**Selvon, Samuel (1923-1994)**

Samuel Selvon was a Trinidadian writer whose vivid portraits of daily life in both the Caribbean and in post World War II England garnered international acclaim. Selvon’s episodic storytelling, vernacular narration, and stylistic inventiveness have led critics past and present to classify his writing alongside both his modernist predecessors and his postcolonial contemporaries.

Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923 to an East Indian father and an Anglo-Scottish mother. In his own words, he grew up as a ‘Creolized West Indian’ (Nasta 3). He worked as a wireless operator for the Royal Naval Reserve during the Second World. After the war ended in 1945, Selvon relocated to Port of Spain and began his early forays into journalism, contributing to *The Trinidad Guardian* and serving as the fiction editor for *The Guardian Weekly.* Selvon’s early stories and sketches, now collected in *Foreday Morning,* show his early preoccupation with the details of everyday life, a preoccupation that cuts across all of his writing. In 1950, somewhat disenchanted with what he called the ‘very complacent and easygoing’ Trinidadian life, Selvon migrated to England on a boat that also carried the Barbadian novelist George Lamming.

Like many other writers from the Anglophone Caribbean, often referred to as the *Windrush* generation, Selvon would launch his literary career from England. Selvon’s first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, was published in 1952, winning him international acclaim. In 1955, Selvon published his second novel *An Island Is a World* and received a Guggenheim Fellowship (he would receive the fellowship again in 1968). Short stories such as ‘Finding Piccadilly Circus’ (1950), ‘Working the Transport’ (1957) and ‘Calypso in London’ (1960) demonstrate Selvon’s The following year saw the publication of his celebrated novel of migrant life in 1950s Britain, *The Lonely Londoners*.

*The Lonely Londoners* follows a group of migrants from the Caribbean and Africa as they make their way through the direct and indirect forms of racism pervading daily life in 1950s London. Selvon’s novel explores both the ecstasies of life in the metropolis and the deep, sometimes unavoidable alienation of urban living. The most noteworthy and discussed feature of *The Lonely Londoners* is Selvon’s use of an invented Caribbean vernacular for the narrative voice. Selvon experimented with vernacular to great effect in *A Brighter Sun* and in short stories such as ‘Finding Piccadilly Circus’ (1950) and ‘Calypsonian’ (1952). Apart from Vic Reid’s *New Day* (1949), *The Lonely Londoners* was the only other work from the Anglophone Caribbean composed entirely in the vernacular; and unlike Reid’s novel which is told entirely by a first person narrator, *The Lonely Londoners* employs an omniscient narrative voice that arguably merges with the voice of Moses Aloetta, the novel’s protagonist, by the end. Early readers took Selvon’s vernacular as an authentic replication of Caribbean speech; Selvon would later claim that he ‘wrote a modified dialect which could be understood by European readers, yet retain the flavour and essence of Trinidadian speech’ (qtd. in Nasta 66).

Selvon builds his novel around loosely related episodes, a style many critics suggest is derived from Calypso song and story structures. The novel tracks the lives of several African and Caribbean migrants, but the majority of the narrative centers on Moses Aloetta. *The Lonely Londoners* addresses the structural racism of postwar Britain, stretching from issues of labor and housing to sexuality and gender relations. With a nod to the linguistic innovation of his modernist predecessors, Selvon renders one episode in stream-of-consciousness narration.

Though they have attracted less critical attention, *The Housing Lark*  (1965), *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983), continue Selvon’s investigations of everyday life of black Britons. The latter two novels follow Moses Aloetta’s further adventures in London and his journey back to his native Trinidad. There is some critical disagreement over whether these two novels and *The Lonely Londoners* constitute a proper trilogy.

Selvon left the UK in 1978 for Canada where he took up posts at the University of Victoria and the University of Calgary where he first worked as a janitor for four months before becoming a writer-in-residence. He died of a heart attack while visiting Trinidad in 1994.

Selected Works:

*A Brighter Sun* (1952)

*An Island is a World* (1955)

*The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

*Ways of Sunlight* (1957)

*Turn Again Tiger* (1958)

*I Hear Thunder* (1963)

*The Housing Lark* (1965)

*The Plains of Caroni* (1970)

*Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972)

*Moses Ascending* (1975)

*Moses Migrating* (1983)

*Eldorado West One* (1988)

*Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986* (1989)

*Highway in the Sun and Other Plays* (1991)

References and Selected Further Reading:

Dawson, Ashley. (2007) *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Gikandi, Simon. (1992) *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

McGoogan, Ken. (1996) “Saying Goodbye to Sam Selvon.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 27.2: 65-75.

Nasta, Susheila (ed). (1988) *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press.

Procter, James. (2003) *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

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