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**MIGRATION AND TRAUMA: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF SAMUEL SELVON'S *THE LONELY LONDONERS***

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the challenges faced by West Indian immigrants in London as reflected in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. It brings to the consciousness of the reader, the eventual sense of failed promise which migrants experience on arriving the supposed "Promised Land" in the West. The reading of this paper is a form of therapy which has the ability to reduce obsession with the West and subsequently, the rate of migration to the West. To achieve this, the research employs the psychoanalytical theoretical framework and further employs the use of secondary sources of data in its analyses. The study projects that the West Indians' experiences of racism, rejection, cultural dislocation, stereotyping, disillusionment and culture shocks in alien lands can be seen as other forms of trauma. Trauma in the senses mentioned above ends up creating neurosis for its textual characters who in real life situations are ultimately patients. Therefore, there is a need to analyze and proffer solution to this trauma so as to salvage the self image, mentality and culture of the affected immigrants. Selvon in his work, ultimately envisions homecoming for West Indian immigrants who have not achieved success in the West.

Keywords: Trauma, Migration, Psychoanalysis, Immigrants

### **Introduction**

After the second World War, the British Government in need of cheap labour to make up for the losses encountered during the war encouraged mass migration for all the people living in commonwealth countries. This migration was backed up by the British Nationality Act of 1948 because it further granted the immigrants British citizenship and full right of entry. Therefore, in June 1948, about 500 Jamaicans were brought to the United Kingdom by the British troopship; MV Empire Wind. This movement formed the bases for Samuel Selvon's work, *The Lonely Londoners*.

Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth and Michelle Balaev have first written theoretic works on trauma which have been referred to as 'literary trauma' in literature. Nevertheless, the works of these scholars have failed to include the heavy contribution which the environment and its culture make on the traumatic experiences of the victims involved. This is the gap which this paper aims to fill in literature. Therefore, the interrogation of the traumatic experiences of black and coloured immigrants and its impact on their individual identities and self form the focus of this paper. It seeks to find out- what ways and to what extent trauma as experienced by Migrants impacts their self -

identities.

### Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis has been applied variously by scholars in interpreting behaviours of characters and also meanings of symbols. Psychoanalysis as a sub-discipline has further been revised and developed in different directions or theories. Under the broad umbrella of psychoanalysis, there are at least twenty-two different theoretical orientations regarding the underlying theory of understanding human mentality and development. The various approaches in treatment called "psychoanalytic" vary as much as the different theories do. Some of Freud's colleagues and students such as Alfred Adler, Eric Erickson, Karen Horney and Carl Jung, went on to develop their own ideas independently. This study, however, employs the Freudian theory in understanding the actual reasons why people migrate and the implications of this on their identity and entire psyche.

Freud is considered to be the founder of the psychodynamic approach to psychology which looks closely at the unconscious drives that motivate people to act in certain ways. He repeatedly talked about the role of the mind. He believes that the mind is responsible for both conscious and unconscious decisions based on drives and forces. Unconscious desires therefore to him, motivate people to act accordingly. This paper interprets these 'desires' and 'decisions' to include the desire to migrate from one location, region or country of origin to another. He believes that people are simply actors in the drama of their own minds pushed by desire and pulled by coincidence.

Note that, psychoanalysis has often been applied to characters in literature to understand their motivations. Terry Eagleton opines that the turmoil of the relationship between developments in modern literary theory, political and ideological turmoil of the twentieth

century does not end with wars, economic slumps and revolutions. For him, it is also experienced by those caught up in it in personal ways, "it is a crisis of human relationships and of the human personality, as well as a social convulsion" (130). He believes that in this period, such experiences have become constituted in new ways as a systematic field of knowledge which is now known as psychoanalysis. This paper therefore is in tandem with the above view

The need to work and labour has dominated human history and "for Freud, that harsh necessity means that we must repress some of our tendencies to pleasure and gratification" (Literary Theory...131). This is the quest for greener pastures and a better life not minding the trauma it carries along as we will see in the texts under study. Freud further argues in *The Future of an Illusion* that

If a society has not developed beyond a point where the satisfaction of one group of its members depends upon the suppression of another, it is understandable that those suppressed should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence their labour has made possible but, in whose riches they have small a share (Literary Theory 140).

According to Eagleton, psychoanalysis is among other things the fact that, "its... intellectual armoury is bent on the exploration of such fundamental matters as what people find gratifying and what they do not, how they can be relieved and made more happy" (166). To him, "we live in a society which on the one hand pressurizes us into the pursuit of instant gratification, and on the other hand imposes on whole sectors of the population, an endless deferment of fulfillment" (167). This study enquires into the dynamics of pleasure and sadness as experienced by immigrants because of the need to know how much repression and deferred fulfillment an individual is likely to endure as seen in the characters under study.

Human attitude, mannerism, experience and

thought are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious. The unconscious mind (or the unconscious) consists of the processes in the minds which occur automatically and are not available to introspection and include thought processes, memories, interests and motivations. Even though these processes exist well under the surface of conscious awareness they are theorized to exert an impact on behaviour.

The unconscious mind according to Freud can be seen as the source of dreams and automatic thoughts (those that appear without any apparent cause), the repository of forgotten memories (that may still be accessible to consciousness at some later time), and the locus of implicit knowledge, that is, the things that we have learned so well that we do them without thinking.

### Literature Review

Generally, many writers like Samuel Selvon, V.S Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, George Lamming, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Chinua Achebe, Kazuo Ishiguro and many others, had left their respective places of birth which were mostly former colonies, for better opportunities abroad and in the process became expatriates.

Selvon's *Ways Of Sunlight*, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Migrating*, *Moses Ascending*, Lamming's *The Emigrants*, *Water With Berries* and *The Pleasure Of Exile*, Edward Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* and many others, have all revealed the immigrant experiences of migration and further the consciousness of the immigrants after the decline of the European empires. Chimamanda Adichie has also in her work *Americanah* described further the trauma associated with migrating to foreign lands; United States of America and London in particular. Blacks and coloureds alike, therefore, go through the feeling of isolation, stereotyping, loneliness, disillusionment, and racism as a result of living in the Western countries.

This complex problem faced by immigrants is best captured by Sree Latha Malyala in her paper which states that, "People move to make their dreams real and to further their future prospects- gain financially and professionally. But while shifting to a foreign country they do not ask themselves if they will be able to adjust to the life and community there" (2).

These feelings no longer need to be repressed to the unconscious mind as it would not help the immigrant.

### Migration

Today, people from around the globe choose to migrate to the United Kingdom as well as to other developed countries like United States of America, both legally and illegally, for better educational and employment opportunities, to escape persecution, to relocate after catastrophic events, including terrorism, disasters and war, or to join relatives who migrated at an earlier time probably in search of a better life.

According to Dinesh Bhugra "people who migrate for economic or educational reasons may move singly and at a later date be joined by their families, whereas people who move due to political reasons may move *en masse* but with or without their families" (1). The process of migration has been described as occurring in broadly three stages. The first stage is the pre-migration, involving the decision and preparation to move. The second stage of migration is the physical relocation of individuals from one place to the other. The third stage, postmigration is defined as the, "absorption of the immigrant within the social and cultural rules and new roles may be learnt at this stage" (Dinesh 4).

If the individual feels isolated from his or her culture, unaccepted by the 'majority culture' and has a lack of social support, a consequent sense of rejection, alienation and poor self-esteem may occur. This is referred to as Trauma in this study. During the stages of migration, there may be factors that predispose individuals to trauma; such factors

may include the personality structure of an individual, forced migration, persecution, among other things. It is worth noting, however, that the stages are often not discrete and most times merge into one another.

According to the online BBC News, more than a million migrants and refugees have in 2015 crossed over to Europe. Most of these desperate migrants arrive Europe by sea while many others arrive on land mostly through Turkey and Albania. The harsh winter of the European countries do not in any way discourage migrants from entering Europe. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 135,711 people have arrived Europe by sea since the beginning of 2016.

Although the bulk of migrants arriving Europe claim asylum; considering the conflict in Syria, the violence going on in Afghanistan and Iraq, the abuses in Eritrea and further the poverty in Kosovo, many other migrants have migrated, not for any of these reasons but probably for economic reasons. Despite the fact that many migrants have lost their lives in the process of crossing the Mediterranean sea, more migrants refuse to be deterred by this.

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

*The publication of the Lonely Londoners was one of the first to focus on the poor working class blacks following the enactment of the British Nationality Act 1948. Selvon wrote this work shortly after he arrived London at the age of 27, after he stayed in an hotel in South Kensington as a newcomer to England. This work remains ever relevant following the continuous issue of migration challenges facing the world especially migrants from Africa and the Caribbean region.*

Poverty and lack of adequate economic opportunities in the Caribbean countries compel most of the West Indians to migrate to other countries. They run away from

home, hoping to find a better life in their supposed Mother Country-London. Also, eurocentrism and the mindset that a better life will be gotten abroad (London), unconsciously affect an individual's choice of place of residence. As the character, Moses, observes, "...most of the fellars who coming now are real hustlers, desperate; it not like long time when forty or fifty straggling in, they invading the country by the hundreds" (8). The West Indians have been taught by the English people to believe that there is no culture or history on the Island, and so they desire to migrate to Britain where they have been taught that culture and history reside. This daily large influx of people from the Caribbean region to London make the immigrants already in London believe that home has not gotten better and so they remain in London hoping to eventually make it in life before going back home.

The West Indians migrate to London because they believe London has more job opportunities; this is despite the harsh cold weather. According to Tanty a fresh arrival in London, the whole family of Tolroy has moved to London because, "...they say that it have more work in England, and better pay...when I hear that Tolroy getting five pound a week, I had to agree" (15). These immigrants ultimately believe that the streets of London are paved with gold, and so they run away from home to live in London.

### **Trauma of Migration for the West Indian Immigrants in London**

Loneliness as a form of trauma runs through the entire length of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon's novel seeks to re-inhabit and rewrite London by showing it as an unreal place of promise that brings to many immigrants a reality of struggle laced with loneliness. For West Indian arrivals sequestered in the slum-like bedsits of Notting Hill, the loneliness was especially acute. We see Moses, the major character as he goes to meet another young man, Henry Oliver. Like other immigrants, Oliver is arriving London from the Caribbean region in search of greener pastures for the first time. Most of these West Indians seek social

advancement; they think that by migrating to London, they have a better chance of acquiring greater wealth, power or status than is available to them in the Caribbean region.

Although Moses has not met Galahad (Henry Oliver) previously, he becomes overwhelmed by the feeling of loneliness on arriving Waterloo. This is a place where immigrants arrive in London and also depart to their home lands when they choose, "...and he had a feeling of homesickness that he never felt in the nineteen years he in this country" (9). We see that most of these West Indian immigrants in London have the custom of going to Waterloo whenever a boat brings passengers from the West Indies, "They like to see the familiar faces, they like to watch their countrymen coming off the train, and sometimes they might spot somebody they know... finding out what happening in Trinidad, in Grenada, in Barbados, in Jamaica and Antigua, what is the latest calypso number, if anybody dead..." (10).

This is the kind of loneliness these immigrants feel in an alien land and so they devise a way to catch up with home by going to the train station even when they are not expecting any arrival. Moses watches these immigrants trying to catch up with the events at home and he feels more lonely and miserable, "Perhaps he was thinking is time to go back to the tropics, that's why he feeling sort of lonely and miserable" (10).

Alienation is another risk factor of trauma which the West Indian immigrants in London experience. It is a mixture of discrimination and loneliness. The blacks and coloureds are discriminated against because of their skin colour. They are not expected to mix up freely with the whites. This feeling gives way to loneliness and they try to overcome this by meeting in Moses' room at least every Sunday as though it were a church venue. In order to feel at home, they discuss issues in their home territories and how each one of them is faring in London.

Galahad, on arriving London, begins his search for job and quest to discover London for himself. He gets to the busy 'Queensway street' and becomes suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling of loneliness and fright, "He forget all the brave words he was talking to Moses, and he realize that here he is, in London, and he ain't have money or work or place to sleep or any friend or anything, and he standing up here by the tube station watching people, and everybody look so busy he frighten to ask questions from any one of them" (26).

At the Ministry of Labour where immigrants register and are assisted in search for jobs, Galahad notes the dirty and degrading environment where all immigrants are attended to and the way they are treated, "...where some tests sit down waiting like guilty criminals... Fellars stand up in little groups here and there, all of them looking destitute and poor-me-one" (30).

Furthermore, we see that the West Indian immigrants experience racial segregation from the English men who feel threatened that the West Indians have come to London to take away the jobs due to them. They despise the West Indians for this. The West Indian boys try to figure out the cause of the hostility they face from the English people, "Well, as far as I could figure, they frighten that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen. The other thing is that they just don't like black people, and don't ask me why, because that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find out from way back" (23). This shows the stereotypical image in which whites have boxed in the blacks.

'The boys' go ahead to compare the racism as experienced by immigrants in America to that experienced in London. They conclude that, racism in America is more direct as they would not mince words to tell you that you are not a part of them, unlike in England where they tend to use subtlety to perpetrate their racism thus being worse. Moses relays to Galahad how life in London is, how clients reject them for a job simply because they are not white, "In the beginning it cause a lot of

trouble when fellars went saying that they come from the labour office and the people send them away saying it ain't have no vacancy. They don't tell you outright that they don't want coloured fellars, they just say sorry the vacancy get filled" (30).

The West Indian boys feel isolated and discriminated against by the very people whose country they worked hard to build. They see themselves as British subjects who should equally feel at home in their motherland, London. Moses recounts their ordeal as immigrants in London:

There is a restaurant run by a Pole call the Rendezvous Restaurant. Go there and see if they will serve you. And you know the hurtful part of it The Pole who have that restaurant, he ain't have no more right in this country than we. In fact, we is British subjects and he is only a foreigner, we have more right than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country, and enjoy what this country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous (24).

In addition, Selvon's development of roles of his characters addresses upward social mobility. This mobility however, is clouded by the characters' designation as the 'other'. Their accents and skin colour mark them as outsiders and force them to form a group identity based on the principle of congregation via segregation. This allows the reader to better understand the self hate, disappointment and struggle that haunt the immigrants. Selvon in addition portrays the sense of isolation experienced in the city by the immigrants through Moses, "It have people living in London who don't know what happening in the room next to them... It divide up into little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers" (58).

Selvon burrows deep into these 'little worlds' where domestic space intended to separate is re-purposed by immigrants as sites of community. The boys in a bid to relieve themselves of loneliness and isolation come together to talk about home because London is 'a lonely miserable city'. Here, we see the characters in the text struggling to adapt to the new socio-cultural roles of their new environments; London. In the process, they begin to experience culture shock, loss of identity and eventual general disillusionment as they try to find a sense of belonging in their new environment. These West Indian immigrants find out eventually that things are not what they seem or what the (British) colonialists taught them to believe. The experiences of lack of decent jobs/accommodation for blacks/coloureds, racial discrimination and segregation from the whites or general disillusionment result in trauma for these immigrants.

The immigrants when they first get to London, we note, seem to enjoy the feeling of independence and carefree life which London exudes. However, after a while they begin to miss the communal life they are used to in the Caribbean, where you visit people in their houses and they offer you a meal. Selvon goes ahead to reveal through Moses that, "Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk. It ain't have no sort of family life for us here" (114).

Also, as part of the experiences of racial discrimination which the West Indian immigrants face in London, we see Bart, one of the boys, as he falls in love with an English girl who invites him to her house to meet her parents. This girl in question is known by 'the boys' to live almost like a prostitute before she meets Bart. The boys are even surprised that Bart would want to marry a 'loose girl' which is against the norms and culture of the Caribbean region where they all come from. Bart does not care about the stigma on the girl simply because she is white, and so he goes ahead to meet her parents. Unfortunately for Barth, the girl's father does not receive him, "Get out! Get out, I say! The father want to

throw Barth out of the house, because he don't want no curly-hair children in the family" (49). This white attitude is similar to Ifemelu's experience in *Americanah* where when Ifemelu visits a beauty spa to have her eyebrows shaped, the female attendant declines to attend to her with the excuse that, "We don't do curly" (291). West Indians just like African immigrants have been denied opportunities because of the colour of their skin or texture of their hair.

Galahad further feels the trauma of racism as he discovers London. He discovers that whites do not openly hold conversations with blacks because of the difference in skin colour. On a certain evening, he meets a white boy and his white mother and the boy tries to strike a conversation with Galahad because he looks black and different. Galahad feels happy and elated but when he settles to converse with the boy, the boy's mother reluctantly takes him away because even if she wants to stay a little while to chat with Galahad, the presence of the other white people around would make that impossible. Galahad ruminates over such encounters with the white people and he laments, "Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we suffer so What it is we want that the white people and them 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" (72).

On another occasion, Galahad was in the lavatory and two white men come in and begin to call blacks bastards, blaming them for the dirty lavatory environment. When they eventually see him, they become shocked, greet him well and even offer him cigarettes out of shame for their discriminatory attitudes. Galahad feels very bad about this attitude from the white men whom they have not even offended but suffer from because all blacks have been stereotyped by whites as dirty humans as a result of the difference in the skin colour, and so he laments, "Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. Why the hell you

can't be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white" (72). He further laments the racial segregation which his skin colour causes him, "Black, you see what you cause to happen yesterday I went to look at that room that Ram tell me about in the Gate, and as soon as the landlady see you she say the room let already . She ain't give me a chance to say good morning. Why the hell you can't change colour" (73). Galahad is so traumatized by the racism experienced in London that he begins to resent his black colour for not being white which he believes is the cause of all his miseries.

The nature of the jobs designated to the West Indian immigrants appears to differ from that of the whites. For instance, when Tolroy's entire family migrates to London, he tries to secure jobs for each of them and so we see the discrimination in jobs, "Then Tolroy take Lewis to the factory and get a work for him. It wasn't so hard to do that, for the work is a hard work and mostly is spades they have working in the factory, paying lower wages than they would have to pay white fellars" (51). The elderly mother 'Ma', ends up washing dishes in a restaurant.

'The boys' also become disillusioned with the real London which they experience, according to Moses, "Is like when you back home and you hear fellars talk about Times Square and Fifth Avenue, and Charing Cross and gay Paree. You say to yourself, "Lord, them places must be sharp." Then you get a chance and you see them for yourself, and is like nothing" (69).

The West Indian immigrants further suffer unemployment in London which was supposed to be a land of endless possibilities. The low and difficult jobs cut out for them are even hard to come by. Most of the boys are willing and ready to work but they do not find jobs in London which can as well happen in their home lands which they fled from, "It had one bitter season, when it look like the vengeance of Moko fall on all the boys in London, nobody can't get any work, fellars who had work losing it, and all over the place kit look like if Operation Pressure gone into

execution in a big way” (106). This experience of lack and out of jobs heighten their disillusionment about London being a land of promise.

'The boys' further experience hunger and hardship as they roam the streets having nothing to eat because they have no jobs. Nevertheless, as they pine away in hunger, the white people have so much to eat and to feed their pet animals like pigeons and dogs. This disheartens the hungry immigrants seeing that animals are cared for by whites more than they, humans, "... and the people does feed them with bits of bread. Sometimes they get so much bread that they pick and choosing, and Galahad watching them with envy. In this country, people prefer to see man starve than a cat or dog want something to eat" (107). This misery pushes Galahad into stealing pigeons to kill and eat so as not to starve to death in London.

Against the backdrop of invisibility, many of the characters struggle with sense of failed promises. Selvon ultimately conveys the unity in their experience by portraying the various coping mechanisms they employ to survive: sex, lavish spending, drinking, hard work, appeasing white women and so on. Moses, having stayed ten years in London still feels empty because his life has not become better and he has achieved nothing. This is contrary to the expectation with which he came to London. He laments to Galahad, "I just lay there on the bed, thinking about my life, how after all these years I ain't get no place at all, I still the same way, neither forward nor backward" (113). Probably, his life would have been more meaningful if he had not migrated to London in search of a better life. Moses is even unable to save money to send to his people back home. He advises Galahad to save up money and go back to Trinidad before he becomes stuck in London like himself Moses. This is Selvon's vision for West Indian immigrants who are still struggling with trauma of migration in foreign lands.

Psychoanalytically, Selvon as an author can be said to have consciously or unconsciously successfully encoded his psyche in his text considering his history growing up. Having been born in San Fernando in the year 1923, Selvon's parents were Indian immigrants from Madras, although his paternal grandmother was Anglo-Scottish. Selvon originates from Trinidad little wonder his constant referral to Trinidad as home in *The Lonely Londoners*. At the age of 15, however, he migrated to London and lived there for about 20 years. From London, he further migrated to Canada before he eventually returned home to Trinidad.

He moved to England in 1950, to avoid "being lulled into complacency and acceptance of the carefree and apathetic life around me" (Selvon in *Tiger's Triumph*, 58). It was as a consequence of encountering migrants from other West Indian islands that Selvon for the first time became "aware of the richness and diversity of Caribbean speech" (Sandhu, 145), an important factor in the writing strategies adopted in *The Lonely Londoners*, enabling him to articulate experiences relatively new to literary fiction at the time.

## Conclusion

This paper examines Samuel Selvon's portrayal of West Indian immigrants who face loneliness, alienation, stereotyping, racism, unemployment, hunger, and homesickness in England. This work has uncovered the hidden causes of neurosis as experienced by West Indian immigrants in London (general disillusionment). It therefore recommends a repression and replacement of the migration-consciousness with the home-consciousness. This intervention is in itself therapeutic.

As a psychoanalytic work, we can say that Selvon successfully encoded his psyche on the text especially on the major character Moses. His experiences as an immigrant in London is seen as he describes the lives of



'The boys' in London. Having returned home to Trinidad after several years of living in London and Canada, Selvon therefore recommends homecoming for West Indian immigrants through the character Moses.

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