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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MARGINALISED IDENTITIES IN SAMUEL SELVON'S *THE LONELY LONDONERS*

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This research paper explores the marginalized identities and marginalized condition of black immigrants in White dominated society, London. Samuel Selvon was one of the early West Indian immigrants to Britain that began in 1948. Selvon classical novel, *The Lonely Londoners* is a novel of realism and it depicts the lives of the marginalized black immigrants in London. The novel *The Lonely Londoners* deals with issue of migration of the Caribbean to England between 1930 and 1950. It focuses on the large body of working class immigrants and the issue of marginalization. There were more than 40,000 West Indians in London. The novel reveals the existence of fellow immigrants like Moses and Galahad from Trinidad; Captain (Cap) from Nigeria; Mahal from India; Tolray from the West Indies; Daniel hails from France; Brat and Five Past Twelve from Barbados and Brackley and Joseph originated from West Indies. All the immigrants are universally treated as 'black' and they are identified as 'others' or 'marginalised' in the white dominate English society. All the immigrants in the novel work in tubes, factories, railway station and perform household chores for low wages. The novel expresses the poor economic reality of the black immigrants and a drastic failure to find the postures in the alien world.

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Introduction:-

Writers such as V.S. Naipaul, J.M. Coetzee, Samuel Selvon, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Chinua Achebe, and Jean Rhys have all rewritten specific works from the English 'canon' with an aim of restructuring 'realities' in postcolonial terms by reversing the hierarchical order. Postcolonial theory is an area of literary and cultural study which has come into being as part of the decentering tendency of post- 1960s. As theorists, the postcolonial writers might be slow to acknowledge the role of specific literary works such as V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) and Samuel Selvon's immigrant novels, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*. They do provide some amount of discussion on the various 'models' of postcolonial theory such as 'migration,' 'racism,' 'marginalisation,' 'exile,' 'hybridity,' 'decolonization' and so on. The remarkable upsurge of writings in countries involved in the decolonization process since the Second World War, especially from Third World countries, has led readers worldwide to see that their own communities could produce writings of great power and relevance. Postcolonial theory is greatly needed because it has a subversive posture towards the canon, in celebrating the neglected or marginalized, bringing with it a particular politics, history and geography. Therefore, Selvon's experimentation of the 'creole dialect' and the themes of 'self-exile,' 'mimicry,' and 'hybridity' highlight the assertion of the marginal voices.

Selvon's immigrants inhabit a nightmare world. They meet at Waterloo station, "a place of arrival and departure [for black immigrants] and a place where [we] see people crying good bye and kissing welcome" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 9). The immigrant next call upon the employment exchange and even in employment they are marginalised and forced to work for low wages: "It ain't have no place in the world exactly like place where a lot of men get together to look for work and draw money from the welfare state while they ain't working. Is a kind of

place where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up. Is a place where everyone is your enemy and your friend" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 29).

It is worth nothing that many of the details which go to make up the deathly universe of *The Lonely Londoners* are also present in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. Describing the effects of the London city, Ralph Singh, the narrator and protagonist, speaks of the people being "trapped into fixed postures", of "the personality divided bewilderingly into compartments", and of "the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person." Selvon's third person narrative voice sees London as a place which is "divide[d] up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 58). This is the panic and marginalised condition where immigrants live in London.

The Lonely Londoners is a novel of realism and it depicts the lives of the immigrants in London. Selvon clearly explains about the real experience of life in London. He says: "I believe in trying to capture the realities of what exists, and in *The Lonely Londoners*, almost every one of the experiences and the characters were drawn from real life... What really motivates and interests me is the behaviour of the people and the reasons why they behave as they do. I also like to record the reality of their lives and experiences which I think is enough to spark interests and curiosity and the desire to know more" (*Interviews* by K.T. Sunitha, 27).

Marginalised and Black Identity in *The Lonely Londoners*:-

The Lonely Londoners deals with the issue of migration from the Caribbean to England between 1930 and 1950. It focuses on the large body of working class immigrants and the issues of nostalgia and marginalised conditions. The novel begins with Moses Aloetta receiving the newcomer Henry Oliver, known in the novel as Sir Galahad, who is coming from the Caribbean to London. Moses is waiting at the "Waterloo station to meet a fellar (Oliver) who was coming from Trinidad on the boat train" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 7). There, he meets Tolroy, "a Jamaican friend" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 10), who came to receive his mother, and finds himself "nervous and frighten" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 10) to welcome his mother Tanty, an elderly lady, who came along with Lewis and Agnes, a couple. Moses experiences nostalgia and alienation when he waits for his friend at the Waterloo station. He feels, "... a feeling of home sickness that he never felt in the nine-ten years. Feeling a nostalgion hit him and he was surprise" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 10). Moses meets a reporter at the tube, assuming that Moses has just arrived at London and starts asking him questions. He explains about the realistic and marginalised situations of black immigrants of London. "The situation is desperate. They can't get work, can't get place to live, and we only getting worse jobs it have... He had a lot of things to say [...] all the people in the place say they go strike.... Under a big headline, saying how the colour bar was causing trouble again" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 12-13).

The reporter then infers that Moses is not a new comer and moves over to Tanty and the family. He asks, "Why so many people are leaving Jamaica and come to England?" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 15) Tanty excitedly responds that "it have more work in England, and better pay" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 15), but in reality, "England is the country that only white people does like" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 15) and the immigrants (black/creole) people have the work "to cook and wash the clothes and clean the house" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 15). Galahad is made of a strange physical disposition as far as the climate is concerned: "he feels cold in winter and warm in summer" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 15), but for Moses it is "a test who living London a long" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 16) and he looks upon "winter as a beast" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 16). Galahad arrives into the London winter with no warm clothes. As he came with just three pounds, he had no money to purchase winter wear. The season made the immigrants to misfit in London weather and even put them in marginalised situation.

As all the immigrants have to find job for themselves, Galahad sets out alone in search of a job without the help of Moses though Moses says "both of us is Trinidadians and we must help out one another" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 21). Searching for a job is difficult for the immigrants. Moses advises Galahad: "London not like Port of Spain.... These days, spades all over the place, and every shipload is big news, and the English people don't like the boys coming to England to work and live.... They frighten that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 23-25). The novel expresses the poor economic reality of the immigrants and a drastic failure to find the postures in the alien world. It also depicts the widely prevalent disillusioned existence at the heart of the metropolis.

All the immigrants are universally treated as 'black' and they are identified as 'Creole/Black' or 'Other' or 'marginalised' in the white dominated English society. The black immigrants in the novel work in tubes, factories,

railway stations and perform household chores for low wages which shows their marginalised condition. Selvon's characters in *The Lonely Londoners* are always 'in-between' their 'roots' and the present place. They are in ambivalent and marginalised condition. Selvon describes the identity crisis or being 'in-between' in white dominated London through the character of Bart. Bart is a 'black' immigrant. He is in a romantic relationship with an English girl whose parents are furious with him. Finally, Beatrice, his girl, also deserts him and Bart keeps on searching for her till the very end of the novel. He suffers from a sense of inferiority complex for being 'black'. Selvon explains his state of 'in-betweenness': "Bart have light skin. That is to say, he neither here nor there, though he more here than there. When he first hit Brit'n, like a lot of other brown – skin fellars who frighten for the lash, he go around telling everybody that he is a Latin-American, that he come from South America [. . .]" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 61).

Captain, or Cap, is a Nigerian immigrant and "his father send him to London to study law, but Captain went stupid when he arrive in the big city" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 32). He is a lazy man who survives without work or food and he is a kind of person who can survive without anything. Cap's trysts with women and his marriage to a French girl are vividly described. He "spent money wild on woman and cigarette and he would sleep all the day" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 32). He continues with his carefree life even after marriage. Through Cap's character Selvon describes the living condition in London. Cap explains: "The people who living in London don't really know how behind them railway station does be so desolate and discouraging. It like another world. It look like hell.... They [white people] send for a store keeper work and they want to put in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think that is all we good for, and they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for the white fellars" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 36).

The novel moves back to another marginalised black immigrant family, Tolroy and his family. Tolroy gets every one jobs and settles them in London. Lewis starts to work on the same job as Moses, working in the factory on night shifts. He feels: "the work is a hard working and paying lower wages then they would have to pay white fellars" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 51). He gets suspicious about his wife Agnes, listening to hearsay about wives having affairs when husbands go out to work. Moses playfully fuels his doubts and Lewis beats up Agnes, prompting her to leave him. Tolroy lives with his family in the Harrow Road, and "the people in that area call the working class" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 57). Selvon provides a real picture of the status of working and also about the immigrant street: "In London that it have Working Class; there you will find a lot of spades. This is the real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come. The houses around here old and grey and weather beaten, the walls cracking like the last days of Pompeii, it ain't have no hot water, none of the house have bath ... or else go to the public bath. Some of the houses still had gas light. The street does be always dirty except it rain fall. Sometime a truck does come with a kind of revolving broom to sweep the road. It always have little children playing in the road, they ain't have no other place to play" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 57-58).

The next episode is Galahad's date with Daisy, a white English Girl. In this episode, racism puzzles Galahad and he tries to find explanation for it. Galahad finally vents out his anger at 'black' and he thinks that his 'black' is the culprit for the humiliation he faced. He explains in disgust: "Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so? What it is we want that the white people and then 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. ... 'colour is you that causing all this. Why the hell you can't be blue or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! Look at you, you so black and innocent and this time so you causing misery all over the world!'" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72).

Galahad is frustrated because of 'colour' and 'racism'. He cannot understand why the blacks are being illtreated when all that the 'black' or 'immigrants' needed were just food, shelter and work. Black people want to survive. The black immigrants have no desire to enjoy equal rights with white people. His outburst: "we only want to get by, we don't even want to get on" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72), explains the real intention of black immigrants in London. Galahad starts speaking pejoratively about the colour 'black,' and racism for "all the misery in the world!" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72)

In the next episode, the character of Big City is revealed. He "came from an orphanage in one of the country districts in Trinidad" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 77). He was greatly fascinated with metropolitan cities, in which he thinks that he can have a great life. Big City's peculiar characteristic is that he gets confused with names: "instead of hearing 'Music' Big City thought 'fusic' and since that nobody could ever get him to say music" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). He calls 'Notting Hill' as 'Nottingham Gate,' 'Gloucester Road' as 'Gloucestershire Road' and so on. He used

to eat so much food and “he always thinking about the big cities of the world” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). That is why he got the name ‘Big City’. Big City wants to make quick money. He desires “to have money, buy out a whole street of houses, and give it to the boys and say: “Here look place live. And I would put a notice on all the boards, “Keep the Water Coloured, No Rooms For Whites” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 78). He would like to take revenge on white people and it clearly shows that Selvon ingrained the tendency to revenge in ‘black/immigrant’ people as a decolonization process.

The next character is Five Past Twelve, who came from Barbados to London after the war and got work as a truck driver. He is called ‘Five Past Twelve’ because he resembles, “black like midnight” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 94). He is fond of parties, fete, circus, carnivals and he also has “women all over London” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 94). In this episode, Harris is introduced has a fellow, “who like to play ladedda, and he like English customs and thing, he does be polite and does get up in the bus to let woman sit down, which is thing even English men don’t do. And when he dress, you think in some English man going work in the city, bowler hat and umbrella, and briefcase ... only thing, Harris face black” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 95). Harris intended behaving like an English man. He wants to look well dignified like an English man.

The latter part of the novel plays an important role in questioning the ‘black identity’ and the ‘crises of unemployment’. The author explains: “nobody can’t get any work, fellars who had work looking it,” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 106). This episode also deals with the weather, poverty and also how Galahad catches a pigeon in the park to survive and Cap catches seagulls. Selvon depicts the episode of eating seagulls and pigeons as a mark of resistance on the part of black immigrants. This part also has long discussions about staying in London. The winter season in London is very bad. Galahad tries to catch a pigeon in the park to eat and he feels: “... in this country, people prefer to see man starve that a cat or dog want something to eat” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 107). Moses reveals the plight of the immigrants and their hard working condition and he confesses: “work hard like hell to get these days” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 110). The novel is full of social commentary, by the characters and by the narrator. The novel captures the loneliness of immigrants. Moses is sick of London and is waiting to get back to Trinidad. “... sometimes I look back on all the years I spend in Brit’n, ... looking at things in general life really hard for the boys (immigrants) in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn’t get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell. Here is not like a home” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 114).

Life in London is a perpetual struggle for sheer survival for the several emigrants who reach England in the same ship. None really succeeds; some flop utterly, while many wear out in the struggle, like many of Lamming’s characters. The Emigrants dramatizes the crumbling of the emigrant’s illusions, his alienation and personal integration which was Lamming’s major experience in the metropolis. In *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming’s Trumper, a returned exile, presents a positive vision of exile and of the immigrant’s experience as capable of fostering a sense of community, race, and of enlarging the West Indian’s vision of himself. But, in *The Emigrants*, this is hardly realized and there is a sense of community on the ship that transports West Indian emigrants into England, because of shared vulnerability and dependence. In the metropolis, West Indian immigrants exist only on the periphery of the mainstream of British life, goaded by a sense of exile and unable to alter their past and unsure of their future which is beyond their control.

In the novel *The Lonely Londoners*, the dream of West Indian settlers in England was shattered and the West Indian psyche was damaged as they were exposed to a superior alien culture. Illusion and reality, or dream and awakening, become central in many West Indian novels, and it is for this reason Moses occupies the central position as the leader of the West Indian group in Selvon’s novels. England is not their ‘Promised Land’ and poverty prevents their return to the West Indies as they cannot afford their boat-fares to get back to their native country. However, they are forced to become optimistic about the possibilities of their ‘better future’ in England in course of time, thus realizing their long cherished dream of becoming prosperous and leading a peaceful and comfortable life in Europe. So, they resolve to stay back and try to establish some roots, and become part of the history of their place of settlement. Moses’ conversation with Harris and Galahad reveals their consciousness of their ‘root-lessness’ and their craving for roots: “Hello boy, what happening so what happening man, what happening. How Long you I Britain Boy? You think this winter bad? You should have been here in ‘52 what happening, What happening man” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 124).

Mose, however, is finally detached from the English History because the white society does not allow any West Indian participation in the present nor does it recognize the West Indian dimension in its past history. The West

Indian 'self' is thus stranded in England, both physically and spiritually. This alienation is emphasized in Galahad's first outing in London, when he gets lost and suddenly feels wholly estranged, wholly alone: "Galahad make for the tube station when he left Moses, and he stand up there on Queensway watching everybody going about their business, and a feeling of loneliness and fright come on him all of his sudden. 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 nor work or place to sleep or any friend or anything.... They not afraid somebody thief the money?... He bounce up against a woman coming out... is only he who walking stupid... On top of that, is one of those winter mornings when a kind of fog hovering around" (*The Lonely Londoners*, 25-26).

The coldness of the English weather, matched by the coldness of the people, and the strangeness of their streets, leaves Galahad in a state of loneliness. The immigrant's illusion of England is one of hospitality and warmth, in human terms, and familiar in terms of the British that the West Indians possessed in the colonies, suddenly dissolves and panic sets in.

Galahad addresses his black colour when he tried to understand why he is being treated so. The incident and conversation reflect the prejudice regarding race and colour: "And Galahad would take his hand from under the blanket, as he lay there studying how the night before he was in the lavatory and two white fellars come in and say how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty, and they didn't know that he was there, and when he come out they say hello mate have a cigarette. And Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, "Colour, is you causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can't be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot o misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you: I ain't do anything to infuriate the people and them, is you! Look at you, so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world!" So Galahad talking to the colour Black, as if is a person..." (*The Lonely Londoners*, 72).

The characters are the fictional representatives of the historical lens about racism and the colour prejudice which hampered the harmonious socio-racial fusion of the two worlds. Beneath the humour portrayed is Selvon's exploration of the separation of self from body, the divorce of personality from flesh which racism affects. The West Indian finally becomes schizophrenic under the pressure of racism. The psychological implication of racist attitudes occurs due to colour prejudice.

Selvon's immigrants face grinding poverty which forces them to eat pigeons snatched secretly from public parks. The white women they dreamt to be nothing but common sluts and old prostitutes, and possession of these women provides no entry into white society. For instance, Bart, a light-skinned Trinidadian, goes out with an ex-prostitute, telling her that he is a Latin-American, and comes from South America. He is ashamed of his West Indian background and is chased from his girlfriend's house by her father. When she leaves him, he spends the rest of his time walking all over London, peering into buses, trains, tubes, to find her, until he becomes haggard and haunted. But the illusion continues, and he never finds her again.

Conclusion:-

The novel *The Lonely Londoners* focuses on the larger body of immigrants, the working class. Selvon's immigrants are offered the worst jobs. They pay high prices for insecure tenancy in the most undesirable houses, and they indulge in sexual exploits that seldom include anything other than sex. All the immigrants are universally treated as 'black' and they are identified as 'others' or 'marginalised' in the white dominate English society. All the immigrants in the novel work in tubes, factories, railway station and perform house hold chores for low wages. The novel expresses the poor economic reality of the black immigrants and a drastic failure to find the postures in the alien world. The disappointment with England takes many forms. The West Indians are faced with outright discrimination in housing and employment. The illusory of hospitality of the English involves as imagined. Nick Bentley discusses in his essay: "Selvon's fiction [*The Lonely Londoners*] is important as one of the very first dramatizations and articulations of the anxieties and daily challenges faced by the marginalized black immigrant population in 1950s and 60s Britain ("Form and Language in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*", 18). As a marginalized, they suffer from rain, snow, wind, and fog, and are driven to become pirates or parasites on the fringes of a host society which regards them with hostility or indifference, and with an often unacknowledged fear of contamination.

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