departure from the islands to establish a firm West Indian cultural identity. It was also a time when over 40,000 West Indians emigrated to Britain in search of employment. Originally invited to the 'mother-country' by the post-war government as an attempt to solve the immediate labour crisis following the Second World War and commonly known as the ‘Windrush generation’, these islanders moved to Britain expectant to improve their standard of living. But the streets of London were not paved with gold and the Journey from island to city, was in many cases one only of disappointment and disillusion.

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SUSHIELA NASTA

Setting Up Home in a City of Words: Sam Selvon's London Novels

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
I feel like me heart gwine burs'
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan' in reverse

Louise Bennett, 'Colonisation in Reverse', Jamaica Labrish (1966)

No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign country.... In this sense most West Indians of my generation were born in England...

George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (1960)

Although a sense of the need to migrate clearly affected early writers born in the Caribbean such as the Jamaican, Claude McKay who left in 1912 for the United States, the period immediately following the Second World War was particularly important for the arrival in London of a number of talented young West Indians artists. London, as Henry Swanzy the producer of the influential BBC Radio programme Caribbean Voices once aptly observed, had become a 'literary headquarters'. It had become a centre where writers from the various islands were meeting for the first time and attempted paradoxically perhaps after departure from the islands to establish a firm West Indian cultural identity. It was also a time when over 40,000 West Indians emigrated to Britain in search of employment. Originally invited to the 'mother-country' by the post-war government as an attempt to solve the immediate labour crisis following the Second World War and commonly known as the 'Windrush generation', these islanders moved to Britain expectant to improve their standard of living. But the streets of London were not paved with gold and the journey from island to city, was in many cases one only of disappointment and disillusion. Moses the eponymous 'hero' of Sam Selvon's well-known group of novels on the immigrant experience in Britain - The Lonely Londoners (1956), Moses Ascending(1975) and Moses Migrating(1983) makes the following satiric observations on the plight of black Londoners:

The alarms of all the black people in Brit'n are timed to ring before the rest of the
population. It is their destiny to be up and about at the crack o'dawn. In these
days of pollution and environment, he is very lucky, for he can breathe the freshest
air of the new day before anybody else. He does not know how fortunate he is. He
does not know how privileged he is to be in charge of the city whilst the rest of
Brit'n is still abed. He strides the streets, he is Manager of all the offices in
Threadneedle Street, he is Chief Executive of London Transport and British
Railways, he is superintendent of all the hospitals, he is landlord of all the
mansions in Park Lane and Hampstead. He ain't reach the stage yet of scrubbing
the floors of Buckingham Palace ..... There is a scramble amongst the rest of the
loyal population for these royal jobs, but with time, he too might be exalted to
these ranks - who knows? Instead of moaning and groaning about his sorrows, he
should stop and think and count these blessings reserved solely for him. He should
realise that if it wasn't for him the city would go on sleeping forever.\(^1\)

The black man is therefore the backbone of the city but we see him only
at night. Many fictional and non-fictional accounts document this period
of West Indian cultural history. Whilst Selvon's pioneering work *The
Lonely Londoners* was emblematic in its creation of a black colony in the
heart of the city, there are many others such as George Lamming's *The
Emigrants* (1954), as well as his well-known collection of non-fictional
essays, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn
Pavement* (1963) and V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) which also deal
with the loneliness and disillusion of the early immigrant
experience. Interestingly few women writers, apart from Jean Rhys
whose work spanned the pre-war period, were published at this time
largely due to the fact that the first wave of immigration to Britain was
predominantly male. Other women writing during this period such as
the poets, Una Marson or Louise Bennett, gained little recognition in the
publishing world. And this imbalance between the sexes is often
reflected in the subject-matter of these early works where there is a
notable absence of successful love relationships, children or any organic
family life.

Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) for instance portrays a familiar
sense of dislocation and cultural confusion as Anna Morgan, her white
Creole heroine, attempts to feel her way in an unwelcoming city. Her
England is a world where no homes are experienced and Anna, like
many of Rhys's later heroines, survives on the edges of the society in an
almost surreal metropolis which is frequently reduced to nothing more
than colourless rooms in sordid boarding-houses. The characters, like
V.S. Naipaul's Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* (1967) or even the 'boys' in
Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* remain adrift whatever their situation:

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost
like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different; the feeling
things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference
between heat; light; darkness; grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened
and the way I was happy...Sometimes it was as if I were back there and England were a
dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I
could never fit them together.\(^2\)
This early representation in Rhys of a kind of cultural schizophrenia points to several fundamental issues which are still major preoccupations in the works of many contemporary second-generation writers, writers who are giving voice to the experiences of their own generation, a generation often born in the United Kingdom but still without a clear sense of home either in Britain or back in the islands. Writers such as Caryl Phillips, Grace Nichols, Fred D’Aguiar, Joan Riley, Merle Collins, David Dabydeen and Linton Kwesi Johnson to name but a few all reflect a concern with these issues. For the experience of Britain does not create a simple antithesis between tropical exoticism and darkness in a cold clime, nor is the meeting of the two worlds in the imagination easily reduced to a nostalgic vision of a lost paradisical childhood and an alien world to replace it. The problem is more centrally one of different ways of seeing, of different modes of apprehending reality which have to be comprehended within a new context. Even for Jean Rhys in the 1930’s, (who is commonly categorised a white West Indian), the main difficulty was to come to terms with the idea of London as an illusion, as a dream built on the foundations of the colonial myth; a myth which has to be demythologized in the mind of the artist who comes from a previously colonized world.

Yet ironically, it was London that created the possibility, in many cases, of a bridge between the past - a history of racial admixture, cultural disorientation and economic exploitation - and the present, which posited a strong need to establish a West Indian 'cultural pedigree'. As Donald Hinds noted in *Journey to an Illusion* escape from the islands was frequently a stage on the route to self-discovery:

> Deep down I knew I loved my persecutors. Our Caribbean background was shaped by English things... but at last I was coming to terms with myself... I am indeed grateful to the English. Grateful for forgetting me in order to discover myself.9

The birth of a Caribbean consciousness by confrontation with the 'mother-country', and the re-definition created by the juxtaposition of the two worlds is a central theme in a great deal of West Indian expatriate fiction. Frequently, as in Lamming’s work, *The Pleasures of Exile*, identity can only be found by facing this dilemma within the context of the Old World, by confrontation with the 'other'; the meeting between island and metropolis, Caliban and Prospero must occur and is a necessary pre-requisite to the flowering of a real West Indian identity. Moreover, combined with the physical and psychological realities of survival in the alien city, the majority of the writers also faced the problem of overcoming the divisive effects of a colonial educational background, an education which had repeatedly told them, that 'real' places were 'cold' places and these were elsewhere:
Everything seemed to conspire against us. The faces we saw in advertisements were not our faces; the places seen in films were not our places... the books we had to read were not our books. Writing began and ended with Charles Dickens. He it was who determined what style ought to be and through whose eyes we saw more vividly than the tropic rain beating against our windows, the nagging London drizzle and old men warming hands over fires in musty rooms.

This craving for fantasy, or a desire to create an alternative world based on the masquerade of the colonial myth had far reaching effects on the voices of this first generation of Caribbean writers who searched often in vain for the solid world of a metropolis, a world which had grown up in their imaginations on dubious and artificial literary foundations. In V.S.Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1968), Ralph Singh's inability to possess the heart of the city reflects the pain of the necessary process of demythologization:

> Here was the city, *...the world*. The trams on the Embankment sparked blue... Excitement! Its heart must have lain somewhere... *I would play with famous names* as I walked the empty streets and stood on bridges. But the *magic of names* soon faded... my incantation of names remained unanswered. In the great city, so solid in its light - to me as colourless as rotten wooden fences and new corrugated iron roofs - *in this solid city life was two-dimensional.* (my italics)

Similarly Sorbert, in Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960) comes to the recognition that he has not inherited a language and culture from his British colonial education but a sense of the lack of it: 'I walk around London and I see statues of this one and the other... There's even Stonehenge. And do you know how I feel deep down?... I feel nothing... We've been fed on the Mother Country myths. Its language. Its Literature. Its Civics.... What happened to me between African bondage and British hypocrisy? What?'

This sense of something missing, the sense of a cultural and historical void beneath the excitement that a group identity in the 'metropolis' can bring is exacerbated by the whole question of a language acquired but not possessed. As was evident from Ralph Singh's reverential incantation of names, the naming of a thing and the knowledge, understanding or possession of it can be very different things. Societies, like the individuals of which they are composed need their own areas of privacy, areas into which they can retreat and refresh themselves. For the West Indian writer abroad for whom the language as V.S.Naipaul said 'was mine' but 'the tradition was not' this cycle of disillusion and cynicism is a crucial stage in the process of decolonization for it is only through this process and the reclamation of an authentic language for identity - that the writer can begin to rescue his/her community from the illusory myths of the imperial centre. And it is in this area of language -
a language for rather than against identity - that Sam Selvon's writing holds such an important and influential position.

BLACK LONDON : CITY OF WORDS

Sam Selvon's fiction set in London between the period 1950 to the mid 1980's, when he left Britain after twenty-eight years to live in Canada, is a crucial milestone in the history and development of Caribbean writing. Recently described as the 'father of Black Literature in Britain' by Maya Angelou, the African-American novelist, Selvon's London works - the short stories collected in Ways of Sunlight (1957), The Housing Lark (1965), a novel as its title suggests concerned with the housing problem, and the 'Moses' novels - The Lonely Londoners (1956), Moses Ascending (1975) and Moses Migrating (1983) - span a crucial period in the growth of black writing in Britain. With the use of a modified form of 'dialect' or what we should describe as a consciously chosen Caribbean literary English, for both the language of the narrator and that of the characters, The Lonely Londoners was a pioneering work as it moved towards bridging the difficult gap of perspective between the teller of the tale and the tale itself. As one of the first full-length novels to be written in this language form, it also reflected an innovative departure away from the more standard modes of portraying unlettered characters in traditional fiction. In style and content therefore it represented a major step forward in the process of decolonization.

Selvon's sojourn in London from 1950-78 acted as a creative catalyst in the development of his art enabling links to be drawn between the two preoccupations of his fiction - Trinidad and London. Through the encounter with London, it became possible to move, on the one hand, towards a more fully realised picture of the world back home and on the other, to define and establish a Caribbean consciousness within a British context. Only in 'London' says Selvon, 'did my life find its purpose'.

The settings of Trinidad and London have formed the major focus of Selvon's work to date. However, whilst the Indian cane community is carefully observed in the best-known Trinidad novels, A Brighter Sun (1952) and Turn Again Tiger (1957), Selvon did not come from a rural background himself nor was he 'Indianized' in any sense. Although he was born in 1923 of East Indian parents and his father was a Madrassi, Selvon related from an early age primarily to the multicultural world of modern Trinidad. Speaking of the Hindi language, he has said:

I just ignored it...I grew up so Creolized among the Trinidadians...Not as an Indian, but as a Creolized West Indian as we say.

The tensions and conflicts implicit in the idea of creolization are a frequent theme in Selvon's art whether his subject is the East Indian
peasantry, the urban middle-classes, the rootless trickster figures of his London fiction or the calypsonian characters in the short stories set in Port-of-Spain. Indeed in the black London that Selvon creates in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) we are unaware of the 'boys' particular cultural identities. So powerful is the shared dynamic of the group at this stage that even Cap, the Nigerian, begins to behave like a West Indian. Like many other immigrants of his generation, Selvon came to London to find work. Describing himself as largely self-educated he had begun his literary career as a journalist with *The Trinidad Guardian*. Soon after his arrival in London, his first novel *A Brighter Sun* was published which gained him international recognition and enabled him to become a full-time writer.

*The Lonely Londoners* is the first of three works dealing with the central figure of Moses Aloetta, a 'veteran' black Londoner, and his experiences with a group of ordinary and unlettered immigrants, 'black immigrants ... among whom I [Selvon] lived for a few years when I first arrived in London'. As in his collection of radio plays, *El Dorado West One* (adaptations from *The Lonely Londoners*), the novel represents a comi-tragic attempt to subvert and demythologize the colonial dream of a bountiful city. Characteristically, Selvon's reversal of the original myth in the plays - a myth linked of course to the European voyages of discovery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the possibility of inhabiting a golden land - has several important reverberations as far as the economic base of nineteenth century imperialism and Caribbean colonial history are concerned. But Selvon's political commentary is always implicit and the world of his Londoners not gold, but grey; his questers may be led and supported by the sage figure Moses but they are limited to the bleak reality of surviving in the wilderness of an alien and alienating 'mother-country'.

At the beginning of *The Lonely Londoners*, the atmosphere of Selvon's city is described: 'as if it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet'. Typically, the narrator subverts the standard English in the novel's opening 'One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unreality about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city ... '(p. 7) Selvon, controlling the narration and using a modified form of Caribbean English creates a distance between the narrative voice and the city whilst establishing an intimacy between the reader and the story teller. The unemployment office 'is a kind of place where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up. Is a place where everyone is your enemy and your friend' (p. 22). More generally '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... It divide up in little worlds... and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers' (p. 74). We meet few white characters, enter few homes and
topographical description is scarce yet the boundaries of Selvon's black
eclave are carefully defined and always made accessible to new
arrivals, who need careful initiation into the games of survival. Black
London is thus domesticated by the ritualistic repetition of the names
not only of important and viable areas; it is bounded for instance in the
west by 'the Gate'(Notting Hill), in the east by 'the Arch'(Marble) and in
the north by 'the Water'(Bayswater) but also by the stories of the 'boys'
who return with exciting 'ballads' to relate after venturing out into
uncharted areas of experience in the city, 'ballads' which strengthen and
reinforce the fragile identity of the group's own mythology. Selvon has
himself pointed out that the London these immigrants inhabited lacked
any of the normal pillars of security or cohesion. His characters may see
the sights or taste the bitter-sweet attractions of the metropolis but they
ultimately live in a restrictive, two-dimensional world.

With its apparently unstructured episodic style and the comic dexterity
of Selvon's use of a modified form of 'dialect' or what Kamau Brathwaite
has more recently termed 'nation-language', the novel when it first
appeared was often mistakenly regarded as being simply an amusing
social documentary of West Indian manners. As such its primary
intention was to reveal with pathos and compassionate irony the
humorous faux pas of the black innocent abroad. The surface textures of
the loosely knit sketches or 'ballads' recounted through the ambivalent
voice of the third-person narrator seemed to support this view. As
readers we are swiftly drawn into the pace of the narrative and the
initiation rites for the 'desperate hustlers' as they 'land up' on Moses's
doorstep with 'one set of luggage, no place to sleep, no place to go'(p.8).
Similarly the idiosyncracies and eccentricities of Selvon's various
characters, known collectively as 'the boys' are clearly delineated. We
witness the first shocks of arrival at Waterloo in the almost surrealistic
opening to the novel as Moses journeys to the station through the fog of a
London winter, the endless and usually abortive search for employment
and the constant hunt for the forbidden fruits of 'white pussy'. The boys
(the term itself suggests the almost primeval innocence of the
immigrants), picaresque and calypsonian rogues from a variety of
islands circle like vultures around their sage and liaison officer Moses
who attempts at times to offer solace.

However from a very early stage in the novel, the romance of the city is
counterpointed by a frightening sense of dislocation.

Sir Galahad's (known on arrival as Henry Oliver) initial buoyancy is
fractured when he ventures out alone for the first time. The 'sun shining
but Galahad never see the sun look like how it looking now. No heat
from it, it just there in the sky like a force-ripe orange. When he look up,
the colour of the sky so desolate it make him frighten'(p.26). Selvon's
descriptions of Galahad's reactions to a different climate, particularly to
the difference in the appearance of the sun, is fresh and enlightening as
he uses terms of reference from a tropical world to describe the incongruities. The psychologically disorientating effects of the alien surroundings on the newcomer is created implicitly in the way the language is used. Most strikingly perhaps, the collision of the two worlds - of Trinidad and London - in Galahad's mind with the dreamlike image of the 'force-ripe orange', enables the reader to experience the extremity of Galahad's fear. Similarly by imposing the language of his subjects on the city, Selvon remakes it in their own image. At times as Gordon Rohlehr has pointed out, they shrink it by the new use of reductive analogies. The walls of Paddington slums, for example, crack like the 'last days of Pompeii'.

Moses's developing scepticism about the resources of this community and his urgent need to discover a private identity provide one of the major tensions in the novel as the voice of the third person narrator mediates between the consciousness of the group and the predicament of Moses himself. After a visit from Big City, who has ambitions to be a world-wide traveller, we are shown Moses's growing awareness of the futility of his existence: 'after Big City leave him Moses used to think bout... money, how it would solve all the problems in the world. He used to see all his years in London pile up one on top of the other, and he getting no place in a hurry', (p.82). Moses's sense of a pointless repetition here is significantly reflective of a voice that becomes more articulate as the novel proceeds. Set apart from the others as the sage figure, with the knowledge of years of ballads behind him, he also has to come to terms with a sense of loss. This is dramatized most clearly in his relationship with Galahad; from the opening pages at Waterloo Station Moses tries to persuade the newcomers to return 'back home' immediately. His words reveal the pain of a superior irony. Whilst Galahad's dreams of the city may be fulfilled like V.S.Naipaul's Ralph Singh in The Mimic Men(1967), by the phrase 'Charing Cross' or by the magnetism of Picadilly Circus, Moses's consciousness becomes increasingly disturbed. Although he attempts to relive his own past through Galahad's love affair with the city, he has already reached a point of stasis. As he says to Galahad,'All them places is like nothing to me now'(p.69). As Galahad's persona becomes increasingly inflated - he begins to feel more and more 'like a king living in London' - Moses is drawn further and further into his introspective reflections and desire to 'draw apart'. And the boys' protective self-caricatures and nicknames become identifiable as only a transparent form of camouflage within the black colony. Moreover, the nature of the language itself in the city of words they have created, with its reliance on repetition, drama and anecdote, can also become a regressive force - a form of restricted code with disturbing implications for the possibility of growth within or outside the community.

Selvon's 'ballad' style in The Lonely Londoners shifts easily between an oral and a literary tone and bears many correspondences with the native
tradition of Trinidadian calypso. The oral calypsonian ballad is well known for its use of a subversive irony, the melodramatic exaggeration of farcical anecdotes, racial stereotyping, repetition for dramatic effect and the inclusion of topical political material. Also, as John Thieme has recently shown, there are close parallels with Trinidad Carnival, a form that is essentially 'parodic, egalitarian and subversive' but constantly offers the possibility for renewal and regeneration. As such The Lonely Londoners, he says, is a central Carnival text, furthermore, Carnival as a system of discourse enables a creolization of language and form that brings together the marketplace culture of Carnival into the world of the printed book. Thus Selvon's attempts at literary decolonization - both colonizes Englan' in reverse and looks forward to the later works of Caribbean writers such as Michael Smith, Earl Lovelace, Grace Nichols, and Linton Kwesi Johnson who combine the literary and the oral not privileging either.

Selvon's boys then, originate in many ways from a world of language, 'a world of words through which they grope for clarity'. Sexual themes are almost always present but from a male viewpoint (which has created critics of Selvon in recent years) though they conform and parallel in many respects the classically chauvinistic attitudes of the urban trickster figures of calypso. Rather like the ultimately reductive and self-denigratory effects of their nicknames, their view of women as 'pretty pieces of skin' reflects ultimately the boys' uncertainty and insecure sense of self.

It is partly because the conflicting values of white society reduces their own stature that they must adopt these postures. This technique of 'naming' or 'labelling' as a means of self-defence is evident when Sir Galahad sets off 'cool as a lord' to meet his white date and confronts the colour problem. Never easily deflated Galahad is left talking to the colour black as if it is a person, telling it that 'is not he who causing botheration in the place, but Black, who is a worthless thing' (p.72).

There is no beginning or end to the experiences of 'the boys' in The Lonely Londoners. Although details about Moses accumulate - we know he is tiring of Britain and frequently dreams of a return to Trinidad - they are unobtrusive and are fitting to his development as the novel proceeds. The surface fragmentation or conscious disorganization of the novel's structure therefore becomes part of its main purpose, that, 'beneath the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts ... is a great aimlessness, a great restless swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot' (p.125). By the end of the novel Moses is aware of a meaningless repetition and circularity in the group's existence. The phrase 'what happening' which echoes throughout and is the fundamental rationale of its numerous episodes, comes to imply less a resilience in the face of complicated experience than a painful sense of futility and incoherence.
Moses's basement room which acts as a kind of surrogate religious centre is where the boys congregate every Sunday morning to swap ballads, talk about this and that but the stories are never finished and the breathless narration of this section (pp.122-5) emphasizes its lack of direction. The repartee of the community has become a self-undermining rhetoric; as the boys attempt to swap well-worn anecdotes, we witness Moses's detachment as he becomes almost a mythical repository, a Tiresias figure who can never escape the constant 'moaning and groaning and sighing and crying'. The oral and rhythmic nature of the prose adds weight to this as the synchronization of voices degenerates into a deflationary climax which then subsides to the original theme:'So what happening these days?' Significantly the questions are not addressed to any particular subject; they ring out like voices in the wilderness.

Only Moses, who has almost merged in consciousness with the narrating voice, seems to be moving forward and can perceive the need to discover a new language for existence. The black London of Selvon's 'boys' has become by the close only a city of words: there are no firm foundations (apart from Moses's basement room), and the surface security provided by this shared code, which has reduced the vast metropolis to a manageable West Indian colony within the city will only perpetuate their isolation as there is no desire for integration. We leave Moses looking down into the River Thames and articulating this sense of a void:'when you go down a little you bounce up a misery and pathos and a kind of frightening-what? He don't have the right word but he have the right feeling in his heart'(p.126) This search for the 'right word' or an appropriate and individual voice to define a new reality for the Caribbean writer in London is central to an understanding of Selvon's first experiments with language and form in The Lonely Londoners and becomes the main preoccupation of a new Moses who is still in Britain twenty years later in Moses Ascending (1975).

FROM BASEMENT TO ATTIC?

In The Lonely Londoners, Selvon faced the problem of both dealing with an early and exploratory response to the creation of a black London as well as discovering a suitable literary frame to express this experience. The slight area of narrative uncertainty in The Lonely Londoners is clarified in Moses Ascending where Moses becomes very much the self-conscious narrator. In this novel we meet a Moses who is actively trying to draw apart from all the hustling of the early days. He is now endeavouring to construct a fully-realized individual persona and at an important level - in the changed social and political climate of the 1970's, a world where the effects of oppressive Immigration Laws affect entry and departure - Moses's development is explored metaphorically. He buys his own,
admittedly delapidated house (due for demolition in three years); he is no longer a tenant but a landlord and furthermore, he wants to be a writer and sets out to write his Memoirs in the uppermost room with a large view of the city, his 'castle':

After all these years paying rent, I had the ambition to own my own property in London, no matter how ruinous or dilapidated it was. If you are a tenant, you catch your arse forever, but if you are a landlord, it is a horse of a different colour(p.8).

Or, as Moses says to Sir Galahad (now a fervent representative of the Black Power movement): 'I just want to live in peace, and reap the harvest of the years of slavery I put in Brit'n. I don't want people like you around, to upset the applecart' (p.9)

Moses only ascends for a brief spell to live in the attic or 'penthouse' of his own house which, as the novel proceeds, becomes increasingly crowded with Bob (his illiterate white man Friday from the 'Black Country') Jeannie (Bob's girlfriend and Moses's sometime mistress), Brenda and the Black Power Group as well as some 'Pakis' who enact a sheep slaughter in his back yard. His ambitions, to be 'Master' of his own house and an erudite Black man of letters, suggest the possibility in fantasy at least, of gaining security and moving away from the stasis of the old days, the days of the 'what happening' and the 'kiff kiff laughter' we saw in The Lonely Londoners. Moreover the image Moses evokes at the opening, of gaining a 'bird's eye view' of life, is indicative of his intention to achieve a dimension of distance on his community. But the preservation of such a sanctuary, a literary haven in Shepherd's Bush, is not shown to be a viable proposition, and Moses's 'castle'(p.46) is progressivley undermined as the novel proceeds.

The atmosphere of Moses Ascending, like Selvon's earlier work is initially congenial and suggests an innocently-mocking comedy concerned with the idiosyncracies of the new generation of Third World immigrants in the city. But Moses's attempts to separate himself from his own community in order to make an investment in 'truth' as he calls it, are barbed throughout by a subtly ironic method which attacks both the aspirations of the budding black writer with his recently acquired social graces as well as those new political radicals who make up the Black Brit'n he now lives in. The tensions which were developing by the close of The Lonely Londoners have culminated in an almost total dissipation of the original group. The supposed security of the West Indian island in the metropolis, the strength created by the 'boys' shared sense of dislocation and cultural identity has collapsed. Tolroy and family are returning to Jamaica, Big City has gone mad; he 'walks about the streets muttering to himself, ill-kempt and unshaven...as if the whole city of London collapse on him', others, we hear have gone up North and some
simply 'down in the underground' (p. 16) never to emerge.

Of the original group, only Galahad and Moses remain and Moses has lost much of his faith in the idea of Black unity:

I will tell you one thing that I have learnt in this life. It is that the black man cannot unite. I have seen various causes taken up and dropped like hot coals. I have seen them come together and then scatter... in all directions (p. 49).

Moses's attempts to shield himself from the suffering of his people however are not taken seriously and Galahad, as we shall see later, becomes a major contributive factor in his old friend's steady descent from his newly-won attic freedom.

Moses's developing scepticism concerning the question of commitment to an ever-continuing series of futile causes, only is comparable once again to V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men, in which Ralph Singh strives through his writing of a personal history to move beyond those sequences of false behaviour in his past which led only to a barren cycle of events. Both Selvon and Naipaul have frequently commented on the dangers for the post-colonial artist in becoming over involved in what Naipaul has termed the 'corruption of causes' and Selvon too has voiced a need to develop his art further than what he regarded to be the ultimately limiting strictures and preoccupations of a literature committed in the main to the assertion of a literary nationalism. In addition his desire is to break through certain narrow interpretative categories - of 'protest', 'hardship' or 'slavery' - often assigned by certain metropolitan critics to the supposed naturalistic work of writers such as himself. Although Selvon does not indicate a withdrawal from the black writer's struggle for acceptance in an established literary world, or that he is retreating from his responsibilities to that world 'where I belong' (which now includes the whole of the Third World as well as Trinidad), he does suggest the need for an expansion of consciousness, a widening of horizons in the new literatures of the world to include grounds of more universal applicability and significance.

Interestingly, Selvon made those observations in 1979 just after his departure from Britain where he had lived for twenty-eight years, a period which also spans the creation of the Moses figure. Moses, however, does not simply present autobiography: as a representative voice of the old generation of immigrants, he typifies to Selvon 'all that happened (during that phase)... he also spoke in the idiom of the people which was the only way that he could... express himself.' Based on a 'true-life' character, Moses, in spite of all his 'presumptions to be English... remains basically a man from the Caribbean'. Yet by the close of Moses Ascending with the growth of a new generation of Black Britons, the Black Power movement, the festering hostility between Asian immigrants and Blacks, we become aware of the impossibility for Moses
of forming an organic relationship either with his own community or the white world outside. He is outdated, a misfit, a black colonial adrift in the city, straddling or attempting to straddle both worlds.

From an early stage we are shown how Moses, with the status of a black landlord, attracts exactly those types he is attempting to avoid. Being 'unprejudiced', his only stipulation regarding tenants is that none of the old group live in his house and he leaves all the house-management in the uncapable hands of his white Man Friday, Bob, an even-tempered, illiterate Midlands white. But the house becomes an illegal centre for the smuggling of Pakistanis into Britain and the headquarters for the local Black Power movement. Moses only becomes conscious of the real 'goings-on' in the house when he witnesses the assembly of a Black Power demonstration in the street below. Similarly his attention is first drawn to the mysterious Faizull Farouk when he hears the bleating of a sheep - a victim for a Muslim sacrifice - in his backyard.

Whilst Moses's lack of awareness is treated humorously, his predicament has several disturbing implications. The episode of the sheep-slaughter for instance is representative of the seriousness of Moses's new situation. On one level, the description of this scene is a successfully comical account of an absurd event which is symptomatic of the confused clash of cultural values affecting the new generation of immigrants in Britain. Moses is interested in the episode only because Galahad has pressurized him to research topical material for his writing. The 'Pakis' are religious about the whole affair and attempt to adhere strictly to Muslim rituals. In contrast, Bob, watching from a window upstairs reacts with horror:

A solitary shriek of horror rent the atmosphere. It was so unexpected and piercing that Faizull lose his grip and slip off the sheep...I was the onlyest one to keep my cool: I look up to the penthouse and see Bob leaning out of the window as if he vomiting. 'I will get the RSPCA to arrest you!' He shout, 'You too, Moses!' Everything was going nice and smooth until this white man run amok.( p.63).

The position of Moses in relation to Bob compares interestingly here with that of Moses and Galahad in The Lonely Londoners when Galahad tells Moses the 'ballad' of his attempt to catch a pigeon for his supper in Kensington Gardens. There is obviously one major cultural difference between the two episodes and that is Bob's conventional English attitude concerning cruelty to animals and Galahad's perspective as a human being who is starving in a strange world where animals(even pigeons) grow fat whilst human beings starve. Bob's lack of familiarity with the cultural context of what he sees curiously parallels that of Galahad when confronted with a universe of cossetted dogs and protected pigeons; a world with different emphases of value. But, most importantly, this parallel involves a further contrast: that between Moses
as confidant or fellow West Indian in *The Lonely Londoners* and Moses as landlord having to accommodate the sensibilities of a native Englishman in *Moses Ascending*. From being simply an outsider listening to those similar to himself, Moses has moved in to the more complicated position of attempting to be an insider with responsibilities both to his tenants and his neighbours which require him to mediate between the black and white worlds. He therefore cannot remain the easy-going black radical of the early days; he is now a man with vested interests who desires to fit in and to find a place in British society. This desire is emphasized by the exaggerated adoption of certain British customs which he considers to be proper to his class, such as a drinks cupboard and a white manservant. This difference is further exaggerated by the language he speaks.

Moses's literary ambitiousness is gently parodied by Selvon, his faith in his ability to write 'Queen's English' is shown to be not that dissimilar to his recent rise in social status and the language he uses further reflects the hybrid nature of his personality. The first person narration modulates between the formality of nineteenth century English, Trinidadian proverbs, Greek myth, American films, contemporary advertising jingles to the banter of the old days. Selvon's linguistic resourcefulness, his subversion of the 'Standard' and his iconoclastic methods which unite both calypso with Western literature, only serve to heighten our awareness that Moses can not yet fully inhabit a 'home'; he is not yet Master of his own house or of the language with which he wants to compose his Memoirs. Furthermore his partial misunderstanding of many of the terms he is trying to appropriate reflects once again the divisive effects of the acquisition of a second-hand language a language used but not possessed. Moses, is not trying to own the 'magical' heart of the city but he is attempting to become a writer and in doing so needs to discover an appropriate voice.

Selvon's portrayal of Moses's attempts to find a voice is one of total confusion: a confusion of notions of order and reality, and the creation of a conglomeration which one reviewer called a 'verbal salad of ungrammatical wit and literary and biblical references'\(^{20}\). However, whilst the iconoclastic effects of this hybrid language may be inspired, as in the following extract describing again the sheep slaughter,

Kay sir rah, sir rah, as the Japanese say. It was a motley trio Faizull shepherd into the house. I have seen bewildered adventurers land in Waterloo from the Caribbean with all their incongruous paraphernalia and myriad expressions of amazement and shock, but this Asian threesome beat them hands down (p. 74).

the result is ultimately one of pathos. Similarly in Moses's innovative, highly ironic and lyrical 'essay' which he composes to the Black man early in the novel (pp.11-15) the only coherent piece he manages to
complete before Galahad's Black Power pressure disturbs him, we see the means by which Moses's potentially serious and political subject-matter is parodied by Selvon and rendered absurd by his literary style.

The essay deals with the plight of black workers in a hostile white urban society (quoted from earlier in the first section of this essay), a position of deprivation and inequality, and an issue that might have most naturally found expression in a polemical attack. Yet Selvon's technique and the quality of the pathos that results moves beyond the basic facts of the issue itself. In its wide range of 'literary' effects and the eccentric usage of a mixture of 'literary' terms, the piece which is too long to quote fully here, mirrors the growth of Moses's linguistic affectations since his retirement. Moses's range incorporates nation language, standard English, the Shakespearian 'Fie' or 'Gods blood things have come to a pretty pass', as well as references by allusion to historic moments such as the 'Black Watch'. At times, Moses even uses a modified form of Caribbean English to describe the white man's predicament. This conglomeration of linguistic modes and Moses's very sincere attempt to write in the argumentative style of the traditional essay form, an attempt which achieves precisely the opposite effect is typical of the novel as a whole. Whilst Moses sets out to present us with all the advantages of the black worker's position, he establishes with innocent elegance a very different picture.

Moses Ascending is very much a novelist's novel. There are explicit references by Moses, the fictional author, to other real Caribbean writers living in London - George Lamming and Andrew Salkey for instance - but more significantly, the predominant tension in the book stems from Moses's attempts to actually become a black writer and to establish an authentic voice that his own people will listen to. The novel therefore dramatises the difficulties Moses faces as a black post-colonial writer in Britain. After careful study of the pros and cons of the writing process, Moses begins to feel that he ought to be able to write a book with a proper plot and theme. Furthermore he must reveal the breadth of his education and knowledge by using a language that can incorporate for instance classical myth, legend, the bible and oral folklore. The result is, as Michel Fabre has pointed out, 'the sophisticated appropriation by 'colonial writing' of a literary style formerly reserved for the British born.' Moses's voice reflects almost a carnivalization of language as he blends outdated, jerky phrases with Trinidadian syntactical shifts and turns. Through Moses as a 'writer-of-memoirs', Selvon as a novelist claims the right to depart from the naturalistic ways of using English usually prescribed to non-British writers....[he] does not assimilate into the ...mainstream, he explodes it.'

Moses's relationship with Sir Galahad and the Black Power movement is also instructive. Throughout the novel, the development of Moses's private identity is threatened by the public and political world of Brenda
and Galahad and the avidly supported Black Power group. Moses does not withdraw completely from them (it is he in fact who acts when the 'Party' does not have enough money to rescue two of its innocent brethren jailed after an unfortunate encounter with the police). Yet, paradoxically, Moses's remaining sense of incompleteness and a doubting of his selfhood is created most strongly by the pressures his own people impose on him. It is because he is a black writer that the conflict between his personal wishes to write his Memoirs and the demands made upon him by a fast-developing political situation are exaggerated. As Moses becomes increasingly plagued by what his 'proper' subject should be, his private work is gradually stultified, and he through conscience becomes involved in events which do not really concern him. Furthermore the possibility of further withdrawal is no longer a viable alternative.

Galahad and Brenda will not accept Moses's refusal to be involved in what he calls the 'bandwagon' of Black Power. Moses regards the new movement only as an alternative to more 'ballads' and 'episodes', 'liming' or roaming the streets. Galahad, the political activist is ridiculed by the narrator's wider vision which penetrates beneath his Black Power 'glad rags' and the use of the latest political jargon to expose a still profoundly vulnerable awareness of self. Selvon gently exposes the corruption at the centre of the party but it is in Galahad's harsh criticisms of Moses's writing that Selvon pinpoints the serious damage which Galahad's unconscious self-contempt reveals. Furthermore it undermines Moses himself who begins to feel like a traitor:

>'What shit is that you writing?' [Galahad]
>'I am composing my Memoirs', I say stiffly...
>'You don't know one fucking thing about what's happening, Moses'.
>'Memoirs are personal and intimate...
>'That's no ... use...nobody ain't going to be interested in anything you have to say. If you was writing about the scene today, and the struggle, I might of got the Party to back you. In any case, who tell you you could write?'
>'I am not an ignoramus like you', I say beginning to lose my cool.
>'You think writing book is like kissing hand? You should leave that to people like Lamming and Salkey.'
>'Who?'
>'You see what I mean? Man, Moses you are still living in the Dark Ages. You don't even know we have created a Black Literature...' (pp.49-50).

This confrontation between Galahad and Moses is perhaps the most explicit demonstration in the novel of Selvon's concern to explore the difficulties facing the writer who remains abroad.

Moses Ascending does not present the reader with any comfortable resolutions but a sense of continuity is created by Selvon's demonstration of the impossibility for the post-colonial writer in Moses's circumstances to achieve such an end. Selvon repeatedly emphasizes the
absurdity of the whole situation and Moses's movements in the novel (whether upwards or sideways) create a cyclical ironic pattern framed by the 'goings-on' in the house and culminating in Moses's final return to life in his own basement room. At one level Moses seems only to have moved from basement to attic and back again during his twenty-odd years in Britain; he is still living an underground existence and his fall from power at the close of the novel almost verges on the tragic. But Selvon's ambiguous ironic tone holds good even in this final moment of humiliation when Bob, Brenda and 'Paki' have all turned against him to further their own interests:

Thus are the mighty fallen, empires totter, monarchs dethrone and the walls of Pompeii bite the dust. Humiliated and degraded I took up abode in Bob's erstwhile room while he and Jeannie moved in to the Penthouse. (p.143)

Having failed to set up home in a city of words, Moses resolves to sell up and return to Trinidad. The gauntlet that he flings at his former tenants in the form of an 'epilogue up his sleeve' becomes the central theme of Moses Migrating in which Moses finally decides to leave London and return home for Carnival. The novel opens with the reality of departure and is illustrative of Selvon's continuing preoccupation with the theme of the exile's displacement and the lack of a firm centre as Moses writes a concerned letter to Enoch Powell thanking him for his generosity in helping Black Londoners to return to their native lands:

Dear Mr Powell, though Black I am writing you to express my support for your campaigns to keep Brit'n White... I have always tried to integrate successfully in spite of discriminations and prejudices according to race etc...(p.1)

The comic-grotesque reversals of the colonial encounter are developed as Moses, travelling third class in a liner - Selvon mock-seriously invokes the trials of the Middle Passage - ends up in the literally 'upside-down' world of the Trinidad Hilton - a tourist, in other words in his own country. The metaphorical possibilities of rooms and houses as a correlative or frame for the lack of a firm cultural identity are thus extended; but it is neither basement nor attic but hotel room which bears the weight of significance. The quintessential transitoriness, artificiality and unreality of the hotel room (under ground too) image the special hollowness and disorientations of Moses's post-colonial identity. Moses seems fated to find no true home in either Britain or Trinidad. No more than in The Lonely Londoners or Moses Ascending does Selvon's character arrive at a promised land. The lack of a resolution, and perhaps the lack of a possible resolution, is demonstrated in the open-ended quality of the novel's final episode - with Moses caught at the close in a kind of suspended state, just outside the doors of Heathrow airport 'like I was still playing charades' (p.179).
NOTES

1. Sam Selvon, Moses Ascending (London: Davis Poynter, 1975), pp.6-7. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


3. Donald Hinds, Journey to an Illusion (London: 1966), p.4


12. Sam Selvon, The Lonely Londoners (London: Longman, 1956). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


15. Gordon Rohlehr, p.15


17. Peter Nazareth, 'Interview with Sam Selvon', in World Literature Written in English, 18, 2 (1979), p.430-1.

18. Ibid.

19. Frank Birbalsingh, 'Interview with Sam Selvon' (unpublished; thanks to the author).

