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LANGUAGE AS A MIRROR OF CULTURAL SYNCRETISM AND HYBRIDITY

Zuzana Klímová

SAMUEL SELVON, as a West Indian author who immigrated into the Western country, found himself in a problematic position as a writer. Oscillating between several different cultural traditions with unequal power relations ascribed to them, he had to face the difficulties of finding an appropriate way of expression, which would reflect the plurality of his experience while still being graspable and comprehensible to wider audience, yet resisting mimicry of the dominant culture. Language and literary form become, side by side with the topical themes, essential tools in this quest.

The three novels of the Trinidadian-born author Samuel Selvon to be discussed in the following text are *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983). The publishing dates suggest the width of the time-span that covers writing of this 'trilogy' of expatriate novels. Although I am using the expression 'trilogy' here, I do not want to imply that I perceive the three novels as sequels in the traditional sense of the word. Selvon himself, in an interview with Alessandra Dotti, admits he does not consider *Moses Ascending* to be a proper sequel to *The Lonely Londoners* (Dotti 1990, 77)¹. All the three novels are to a certain degree following experience of the character Moses Aloetta but there is not a direct thematic link between the two younger novels (*Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*) and *The Lonely Londoners*. I understand these three works as a distinctive entity predominantly because of its dealing with the prevailing topic of exile and expatriation and also because of its reflection of the genesis of Selvon's point of

1. Kenneth Ramchand in the introduction to the Longman 1985 edition of *The Lonely Londoners* clearly expresses the uniqueness of the novel especially because of the difference of the main character of Moses Aloetta. On the other hand, Mervyn Morris is more cautious about preserving partial link between the novels when calling *Moses Ascending* "a kind of sequel" to *The Lonely Londoners* (Morris 1984, vii).

view representative of postcolonial experience covering positions of a new as well as experienced immigrant, but also that of an expatriate attempting to return 'home' after years spent in England.

The West Indian identity itself is showing syncretic qualities mixing African, European and Asiatic cultural traditions. Selvon is of the East Indian and partly Scottish background, but considers himself fully creolized Trinidadian without direct cultural links to any of the older traditions of his ancestors outside the West Indies. When transferred to the expatriate environment, the multidimensionality of his cultural experience seems to be even heightened. Cultural legacies that are brought together in Selvon's work develop into a specific hybrid² form fitting the emergence and development of a 'multicultural'³ community of London since the 1950s to its more 'trans-cultural' form.

Selvon himself admits in *The Lonely Londoners* that there is no such thing as West Indian community in the West Indies. Exile becomes necessary condition for its creation. It is partly the ignorance of the western community and the common experience of displacement on the side of the immigrants that participate on this 'external' formation of the West Indian community outside the West Indies creating an awareness of the common West Indian identity. Selvon expressed several times the wish to signpost the little islands in the maps/minds of the indifferent 'First World' countries (Thieme 1990, 72), "to project" by means of writing "[his] part of the world onto the map" (Nazarath 1988, 81). Lisa M. Kabesh identifies the text of *The Lonely Londoners* itself "as a work of community-building." She states that "it produces the community it describes in the act of writing, recording and mapping its voices and movements" (Kabesh 2011).

The building of such community undergoes various changes in the course of the three books. They explore aspects

2. I understand hybridity as a stage following syncretism. Hybridity is characterized by the dissolution of any boundaries between what is understood, in syncretic society, as still partially separate communities. In effect, it leads to "the dissolution of identities themselves" (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*).

3. Traditional usage of the term 'multicultural' implies syncretism (coexistence of various groups) rather than hybridity of (fluid intermixing of various traditions) 'trans-cultural' society (Wilson Harris's term).

of the experience of exile on an individual as well as a communal level. It tries to depict the changes and clashes between generations of immigrants who adopted different strategies of their dealing with the western environment. It further deals with different attempts of dealing with the feeling of displacement from the first generation's striving for assimilation, their disillusionment and often acceptance of lower position in society (*The Lonely Londoners*) to revolutionary and even violent practices inspired by the Black Power Movement in *Moses Ascending*. The feeling of displacement of the expatriate reaches its peak in *Moses Migrating* when Moses's attempt to return to his native land proves impossible, leaving him trapped in a kind of limbo between two countries symbolic of his ambivalence towards their cultures. This image reappears in all three novels repeatedly in various situations. A short passage from *The Lonely Londoners* which follows is characteristic of the feeling of disunity and ambivalent self-positioning: "That is to say, he neither here nor there, though he more here than there" (*The Lonely Londoners*).

Since *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon was struggling with the language of his writing. Such problems were, in fact, quite typical for the 1950s. As Bill Ashcroft et al. note, the search for alternative authenticity and some kind of committed writing were preoccupying many writers from newly independent countries or those yet struggling for political as well as cultural emancipation (Ashcroft 1989, 41). Selvon started to write *The Lonely Londoners* in Standard English, but the medium proved to be insufficient for his subject and he admitted the difficulties such writing presented for him. In the course of writing he gradually switched to the use of creolized English in both dialogue as well as narrative voice, and he prides himself for being the first one to do so to such an extent (Selvon in Nasta 1995, 74). His language and form, however, are not simply using one or the other variant only to distinguish characters from different social and/or cultural backgrounds. Selvon managed to create a very original, yet sufficiently realistic artificial language. Nick Bentley argues that *The Lonely Londoners* disrupts the 1950s assumption that realism and experimentalism in literary form were ideologically opposed (Bentley 2005, 69–70). Selvon draws on the whole continuum of linguistic material ranging from old-fashioned and even archaic English of the

Bible and canonical works of literature, through street/urban dialects to Trinidadian Standard as well as colloquial English. In an interview with Michael Fabre, Selvon says that what he tried to do was “to produce what [he] believed was thought of as a Caribbean dialect” (Fabre 1998, 69). Language, for him, is inseparable from the characters “it is part of them . . . just through the language alone you can describe what type of people you’re talking about” (Thieme 1990, 72).

Though the form and language look highly experimental, Selvon’s comments suggest that it is not a conscious attempt at revolt or subversion of traditional forms and language of ‘the colonizer’. For him, it was a discovery of something absolutely natural to his narrative expression. “With this particular book,” Selvon says, “I just felt that the language that I used worked and expressed exactly what I wanted it to express (Selvon in Nazareth 1988, 78). The same can be said about the form itself which some critics considered to be deconstructing the traditional form of a Western novel. Selvon denies in a 1983 interview that he had any such intentions, he simply “wrote it as it came to [him]” (Dotti 1990, 81).

The chosen code, as well as style and form reflect the hybrid nature of the West Indian exile. The pool of resources available to him gives rise to a very specific textual amalgam combining scribal medium of the dominant Western culture with oral features of storytelling and calypso typical of Trinidadian society. It was in *The Lonely Londoners*, Birat says, “that Selvon worked out a technique capable of reconciling authenticity with narrative coherence.” She also stresses Michael Fabre’s analysis of the novel in which he emphasizes the importance of language not as a reflector of Caribbean origin, but as a narrative device permitting the narrator to bridge the gap between Caribbean content and European form (Birat 2009, 2).

While reading *The Lonely Londoners* we become witnesses of what seems to be almost compulsive creative energy that participates in Selvon’s search for the ‘right’ form and language. The influence of orality and folk narration is most visible in this 1956 novel more than anywhere else. The more recognizably oral-narrative parts first appear in short episodes inserted into the wider frame of the story:

One time in Camden Town Bart get a small room, and he fall sick and he nearly dead in that room. He get pale and had fever and he coughing like a bass drum. Moses went to see him. Bart lay down there on this bed like he dead: when he start to cough he scattering blanket and shaking up like a old engine. (Selvon 1985, 64)

However, this technique reaches its peak towards the end of the book where narration gradually transforms into a pure stream of consciousness with hardly any interruptions by punctuation or paragraphs. This significantly long part of the text contains also a passage where Selvon offers the listener (rather than the reader) series of anecdotes or ballads about what happened to Moses and his friends. Like most of the 'ballads' even this one spins around women. The whole event is described as if told 'in one breath':

listen to this ballad what happen to Moses one summer night one splendid summer night with the sky brilliant with stars like in the tropics he was liming in green Park when a English fellar come up to him and say you are just the man I am looking for who me Moses say yes the man say come with me Moses went wondering what the test want and the test take him to a blonde who was standing up under a tree and talk a little so Moses couldn't hear but Blondie shake her head then he take Moses to another one who was sitting on a bench and she say yes so the test come back to Moses and want to pay Moses to go with the woman Moses was so surprise that he say yes quickly and went with the thing and the test hover in the background afterwards he ask Moses if he would come again and Moses say yes.

(Selvon 1985, 106-7)

Such stream of consciousness including number of other 'ballads', goes on for several pages. Neither of his later works employed oral narrative features to such an extent. The earlier writing owes much to fresh intuitiveness and also greater uncertainty about the style Selvon probably felt at the beginning of his career as a professional writer. In later works the bold spontaneity of *The Lonely Londoners* was gradually substituted for a more conscious and careful fabrication. Characters themselves required the change of tone and language. When talking

about *Moses Migrating*, Selvon admits he felt it necessary to adjust Moses's language as well as thoughts to the new environment. Also both *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* emerged from the pen of a much more experienced writer and Selvon is clear that in later books, writing became slower and more conscious. In comparison to his first texts which were practically not revised, with the rising number of successful publications he began to feel responsibility to keep certain standard expected of him (Nazareth 1988, 86–91). This shift can also be understood as showing greater confidence of an author who had already found his true authentic way of expression and no longer struggles to prove its relevance and adequacy. The result is a more subtle employment of language and form in both *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*. They are much more modest in their stylistics and particularly the use of the fabricated dialect and oral fluency of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Instead, the multidimensionality and the experience of the exile are incorporated especially into the very specific symbiosis of various registers in combination with topics/situations which usually create tension or clash, often with ironic, bitter effect. Comedy is, in fact, crucial aspect of Trinidadian calypso, but also of a black West Indian community in general. It works as a defense mechanism (Nasta 1988, 11) of the individual as well as community to come to terms with the sufferings of the past and those found under their present conditions not only in exile. The ending of *The Lonely Londoners* offers one of these moments when comedy is uncovered to be only a mask covering bitter reality not only from the outer world but also those who wear this mask to make their lives bearable and manageable:

As if on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening—what? He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart. As if the boys laughing because they afraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity. (Selvon 1985, 142)

From the West Indian, or more specifically Trinidadian, narrative elements we can clearly identify the continuing use of episodic structure of all the three books whose main building elements are kinds of ballads or anecdotes built around charac-

teristic trickster figures and ‘buffoons’ of West Indian folk narratives. The omnipresent feeling of ‘the carnivalesque’ is further supported by other features of calypso – its rhythm and music, irony, sexuality, machismo and picong⁴ that are quintessential for West Indian identity. In the same way he speaks about his final choice of language and form, Selvon describes calypsonian elements as coming naturally with the West Indian characters presenting them “most truthfully” in this particular form he is using (Thieme 1990, 72).

We can find excellent examples of this employment of typically calypsonian elements in all three novels. This demanding form requires thorough knowledge of various registers and dialects of English. This device therefore dominates the later of the three novels. With growing experience with the craft of writing, Selvon’s technique evolved to a more scribal structure than that which he presented in *The Lonely Londoners* but he still preserves its originality and edge while it remains perfectly comprehensible to the Western reader. Selvon draws on all dimensions of language available to him and although often ‘acting’ like mistakes, his picong demonstrations always resonate with several meanings and connotations. In *Moses Ascending* we can find proclamations just wincing under a picong jab, such as that you have to “peddle⁵ your own canoe for survival” (my emphasis Selvon 1984, 39), or that one has to behave like a gentleman in any situation, “even if it’s pouring water on a duck’s back”⁶ (my emphasis Selvon 1984, 40). Such ‘misspellings’ or ‘wrong’ formation of idioms and phrases is also accompanied by their absurd misplacement creating ironic twists so typical of calypso. For example, when Moses Aloetta threatens members of Black Power, he boasts that he “will knock them in the Old Kent Road⁷ with a language alone . . . [his] very usage of English will have them rolling in the aisles”⁸ (my emphasis Selvon 1984, 78).

4. Picong is characterized by playful use of language and wit based on caricature. The Free Dictionary defines it as “teasing or satirical banter, originally a verbal duel in song” from Spanish *picón* mocking (*Collins English Dictionary*).

5. paddle vs. peddle – ironic effect of an inappropriate word as well as the ‘doubling’ of the meaning in the particular context.

6. “like water off a duck’s back” meaning something has no effect on somebody (OALD).

7. 1890s song by Albert Chevalier “Knocked ‘em in the Old Kent Road” sang in cockney dialect (Archeophone.org).

8. Correctly formed idiom but misplaced to create a comic effect.

Similar technique appears also throughout *Moses Migrating*. Here the intentionally distorted and misplaced words often appear in a rather pathetic or philosophising context which itself emphasizes the comical effect this “mock-heroic” work (Whitlock and Tiffin 1992, 93; Ramchand 1985, 11) creates. Such as the passage when Moses regrets poor white inhabitants of England who are “trying to raise a little *econo-mince* to feed their families” and he feels like a “*masoshit*” for leaving England in such a difficult situation, moreover, in the company of all those happy blacks who are gladly leaving it (my emphasis, Selvon 1992, 25).

On the other hand, Selvon makes use also of language associated with Western literary canon (especially the classics like Shakespeare, Defoe, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Fielding as well as the Scriptures) to create more or less the same effect – beginning with the allocation of the titles – in “A Special Preface by Moses Aloetta Esq.” introducing *Moses Migrating* or the Fieldingian addressing of the reader “dear R”⁹ throughout *Moses Ascending*. Very archaic language is again used as a contrast to an absurd situation when Moses is found in a compromising situation with Jeannie and he leaves his ‘penthouse’ flat for the basement he detests and which also symbolises his social position within his circle¹⁰. His lamentation over the loss of the flat resembles the language of Doomsday: “Thus are the mighty fallen, empires totter, monarchs de-throne and the walls of Pompeii bite the dust” (Selvon 1984, 134).

Fluent transition from poetic passages or archaic language to more oral tone of ballads interspersed with Trinidadian expressions, tongue-in-cheek calypso humour contrasting with philosophical or moralizing passages, unexpected juxtapositions of several registers in one paragraph or even within one sentence, all that forms the specific language and style characteristic for Selvon’s novels. Combination of all the above-mentioned literary techniques pinpoints very well the omnipresent irony of the displaced exile, who does not fully possess any of those traditions, yet his or her whole identity is weaved

9. “Without further ado, dear R, let me say that after these sober reflections, I resolve to turn over a new leaf” (Selvon 1984, 117).

10. When moving upwards for the first time Moses comments on it as follows: “Having lived below the surface of the world all my life I ensconced myself in the highest flat in the house” (Selvon 1984, 3).

out of them. Nevertheless, Selvon's uniqueness does not rest only in his ability to capture this difficult situation of the exile. He manages to go beyond the depressing hopelessness such position can create. He creates a new, evolved form of the displacement which is more universal, because the feeling of displacement no longer belongs only to immigrants, but can be found throughout the global urbanized trans-cultural society. Kenneth Ramchand expresses it accurately when saying that the language Selvon uses "is not the language of the people of any one stratum of the society; . . . [it] contains and expresses the sensibility of a whole society" (Ramchand 1988, 229). Its strength and authenticity lies not in using any particular real language variation, but exactly in that particular "negotiation of 'verisimilitude' and 'fabrication'" Selvon managed to fashion (Selvon in Fabre 1988, 67). It allowed him to liberate himself from the restrictions of the stereotypical connotations connected to the use of Standard and Creolized English and gave his work a truly 'trans-cultural' dimension showing the new direction of the British novel reflecting the cultural changes of modern society. He shows how literature can preserve the essentials of a particular community, or communities, while evolving according to the needs and changing environment of contemporary world. Selvon openly expressed his wish not only to place Trinidad on the map of the world, but to "enrich, renew English language and its literature" by his work and by that to contribute to what might one day be called not Third World or British, but "world literature" (Selvon in Nazareth 1988, 86). He believed that through literature bigger countries can learn and understand more about what is happening in other parts of the world (Selvon in Dotti 1990, 83). *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* remain principal works in this quest for better understanding between various cultures whose potential has not yet been fully realized.

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ABSTRACT

In the following essay I intend to consider the issues of the search for an authentic expression in works of Samuel Selvon who employs various literary and linguistic devices in order to find adequate means reflecting his position of the author caught between (at least) two cultural traditions. Selvon has to deal with differences of narrative traditions and power relations of the various languages/cultures participating in postcolonial discourse. The technique Selvon uses is, from my perspective, a kind of manifestation of cultural evolution and represents one of the possible reactions to socio-political issues related to the global changes in the twentieth century. Selvon's particular literary language presents us with a concord of calypsonian elements with the wide continuum from creolized to Standard English creating the atmosphere of a new postcolonial community. Through his particular literary form, Selvon demystifies both West Indian and European cultures, thus creating space for individual consciousness of his characters as well as readers through work which is capable of preserving the essentials of community while evolving according to the needs of the contemporary world.

AUTHOR

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