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Abstract

It have a lot of myths and legends and nancy stories that circulate since I, Moses Aloetta Esq., presented my credentials to the literary world. Some people think I am an asshole, some people say I am an enigma that never arrived, the chosen few consider me a genius, and one evening at a big literary conference at the Commonwealth Institute in London whilst I was reading a bawdy passage from one of my tomes in front of a big audience that included Whites a black Guyanese bitch walked up to the microphone and slap me bam bam in my face. I wouldn't of minded if Blacks alone was present, but to slap me in front of White people really hurt.

SAM SELVON

A Special Preface by Moses Aloetta Esq. (1991)

It have a lot of myths and legends and nancy stories that circulate since I, Moses Aloetta Esq., presented my credentials to the literary world. Some people think I am an arsehole, some people say I am an enigma that never arrived, the chosen few consider me a genius, and one evening at a big literary conference at the Commonwealth Institute in London whilst I was reading a bawdy passage from one of my tomes in front of a big audience that included *Whites* a black Guyanese bitch walked up to the microphone and slap me bam bam in my face. I wouldn't of minded if *Blacks* alone was present, but to slap me in front of White people really hurt.

The author has often been asked how much of the books is himself, or the fictional character, or the actual person who inspired him. In the process of creativity, unknowingness is the quintessence that propels me - I want to know as much as the reader what happens next, or what shit 'Moses' is going to come out with, and when I emerge, your guess is as good as mines as to who is the culprit. So that when literary critics - seeing some significance in the name as the biblical Moses who led his people out of bondage - as me, 'were you thinking of that when you were writing about your Moses and the black immigrants settling in England'. I can only say. 'no, the name is common in Trinidad, and I, just pull it out of a hat.' But they dig and delve. Look for plot and sub-plot. Climax and anti-climax, purpose and motive. The machinations that went on in my mind whilst I was writing, if I had them all the time I would be writing books like peas.

Of the factual human being that Moses was based upon, I know that under the welter of adversity, and the wonderment of living in the heart of the Mother Country after coming from a small island known only to map-readers, was the yearning to be a writer. 'Boy,' he told me, 'is as if I only start to live since I come to Brit'n. I wish I was a writer like you.' Instead, he was a master raconteur. Not that he held forth recounting the ballads and episodes: he would drop a hint or a clue and leave it up to his listeners to embellish or elaborate. His word-to-the-wise economy sometimes exasperated me, and I would ask, 'but what actually happen?' and he would shrug and say, 'imagine if you was me...what

you would of done?'

I did nothing about writing down his adventures until I got the 'distant perspective' from a writers' colony in the United States. I started to make notes, and when I returned to England I sat down to write *The Lonely Londoners*. I couldn't make any headway; was totally frustrated until I realised I was using the wrong kind of right English. I tried the 'nation language' of the English-speaking Caribbean and everything fell smoothly into place. I made some slight modifications, mainly by not spelling phonetically or shifting a phrase to make it more understandable. Some diehard Caribbean critics claimed that it lost authenticity.

Be that as it may, the book was highly praised in England and the United States, special reference made to 'the injection of new blood into the English language.'

Some twenty five years went by before Moses appeared again (*Moses Ascending*) to depict the changes during that time—a new generation of Black Britons, and an influx of Indians and Pakistanis had come to add *more* colour to the scene. Moses has ascended to being a landlord, and his language has escalated from the basement to the penthouse, a kind of hybrid mixture of ye-olde and what-happening. Once again the language swept the book along like a cork on a tidal wave, and the critics were full of praise.

In fact, though I had not anticipated doing another book on the life and adventures of Moses, I was in high gear. As it happened, the true-true Moses felt that Brit'n had taken its toll not only on his philosophy but his physiology, and he decided to peter out his days in the warmth of the tropic sun in his homeland of Trinidad.

I well remember some faithful friends saw him off at Waterloo Station, in good time to catch the boat-train. This was where it had started, and this was where it was going to end as far as his life in London was concerned. There were no tight throats, no gruff voices, no loose-fingered hand raised surreptitiously to wipe away a tear. We covered sentiment with banter and old-talk, recalling the old days, joking about how he would miss scouting the streets of London to pick up a sleeper. Finally, we all shook hands and embraced him. And he left London.

Truth is *stronger* than fiction. Who knows what ballads and episodes more graphic and pertinent than any I have tried to describe in the books he might have taken away to reminisce over in his rocking-chair days?

He might well have rested in peace had I not decided to follow him to Trinidad in the present novel *Moses Migrating*. And considering the characteristics that are his trademark - *the* mimicry, the convolutions of irony and satire, the ambivalences - nothing seemed more appropriate than the celebration of Carnival, a national, emotional event that is more important to the people than voting for Prime Minister or taking precaution against a devastating hurricane. Somewhere between the

actuality and the dreamworld of fiction the truth about Moses-the truth about the whitewashed Black man torn apart by the circumstances of living in a white society-exists. If I as author consciously strived at anything when he gave me a chance, it was to keep some thread of authentic commentary of the tribulations of Black people surviving away from their roots, which I tried to weave into the kiff-kiff laughter: there is no question that Britain's image needed a boost at the time of his migration: there is no question that *any* Black immigrant returning to his homeland would have qualms about resettling.

The humour and entertainment that Moses provides sometimes tend to overwhelm the serious side of his nature. It is a knack that all Black people acquire to survive. In my own years in London, any hardcore material I wrote about Blacks had to have ha-ha.

So laugh your guts out. But remember there is more in the mortar than the pestle.

An Afterword on Moses's Preface

The Preface above, which Sam wrote in 1991 for the publication of an American edition of *Moses Migrating* which was originally published in Britain in 1983, marks an important moment in Caribbean literary history and refers to an episode which occurred during a conference on Caribbean writing held at the Commonwealth Institute in London in the autumn of 1986. Sam was present as an invited guest at this conference along with many other distinguished writers including Austin Clarke, Earl Lovelace, Lorna Goodison, Martin Carter, Grace Nichols, John Agard, James Berry to name but a few. Whilst reading a satirical extract from *Moses Ascending* (1975) Sam was slapped across the face by a black Guyanese woman who left her seat in the audience and delivered the blow on the stage where he was standing. The offending passage (which we had discussed on route from the airport in to London) was taken from a moment in the novel where the would-be writer/narrator Moses is commenting with irony on the new generation of 'Black Britons' that were threatening to take over the city:

Blessed be the new generation of Black Britons, and blessed be I that I am still alive and well to witness their coming of age from picaninny to black beauty. It is a sight for sore eyes to see them flounce and bounce about the city, even if they capsize on their platforms and trip up in their maxis. Be it bevy or crocodile, Women's Lib or Women's Tit, they are on the march, sweeping through the streets. You see one, you see two, you see a whole batch of them. There are no woman in the world who could shake their backsides like a black woman...It may be that they inherit that proud and defiant part of their anatomy from toting and balancing loads on their heads from the days of slavery. But howsoever it come into being, it is good to look at...(pp.21-2).

Whilst the passage clearly pokes fun at black women it has to be seen in the context of the novel as a whole which is utterly subversive and satirical and targets everyone - whether white, black, male, female, fellow writers or Moses's illiterate white Man Friday from the Black Country.

It was an important moment in Caribbean literary history because not only was the man who had mythologized London for black people in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

publicly assaulted by a black woman but also because of the effect it had on all the other writers present who, whether male or female, respected the central significance of Sam's work in the development of a Caribbean literary tradition. The woman did apologize but Sam himself was deeply wounded by the incident and talked of not reading in London again though he did come back several times in the following years. He questioned however whether his work could still be read in such a climate and he prevented me from publishing an article in the national press on the subject preferring to not make a stir. Nevertheless, he proceeded to tour the Caribbean in that very year reading the piece over and over again. The preface to *Moses Migrating* followed later.

The event has of course taken on mythological proportions in memory and many writers/critics have referred to it since but I do want to put the record straight on one thing and that is that the passage was from *Moses Ascending* not *The Lonely Londoners* as many people have suggested. The slippage is interesting: were those early black veterans of the city, the parents of today's black population being violated yet again? In a way it is not important, for Selvon's black Londoners live on and have been immortalized in the imaginations of several generations of readers and writers.

Susheila Nasta