Sam Selvon: Interview with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla

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Abstract
Reed Dasenbrock You've been living in Canada now for some years. Sam Selvon: Yes, I moved in 1978, and I've been in Canada now about ten years. RD: Why Canada? Selvon: I came to England in 1950, and I spent twenty-eight years of my life here which I consider to be a good slice of my life. I suddenly felt that I had had enough of English tradition and European culture. I wanted to get back to the West before it was too late. Everyone asks why I selected Canada. Some of my wife's relatives who had settled there some years ago were doing pretty well for themselves, so she said,'let's go to Canada,' and that's how I ended up there.
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Reed Dasenbrock You’ve been living in Canada now for some years.

Sam Selvon: Yes, I moved in 1978, and I’ve been in Canada now about ten years.

RD: Why Canada?

Selvon: I came to England in 1950, and I spent twenty-eight years of my life here which I consider to be a good slice of my life. I suddenly felt that I had had enough of English tradition and European culture. I wanted to get back to the West before it was too late. Everyone asks why I selected Canada. Some of my wife’s relatives who had settled there some years ago were doing pretty well for themselves, so she said, ‘let’s go to Canada,’ and that’s how I ended up there.

RD: Did you think at all of going back to Trinidad instead of moving to Canada? I’m thinking of Moses Migrating in which Moses thinks about returning to Trinidad but finally returns only for a holiday. Were those your sentiments as well?

Selvon: Well, I go back from time to time. In fact, I’ve just been down there for three months at the beginning of this year. But I feel that I do as much for the island and for the people by living abroad, as I would be able to accomplish if I went back. I don’t see that there is going to be any useful purpose being served by my returning for good. I go back from time to time and teach, but the way I see it is that I would just feel myself to be somewhat retired and off the scene if I went back to Trinidad.

RD: You’re part of a group of West Indian writers who are roughly contemporary, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul and others, all of whom began writing in the 1950s and quickly became well known. In 1960, West Indian writing was certainly much better known than African writing in English or Indian writing in English because of these writers. Yet today, I think, one would have to say the opposite was true. Soyinka has won the Nobel prize, one reads a great deal about Achebe and Rushdie, etc. What’s the difference? (Since this interview took place Derek Walcott has won the Nobel prize and writers of the status of Caryl Phillips, John Agard, David Dabydeen, Grace Nicols, Olive Senior, Erna Brodber and many more can not be ignored, Anna Rutherford. ed.)

Selvon: I don’t know. I think that there has really been a lull in literary activity, if you like, in the Caribbean since that surge, since that time of
which you speak. Certainly, I don't think that there have been very many new writers since that time. Perhaps there ought to be more.

**RD:** Is there a missing next generation?

**Selvon:** I think so. There are some writers, for instance, who are about to reestablish themselves and have gone back and stayed in their island. In Trinidad, there's Michael Anthony and there's Earl Lovelace who both reside there. My feeling is that the new writing will have to come from the new generation rather than from the older ones like myself. That is where the surge will have to come in. It isn't that I haven't got more to write, but I just feel that is the direction from which this new movement will come.

**FJ:** And yet you're very avant-garde in your own writing style. You use a kind of nativized English or local English, West Indian English, in a way no one did before you. Can you comment on the ways in which you use English? How realistic is it? How much of the style is made up of realistic cadences you're catching and how much of it is creative variance?

**Selvon:** I think it's a bit of both. I really try to keep the essence, the music of the dialect. I've tried very hard to keep that. I don't do any phonetic spelling, and I try to avoid some words or phrases which I feel would be very difficult for an audience outside of the Caribbean to follow. Or if I do use it, I would try to make it clear in the text.

**RD:** Can you give an example of something you might avoid?

**Selvon:** Well, for instance, there's phrase that I use that has been criticized as not coming from the true dialect. The phrase is 'monkey smoke your pipe.' That's a phrase that I use; in fact, the Trinidadian phrase is, 'Crapu smoke your pipe.' Now you're going to ask me what a craptu is, I'm sure. Do you know what it is? It's a kind of frog; it's a toad. It's in the dictionary, but that's a Trinidad word. Now, I think that 'monkey smoke your pipe' has a more universal appeal and brings a good visual image to the reader much more than 'Crapu smoke your pipe.' That is definitely going to throw off the reader, immediately. However, it wouldn't throw a Trinidadian, who would say,'ah, yes, that's the real thing."

**RD:** So there you would need a footnote or something like that to make it clear.

**Selvon:** Exactly, and I don't like using footnotes. I like it to be all in the text of the writing. So that's a small example. Even when I began to use the word 'lime', to go 'liming about,' I try to make it clear in the text that it just meant passing time away standing at a corner and watching the girls go by.

**RD:** So on the one hand you try to be as accurate as possible, but on the other
hand you keep at least one eye on the reader who would not understand.

Selvon: Exactly, on the reader who might have difficulty in understanding fully. And as I say, I think that is responsible for the success that has happened. In fact, a great many other writers are now seeing that this is a form that could be used well.

RD: Do you see your work as an influence, let's say, on Earl Lovelace in The Dragon Can't Dance or on other younger writers using dialect?

Selvon: I think so. I think that children of the new generation in the schools in particular, when they are trying to write dialect now, follow that pattern by avoiding, for one thing, phonetic spelling. What I have also done with the dialect is that I have kept to standard English where I felt that it just wasn't necessary to change even the spelling of a word or anything like that. I didn't use d-e for t-h-e; I feel that t-h-e is fine with me. When I open a book, I look at a sentence, I look at the writing of it, and I say that's ok if the rhythm of dialect is still there. I feel that writing in phonetics jars the reader. I've heard many people say that reading different dialects with phonetic spelling is a bit irritating, having to analyze it all in your mind.

FJ: One thing Wilson Harris has said to us about your work is that you've made the dialect part of the consciousness of the narrator which he doesn't do. He admires you for that. He moves from standard English to dialect only in dialogue, as opposed to having it be the consciousness of the narrator.

Selvon: I think that those are the parts that have really shown the extent to which one can use that kind of language. If it were relegated only to dialogue, then I don't think you would see the potential. But with the narrator using dialect you can see it a little more.

RD: It seems that the novels with Moses as the protagonist all are written almost entirely in what we've been discussing -- dialect. But some of your other novels go back and forth a little bit more. In A Brighter Sun, for instance.

Selvon: Oh yes, that wasn't my style with all my work. When I started to write, at that stage it wasn't my aim to try and do something with the dialect language at all. In fact, from my earlier work up to The Lonely Londoners and even after The Lonely Londoners, I have written works like The Plains of Caroni using both standard English and the dialect form. I started out like most of the other writers, using the dialect form in the dialogue only. Maybe there was even a slight bit of dialect in the narrative with the first novel, but I wasn't quite conscious of it there. Some people have pointed that out to me and said: 'But look, even in your first novel you were using that dialect form in some of the narration itself.' When I looked at it, I had to agree, but that must have been really something unconscious that happened during the process of creation,
because I wasn’t aware of it then.

**RD:** You were in a sense working towards the later works?

**Selvon:** I don’t know, I think I would have continued to write in both standard English and using the dialect form mainly with dialogue. It was only that when I started to write that particular novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, I just could not do it with standard English. Suddenly when I started to use ‘nation language,’ the Trinidad form of English, I just got on the right vehicle. It shot along and in six months the whole book was finished. It just wrote itself. It just seemed as if one was waiting for the other, as it were, and as soon as they matched, it took off.

**FJ:** So you were not consciously trying to create a style or consciously trying to create a language, but writing in what was out of your consciousness.

**Selvon:** That’s quite true, though it’s developed into something else now, in the sense that having had that earlier success, I went on to push it even more in *Moses Ascending*, where I used that same dialect form together with a kind of English dialect of its time. I merged them and used them, I think, to great effect in that particular novel. Again, the reception of the novel was mainly about the language, what has happened with the language.

**RD:** *Moses Ascending* seems a little different in the sense that Moses himself uses a broad range of English. He moves from dialect to a very almost literary, almost Shakespearean kind of language. So his linguistic range seems enormous and then you follow him where he goes linguistically.

**Selvon:** But this was the aspect I wanted to show with the Trinidad dialect. That one would work with the other. Moses’s flowery language is a great deal of his pretension. The book is a satire but a lot of people are still making mistakes and not interpreting my character quite properly. Moses is a very strange, ambivalent figure, and he can’t be pinned down at all. He’s almost an Anansi spider character. I used him very much as I wanted to, sometimes expressing my own feelings, but sometimes he himself would take over in the process of writing the novel. There are actually sections of the book that some people feel offended by for no reason at all, because the whole thing as I say is a satire.

**RD:** They identify you with Moses.

**Selvon:** Yes. That may be true in some instance; I don’t suppose any writer could deny that part of himself gets expressed. But not always. Sometimes Moses is there, sometimes I get into Moses, so it’s a two-way thing that’s going on there all the time.

**FJ:** When you started to experiment with style, were you conscious of a tradition before you? Were you thinking, ‘I’m working in the tradition of James Joyce’ or
someone else who had been experimenting with style, or you just did this on your own as an expression of the consciousness that you were trying to depict?

Selvon: I did this on my own. I admit to being what one would perhaps call a primitive writer, as you talk about a primitive painter, someone who does something out of some natural instinct. I've never studied the novel or studied the short story. I did a great deal of reading. I read everything I could bring my hands on from the time I was able to read, and when I started to write, I just started to write short stories. When I moved on to novels, most of my novels began as short stories and then they developed further along.

FJ: So you didn't see yourself as coming out of a certain literary tradition?

Selvon: No, not really. I paid very little respect to the rules, purely because I'm ignorant of them. Intuitively I found that if I was succeeding by my primitive way, I would continue to use it. That way, I also feel that I do maintain some kind of individuality in my work. For me the best pleasure I get out of writing is for someone to be able to say that that's a Selvon novel or that's a Selvon short story. I've always felt that if I probed too deeply and started to become knowledgeable about what the novel is, I would lose that individuality. Whether it is good or bad—that's something else. I've decided, because I have succeeded, that I'm going to just stay the way I am—I'll be ignorant of all these things. So I really don't think of form. I don't start without any idea, I don't sit down and wait for the muse to come to me. I do have a concept, and I do try, of course, to tie up loose ends or to round off my concept and so on, but most of the writing happens during the actual process of creation.

RD: Do you think that others writers can get too conscious of the rules or a certain tradition, which makes their writing overly intellectual?

Selvon: I don't know. Sometimes I feel I am the freak because I work so differently from other people. I really do. I don't conform to those things, and this is why I feel that to keep my individuality, I have to maintain a certain amount of deliberate unattachment to too many literary things. I actually teach creative writing, but I do it in my own way, with things I like. I tell my students that you can't teach writing. There are hundreds and hundreds of books that they can read that might help them, but I'm not going to help them that way. I'm just going to assist them—I can do that. I know what is good writing and what is bad writing. I've been writing long enough to know that.

FJ: Do you think the reception of your books has somehow been conditioned by that literary environment? Do you think that you were seen as just another step, maybe, in this innovative writing technique style, or do you think it's the characters that go out and grab the reader? I know that for my own point of view, it's the characters, because you bring the characters so much alive. I find
myself at some points very sympathetic, at some points laughing out loud responding to the characters. But I wonder if you think the English reception of the books may be conditioned because its another step in stylistic experimentation?

Selvon: I don't know. I suppose it could partly be that too. Also, of course, there was the whole feeling that this was an exotic literature that had sprung up in the early fifties, and that it would not last. But it has not only lasted, because of the spate of books written during that time, it has actually been part of building the whole Caribbean literary tradition. I feel that I still have novels to write. I still feel I haven't written my best novel, my best book, and what I'm working on now I hope will be better than all the rest.

RD: Can you say a little about that, or would you rather not talk about it?

Selvon: I keep talking about it so much, and it's been delayed because I write slowly, but certainly it's a very ambitious book. I want to explore the psyche of the Caribbean mind, and to find out if in fact the West Indians have not accomplished very much and are not capable of accomplishing much, as some people say. I want to explore why that is so, if in fact it is so.

RD: You're responding to Naipaul's famous remark, 'Nothing was created in the West Indies.'

Selvon: Naipaul is pretty outright about it, but there are a lot of people who feel that we are not creative enough, we are indolent, and we just don't seem to care as much about literature and the fine arts. We're just happy-go-lucky kind of people, and I want to get to the psyche behind all this. I want to really explore why, if it's because of the mixture of races there or what. It's a very ambitious novel, and I know what I want to do, but it isn't easy to sit and do it.

FJ: But you reinforce some of those stereotypes a little bit. I always remember Moses criticizing Cap in The Lonely Londoners, so that might even be you criticizing the West Indian consciousness. What is the consciousness of the West Indian man? What would you say?

Selvon: Well, I don't know. This is what I'm really going into. I think it's a creative one. I have hopes for it. This is what I'm going to try to find out in this novel that I'm working on.

RD: You mention the mixture of races in the West Indies. Certainly one of the things one notices about the Moses books is that, of course, Moses is black, and you are of East Indian descent. Have you been criticized for that?

Selvon: No, not at all. In fact, I think that I am representative of what I always say is a third race in Trinidad. We talk about the blacks and the Indians being the two races there. But there is a third race who are people
from my generation who grew up Westernized, who still remain what they are because you can't change yourself, but who have adopted a way of life which tries to work and operate between the two races and who are Creolized as it were, and who see themselves more as West Indians than as perhaps belonging to people who originally came from India.

FJ: And they also see themselves more Westernized.

Selvon: They are more Westernized and they are creating a nation out of this mixture. I'm not the only one. Very few people talk about that third race, but that is a race that exists. I know that it exists, and that is the race that I am putting my hopes on for any future for Trinidad.

RD: So as opposed to those people who would see themselves first as black or first as Indian, there are other people who would see themselves first as West Indian or Trinidadian. How does your work express that?

Selvon: I think I've always tried to keep an element of that in my work. I've always tried to give more voice to this publicly in many ways, whenever I talk, wherever I go. Even from the first novel, from A Brighter Sun, I've been concerned with the existence of these races that could live in some kind of workable harmony.

RD: Like the friendship between Tiger and Joe.

Selvon: Yes. It's something that people know about. If that never existed, a lot of people would have criticized the book to hell. But people of my generation know that kind of living together happened, actually existed and still exists to some extent in Trinidad.

FJ: That's similar to the whole generation here now both in England and maybe even in America of the children of immigrants from Asia and the West Indies. So, for instance, there's the Asian writer here, Hanif Kureishi, who really should be British because he's part British and Pakistani, yet that generation seems to be less accepted by the white establishment than the purer West Indian or the purer East Asian generation. It's an interesting comment to me that this generation which is by birthright British or American is less accepted than the immigrant generation.

Selvon: I imagine that there are very, very interesting aspects about that new generation that you talk about that I am hoping will come out. I would hope very much that the new writing will come out of that generation already. I know that there's been a considerable amount of short story writing and poetry and so on. I am hoping that there will be one of two big novels coming out from that new generation that will depict their times and experiences as The Lonely Londoners did for the fifties and sixties.

FJ: I wonder what happens to the consciousness of this generation. I've been
thinking about this a lot just because I just finished reading V.S. Naipaul’s *Enigma of Arrival*. It’s interesting in the way in which that book is both Hindu - gives expression to his Hindu consciousness - and yet wants not to be. I wonder if this forthcoming generation will then also be like a Naipaul consciousness that says, ‘No, we’re not really what we came from; we don’t want to be associated with it; we want to be white, mainstreamed.’

Selvon: I don’t know. That would be very interesting to see. I think that this is a kind of dilemma that doesn’t face just one individual. I think it’s a dilemma that faces any number of people who move out of one culture into another, particularly people from Third World countries because of their color, who move into white societies to settle. And I think that they have this problem of how they are going to identify themselves. Are they going to keep their original identity or keep their roots, or are they going to allow themselves to be assimilated completely into their new culture?

RD: Is it different in Canada? Is the dynamic different in Canada and Britain?

Selvon: No, there is no difference in this particular point that I was just making. The difference that does exist is that West Indians who are westernized get along much easier, I think, in a place like Canada than they do when they come to England. English culture is so much more stiff upperlip and closed which they’re not quite accustomed to. There has always been a fairly easy going relationship between the Americas and the Caribbean - we are part of the same area. We practically come under American politics, some are already somewhat Americanized in the Caribbean.

FJ: Should these people make some effort to retain either their Caribbean selves or Indian selves or African selves, or should they seek to mainstream themselves rather than to retain their identity? If they did this, would it just generate a kind of robotic culture, a culture without culture, as it were?

Selvon: I don’t know. It could evolve a new culture for that matter. If you say a culture without a culture, that is a kind of culture. *(Laughter)* However the dilemma would be resolved, I would certainly feel that they should not forget their past, their background, where they come from. I have always remained Trinidanian myself. I know where I come from, and I know that by race I am mixed. I am predominately East Indian, I know that, but that doesn’t stop me from formulating my own philosophy or my own psychological approach as to how I am going to assimilate myself into the culture. I don’t know which is best, but I would certainly hope that they would not forget their past or turn a blind eye to the origins of the whole thing. I don’t think that you can build a future without using the past, and I don’t think that they should try to forget their origins at all. But certainly I think they should make some effort to assimilate into the society in which they have to live day by day.
Are we going to have just ghettos of people who are living completely apart?

RD: Of course, if the East Indians had done that in Trinidad, you wouldn't have the third race that you're talking about.

Selvon: Exactly, you see, so that's not integrating at all.

FJ: What is the reception of the East Indians in the West Indies? Have they integrated themselves within the fabric of society or are they, as I see here in London, in almost separate townships, as it were.

Selvon: I think that it's about half and half. There are people, like myself, my generation, who have been Westernized. Then there are others who have remained more Indian.

RD: Is that true of the writers too do you think?

Selvon: I've never studied the writings of the writers to that extent, but I am pretty sure that probably you would get elements of that existing in the writers as well.

RD: George Lamming many years ago in The Pleasures of Exile praised you at the expense of Naipaul because he said that you were exceptional among West Indian writers for being willing to deal with the multi-racial situation.

Selvon: Well, it's true; what else have I got to deal with? That is the problem that we have. So, you know, I can't turn a blind eye to it. In fact, the thing with me is that I am so much Westernized, so much Creolized, that it's the only element that I think that I am really strongest in. In some of my books, I've tried to avoid going into too much description of Indian ritual and custom purely because I don't know them myself.

FJ: Could I ask, are you from a Tamil background? The name Selvon sounds Tamil.

Selvon: I think so, I think perhaps it could be from a Tamil background. I've never really tried tracing it back, but I have a feeling that it might well be from the south of India.

FJ: How many generations does that go back?

Selvon: I would be third; I guess about two generations back.

RD: Your grandfather came from India? And you were brought up in a completely English-speaking environment?

Selvon: Yes. That's right, yes, from the time I was small. My mother could speak Hindi very well.

FJ: Your mother was half-Indian?

Selvon: Yes, my mother's father was Scottish, and her mother was
Indian.

RD: So then you were probably brought up in a more Creolized society than Naipaul.

Selvon: I would definitely say so. From the time I was small, it's what I knew. And yet, as I say, you can't forget who you are. I had aunts and uncles living in the country districts who were really what's called the orthodox Indians. I would go there and they would wear saris and cook roti, and so on, so I think I had a good taste of both.

FJ: So you yourself are a kind of multicultural consciousness. You grew up with that kind of multicultural consciousness.

Selvon: Exactly, you see. A lot of my friends in my neighbourhood and in my school in the town that I grew up in were mixed blacks and Indians.

RD: You grew up in Port of Spain?

Selvon: In San Fernando. it's the second largest city in Trinidad after Port of Spain.

RD: Therefore what you're talking about in terms of this third race is very much what was being created when you were growing up.

Selvon: Yes, and as I say, I know this from people of my generation. I have to admit my Indian blood, what I am, but certainly I think of myself more as a West Indian. Perhaps I even want to go further than that and create a Caribbean mind, one who comes out of that particular part of the world.

RD: What's the difference there between West Indian and Caribbean?

Selvon: I was going to say Trinidadian, but even with West Indian there would be a difference. I prefer the word Caribbean. I like it; it's a nicer word. I think that people tend to make mistakes about what is a West Indian. People here in England hear the terms West Indian and they say, 'You're from West India?' they don't know.

RD: Let me go on a little bit with this Trinidad question. You're saying that you prefer to move beyond a kind of local consciousness to a larger area.

Selvon: Yes

RD: But of course the Caribbean is not just English speaking; it is also French speaking and Spanish speaking. Does this change as you move from an English-speaking milieu?

Selvon: Yes, I think it will change, but we will just have to say the English-speaking Caribbean in that sense. We would have to move first to, say, an English-speaking Carribean consciousness, and then extend it
to incorporate the French and the Dutch and the Spanish and so on. The Spanish do that. They're incorporating the English-speaking Caribbean with their arts festivals and things like that in Cuba and drawing them in. So I think we also should be doing some of that sort of thing. But we should bring them to us rather than we go to them.

RD: What are the advantages of that? What if someone said: I'm from Trinidad, I don't know what the Caribbean is, what would you say to that?

Selvon: Well, I think it's more likely that they'll know where the Caribbean is, but they don't know where Trinidad is. I think it'll work that way. I think that the concept is a bigger one. People in England all know where the Caribbean is, but they can't identify what island is in it. They don't know where Trinidad is. It is also a much more ambitious concept to try and get a national feeling among the English-speaking Caribbean writers. This is not just my dream because they've tried it already with the Federation in the late forties. I myself was very disappointed when that fell through.

RD: Why do you think it broke down?

Selvon: Well, I think it's just because we couldn't agree among ourselves. There was all this bickering. Trinidad feels that it's a better island than Jamaica, and Jamaica feels it's the biggest English-speaking island. They want everything to happen over there, and Barbados doesn't want to have anything to do with it. That sort of petty rivalry that goes on has been keeping us apart for years and years. I think we are slowly growing out of that now, and we are able, at least, to get together and talk more about what will be done for the area as a whole. In fact, it is already, in a way, in practice with trade agreements going on between the islands and so on.

RD: But you're saying there's a cultural component?

Selvon: The cultural thing is what has to follow now. It should really be going side by side, but culture, of course, is the best thing in the budget of any Caribbean government.

RD: It may be, in a sense, easier for you in Canada or a writer in England to have that regional sense that you're talking about than someone in the area, because they may have more of a sense of the differences between the islands.

Selvon: I quite agree with you. Most Caribbean people who have moved out of the islands and settled abroad have really established themselves well, not only as writers, not only in the field of art and so on, but in other professions and in medicine and social work. Any part of the English-speaking world you go to you can see these West Indians in very responsible seats, you know, very high administrative levels they're working in all over. I feel that this is a very good thing for the Caribbean.
I think that this is why the rest of the world has become interested in the Caribbean.

FJ: Because it breaks the 'stereotypes'?

Selvon: Yes. Who are these people? They've got these writers - what's it like down there? This is why people become interested. So I think they do a good job; I think we do a good job. We're not really exiles in that sense.

RD: Ambassadors perhaps.

Selvon: Yes.

RD: Therefore, maybe this broader consciousness will come largely from this community abroad.

Selvon: I think so. When I talk to West Indians who are living abroad about it, they sense it much more than back home. When I first came to England in the fifties, for the first time I met people from all the other islands that I had never met before in Trinidad. For the first time in my life, I was meeting Grenadians, Jamaicans, Barbadians - four thousand miles away from the Caribbean, here in the heart of London meeting these people from the other islands that I'd never seen in my life before.

FJ: So your new Caribbean consciousness, the man with the new Caribbean consciousness, would blend all these as well as the immigrant consciousness?

Selvon: I would hope so. What I would like to see being done further is I would like to see writers writing about movement from one island to the other. I don't really want a novel about Trinidad. I want the characters to move and go up to UWI [University of the West Indies] in Jamaica and spend a week in Barbados - have friends in Barbados, have friends in Cuba. This is what I'm hoping to do in the new novel.

FJ: That's a good note to end on, and we'll await your book then, in a couple of years or a year you think?

Selvon: I hope it'll be a year. It's a very ambitious project, as I'm sure you appreciate, but I hope it will be a year.