Hybridity and the West Indian Experience in *The Lonely Londoners*

*The Lonely Londoners* was written in the backdrop of the mid twentieth century, over a century after Caribbean independence from the British Empire in 1843, and in succession to the end of World War II in 1945. The novel reverses colonisation as the Caribbean immigrants seek a place of belonging in London, travelling in on the SS Empire Windrush. The protagonist, Sir Galahad, arrives by train at Waterloo Station to make the acquaintance of Moses Aloetta. I will focus on Galahad’s arrival in relation to Homi Bhabha’s ‘hybridity’ and the West Indian experience, exploring language, the London illusion, and disorientation to analyse an extract taken from the text (Selvon 22-25).

**Language**

When Sam Selvon (1923-1994) tried to write the novel in Standard English, he said it “just would not work” (Nasta vi). Young says, when translated, “certain aspects of the indigenous culture may remain untranslatable” (Young p140). Selvon wrote in Creole English instead, reversing colonisation as a translation of West Indian culture.

**Narrative voice**

Third person narrative is the source of linguistic hybridity, in line with Bhabha’s poststructuralist repertoire: “transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both” (qtd. in Seldon, Widdowson, and Brooker 229). *Londoners* is a modernist text as a social commentary of post-war London and Caribbean immigration. Selvon uses free indirect discourse, “You think any of them bothering with what going on in his mind?” (Selvon 23) and aspects of surrealism to recreate the West Indian experience of London in the 1950s.
Discourse

There is discourse between Moses Aloetta and Sir Galahad, Sir Galahad and the policeman, and among the people getting on the bus. These interactions are the source of colonial discourse; Moses says, “one spade do something wrong they crying the lot down” (Selvon 22). Spade is a derogatory term for a ‘black person’ taken from the symbol of the ace of spades. Focus is on the solid opposition and non-blurring of black and white, resisting Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. The colonial discourse creates an atmosphere of ‘us and them’.

Poststructuralist Michel Foucault was interested in examining how discourse creates relationships of power/knowledge (Klages 142), and this extract can be analysed in terms of binary oppositions. There are opposites of native/foreign and old/new as a general colonial attitude. When Galahad skips the queue for the bus, an angry bystander says, “They’ll have to learn to do better,” (Selvon p25) mistaking Galahad’s naivety for rudeness and assigning rudeness as a racial characteristic, meanwhile asserting English superiority.

The London Illusion

There were inaccurate depictions of Britain and London through the imperial discourse of the media and film, “to them you will be just another one of them black Jamaicans who coming to London thinking that the streets paved with gold” (Selvon 22). ‘Jamaicans’ is a broad term used incorrectly by the British media for Caribbean immigrants. Moses and Galahad are from Trinidad, showing the English lack of any real interest in the Caribbean community.

Illusion

There seems to be an experience of London, one that natives and foreigners strive for, but it is predetermined that this experience only belongs to or is available to white English natives. Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe say, “The journey to England is a journey to an illusion, and the sojourn in England is a shattering of that illusion” (144-5). The illusion is three-fold: a material dream about the wealth of England; the courtesy, hospitality and human warmth

Postcolonial Literature in English
of the English; and a romantic sense of English history. Galahad’s arrival in England is a clear shattering of the London illusion.

**Reality**

For Galahad, the reality is segregation (us and them), fear (“a feeling of loneliness and fright come on him all of a sudden” (Selvon 23) alienation (“is only he who walking stupid” (23)) and disorientation. In his disorientated daze, Galahad experiences a loss of identity, “he begin to search for passport and some other papers he had,” perhaps a literal exhibition of a questioning of self, “‘What happen to you? All of a sudden like you gone stupid. Take it easy’” (25). The harsh reality was hostility and violence between blacks and whites, like the incidents of the 1958 Notting Hill Race Riots. Coverage from Pathé News called it a ‘Shameful Episode,’ from which “something new and ugly raises its head in Britain: racial violence” (British Pathé).

**Disorientation**

**Identity**

Name, home and style can be explored in this extract. The name Moses has religious connotations of the prophet Moses who lead slaves out of Egypt. In reverse, Moses Aloetta is helping Caribbean immigrants like Galahad to settle in London. Sir Galahad, rechristened from Henry Oliver, is a mock-epic hero whose name is an attempt to fit into the illusion of Englishness, overcorrecting his foreignness.

Nasta describes that “they exist in a twilight subterranean enclave of cramped-up rooms situated somewhere between Notting Hill and the Harrow Road” (viii). This is no home at all where, as Nasta says, they do not *live* but *exist*. The home is an illusion that the Caribbean immigrants would hope to achieve, but building a community, a home, and a sense of belonging is not possible yet.

There is a detail of style in this extract, “Moses start shining his shoes” (Selvon 23). This is a western custom of appearance; Moses takes care of his appearance but shines his shoes himself, removing the hierarchal standpoint of the shoeshine boy and the professional, and therefore being both and achieving hybridity of class. Bhabha theorises
mimicry as a process of hybridity, but it was not only immigrants who adopted old customs. The 1950 subculture known as the Edwardian “Teddy” boys mimicked the style of the upper class dandy, an aesthetic that blurs black and white opposition through mimicry. The “Teddy” boys were at the forefront of attacks on the West Indian community in the 1958 race riots.

**Time and space**

Galahad’s disorientation can be interpreted through the “formative dimensions of human existence: space, time, and being” (Galahad would have had a long journey from Trinidad to London, and many immigrants travelled from Jamaica (hence termed by the media) on the SS Empire Windrush, travelling through five or six different time zones. London is five hours ahead of Trinidad and six hours ahead of Jamaica.

The notion of arrival can also be considered; arrival has a strong sense of purpose, when expectation and experience meet. The reality of Galahad’s arrival is one of not knowing where to go, with nowhere definite to go, and without purpose or direction – and without friends.

**Surrealism**

*The sun shining, but Galahad never see the sun look like how it looking now. No heat from it, it just there in the sky like a force-ripe orange. When he look up, the colour of the sky so desolate it make him more frighten. It have a kind of melancholy aspect about the morning that making him shiver. He have a feeling is about seven o’clock in the evening; when he look at a clock on top a building he see is only half-past ten in the morning.* (Selvon 23-4)

The surrealist artwork of Rene Magritte might also help to interpret Galahad’s disorientation. *Empire of Light* visualises a desolate and frightening atmosphere; the opposition of the blue sky and the dark street create a “melancholy aspect” and the uncertainty of what time it is.

Nasta says, “psychologically disorientating effects are created by the collision of two worlds – of Trinidad and London – in Galahad’s mind, as the surrealist image of the dream-like orange becomes object of the extremity of Galahad’s dislocation and fear” (viii). In this extract, the sun is the only tie Galahad seems to have to Trinidad, but even this is unfamiliar

Postcolonial Literature in English
and strange. Selvon’s mirage of a force-ripe orange and satirical energy create a surreal and disjointed world for Galahad, a feeling that might be visually accessible in Magritte’s *The Art of Living*.
Bibliography


