

Identity Crisis of Immigrants in Samuel Selvon's
The Lonely Londoners

U. Durgadevi, M.Phil. Research Scholar



Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lonely_Londoners

Abstract

This paper reviews the novel *The Lonely Londoner* by Samuel Selvon as a postcolonial novel. The paper examines the plight of the Caribbean migrants who traveled to England hoping that the fairytales they had been fed on by the colonizers were realistic and confined to England. The majority of the immigrants to Britain welcomed the possibility of abandoning the illusoriness of the colonial periphery for the presumed reality of the life in London and other metropolitan centers. Bhabha employs the technic of building on the diaspora traditions and cultural practices to try and break the economic and social barriers that have existed for generations. The novel depicts the wrecking of the sensation of identity, of belonging to the English society, and that of who is the Englishman. Thus, the paper investigates how mimicry and hybridity have been portrayed in the novel *The Lonely Londoner*, and at the same time looks into how Samuel Selvon typically applied them to express his postcolonial discourse in his work.

Keywords: Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, Postcolonialism, Identity, Mimicry, Unhomed Condition, Homi Bhabha, Postcolonial Novel.

Introduction

The question of identity is the most controversial issue in postcolonial times and literature and it can be regarded as the most important because of crisis exists in all postcolonial communities. According to the Oxford English dictionary, identity is defined as "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is". But in the postcolonial context, identity is a complex concept that would be difficult to define. Black British novel is a story about the sufferings of immigrants from West Indies in Britain. The Black literature is composed of works by authors from former British colonies in Africa, Asia and also some literature by the Caribbean. The work in Black British Literature has similarity regarding disillusionment with England, mostly about London and what London has to offer to the black immigrants.

Samuel Selvon was also included in the immigrant's population of the mass movement from the West Indies. His use of dramatization brought up an important increment in the Britain's cultural value. It helps the immigrants have the value and importance to face the challenges that they had from their daily activities. Selvon gives his right in the engagement of the Centre dominant literary culture as a member of the group fighting for the immigrant's freedom. Samuel Selvon expresses his anger and disappointment faced by the black immigrants experienced in London and neighboring towns. This paper examines how Selvon portrays the identity crisis in the novel *The Lonely Londoner*.

Identity crisis can be said to be the main theme of the novel though the novel offers hope to West Indian migrants through adaptation. It is evident that London is one of the most cosmopolitan urban centers in the world. The number of blacks living in England continued to increase year by year after the World War I. To curb the increasing number of black migrant, a regulation to reduce the number by half was enacted. The regulation was enacted to prevent London being from flooded with black immigrants. The British government adopted austerity measures to prevent the repetition of what happened in the late 19th century when white immigrants stormed London.

Selvon begins the novel with the interplay between the reality and illusoriness of the London city. The author is a part of an immigrant group from the Caribbean, who transformed England's metropolis after the end of the war. To survive in Britain, Selvon had to adjust his identity from the old traditional practices of the Caribbean people. According to Selvon, the reality in London was far from his expectation. For instance, being colonized and to see others celebrating Christmas sounds inhumane. Christmas is a holiday where people show love to one another, this is in contrast to what was happening in London and its metropolitan ways due to racial discrimination (Weedon, 2004, 91).

By the 1950s, Britain was home to most of the immigrants from the Anglophone. To some individuals the migration was an attempt to colonize their former colonial master. The

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majority of the immigrants to Britain welcomed the possibility of abandoning the illusoriness of the colonial periphery for the presumed reality of the life in London and other metropolitan centers. In this center, it was assumed that it was here true living took place. On the arrival in London or other metropolitan centers, immigrants were always amazed by these cities. At times even the news that one will be going to London amazed the blacks. For instance, in *The Lonely Londoners*, Galahad is mesmerized by the news that he will be visiting London. He stated that he “felt like a king living in London” (Selvon 84-85).

The novel *The Lonely Londoners* presents identity crisis the author employs various approaches to survive as immigrant in the process of doing so they establish a risky hold on London life. A refrain that reappears throughout the novel turns on the perseverance that the old identities that the immigrants brought with them to London. The old identity of Cap is characterized by the use of fashion style from either Spain or Kingston, lack of cooperation, untransformed. Cap also uses her fashion style to disappear in moments when he does not want to be noticed. Harris’ character is contrary to those of Cap.

Harris is an early model of what Naipaul defines as a mimic man; he is obsessed with earnings respect and adopts English traditions to the maximum. Many people had rated the works of Selvon regarding him as part of themselves especially when he moved to Britain from the Caribbean. Also, London literary grounds was affected and had been influenced in the introduction of certain aspects from the writings of Selvon. The writings of the season had impact on the London literary scenes and the characteristics of the post-colonial era. It gives a clear picture on the advantages of the sharing of labor among the existing colonial migrants.

In Bhabha’s essay "Of Mimicry and Man" in "The Location of Culture" he posits that the colonial subject's mimicry of his colonizer does not produce a replica of the colonizer, rather this mimicry produces something that the colonizer does not anticipate. Bhabha’s work on Contemporary culture valorizes the hybridity of migrant and diaspora culture within what is conceived as the homogeneous space and time of the nation. Bhabha employs the technic of building on the diaspora traditions and culture practices to try and break the economic and social barriers that have existed for generations. In the novel the speaker shows harmony and realization of his identity, the native identity that is the foundation of the society and the narration comprises of telling stories and at the same time bringing unity among individuals and has an identity in the nation. In an aim to unify, there will be the buildup of self-identity which will be the base of all the factors.

According to the Theory of Identity, the immigrants are always seen as “the other” (Bhabha, 1994: 36) by the local people. Western world imagines and describes the situation of the colonized subjectively and emotionally. From their point of view, the images of immigrants are associated with words like poor, savage, uncivilized and illiterate. The white people’s sense of superiority and distorted view of the immigrants are the primary reasons for every form of prejudice, gradually leading to cultural barrier. Although most of the immigrants want to maintain their Creole cultural identity when they first arrive in London, they are unable to stick to Creole tradition. The metropolis despises their culture. The immigrants are isolated from the

mainstream society and begin to experience every kind of discrimination. They have to face their problem of cultural identity directly for their traditional identity becomes more and more challenging.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Galahad locates himself as the universal subject of the city. He comes to London full of dreams and ambitions. In his opinion, London is a city paved with gold. It can provide a lot of possibilities. But after living and working in London for a while, he experiences the cultural shock and racial discrimination. He begins to have the awareness of his status of an outsider and the sense of alienation and difference. Samuel Selvon describes the experience of Galahad in detail. His encounter shows their dilemma of identity and the attitude from the host culture. This is the first time Galahad has realized his problem of identity. He is now facing a dangling identity. Before this point, he hadn't realized that all his troubles in job-search, in general life, all original from this.

In the novel *The Lonely Londoners*, each manifestation of self-identity, mimicry and hybridity is presented in a manner that indicates they have been limited regarding their use and exploitation. Although the use of the theory developed by Bhabha is not found exhaustively in the novel, there are areas that indicate its usage in some ways. While Galahad was enjoying 'the luxury and appreciating his experience of traveling through London, a white child walking along his mother shouts....that Black man!'. This is close to the tone that is evident in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* since it is portrayed as the white despising the black man [8] (Selvon, 1985, pp.87). The novel depicts the wrecking of the sensation of identity, of belonging to the English society, and that of who is the Englishman. This is depicted by his daydreams about London whose chimera was that the streets were gold-cemented and that jobs were lucrative and easily accessible. Another illusion was the thought that the English natives were courteous, hospitable, welcoming, and of human cordiality.

The novel *The Lonely Londoners* is an excellent sample of postcolonial literature that clearly depicts the woes of the West Caribbean migrants who settled in London. The migrants who moved to London during and soon after the colonization of the islands by the English men can easily account for their predicament through references to the activities that are spelled out in the setting and activities of this novel. The summary of the novel also presented looks into Selvon's aim of decolonization concerning the explorations and the display of the inhuman actions of the native Londoners. Galahad felt irritated due to the miseries that his color and to his fellow migrants had caused them in England, a place in which they had high expectations and hopes of developing their lives there (Kanneh, 1993, pp. 43).

In his conversation with the color black, Galahad portrays mimicry in the sense that by the denial of his self-identity, he had wished that he would be like his colonizers or at least not black. Galahad's disassociation from the reality is however soon overridden by the migrant's newly acquired character that assisted them to further their intimate desires. The migrant hybrids into a stronger character that tries to conquer the hierarchy that the colonizers had set in their minds. Through the portrayal of sexual superiority by the young black men, Selvon evidences Bhabha's hybridity coming into the scene in this novel. The migrants also hybrids into imposing

anthropological investigation despite being impoverished and loathed by the Londoners. Throughout the novel, the narrator explains the peculiar habits of a native Londoner and separates them from those of the migrant Londoners.

This novel describes the experiences of the West Indian immigrants in London. It shows how London that is the 'promised land' for the emigrants is nowhere close to the ideal. It is shown how the 'whites' of London look down upon the 'blacks'. The emigrants adjust themselves to this life. Migration is quite common in recent times. But the impact of migration on the individual is complex. Migration is, of course, a physical or geographical moving out of one's land where, the migrant believes, he will find satisfaction; but it also implies a severing of the immigrant's spiritual and symbolic ties with the mother country. And unless the migrant decides to leave the country due to some distaste for his home country, the migration process is bound to be painful. In *The Lonely Londoners*, readers see the lives of a group of Caribbean immigrants in London and their loneliness. This is humanistic because they see the difficulties of the people who have immigrated to England.

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U. Durgadevi
M.Phil. Research Scholar
Arignar Anna Government Arts College
Villupuram – 605602
sakthidurga005@gmail.com