The Coldest Spring in Fifty Years: Thoughts on Sam Selvon and London

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Abstract
What I want to do today on the occasion of this celebration of the work of the late Sam Selvon quite simply is to try and locate the context in which this arrival of writers from the Caribbean took place in London in the 1950s. Can you imagine waking up one morning and discovering a stranger asleep on the sofa of your living room? You wake this person up and ask them 'What are you doing here?' and the person replies 'I belong here'. This was exactly the extraordinary predicament quite ordinary English people found themselves in when they awoke one morning and saw these people metaphorically on the sofas of their living rooms and the people - meaning the authorities - who had brought these strangers into the 'native's living room' had not asked permission or invited consultation about this invitation.
What I want to do today on the occasion of this celebration of the work of the late Sam Selvon quite simply is to try and locate the context in which this arrival of writers from the Caribbean took place in London in the 1950s. Can you imagine waking up one morning and discovering a stranger asleep on the sofa of your living room? You wake this person up and ask them 'What are you doing here?' and the person replies 'I belong here'. This was exactly the extraordinary predicament quite ordinary English people found themselves in when they awoke one morning and saw these people metaphorically on the sofas of their living rooms and the people – meaning the authorities – who had brought these strangers into the 'native's living room' had not asked permission or invited consultation about this invitation. On the one hand, the sleeper on the sofa was absolutely sure through imperial tutelage that he was at home; on the other, the native Englishman was completely mystified by the presence of this unknown interloper. On arrival we shared the same room in the same hostel and this hostel was the location of many of the scenes of The Lonely Londoners. We maintained a relationship of great comradeship and intimacy until Sam Selvon left some twenty odd years later in 1978 for Canada. But we were on the ship on arrival in Britain; there have been so many convulsions and transformations since this time that there is a whole generation now that finds us very difficult to understand. I know of no one who ever came to London by plane in the time I am speaking about. Also, it was I think absolutely impossible in 1950 within the spaces where we moved to find any Caribbean person who was a grandparent. I never ran into anyone who was a grandparent in 1950. I take it that grandparents are now quite numerous in 1995.

England lay before us not as a place or a people but as a promise and an expectation. Sam and I had left home for the same reasons. We had come to England to be writers and now as we were about to be anchored at Southampton, we realized we had no return tickets. We had no experience in crime; moreover our colonial status condemned us fortunately to the rights of full citizenship – in no circumstances could we qualify for
deportation. There was no going back. And all the gaiety of reprieve which we felt on our departure had now turned to complete apprehension. Like one of the many characters which he has since created, Sam said to me on the deck, 'Who send me up in this place?' For it was a punishing wind which drove us from looking at the landscape. An English voice said that it was the coldest spring he had known in fifty years. We believed him, but it seemed very cold comfort for people in our circumstances. I want to make two comments on this: first of all on the English consolation and then on the idea of it being the coldest spring we've had in fifty years. The English, who it seemed have had a very long experience of and tolerance of discomfort always try, or used at that time to try, to relieve the distress of strangers. This is what the comment 'it's the coldest spring we have had in fifty years' meant because two years later Sam phoned me and said 'look you know what a man just told me, "It's the coldest spring we have had in fifty years!"', and I would say that for the next two decades of my living in London I had been consoled by a voice that said the same thing. Then there's that strange question 'who send me up in this place?'; one finds this kind of question repeated in various ways in his work. It was as though we had no concrete choice to make – there was simply some force at work that sent you up in this place. It is the situation that the 'boys' run into all the time in The Lonely Londoners (1956).

The experience of migration here presents an interesting paradox and that is a paradox which is at the heart of the title of my book The Pleasures of Exile (1960) because West Indians were arriving in England with a very strong idea of England and that idea granted by imperial tutelage had a much more powerful influence on many of them – than their experience of the actual reality – which came out later in The Lonely Londoners amongst men who suffered all the hardships of being in Britain but still speak with this affection of not being able to leave the old Britain. It is an aspect of the colonial experience which goes much much deeper than its economic relation. There is a most extraordinary kind of bond that is forged by the history of that relationship and the Caribbean was the most extreme example of the colonial experiment. I remember coming in on what was called the boat-train into Waterloo. You see these buildings, these sort of factories and men are telling each other: 'Look, that is where we get the Bovril from', 'Look, look that is where we get the Ovaltine from', 'Look, look, look', and what was happening there was that they were coming into an immediate contact with all the things they ate or wore in the Caribbean. I think the word used today is 'consumed', and the one thing that came as a direct lesson from that was the extent of your total dependence on these places which you were seeing for the first time. 'Look, look that's where so and so comes from.' The other was a very gradual learning of how two sets of people existed in each other's consciousnesses.
After we split from the hostel, I think Sam was getting a little tired of seeing so much of me and the same was true of me by this time. The business of walking around the town every morning and sometimes with nowhere in particular to go and nothing much appearing to happen became repetitive. We therefore got separate addresses and I lived in a very well located address called 70, Parliament Hill, which was on the edge of Hampstead Heath. There was a man living in this place by the name of Pollard; he was some kind of engineer and he was anxious all week because he was expecting a letter. There was a job involved; Monday came, Tuesday, Wednesday. The letter should have come the week before; Thursday and I was now also expecting a letter. You lived in that kind of expectation. I am not sure where my letter was coming from or why I was expecting a letter and that was that. Every day was a state of emergency - you were expecting a letter. So we would meet on the stairs and he would ask me to look and then one morning, there were two letters. We spotted two letters and he said, ‘I see two envelopes, you go’. I said, ‘No it’s Friday and Friday is not a day for me, you go’, and he refused to go. So I went. There were two letters but they were addressed to the same name which was neither Lamming nor Pollard but Singleton whom we had never heard of. When we read the address it was our street alright - Parliament Hill – but instead of the number 70 the number was say X, which must have been Singletons. We were convinced that Singleton had our letters and we had Singletons. So we went to number X, Pollard rang the bell and an old woman came out. She seemed a little afraid of Pollard and that scared Pollard too. While we were trying to explain another old woman appeared. They didn’t know anyone by the name of Singleton but they took our names and went to look again. We waited and when they came back an old man was with them. It was a house of old people, now very courteous and willing to help, but our letters were not there. ‘So sorry’ the old woman said, ‘I have looked at all the envelopes that came in for the last few days but I didn’t see any black stamps.’ Pollard fell about with laughter and I thought that the old woman might have died from a heart attack. Black stamps. We must be clear about her meaning. She didn’t simply mean negro, she meant stamps marked Africa or India, China or the West Indies. One kind, honest and courteous old woman had fixed almost two thirds of the World’s population with one word. You might say that the old woman was a simple example of ignorance but I maintain that ignorant or not it has fundamentally to do with a particular way of seeing. These are different examples of how you exist in this consciousness.

I remember walking around Chelsea once and being stopped by an old-age pensioner and being asked, how long are you here and so on. He was telling me about these marvellous houses and we had a very fine time talking about the wickedness of the rich; he was poor and he told me about his childhood and so on and I told him about mine. Then he said, ‘1
wish you good luck you should be all right’ and I said goodbye. It was one of the most cordial and affectionate exchanges and then when I had got, I would say a few feet away, he said, ‘Oh, by the way, there is something I wanted to ask you. Do you belong to us or the French?’ Well this was 1950 and a Chelsea old-age pensioner but this is what I mean. This man had in the most natural, but you might think most extraordinary way, identified himself completely with the ruling and oppressive class. He had turned the person to whom he was speaking into an object, into one of his possessions. It was a way of seeing which cut right across all barriers of economic categories. But what is very easily forgotten is that this London which I am describing sounds very strange when you look at it today – that London was still a very powerful international political capital.

We are not often aware of the extraordinary speed of events that have taken place in our time. There was no independent black country south of the Sahara in 1950 with the exception of Ethiopia. Tremendous anti-colonial struggle was taking place but it would have almost been possible to find the most optimistic radical in 1950 who would genuinely have believed that South Africa’s apartheid would collapse before the end of the century. That it would collapse, yes, but it would really be crazy and erratic to imagine that within the century. The English press were reporting on a war that was made very horrendous in the 50s. It was a war of independence in Kenya but which was known to the English people as ‘Mau Mau’ and ‘Mau Mau’ was synonymous with cannibal and blood drinking and extraordinary ritual. If you go back and check with the popular press of the 1950s the newspapers reflect this kind of attitude. A dominant debate, if it can be so called in the House of Commons, was the suspension of the Guyana constitution in 1953. The Guyanese had had what was called a free and fair election which was very fair and very free, and the popular political party the PPP had won and ninety days later, the British Government suspended the constitution and imprisoned all the ministers except one. I want to suggest that not only in Moses’ basement room where they are usually discussing certain varieties of hustling but in barber shops and a variety of cells in drama, conversation was dominated by this kind of event which was taking place. This kind of event was feeding and fuelling the feelings of both the English and the West Indians. There was a man – a prolific speaker at Hyde Park and also a Guyanese – who once put the question to a large audience, ‘You know why the sun has never set on the British Empire?’ and the irate English would say ‘Why Why Why Why?’ and he said ‘Because not even God could trust an Englishman in the dark.’ This was a very sinister spectacle because this man had lost four fingers on one hand and that was the hand he always used to gesticulate to the audience, not his good hand. A very extraordinary kind of humour was developing out of these situations. It reminds me of Sam’s work for it was typical of Sam who always turned
things on their heads. He has a character for example – a very strange man who is called Galahad and for some reason which doctors may be able to explain, he is always hot in winter and cold in the summer. In the summer they have to give him vests and wrap him up and in winter all he wants is a night-shirt.

I think that the event that really started to twist feelings was what were known as the Notting Hill riots. 1958 was that critical moment when as it were, the wound opened very wide because attitudes in England on the question of race were very ambivalent. The English never liked this question to be raised explicitly and in any discussion of race relations would find some other term – a euphemism. For example, there was a Jamaican who applied to join the Metropolitan Police. In those days I had never seen a non-white person in most services, not any except maybe in hospitals. Anyhow, this man was asked to come to take the police exams and did very well. The inspector even asked him to tea – he did not just receive the letter giving him his results but was asked to tea. The man told the story of how the inspector congratulated him on his results but then he said, ‘You know, there is something I have to explain which has nothing whatsoever to do with this question of race but your case raises difficulties. We may not be able to have you because if you have noticed on the streets of London you will never see police with any distinguishing facial characteristics – like a scar for example.’ The Jamaican recounted the story marvellously; that he had never been so ‘elevated in Britain’ as by a phrase concerning his face which referred to distinguishing physical characteristics. I have you may think a certain sympathy at waking up on the sofa of decent liberal English people but such people got themselves into a lot of trouble when interviewing young black men for jobs.

It has always seemed to me that there’s a certain dialectic at work in relation to the colonial encounter as it took place in the Metropole. It is very curious that the Metropole was to a large extent responsible for the separation and fragmentation of men and women from these various territories. You could hardly get from Barbados to Jamaica. You could get a lot of trouble going from Barbados to Guyana and so on. The very Metropole had in a way organized and supervised this. It would be at the Metropole that you would see the creation of a regional movement. It is really at the Metropole that a certain type of new West Indian was born not in fact in one of the territories itself but by that extraordinary social movement which took place between Jamaica and Barbados between Trinidad, Guyana and so on in London. It was this encounter – this colonial encounter at the Metropole – which provided Sam Selvon with much of the human raw material of The Lonely Londoners.

Mention has been made of Caribbean writers. It was perhaps the most critical moment in the development of Caribbean literature, particularly aided by the work of Henry Swanzy of the BBC and Caribbean Voices programme (who by the way is still alive and was 80 on the 15th June). It
was a very strange thing that from Jamaica to Guyana, throughout the islands every Sunday evening, people gathered round a radio to hear whose work was going to be read from London. It's very interesting here how culture almost followed the journey of economics. Many of these stories were written in say Trinidad or Barbados, just like you would cut the sugar in Trinidad or Barbados, but the stories were not read or heard in Trinidad or Barbados. The stories were sent to the editor of Caribbean Voices, as you would have sent the sugar to London to be processed and returned in crystals. So the stories were processed, too, as it were and returned to the audience for whom they originally belonged. It was a very extraordinary but a very fruitful journey. Every what you call major writer of the region came through these particular channels of writing in the islands, almost paying to get published in local literary magazines, and then being taken up by the BBC Caribbean Voices programme and channelled back to the islands. I don't want to tell too many stories about Selvon now but I might add that on the BBC programme you didn't only get paid but you got paid by the minute. Men learnt how to read slowly and remain convincing, you couldn't appear to be cheating. If you could stretch a minute and a half to two, it would be the difference between one and a half and two guineas. If you got a guinea for one minute, it was that sort of income in a way that made possible the livelihood amongst the writers. All of my first novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) was written when I was doing this guinea a minute thing at Oxford Street. I do not think it could have been written then without that arrangement with Henry Swanzy.

Linked fairly closely to that period was another major Caribbean writer, Andrew Salkey who sadly passed away recently. I don't think that Andrew had any replacement when he was alive in those days, he was irreplaceable always as a man who had cultivated a capacity for holding people together, for bringing them into touch with each other. He was able to bring into the same room men who in no circumstances would want to share the same space with each other. For Salkey, they came. His wife was the most gracious hostess. I do not know if you can imagine Naipaul and Lamming and Mittelholzer in the same space. Well, that was made possible by Mr and Mrs Salkey. It didn't only bring people together and hold them together in that way but he made sure that if necessary everyone would know where to find anyone. If you were trying to find La Rose and you couldn't find La Rose, you would call Salkey and he would say 'He is in Trinidad, here's the address and the phone number'. If you couldn't find X you would phone Salkey and he would say 'He is in Lagos; the address is ...' There was no corner of the globe that these men might travel that was not monitored by Andrew. He did it entirely for them and it was at that time an extraordinary fraternity of young writers who were purposefully engaged in what they saw as the pioneering work of the foundations of an important regional literature. Without London it
is very unlikely that any of us would have met and without London and what was called the exile – hence the pleasure – I think it is very unlikely that most, if any, of the books would have seen the light of day. There is a very strange reciprocity of taking and giving in this context between two landscapes and people of the Caribbean made very important discoveries, discoveries that they were not able to make from their base. They discovered the existence of a white working class. You may find this very strange. I tried to put this down in The Pleasures of Exile. I remember returning to England after my first visit back to the Caribbean in 1956. Coming back on the boat, there was a man – a very senior civil servant – on the deck as we were coming into Southampton. He said ‘Look’, I wasn’t clear what he was talking about but he was pointing at a porter because he had never seen a white man carrying anybody’s luggage. ‘Do they let them do that?’ Now this was a very interesting comment because I am talking about a man who would have read Dickens in the Caribbean. He would have passed the Cambridge Senior Certificate reading Dickens but obviously something very important about Dickens had never got inscribed on his consciousness – something about Dickens made him always think that the hand that did labour could not possibly be a white hand. It was one of the most critical moments I had.

I actually am coming to the end of what I want to say today and I want to return to Sam Selvon. There was always something very elusive about Sam – Sam was there and elsewhere and beneath that surface of the prose, that surface that is so funny, beneath that surface of the ‘Kiff-Kiff’ laughter lies a very deep and very persistent melancholy. I regret very much to say that in later days a great distance both personal and spatial seemed to have come between us. We would meet in various places in the Caribbean or in the United States but I felt that he was always withdrawing from any exchange which threatened to be serious. I saw him in Martinique about four months before he died and I wanted to ask him about this withdrawal but I didn’t. It is possible I didn’t want to know and preferred to remember him as the Sam I had always known – very gentle and most generous.

NOTES

1. The day to commemorate the work of Sam Selvon held in the Purcell Room, London’s South Bank on 24 June 1995. The transcript of this talk was edited by Susheila Nasta, organizer of the event.