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Racial Prejudices in Sam Selvon's

The Lonely Londoners

The Lonely Londoners, a novel by Sam Selvon, broaches and expounds the issue of immigration to Great Britain from her former colonies during the 1950s. Selvon, who was of Trinidadian descent himself and was "part of the first-generation immigrants [...] who had made the passage to Britain from the West Indies" (Pichler 47), published the novel in 1956, in the midst of increasing immigration waves and rising tensions in the country. Given that Trinidad achieved independence in 1962, "Trinidadians and other West Indians were – legally, at least – considered full subjects of the British crown", meaning that "Selvon was not a border-crossing 'immigrant' in the strictest usage of the word" (Dyer 113) and did not write out-of-language or out-of-country. Selvon's novel is written from the immigrants' point of view and employs a creolized form of English and myriad slang expressions as a multicultural narration strategy. The book accentuates the life of West Indians immigrating to the Mother Country in hopes of acquiring well-paid jobs and finer living standards. The fact that *The Lonely Londoners* focuses on immigrants from the West Indies is not only relevant due to the author's background, but because they were "the first nonwhites to settle in large number" and "[o]f all the immigrants arriving in Britain in the middle of the twentieth century, none attracted as much attention from whites as West Indian men" (Collins 391), beginning with the passengers who had disembarked from the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, which marked "year zero for mass black immigration" (ibid). Selvon's fictional characters are depicted struggling and eventually succeeding, not only to accommodate to the unfamiliar climate and culture, but to a world that mistreats them solely on the basis of the color of their skin.

Selvon draws attention to the racism, mistreatment, inequality and prejudices with which the immigrants are faced when arriving in Britain. To this end, the reader is introduced to several characters and events, each bestowed with a pivotal role to illuminate the issue. Praising the work as noteworthy, Ashley Dawson mentions Selvon in his monograph, elaborating on the migration to the United Kingdom after 1948: "Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* depicts the first generation of overwhelmingly male immigrants from the Caribbean struggling to cope with the stereotypes and prejudices they encountered in Britain" (30). Selvon presents the situation right after WWII, when the stereotypes had only evolved into prejudices and hostility, rather than erupted into violence and rioting. In her paper on the immigration and politics of everyday life in Selvon's fiction, Rebecca Dyer asserts that Selvon's target audience were not the Caribbean people, rather white Britons, whom he sought to inform of the immigrant life as he "inserted important messages about race relations in Britain" (115) in his fiction. The first character introduced in *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses Aloetta, is a male Trinidadian immigrant who has already spent ten years in London and has helped out other West Indians who come to the UK in search of a better life. One such immigrant is Galahad, the second protagonist of the story, who arrives in Britain at the beginning of the novel. Moses aids the newcomer since "he used to remember how desperate he was when he was in London for the first time and didn't know anybody and anything" (Selvon 3). Recalling the plight that he himself

has faced, Moses deems it only fair to assist his countrymen when in a position to. The gratuitous aversion towards people of color is all too well known to him.

The first scene in the novel reveals the importance of discourse with regards to this aversion, as it is made clear that prejudices against the West Indians are stirred up by the media. Whether it is written or spoken communication, words tend to shape the way in which people approach or perceive a certain issue. In her analysis of the concept of nation and belonging in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Pichler suggests that the nation, among other things, is "a system of (cultural) representations, a discourse which creates significations and influences our behaviour towards and perceptions of others and ourselves" (45), a concept that "many make use of in order to exclude 'Others' from being part of and taking part in the 'imagined community'" (ibid). This representation matters if an individual is to be recognized as a rightful member of the community. In the novel, it is the radio and the newspaper that produce discourse about the immigrants and their reasons for coming to Great Britain, essentially deciding how the 'other' is represented. It comes as no surprise then that mainstream media is the kernel of the prejudices displayed by the white Britons in *The Lonely Londoners*. Moses states this at the very beginning: "...whatever the newspaper and the radio say in this country, that is the people Bible" (Selvon 2). The media describe the West Indians as primitives who imagine that the streets of London are paved with gold. The first scene describes a reporter enquiring into the story of a family that has only just arrived in Britain from Jamaica. The reporter portrays the event as an invasion in his periodical. "The next day when the *Echo* appear it had a picture, and the picture write: Now, Jamaican Families Come to Britain" (Selvon 12). Such half-truths and scare tactics formed and spread by the media serve to corroborate the notion of an ample arrival of immigrants, warning the British public that hitherto the immigrants had been arriving alone, but now their entire families followed.

Media fearmongering resonates with the already existing racism, as it essentially verbalizes it into a particular discourse, but it remains unclear why such intolerance – taking the shape of prejudices and stereotypes – is present in the first place. In their essay on the psychology of prejudices, Victoria Esses et al. introduce a theory that apprehension towards the 'other' is caused when two groups are forced to share scarce resources. The paper uses the term resource stress, further explaining: "Resource stress refers to any perception that, within a society, access to resources may be limited for one's group. The resources involved may include economic resources, such as money and jobs, as well as less tangible resources such as power and prestige" (Esses et al. 100). According to this theory, if too many people are crammed in a certain area, the resources end up stretched thin, which prompts hostility between different groups. In *The Lonely Londoners*, white Britons feel threatened by the influx of West Indian workers, who are manifestly ready to accept smaller wages than them. This leads to the so-called zero-sum belief – a belief that the more the other group obtains,

the less is available for one's own group. Hence the competition between the groups. Moses alludes to this not always having been the case, only in the latest period as the immigration rate increased, and presents his assumptions to Galahad: "Well, as far as I could figure, they frighten that we get job in front of them [...] The other thing is that they just don't like black people, and [...] that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find out from way back" (Selvon 20). The trepidations shared by the white Britons are, Moses argues, illogical. Rarely do the British lose employment in favor of a 'spade', particularly when it comes to well-paid jobs. The way Moses describes the prejudices held by the British instantly reminds Galahad of the situation in the United States, alluding that Galahad had either previously been mistreated in the 'Land of the Free', or simply affirming America's notorious reputation as far as racial inequality is concerned. Moses, drawing a comparison between the US and the UK, admits that similarities exist, but that white Americans dislike nonwhites and tell them so outright, whilst white Britons treat the immigrants coldly and resort to "the old English diplomacy" (ibid.), as the British refuse to admit out loud that they are perturbed by the presence of black people.

Group competition is closely tied to the dissemination of discourse, since it fuels primarily negative narratives and representation of rival groups. When they feel threatened, groups resort to different ways of attempting to remove the competition. In their paper, Esses et al. denote several strategies that aid the groups in completing this agenda, the first of which is promoting negative discourse: "First, a group may attempt to decrease the competitiveness of the other group. This may take the form of expressing negative attitudes [...] about members of the other group [...] in an attempt to convince both one's own group and other groups of the lack of worth of the competitor" (101). Moses and Galahad discuss how this strategy comes to be when Moses narrates the story of Cap, a young Jamaican immigrant who pulls tricks and hoaxes. Cap is characterized by idleness and manipulation. Since he cares not for an honest day's work, he employs cunning tricks and charm to get by. Cap does not present a prototype of a West Indian worker, but rather a swindler who can be of any race and color, yet the blame will be associated with his own cluster at the end of the day. Moses warns of the credibility this provides for the prejudices maintained by the British; "...is fellars like that who muddy the water for a lot of us [...] One worthless fellar go around making bad, and give the wrong impression for all the rest" (Selvon 34). Prejudices are often born from isolated incidents and are then applied to a group as a whole. The Jamaican immigrant pulls ruses in hotels, falsely presenting himself as a student and giving promises of an incoming allowance, with no intention of ever paying the bill, and then his misbehavior gets associated with others like him, not just Jamaicans, but West Indians and black people in general. Having introduced the story of Cap to his illustration of the migrant underclass and their experience, "Selvon does not suggest *all* immigrants have been unjustly defamed, simply that in the current atmosphere, racial mythology [...] is disproportionately powerful" (Ellis 222). The mischief Cap causes only fuels

the prejudices formed by the whites and becomes the nexus point of discourse that seeks to remove the competition, thus making it even more difficult for the diligent, hard-working West Indians to make an honest living.

Incidentally, the mistreatment is apparent in the employment of immigrants, not just the lack of it. They are given lesser jobs, if any at all, and are gravely underpaid. The 'logic' behind the zero-sum belief demands that the West Indians be given lower wages, else there would not be enough money circulating for the white Britons. Supporting the mistreatment of immigrants is the notion that they are ignorant and bereft of skills. In his essay *Pride and Prejudice: West Indian Men in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, Marcus Collins discusses several aspects of the immigrant experience, ranging from family life and interracial sex to interracial violence and citizenship. As for the experience of employment, Collins asserts that West Indians emigrated primarily in order to work, as most migrants do, but when they began seeking employment in Great Britain, "they found out that whites doubted whether they were either willing to work or able to do so" (399), as the general consensus was that migrants are slow, lazy and irresponsible workers. Thus, the worst of vacancies were reserved for them. The exploitation of West Indians as presented in the novel is based on the false impression of immigrants as less intelligent or inept, which simultaneously justifies their mistreatment. The employers take advantage of the immigrants being in dire need of employment, since they are ready to do just about anything, no matter how inconsiderable the salary is. Moses warns Galahad that many firms even deny access to black people applying for a job, and if a vacancy is open to West Indians, it is solely for the low-paid labor they provide: "They think that is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for them white fellars" (Selvon 35). Moses' words resonate perfectly with the statistics from the 1950s, as "over three-fifths of the men were placed in such [semi- or unskilled] jobs in Britain, with fully half of them consigned to the lowest category" (Collins 401), prompting Collins to draw a grim conclusion in his article: "West Indian men were damned if they worked and damned if they didn't" (402). Selvon's characters are not poor as a result of incompetence to find a suitable job or get promotions. They are bereft of the good life because their employers seek to profit off a labor force severely underpaid, while the government and the society at large refuse to acknowledge them as equal to the white Britons, which translates to the migrants' salaries ending up unequal as well. Moses and Galahad are powerless to oppose the harsh conditions imposed on them, not unable or unwilling to recognize the injustice of it. This mistreatment of the West Indians, compared to their white counterparts, is also one of few ways for the West Indians to conceptualize the other side, i.e. the life of the British majority. Ma, for example, is an honest immigrant who works in a restaurant and who 'meets' the white Britons in quite a bizarre manner: "Only from washing up Ma form a idea of the population of London" (Selvon 68). Ma lives in a different world than the whites do and her only contact with them is through the dishes she washes – a rare point of contact between the worlds of the rich and the poor, albeit brief and indirect.

As vile as the exploitation of cheap labor-force can become, it is the ordinary Britons who are described as most hostile towards the migrants, for they are perturbed by the influx of 'spades' from the Caribbean. Due to racism and xenophobia, the British disdain the immigrants and seek to separate themselves from the colonial 'other'. This phenomenon of prejudice is explained by Gordon Allport, who uses the term in-groups. Allport explains in his essay: "These [in-group] memberships constitute a web of habits. When we encounter an outsider who follows different customs, we unconsciously say: 'He breaks my habits'" (46). In-groups give people a sense of 'us', for they hold the conventions and traits one treasures. People prefer the familiar. That which is alien is regarded as less good, potentially harmful or even dangerous. During his first winter in Great Britain, Galahad embarks on quite a venturesome undertaking. Starving and frightened, Galahad goes to the park, catches and kills a pigeon, which he plans to cook with rice. Observing the whole episode is an old white woman, who panics at such an incongruous sight, screaming "monster" and "killer" at Galahad. Galahad flees the scene and retells this incident to Moses: "The old geezer call me a cruel monster [...] If you did see she face, you would think I commit a murder" (Selvon 120). Galahad is bemused by this conundrum: such reprimands are directed at him for killing one of a thousand pigeons, yet no one seems perturbed by the West Indian immigrants starving on the streets. The old lady's reaction is such because her familiar environment is jeopardized. Pigeons are not for eating, such is the established rule, and if one breaks it, then their values must be savage, outlandish and intellectually inferior. Focusing on the character of Galahad and his feelings of anxiety in London, Kanneh argues that migrants from various Caribbean islands form a new identity, that of the black British, by which they "radically change the identity of London itself, *claiming* London for their own" (40, emphasis in the original). This identity, with its new norms and patterns that stand in stark contrast to the ones established by the whites, is met with outrage. Norms are universal, but there are no universal norms, which is why the Britons cannot comprehend the customs of the West Indians, who on their part regard their behavior as normal and acceptable.

Prejudices arise from stereotypes as well. It could be argued that the two come hand in hand. Forming a widely-held and oversimplified image of a person or a thing necessarily gives rise to preconceived opinions of the stereotyped concept. US philosopher Lawrence Blum, who wrote about stereotypes and stereotyping, describes the phenomena as cultural entities. Even if a person does not accept or hold a stereotype, they still recognize it when used, the effects of which can be subliminal. Going on, Blum claims: "When we say that group X is stereotyped in a certain way [...] we generally refer to the recognizable presence in a certain sociocultural context of salient images of that group – more precisely, of associations between a group label and a set of characteristics" (Blum 252). Labeling a stereotype as "sociocultural" is the crucial part. An individual may form their own personal stereotype, but if it stays at that, it may as well be classified as an opinion. A cultural stereotype has to be accepted by a majority and operate

so as to model the general stance of the stereotyped group, which is why Blum refers to them as 'cultural' (252). In *The Lonely Londoners*, the West Indians are seen stereotyped as oddballs and criminals who refuse to adapt to the British lifestyle. Moses mentions how the white Britons regard all black people as drug-dealers; "They like weed more than anybody else, and from the time they see you black they figure that you know all about it, where to make contact and how much to pay" (Selvon 114). The irony, Moses explains, is that the whites are drawn to marijuana as much as the West Indians, if not more, and yet the prevailing air has it that black people are smugglers and drug-consumers (or associated with them). The judgement has no relation to reality, and yet it comes out dominant. It is unlikely that encountering an honest West Indian would shift a Briton's perspective on the matter. The Briton would either regard this as an isolated incident or refuse to accept that one exists.

Even if not of biased opinions themselves, other Britons will heed to the beliefs already established by the majority. It is a question of numbers. An individual feels the need to submit to the opinions of a larger group, especially one's in-group, as a result of social pressure, even if they disagree with those opinions. Scarcely anyone wishes to be classified an eccentric. This phenomenon is known as the Asch Paradigm, named after Solomon Asch, a psychologist who studied if and how personal opinions and beliefs can be affected by a majority group. Asch clarified the findings of his many experiments as follows: "Apparently the sheer weight of numbers or authority sufficed to change opinions, even when no arguments for the opinions themselves were provided" (3). Even a wrong opinion will be accepted, because the minority group often yields to a majority group and their beliefs. In the novel, on one occasion Galahad encounters a mother and a child in the streets of London and courteously attempts to confer with them. "But the child mother uneasy as they stand up there on the pavement with so many white people around: if they was alone she might have talked a little [...] but instead she pull the child along and she look at Galahad and give a sickly sort of smile" (Selvon 76). The woman is constrained due to social pressure, as it is explicitly stated that she would not behave this way were they "alone". It is a patent instance of the Asch Paradigm at work. The woman's impudent demeanor towards the West Indians and any prejudices she may display are not formulated by the media or discourse, they result from social implications. This is a case of a more subtle, indirect influence of media narratives. Their fearmongering is absorbed by most Britons, a majority, whose attitudes and actions force the other Britons, the minority that has remained immune to media lies and half-truths (although, these cannot be dismissed, since their effects are still subliminal and serve at the point of recognition of stereotypes), to subscribe to in-group logic. The woman is not hostile towards immigrants. Her interest to pleasantly confer with Galahad is depicted as genuine, but she displays anxiety in his presence, and Galahad is aware of this – and affected by it, as it causes him deep sorrow. The other whites discard the immigrants, so it should only be expected of the woman to do the same, to which she conforms.

This episode leads Galahad to form a theory of his own: it is the color black that the Britons do not like; it is the color black causing his troubles; it is the color to blame for all his ordeals; there is nothing wrong with him individually. "So Galahad talking to the colour Black, as if a person, telling it that is not *he* who causing botheration in the place, but Black, who is a worthless thing for making trouble all about" (Selvon 77, emphasis in the original). Referring to the cultural setting in Britain, whether fictional or not, and to the friction between various cultures in the postcolonial period, Pichler arrives to a conclusion that "race undoubtedly was and presumably still is the most powerful factor of alienation and insecurity" (47). According to Pichler, the immigrant characters in *The Lonely Londoners* are seen struggling to overcome the initial culture shock, to somehow acculturate to the Mother Country, but this goal proves difficult for them to attain as they are stuck in "a society in which race and social class are fixed and rigid instruments for categorizing people" (51). The environment in which the West Indians find themselves resolves to constitute them as second-class citizens, assuming they are accepted as citizens at all. This in turn creates problems of poverty and a lack of education among the West Indians, giving further claim that they are not as resourceful as the white Britons, and it keeps their category of race intertwined with a perpetual state of poverty. Galahad feels so strongly about this belief that he attacks the color black, referring to it with a capital B, and blames it for all his misfortune, designating it as the main culprit for the vacancies and lodgings that elude the West Indian immigrants. It is worth noting that at this point the color of his skin no longer constitutes a racial category, but a socially constructed one. In her paper on racism, culture and national identity, Kadiatu Kanneh, analyzing numerous works of fiction produced in the UK and the US that tackle the topic of racial inequality, refers to this specific scene with Galahad and states that, in this moment in the story, Galahad "discovers a sudden split between his identity as a British citizen and the Blackness which keeps him continually in transit" (44). However, as Kanneh discusses, the term 'race' seems to become synonymous with other terms denoting the 'other', as a result of which "Inflation, culture, home and belonging become words fraught with contested meaning, and the word immigrant becomes totally conflated with the word Black" (41). It is the conflation of immigrant with the color black that serves as "the cause of a separation between citizen and ethnicity, between British and foreign" (44). Stereotypes associated with West Indians – them being thieves, drug-dealers, unintelligent, incompetent, inferior – are treated as inborn traits of the black community. It is these characteristics that define one as black more than the skin color itself, which is why blackness can be applied to any outsider deemed undesirable, any 'other', no matter what race they belong to. The actual color of the skin is important solely on the level of easier identification of an immigrant's blackness. Thus, this becomes an issue of "narrative, myth and emotion" (Kanneh 44) more than reality, affirming again the impact and importance of discourse. By being black, one is an immigrant, and by being an immigrant, one is black.

Reactions to prejudices and stereotypes can vary. Other than our in-groups, which include people who follow the same customs and abide by the same norms, essentially – groups that one belongs to, Gordon Allport also distinguishes reference groups – those groups one strives for and looks to acquire their membership. Allport uses an example to better enlighten his theory: "A Negro may wish to relate himself to the white majority in his community. He would like to partake of the privileges of this majority and be considered one of its members. He may feel so intensely about the matter that he repudiates his own in-group" (Allport 37). In other words, if one's in-group is underprivileged and discriminated against, the person will naturally look to another group, one that is better off, which then becomes one's reference group. Some West Indians in *The Lonely Londoners* react to the prejudices by denying their origin, hoping to be accepted into their reference group, in this case the white Britons. This self-hatred and feeling of shame lead the migrants to distance themselves from their own kin, if only to avoid being associated with them. Such is the case with Bart, a West Indian immigrant of rather light skin color, who is embarrassed of his company and tends to present himself as more English. He would justify himself to the white Britons; "I here with these boys, but I not one of them, look at colour of my skin" (Selvon 48). And yet, despite all his attempts and claims, Bart is never accepted by the whites. He cannot escape his in-group any more than he can escape his blackness, regardless of how much he tries.

In brief, the prejudices directed towards Selvon's characters originate from media libels, unfounded trepidations, misguided assertions, racial discrimination, intolerance of different customs, subliminal effect of stereotyping, and social pressure. The immigrants presented in *The Lonely Londoners* display discernible resolve to endure the daunting trials of their everyday life in the United Kingdom. Based on no grounds, rather through faulty reasoning (zero-sum logic, fears bred by media narratives, etc.) and a failure to understand or accept the plight of the 'other', the white Britons question the morals and diligence of their Caribbean neighbors. The migrants are left having to deal with the uncomfortable reality of belonging and not belonging at the same time, inhabiting a city of divided worlds. The novel brings the scattered individual stories of migrants into a single narrative, one that finally tells their story.

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