

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs that appear to be floating or falling from the top left towards the bottom right. These motifs are scattered across the entire cover, with some appearing near the top and others near the bottom.

# THE NOVELS OF SAMUEL SELVON

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A Critical Study

Roydon Salick

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Samuel Selvon*

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*A Critical Study*

ROYDON SALICK

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**FOR KEN RAMCHAND**

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## *Introduction*

The following chapters were not initially conceived as a book; they were written intermittently over a period of 10 years with different objectives. These essays are critical evaluations of the 10 novels, assessing analytically what Samuel Selvon was attempting to do in each novel. This book is therefore a timely counterbalance to the two specialized full-length studies by Clement Wyke and Mark Looker: the first is a stylistic critique, the other, a problematic postcolonial reading of Selvon's novels. They make important contributions to Selvon studies, but they both need a prefatory work. Using an eclectic approach, this study provides the student of Selvon with a critical understanding of the novels, analyzing, within each fictional context, the elements of Selvon's art. An author's stated intentions perhaps provide the most reliable guide to achievement; they become especially important when there are, as in Selvon's case, so many, repeated in interview after interview. The best that criticism can do consequently is to assess the distance between intent and achievement.

There has been all along, in these essays, a conscious effort toward reevaluation, not for its own sake, but because there are new and remedial things to say. There is also an attempt to redress the

critical balance by correcting the heavily lopsided emphasis on Selvon's style, an emphasis that Selvon unwittingly encouraged. Too polite and self-effacing to be controversial, Selvon too often went along with just what interviewers wanted to hear, and that was almost invariably his use of language. There are penetrating things written on Selvon's use of language; yet, too often, the remarks on language (and culture) come from those who have no intimate or firsthand knowledge of Trinidadian dialect. And critics who depend on secondhand scholarship put their credibility on the line, for they are likely to be misled even by such a scholarly work as Richard Allsopp's *Dictionary of Caribbean Usage* (Oxford, 1996), marred by an apparent Afro-Guyanese bias and a subjectivity that is difficult to comprehend. Yet, alarmingly and sadly, there has emerged a critical imperialism, in which the dicta influencing criticism are being set outside the Caribbean by individuals who have no significant experience of the region or the culture. There is, too, a sense in which the Caribbean continues to be exploited for critical gain. Texts too often are merely texts, and many critics lack a true, well-meaning, and sympathetic grasp of what such a writer as Selvon is trying to do.

There are also problems with postcolonial theory in its sweeping generalizations about colonized peoples and their political contexts; these tend to make colonialism a Procrustean bed, so much so that criticism appreciates little significant difference between colonized individuals of disparate regions, races, and classes. Even within the same regional ethnic community there are often real differences; to treat the Indo-Trinidadian as a monolithic entity is to minimize or erase significant differences in religion, caste, economic situation, accommodation, and education. There is, too, an alarming tendency now to prioritize the statement of theory over the close reading of the text and to allow theory to run roughshod over works, sometimes willfully distorting, sometimes blatantly misreading, the text.

Postcolonial theory, if it is to be fair-minded and instructive, needs to place literary texts in a political, historical, and social context that is ongoing and alive; it needs, in other words, to establish a meaningful tangency between works of the imagination and real life. When Selvon depicts the struggles of his Indo-Trinidadian peasants, he does so as one who, though socially not of their world, has entered their experience imaginatively, sympathetically, and authentically. Therefore, Tiger's, Balgobin's, and Romesh's struggles against the constraints of history and ethnicity demand to be placed

within the understanding of the invaluable contribution the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry has made, and continues to make, to the quality of an economy that is now oil based, and to a multicultural experience that is richer and more complex than any in the Caribbean. So, to claim, as Simon Gikandi does, that at the end of *A Brighter Sun* "Tiger's new knowledge displaces him by drawing him deeper into the colonial epistemology and so exacerbates his crisis of selfhood,"<sup>1</sup> is to isolate Tiger from the historical, colonial context that Selvon so carefully constructs in the novel. And Looker in his refusal to credit Tiger with real achievement at the end of the novel<sup>2</sup> is doing much the same as Gikandi, on whom he relies fairly heavily for his generalized insights into an alien culture.

This does not mean that the outsider who approaches the culture with "humility," to use Achebe's word, cannot write intelligently about West Indian literature. Susheila Nasta, Edward Chamberlin, Helen Tiffin, and others have; these are critics we trust and go back to. But, despite Said, the insider does have privileges of experience and knowledge, though to merely fetishize that "insiderness" is an act of spendthrift betrayal. It remains a telling fact that those who are Selvon's best critics are either percipient West Indians or non-West Indians who have taken the trouble to enter sympathetically the unique and complex creative world of the Caribbean.

The format of this study of Selvon is new; its organizing principle is twofold: chronology and category. This combined emphasis on when a novel was written and the category to whom it belongs is the thrust of the fairest and most rewarding approach to Selvon's novels. Although Wyke and Looker, in their full-length studies, speak of chronology and category, both of them place on these twin principles the wrong emphasis. For to emphasize chronology at the expense of category is to minimize the enormous achievement of the cane novels; to downplay the importance of chronology is to fail to recognize or to deny the existence of internovel continuities and intracategory trilogies. Apportioning chronology and category their proper emphasis, therefore, is the safest way to arrive at a reasonable recognition and understanding of what Selvon is consciously attempting to achieve in his novels. This, to be sure, is the main burden and responsibility of a criticism that aims at reevaluation and redress.

Consequently, there is no intention in these chapters of tracing in a sustained and meticulous manner the development of a particular theme, image, or setting, from novel to novel. Such a prescriptive method is likely to repudiate or omit what is characteristically West

Indian about Selvon's fiction. How do we assess a work as uniquely nonconformist as *The Lonely Londoners*? It is hardly a novel by conventional standards. To apply conventional criteria to its triumphant unorthodoxy is to deny that which distinguishes it from all other West Indian and non-West Indian novels. To search rigidly for such critical shibboleths as organic unity, tightness of structure, and imagistic and symbolic coherence is sometimes to engage in at best a frustrating exercise. Such an approach is fraught with difficulty because it invokes the reactionary spirit of a deflated colonialism, only this time, linguistically and critically. West Indian culture has always been creatively subversive, and Selvon's fiction, like its musical manifestations calypso, steelband, and reggae, in this regard is an excellent reflection of the nurturing culture. Selvon did not always work methodically, in the conventional meaning of the term; to approach his corpus with preconceived notions of form, style, and structure is, then, a humbling experience, in which meanings are likely to be missed, and contexts distorted.

Far from slipshod or arbitrary, though, Selvon allows the West Indian flair for the unorthodox and the leisurely to move his spirit and his pen. He speaks of himself as "a primitive writer . . . who does something out of natural instinct."<sup>3</sup> He also confesses in the same interview, "I paid little respect to the rules [of writing], purely because I'm ignorant of them" (118). Selvon, who has always worked "intuitively" (118), is not the most circumspect of novelists; any one familiar with Trinidadian ethnic life and with island geography can find inaccuracies and anomalies in the novels. And we as mature critics ought to be honest enough to recognize these anomalies as anomalies, rather than naively attempting to rationalize them as part of Selvon's deliberate technique. When Selvon tells us that at Tiger's wedding there was meat—mutton and goat—we know that Selvon is factually mistaken. Hindu weddings in Trinidad—and Tiger's wedding for all intents and purposes is a Hindu one—have been and still are meatless affairs, although they are becoming increasingly westernized. It is more than likely, therefore, that Selvon never attended a Hindu wedding. Appropriately, Selvon in one of the last interviews he gave confessed to a lack of sufficient knowledge: "In some of my books, I've had to avoid going into too much description of Indian ritual and custom purely because I don't know them myself."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Selvon's fiction is such that the inaccuracies and anomalies do not destroy or taint our aesthetic pleasure, although they may raise niggling issues of authenticity, especially for cultural purists.

My interest in Selvon began when I first met him many years ago at a reading in Winnipeg, Canada. Years later, I was asked to write the introduction to the Longman edition of *A Brighter Sun* (1989). Having read the four peasant novels in order to assess *A Brighter Sun* contextually, I began to research the criticism and discovered that while there was some on *A Brighter Sun*, there was little on *Turn Again Tiger* and virtually nothing on *The Plains of Caroni* and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*. Indeed, in spite of the popularity of Selvon's fiction, there was a general dearth of critical material. Criticism decidedly focused on *A Brighter Sun* and *The Lonely Londoners*, his two most popular and most adequately critiqued novels. The two middle-class novels—*An Island Is a World* and *I Hear Thunder*—and the peasant novels, *The Plains of Caroni* and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, had received only a few short, descriptive, and insubstantial reviews. I began to look at these novels individually, seeing the need for them to be critically assessed. My interest in epic and heroic literature led me to reread *The Plains of Caroni*, and to argue in a paper given at a conference in Leyden (subsequently published) that this was Selvon's most heroic novel. That essay established for me how misunderstood Selvon was and how misguided critics were about his work and the work of other West Indian writers.

The bulk of Selvon criticism focuses primarily and generally on his style, too often emphasizing style and neglecting all other aspects of his fiction.<sup>5</sup> The best criticism rightly claims that in his use of the vernacular in new ways Selvon liberates the West Indian novel from the strictures of standard English, the language of the colonial master. The worst speaks of style in a virtual vacuum, suggesting that there is little else of substance in Selvon's novels and refusing to dig deeply enough to allow the narrative ore to yield the gold. Selvon is a wonderful storyteller with a splendid sense of the character of the Trinidadian and the West Indian. He has much to say, and he says it in linguistic structures, some of which are quite different from anything else in West Indian fiction. Furthermore, no other writer has expended so much energy in writing about the interactive experience of the two largest ethnic groups in Trinidad: their insecurities, their insularities, and their strengths.

Those of us who knew Selvon well know that he was a chain smoker and a moderate to heavy drinker; he said again and again that he smoked because he could not quit the habit, and that he drank because he enjoyed drinking. (The combined habits, of



course, in no small way contributed to his untimely death.) There was so much of the connoisseur in him, and this connoisseurship appears quite often in his work, especially in his early writing. He was meticulous with the mixing of drinks and could talk at length about the various ingredients of what he called "a good curry." He loved all varieties of cuisine and prided himself on being able to cook well. He especially loved authentic Indian cooking but also enjoyed such Trinidadian delicacies as souse, black pudding, and raw oysters served with homemade hot sauce. Although he enjoyed the staggering range of pepper sauce produced in Trinidad, he took special delight in eating with meals the hottest raw pepper he could find. He drank Teacher's Scotch Whisky and Cream of the Barley in England. Whenever he came to the West Indies he drank rum, especially Vat 19, and he enjoyed Carib beer, the beer of Trinidad. Indeed, some of the last words I remember him uttering, on a beautiful March morning in 1994, as we drove through Barataria discovering for the last time the locations of Tall Boy's shop and Tiger's garden, were "By any standard, a cold Carib is an excellent beer."

During the many years we knew each other, whenever it was possible we cooked, ate, drank, and played the two most popular Trinidad card games—rummy (always pronounced roam-ee) and all-fours. Living abroad for the better part of his life had obviously broadened Sam's horizons but at the same time had surely deepened his love and appreciation for the land of his birth and upbringing. Sam was through-and-through Trinidadian: in manner, in speech, in thinking, in perspective. He was ever a down-to-earth man who felt profound pleasure in the simple joys of Trinidad living: in the sweetness of a starch mango, in the taste of a katchourie, and in the song of a picoplat. He had no pretensions, and handled his fame very easily. By nature reticent, he was reluctant in normal, everyday company to talk of his achievement, but he did not disappoint interviewers. His customary self-effacement did not permit him to think of himself as a great novelist, although he was sensitive to the fact that he might be an important one. He read reviews and criticism, marveling often at the sorts of positive things critics were saying about his work. And it was never his habit to put anyone down, especially his fellow novelists, for whom he had the highest regard. Added to all of this, he had, as one would expect after reading the immigrant novels, an infectious sense of humor, a characteristically Trinidadian sense of humor, able to find endless possibilities in the simplest word, in the smallest morpheme, in the

silliest of sounds. He was, like Boysie in *A Brighter Sun*, a tall and handsome Indo-Trinidadian, a soft-spoken, gentle man, a wonderful friend, capable of simultaneously giving wise advice and deadly *picong*. Victor Ramraj, Austin Clarke, Ismith Khan, and Kenneth Ramchand, among others, in *Tiger's Triumph*, have expressed in their tributes what all of us have come to accept, namely, that we have lost, not just a splendid, unique writer, but a great soul.

Although in interviews Selvon divided his novels linguistically into two large types, "straight" and "dialect," to use his own words, no doubt to satisfy the curiosity of those who stressed his use of language above all else, it seems more rewarding to divide his corpus, as Nasta does, into three categories: peasant novels, middle-class novels, and immigrant novels. This tripartite division of Selvon's ten novels is preferable to the less satisfactory twofold division of Trinidad novels and London or metropolitan novels, into which it is somewhat difficult to fit *Moses Migrating*, a novel which begins in London, spends most of its time in Trinidad, then returns briefly to London. Moreover, we can go beyond Nasta and argue for a neater division: there are three novels that deal with the cane experience, and these plausibly form a trilogy; one peasant novel deals peripherally with the cocoa experience. Among the immigrant novels there is also a trilogy of sorts, having at its center the immigrant experience of Moses; a fourth, though set in London and its environs, does not feature the character of Moses. The final category is the most straightforward, comprising two middle-class novels. It is difficult to discover just how consciously Selvon planned his novels, even though he spoke of "sequels." Yet, as this study illustrates, there is a good case to be made for the two contrastive trilogies just mentioned.

The peasant novels deal with the individual and communal life of the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry,<sup>6</sup> mainly Hindu, who work on the large sugarcane plantations or in their private gardens producing a wide range of vegetables. In the first three peasant novels Selvon has written what is arguably a trilogy; Tiger Baboolal appears as the protagonist of the first two, and although there is no character by that name in *The Plains of Caroni*, we see aspects of Tiger in both Balgobin, the old man, and in Romesh, his son. The Tiger saga is therefore continued and brought to a fitting close in *The Plains of Caroni*. Tiger's commitment to the land and to agriculture and his cane experience culminate in Balgobin's expertise and mastery of

the cane cutter's art; in Romesh's movement away from the canefield to university, we see the apotheosis of Tiger's intellectual aspirations. It is in Tiger, his first important hero, that Selvon establishes the two poles between which his typical protagonist must move. Tiger is given a sensibility that permits him to seek a balance of the past and the future, of hard manual labor and intellectual aspirations, of tending his garden by day and reading by night, and of orthodoxy and radicalism. Tiger does not actually move away from the land in *A Brighter Sun* or in *Turn Again Tiger*, although we sense it is purely a matter of time before he does.

Because *The Plains of Caroni* fulfills the promises implicit in *A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger*, it is, I contend, the most important of the peasant novels. This is a new and intriguing claim, but certainly not an untenable one. In Balgobin's life and death we have a cogent illustration of the bittersweet experience of indenture; in Romesh's gradual social and intellectual climb, we see unlimited future possibilities for the Indo-Trinidadian through creolization and education. Had he lived a bit longer, the vatic Selvon would surely have appreciated the real-life version of the apotheosis of the Indo-Trinidadian peasant in the swearing in of Basdeo Panday as prime minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on November 11, 1995. It is not difficult, therefore, to interpret *The Plains of Caroni* as the only stylized epic of the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry, given Selvon's deliberate disposition of linguistic clues by which we can gauge the heroism at the heart of the quite different struggles of Balgobin and of Romesh. Considered as such, then, *The Plains of Caroni* is transformed from one of Selvon's most neglected and misunderstood novels into a unique imaginative document with enormous topical significance.

*Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, however, is set on a cocoa estate in Sans Souci on the northern coast of Trinidad. Selvon, no doubt sensing that he had completed to his satisfaction the story of the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry as cane men, moves his peasants to the other sector of agriculture where they made an enormous contribution. For the first time, Selvon combines realism and romance in this novel to create a context for the most passionately fulfilling relationship in all his fiction. This fourth and final peasant novel also affords Selvon the opportunity of presenting his most fully rounded and sexually attractive heroine—Sarojini. Beautiful, instinctual, and self-possessed, Sarojini is given an immunity against physical injury, against uneasy compromise, against the sting of vicious ru-