

## **THEME OF RESISTANCE IN SAMUEL SELVON'S *THE LONELY LONDONERS*: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*Postcolonialism is influenced by 'deconstruction,' 'poststructuralism' and other text based literary theories. The postcolonial critics and writers initially sought to draw attention to the theme of 'resistance' on colonialism in the postcolonial context. 'Resistance' theory in postcolonial literature disproves or rebuts the very notion that the idea of 'representation' also signifies further subjection. The postcolonial writers portrays 'creole,' 'hybrid,' 'ambivalent,' and 'mimic' as a form of resistance in the postcolonial context. The colonized nation is 'writing back,' speaking either of the oppression and racism of the colonizers or the inherent cultural of the indigenous people. In this context, Helen Tiffin expresses in her essay "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse": "post-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse" (in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 96). Thus the 'counter-discursive/narrative' plays an important role as a 'resistance' form. Therefore my study focuses on Selvon's use of 'creole language' and depiction of 'black immigrants' in 'white' dominated society as a form of 'resistance' in the postcolonial society in his immigrant novel, *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon, as a West Indian Immigrant uses 'Creole language' and depicts the living condition of 'black immigrants' in London. He uses the themes of 'hybrid,' 'ambivalent' and 'mimic' as a form of 'resistance' through the characters Mosses, Haris, Bart, Galahad, Big City, and Five Past Twelve in his immigrant novels. The immigrant novels update issues and problems faced by the West Indian immigrants in London in the 1950s and 1960s.*

**Key Words:** 'Resistance,' 'Selvon,' 'Postcolonial,' 'Reversed Colonialism,' 'Creole,' 'Hybrid,' 'Ambivalent,' and 'Mimic'

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### **Introduction:**

**T**he 'rewriting' of the master narratives of English literature is a common practice among the postcolonial writers as a form of 'resistance'. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is being just another case in point. The telling of a story from another prospective can be seen an attempt to explore the gaps and silence in a text. Writing as a extension of 'language' use, is one of the strongest forms of cultural hegemony and the 'rewriting' of the colonial canon becomes a subversive and liberating act for the colonized. Hence, the postcolonial view of the *Tempest* is through the character of Caliban, seen not as the 'deformed slave' of the dramatise personae but as a 'native' of the island over whom Prospero has imposed an obnoxious form of colonial domination.

The Caribbean writers like V S Naipaul, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Derek Walcott and writers of similar persuasion defined the use of 'western' intellectual paradigm. From their writings as a form of 'resistance' the Caribbean writers challenge Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban as bestial and brutal, and reclaim his image as an icon of Caribbean 'self-assertion' although Shakespeare did not explicitly state the setting of *The Tempest* is the Caribbean. The power relations between Prospero and Caliban are suggestive of the master-slave relationship found on the plantation. In this context, the Caliban and Prospero relationship leads to the longer issues of language. Caliban is Prospero's slave. Prospero also claims that Caliban did not know the use of language until he was thought by his master. Thus, only way Caliban can express himself is within the parameter of his master's tongue. George Lamming in his collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) argues for the reason that Caliban is imprisoned in Prospero's language: "there is no escape from the prison of Prospero's gift; this is the first important achievement of the colonizing process" (109). He also exclaims that Caliban is a metaphor for the enslaved.

### **Using of 'Creole Language' as 'Resistance'**

One of the contemporary authors who has been long neglected by academic criticism and who came to the Department of English, University of Mysore, Mysuru, Karnataka in 1984 is the Trinidadian, Samuel Selvon, best known for his novels, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, *Moses Migrating* (Moses Trilogy), *A Brighter Sun*, *Turn Again Tiger* and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (Peasant Trilogy). In his works he experiments

with a language and culture that is neither English nor Trinidad 'creole,'<sup>1</sup> but an artificial fusion where two languages, even cultures, merge and blend to yield an innovative and precocious response to the difficulties brought about by decolonization. Selvon neither rejects British language and culture nor does he parrot English literature. Instead, he maintains a position which is not unlike other Caribbean writers such as Lamming, Walcott, Brathwaite in that he recognizes the inescapable weight of European influence but still interrogates and contaminates it using 'other' narratives.

Today, many of the indigenous languages have become extinct or are dying out. In recent years, the postcolonial Caribbean islands have become aware of a linguistic inheritance of sorts. However, in the Caribbean, languages are mostly aimed at multilingualism. The mixture of languages and cultures produced their counterpart in legends drawn from deeply fed layers of imagination and creative and innovative writing.

1. The English word 'creole' is derived from French 'cre'ole,' which the term came from Portuguese 'Crioulo'. The term 'creole,' originally referred to a white man of European descent, born and raised in a tropical colony (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*). The term later meant indigenous people and others of non-European origin and was soon applied to the languages spoken by creoles in and around the Caribbean and in West Africa. Yet the most common use of the term in English was to mean 'born in the West Indies,' whether white or black (Ashcroft 1998: 57). Brathwaite coined the term 'national language' which he defines 'creole': "the kind of English (broken/pidgin/creole) spoken by the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadores" (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of National Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, 5-6).

As language and culture are inextricably intertwined, the induction of English gave rise to cultural alienation in the colonies. English was effectively used in the construction of colonial discourses which extended the cause of colonization. Therefore, a postcolonial writer's engagement with the English language is also simultaneously an exercise that reassesses, through the grid of fiction, the cultural and linguistic positioning of the ex-colonized, which are inextricably embedded in the political history of the colony and its own recurrent consequences. The postcolonial novelists express their unflinching involvement not only with the experiential content of their writing but also with the medium through which it is conveyed. In the view of using language, Edouard Glissant analysis that the creole language reflects the power relations and also used for creative writing in the Caribbean literature:

Language not only reflects but enacts the power relations in Martinican society. Neither French nor creole is the true language of the community. If, as most militant writers are tempted to do, artist resorted blindly to creole, could fall into an empty 'folklorism'. (*Caribbean Discourse*, XXV)

Language plays an important role in determining human identity; it will invoke the Derridean concept of 'deconstruction'. For the Caribbean writers, English language was the language of oppression because of the history of the region and attitudes of the colonizers and even the people of the Caribbean themselves towards the local population. From a linguistic point of view, the creole dialect of the region was neglected and disclaimed for a long time. Not only the change in linguistic approaches, but also the literature produced by the Caribbean writers began to change the position of the languages of the Caribbean in literature and in society in general.

Writers like Selvon, Lamming, Harris, Naipaul and Lovelace from the Caribbean are portrayed as "being torn between two languages" (Hall, 111). The roots of myth went much deeper and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is one of the major literary works the West Indian authors had to contend with. To deconstruct the myth about their homeland and their languages, the writers from the Caribbean had to confront the imposed English language, as well as the established literary canon, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European realistic novel. In the creole speaking Caribbean islands, both oral and written texts came to represent forms of resistance to colonial cultural dependence in the crucial period of transition from British imperialism to the postcolonial age. Another important characteristic of these writers is the fact that they are often in a state of exile from their home country. Creole language is considered as 'low' being that of the colonized people, and English, obviously, is considered 'high' being the language of colonizers, labels such as 'high' and 'low' clearly represent the attitudes of both the colonizers and the colonized. During the age of transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, the Caribbean writers were torn between these two languages in a complex political and linguistic situation. Writers such as Selvon settled for a linguistic compromise, using Standard English to represent the voice of the narrator and creole for the dialogues.

Selvon uses creole dialect in his writings. Creole language is considered as a primitive language. To decolonize the myth of the primitive from the colonizers, Selvon uses creole language in his works. The myth pervasive among the Caribbean people gave the impression of their language originating from the colonizer, like the relation between Shakespeare's characters Caliban and Prospero. To deconstruct their myth, the Caribbean writers use creole language as the concept of decolonization in both language and culture. So the Caribbean identities triggered as creole and the whole society undergoes the process of creolization which can be seen clearly in the novels of Selvon, Earl Lovelace and Naipaul.

Samuel Selvon, as a postcolonial novelist, uses a language to suit his style by subverting the language of the colonizer. In the Caribbean, language and culture are intertwined. The Africans were transported and transplanted in the Caribbean Islands and Asians came there as indentured labourers. The Africans and the Asians were inherently

resistant to the colonizers and their systems and manifest them to take up writing of the masters' language. In recognition of a language as an instrument of the power politics, Derek Attridge points out:

Why does the culture privilege certain kinds of language and certain modes of reading? Such a question can receive an answer only when we reach the realm of political and economic relations, the structures of power, dominance, and resistance which determine the patterns and privileges of cultural formations. (*Peculiar Language*, 1988; 15)

The use of creole by Selvon is a classic example of postcoloniality in which the concept of language and practice take centre stage as opposed to the concept of 'centre' and 'marginal'. In this context, it is pertinent to consider what the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* say:

The theory of the Creole Continuum, undermining, at it does, the static models of language formation, overturns 'Ecocentric' notions of language which regard 'Standard English' as a core. Creole needs no longer to be seen as a peripheral narration of English. (*The Empire Writes Back*, 47)

Therefore, Selvon writes in the 'Creole Continuum' to give voice to the suppressed thoughts, feelings and emotions of which had been silenced for ages.

Selvon uses English language in a unique form. He uses 'creole' as the narrative form in his London novels, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, and *Moses Migrating*. Creole is the principal narrative form in these novels and it figured prominently in all the novels. Ismail S. Talib points out:

Selvon's novel [*The Lonely Londoners*] does appear to be particularly successful in its language use. Other Caribbean writers, such as Wilson Harris and Roy Heath, have expressed their admiration of Selvon's language in his work. Wilson Harris specifically commends Selvon for making 'dialect part of the consciousness of the narrator'. (*The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, 139)

The vitality of the popular Creole dialect and idiom is reflected in the achievement of the Trinidadian Samuel Selvon. In his novels, Selvon uses a modified literary form of Trinidadian Creole dialect, distanced from everyday speech. Jeremy Taylor has written on Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*:

The first novel was written throughout in the fully Creole dialect form, that the Caribbean speech, with all its intricacies and subtle rhythms, onto the page not as curiosity, not as something exotic, but natural as sunlight. Caribbean language suddenly found a narrative voice its own. (Taylor, Jeremy. *Play Again, Sam*, 34)

Samuel Selvon succeeds in communicating with the use of Creole and Standard English to the people who were of different environments, cultures and civilizations. He

successfully addresses a 'double audience'- local and foreign- in his first novel *A Brighter Sun*. It is not an easy task to cater to people of divergent tastes. Selvon had to evolve his own technique of narration, because, he had no predecessor to learn from or follow. But he was undeterred by the daunting task and his *A Brighter Sun* is a classic example of that.

### **Resistance in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners***

As a form of resistance, many writers from the Caribbean have chosen to live abroad, often in the former colonial centers in Britain, France or, since it has become a massive force in the area, the United States. Writers like V.S. Naipaul, Edgar Mittelholzer, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and Wilson Harris have experienced what Naipaul called the "threat of failure, the need to escape.... Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is, where he stands" (*Middle Passage*, 45, 73). C.L.R James expresses the psychological, socio-cultural, familial, religious and political power structure of slave society in his classic work *The Black Jacobin*. The structure of the society made the Caribbean people to be in 'self-exile' as a form of resistance. In this contrast Edward Brathwaite also says, "The desire to emigrate is at the heart of West Indian sensibility: Whether that migration is in fact or by metaphor" (*Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*, 175). The concern of self-exile and migration as a form of resistance was a response both to a historical phenomenon and a psychological colonial problem.

Most of the 1950s novels of the West Indian immigrant writers have explored the pleasures and perils of exile along with their impact on the sensibilities of the West Indians. Lamming's *The Emigrants*, Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, *Moses Migrating*, *Ways of Sunlight*, and *The Housing Lark*, Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*, and also the novels of Austin Clarke have depicted the enlarged consciousness of the emigrant with his peculiar disorientation in an alien world. Increasingly, however, the idea of migration has become almost a 'global phenomenon,' mainly in North America and other parts of the World. The most sustained and passionate urge to leave the islands for a 'better break' is portrayed as resistance in Selvon's immigrant novels and George Lamming's *The Emigrants*. The immigrant novels of Selvon and Lamming trace the lives of a group of emigrants who travelled to England to find a 'better break' and for 'better future'. The concepts of 'better break', 'better future', and 'self-exile' concerned with historical and psychological phenomena of colonialism which considered as resistance in the postcolonial context.

The novel *The Lonely Londoners* focuses on the larger body of immigrants, the working class. Selvon's immigrants are offered the worst jobs. They pay high prices for insecure tenancy in the most undesirable houses, and they indulge in sexual exploits that

seldom include anything other than sex. They are exposed to rain, snow, wind and fog and are driven to live as pirates or parasites on the fringes of a host society. The illusory hospitality of the English society involves an imagined willingness of their white women to readily accept black men. Sexual exploits can be read as 'reversed colonialism' where the black man desires the white female body to get back the lost dignity which has been snatched by humiliation from the white men. England's fabulous and romantic history attracted the West Indian emigrants but their participation in its history was only an illusion. Further, colonial education degraded their history and culture.

Postcolonialism as a postmodern approach seeks to illustrate the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In this study, an attempt has made to identify the problems like 'stereotyping', 'mimicry', 'hybridity' and 'creolization' in Selvon's immigrant novel-*The Lonely Londoners*. Characters of this novel are away from their 'homes' and have to accept the rules and customs of the dominant 'white' culture in which they find themselves 'unhomed'. As Bhabha opines that 'psychological refugees' that the immigrant characters do not know to which culture they belong, to their West Indian culture or to British one. They do not know which culture should be of value to them as a result of which their characters and personalities become 'ambivalent'. Their identities are floating, hovering between the dominant culture and their own cultures. As the form of resistance, the black immigrant characters try to imitate British culture and their life style; this is what Bhabha urges as 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' in his well-known book *The Location of Culture*.

*The Lonely Londoners* explores the first phase of Britain's Black Community from the time of their arrival as 'West Indian migrants' to that of their 'transition,' to assume what Stuart Hall calls, the 'New Ethnicity'. This novel is able to capture the changing identity of London's West Indian migrants as a historical reference. It captures the process of identity change amongst London's Caribbean migrant community in the 1950s from self-identifying as British into the emergence of a new 'hybrid identity'. *The Lonely Londoners* captures the sense of British and hybrid identities amongst the Caribbean migrants in the conversation between Moses and Galahad with Moses stating:

... see if they serve you. You know the hurtful part of it? The Pole who have that restaurant, he ain't have no more right in this country than me. In fact we is British subjects and he is only a foreigner, we have more right than any people from the Continent [Europe].... and enjoy what this country have because is we who bleed. (*The Lonely Londoners*, 24)

In this scene Selvon uses Moses to depict how 'West Indians saw themselves as socially and legally British' as a form of resistance, when they arrived in Britain, rather than as strangers or foreigners.

The West Indians were initially the most 'assimilationist' of all coloured immigrants. Selvon captures the cultural identification of many of the Caribbean migrants as British and English through the character of Harris. The narrator describes Harris as "a fellar who like ladeda, and he like English customs....and when he dress you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler, and umbrella, with the *Times*, only thing Harris face black" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 111). Harris had an idea of behaving like an English man. He wants to look well dignified like English man. Selvon portrays Harris character as 'hybrid', 'ambivalent' and 'mimic' of English people as a form of resistance in the postcolonial context.

There were more than 40,000 West Indians in London. The novel reveals the existence of fellow immigrants like Moses and Galahad, from Trinidad; Captain (Cap) from Nigeria; Mahal from India; Tolray from the West Indies; Daniel hails from France. Bartholomew (Bart), and Five Past Twelve are from Barbados, while Harris, Brackley and Joseph originate from West Indies. All the immigrants are universally treated as 'black' and they are identified as 'Creole/Black' or 'Other' in the white dominated English society. The characters in the novel work in tubes, factories, railway stations and perform household chores for low wages. Selvon gives the real picture of working class status and about the immigrant street. He explains:

In London that it have Working Class; there you will find a lot of spades. This is the real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come. The houses around here old and grey and weather beaten, the walls tracking like the last days of Pompeii, it ain't have no hot water, none of the house have bath [...] or else go to the public path. Some of the houses till had gas light. The street does be always dirty except it rain fall. Sometime a truck does come with a kind of revolving broom to sweep the road. It always have little children playing in the road, they ain't have no other place to play. (*The Lonely Londoners*, 57-58)

Next, is the story of Bartholomew, or Bart, who is ashamed of being identified as 'Caribbean/Black'. He is a friend of Moses and the author explains that, "Bart have light skin he neither here nor there he go around telling everybody that he is a Latin-American, that he come from South America" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 45). Aided by his light skin, he claims to be a Latin American. He tries to imitate the white man. He had "ambition that always too big for him. He always talking about this party and that meeting" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 46). He is in a romantic relationship with an English girl whose parents are furious with him. Finally, Beatrice, his girl, also deserts him and Bart keeps on searching for her till the very end of the novel.

The next episode is Galahad's date with Daisy, a white English Girl. In this episode, racism puzzles Galahad and he tries to find explanation for it. Galahad finally vents out his

anger at 'black' and he thinks that his 'black' is the culprit for the humiliation he faced. He explains in disgust:

Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so? What it is we want that the white people and then find it so hard to give? A little work, a little food, a little place to sleep. We not asking for the Sun, or the Moon. We only want to get by we don't even want to get on.

... 'colour is you that causing all this. Why the hell you can't be blue or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! Look at you, you so black and innocent and this time so you causing misery all over the world!' (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72)

Galahad is frustrated because of 'colour' and 'racism'. He cannot understand why the blacks are being ill-treated when all that the 'black' or 'immigrants' needed were just food, shelter and work. Black people want to survive. The black immigrants have no desire to enjoy equal rights with white people. His outburst: "we only want to get by, we don't even want to get on" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72), explains the real intention of black immigrants in London. Galahad starts speaking pejoratively about the colour 'black,' and racism for "all the misery in the world!" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72)

In the next episode, the character of Big City is revealed. He "came from an orphanage in one of the country districts in Trinidad" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 77). He was greatly fascinated with metropolitan cities, in which he thinks that he can have a great life. Big City's peculiar characteristic is that he gets confused with names: "instead of hearing 'Music' Big City thought 'fusic' and since that nobody could ever get him to say music" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). He calls 'Notting Hill' as 'Nottingham Gate,' 'Gloucester Road' as 'Gloucestirshire Road' and so on. He used to eat so much food and "he always thinking about the big cities of the world" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). That is why he got the name 'Big City'. Selvon uses the typical form of wrong pronunciation as the way of resistance through the black immigrant character, Big City. Big City wants to make quick money. He desires "to have money, buy out a whole street of houses, and give it to the boys and say: "Here look place live. And I would put a notice on all the boards, "Keep the Water Coloured, No Rooms For Whites" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). He would like to take revenge on white people and it clearly shows that Selvon ingrained the tendency to revenge in 'black/immigrant' people as a decolonization process.

The next character is Five Past Twelve, who came from Barbados to London after the war and got work as a truck driver. He is called 'Five Past Twelve' because he resembles, "black like midnight" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 94). He is fond of parties, fete, circus, carnivals and he also has "women all over London" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 94). The latter part of the novel plays an important role in questioning the 'black identity' and the

'crises of unemployment'. The author explains: "nobody can't get any work, fellars who had work looking it," (*The Lonely Londoners*, 106). This episode also deals with the weather, poverty and also how Galahad catches a pigeon in the park to survive and Cap catches seagulls. Selvon depicts the episode of eating seagulls and pigeons as a mark of resistance on the part of black immigrants. This part also has long discussions about staying in London. The winter season in London is very bad. Galahad tries to catch a pigeon in the park to eat and he feels: "... in this country, people prefer to see man starve than a cat or dog want something to eat" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 107). Moses reveals the plight of the immigrants and their hard working condition and he confesses: "work hard like hell to get these days" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 110).

The novel is full of social commentary, by the characters and by the narrator. The novel captures the loneliness of immigrants. Moses is sick of London and is waiting to get back to Trinidad.

... sometimes I look back on all the years I spend in Brit'n, ... looking at things in general life really hard for the boys (immigrants) in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell. Here is not like a home. (*The Lonely Londoners*, 114)

The title of the novel signifies at the end of the novel. Moses feels lonely and miserable in London. Moreover, all the characters depicted are immigrants and through whom the author explains the realistic identity of 'black/creole' people in the white society. The title of the novel clearly notes that the characters in the story are represented as 'Black Londoners' and also 'Lonely Londoners'. Racism is rejected outright by this change of title. The immigrants are 'black,' and their experience and identity are shown in the novel. So, there is racist depiction in the novel, but a realistic one, that of a city which breeds 'loneliness'. The novel ends with Moses standing by the bridge feeling that "he had lived in the great city of London, centre of the world" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 121). Moses would like to write a book of memories as a form of resistance and he imagines the scenario, "one day sweating in the factory and next day all the newspapers have your [Moses] name and photo, saying how you [Moses] are a new literary giant" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 126).

### **Conclusion**

Selvon's classical novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, shows the hopeful aftermath of the war. The black immigrants from the Caribbean Islands flocked to the 'Mother Country' in waves, looking for a prosperous future, and finding instead a cool reception, bone-chilling weather, and bleak prospects. Yet, friendship flourishes among these lonely Londoners and they learn to survive, and even to love their 'Mother Country,' London. The novel depicts the lives of black immigrants in the 1950s and it is rich in characters such as Galahad, who

never feels the cold even in winter, Big City, who dreams of fame and fortune, Harris, who likes to play ladeda, Moses, who hates his own soft heart, and Captain, who has a way with women.

*The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon's third novel, is considered as his most outstanding work. This novel depicts the experiences of West Indian black immigrants in London. Selvon portrays how London, which is the 'promised land' for the black immigrants, is difficult to adjust. The novel describes how the 'Whites' of London look down upon the 'Blacks'. The novel is all about the immigrants adjusting themselves to the white dominant society. Racism plays a very significant role here. The black man starts mimicking the white man, and loses his identity which served as a form of resistance. Selvon's immigrant novels- *The Lonely Londoners* *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*- depict exile, racial and ethnicity problems. Hence, Selvon clearly succeeds in highlighting the problems of racism, acculturation, and the assimilation process in a multi-cultural society. At last, Selvon comes to the conclusion that the dynamic response to racism is 'creolization'. The main character of these novels, Moses, tries to live in harmony, which is possible in a multi-racial society by opting to 'creolize' and by incorporating the best of all cultures.

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