

*An Island Is Not a World:  
A Reading of Sam Selvon's  
"An Island Is a World"*

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IN 1955, the year Allan Wingate (London, England) published Sam Selvon's *An Island Is a World*, his second novel, not many men and women of letters in England would have given much thought to the development of a distinctively West Indian novel. Isabel Quigly, who reviewed *An Island Is a World* for *The Spectator*, is a case in point. Her review suggests that she read the novel against the one yardstick by which she probably measured all fiction: the great tradition of the English-European novel. She seems to have searched Selvon's novel for evidence of its affinity with that tradition, dismissing as she did so the novel's palpable Trinidad setting—an absolutely crucial element of *An Island Is a World*—as not much more than "local colour." Here is what she had to say:

What is also interesting, though perhaps disappointing, is how closely the cast of an intelligent young West Indian's mind seems to resemble that of a young European; how, apart from the conscious passages of description and local colour, this novel might just as well have been written by an Englishman: a vaguely disturbed, spoilt, talented young man at odds with life till he finds the right girl. (480)

So Selvon's sensitive and perceptive exploration of the void in the lives of his characters (including Foster, the central character of *An Island Is a World*, who is afflicted by an existential despair that transcends West Indianness), a void that is a crucial part of the West Indian experience, is reduced to the archetypal pattern of a disaffected young man's fulfilment till he finds the right girl.

But *An Island Is a World*—to say nothing of *A Brighter Sun* (1952), and *I Hear Thunder* (1963)—could not have been written by an Englishman. Only a West Indian, and more perti-

nently, only a Trinidadian of Selvon's generation—the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, when Trinidad was a crown colony—could have written these novels. These three novels are preoccupied with a peculiarly distinctive Trinidadian (and West Indian) *angst*: identity, self-awareness, and wholeness in a colonial, pluralistic society crippled by self-contempt and the psychic scars of slavery, and the equally dehumanizing Indian indenture system. Selvon's characters, including the exiled West Indians of his "London Fiction," are plagued by a syndrome that is perhaps best described by George Lamming's term, "psychic shame" (Lamming 69). Selvon's novels explore the one question that may be regarded as the essence of his work: what does it mean to be West Indian?

*An Island Is a World, A Brighter Sun, and I Hear Thunder* grew out of a particular society, carefully observed and then accurately depicted in the novels, a society from which Selvon—like Foster and his brother Rufus of *An Island Is a World*—escaped. Here is Selvon speaking in an interview:

I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become very complacent and easy-going; this general impression of beach parties and boozing-up parties and driving a car around and going swimming in the blue Caribbean waters, and things like that, is part of the life in Trinidad. And I felt myself getting into it.

(Nazareth 425)

Selvon's remark is reminiscent of Adrian's sullen, sometimes bitter, reflections in *I Hear Thunder*. Bound fast to the kind of complacency Selvon deplors, and envious of his friend Mark's success, Adrian complains that he is "sick and tired of parties and dances and week-ends by the sea." Moreover, he lived in a society, Selvon writes, "which made few demands, and where the business of life was uncomplicated and the future stretched before him in an unbroken flow of serene days" (9-10).

Selvon grew up in the society described by Adrian: a society of individuals who worshipped all things British and American and who were indoctrinated by the belief that "established cultural traditions belong to the white world and gatecrashers are not welcome" (*Foreday Morning* 219), a society of petty racism, of men and women with a discriminating eye for shades of skin

complexion and hair texture, a society of racial and religious divisiveness characterized by various exclusive ethnic and racial clubs. A character such as the shallow, womanizing Randolph, a white Trinidadian whose whiteness gives him *carte blanche* in *I Hear Thunder*, is drawn from reality; and Selvon portrays him as a telling example of this society's superficial values.

The problem of West Indian divisiveness and backbiting which works against unity was one of Selvon's abiding concerns, and it pervades his writing. "Shortly before I left [Trinidad]," he said to a University of the West Indies audience, in 1979, "the dream of federation had evaporated because of . . . the differences and prejudices that exist from islander to islander . . . and the failure to organize a unified body that would be representative of the Caribbean as a whole" (*Foreday Morning* 215). The question of identity, he added, "has assumed greater importance and . . . the inhabitants seem to be thinking of themselves not as Trinidadians or Barbadians or Jamaicans, but as East Indians or African" (*Foreday Morning* 223). West Indian unity and identity—an urgent need for Andrews, Foster's friend, at best a dubious enterprise for Foster—are important themes in *An Island Is a World*. Andrews's dream of a West Indian Federation as salvation for the small islands is deflated and ridiculed by Foster's abrasive and prophetic comment: "Federation! Up to now the islands can't decide what to do. . . . They don't know their backside from their elbow. . . . Ah, with all the differences in these islands it will be one hell of a job to unify and have a common loyalty" (212-13). One can clearly hear Selvon's voice in these sentiments.

The search for identity and nationalism, the stasis that is the result of colonial neglect, the sense of entrapment and rootlessness, the smallness of the colonial world, alienation, escape, and disillusionment—these are the major obsessions of almost all of the characters in *An Island Is a World*. More pertinently, entrapment, escape and disillusionment make up the thematic dynamic of *An Island Is a World*. And the smallness of the colonial world is at the heart of this dynamic; it exacerbates the characters' sense of insignificance and alienation from the larger, "more important world."

The men and women of *An Island Is a World* have no sense of belonging to a nation with a strong identity and culture, at any

rate not an important culture. They are largely of a piece with Johnnie Sobert of Andrew Salkey's novel *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960); the displaced men and women of Claude McKay's 1929 novel *Banjo*; and Zampi, the anguished, questing obeah man of Ismith Khan's *The Obeah Man* (1964). Khan's Zampi and Selvon's Foster share some important characteristics. Both are decidedly amorphous, the result, both novelists imply, of the cultural void created by a self-serving, contemptuous colonialism. Zampi is without race or caste, and is "the end of masses of assimilations and mixtures" (*Obeah Man* 11); and although he is of Indian ancestry, Foster—like Selvon, who abjured any kind of narrow racial classification, and identified instead with Trinidad's cosmopolitanism—does not belong to any particular race or people. Foster is "a Trinidadian, whatever that means" (*Island* 181).

As Foster watches Johnny and other disaffected Indians leave Port of Spain for Mother India, he cannot share their enthusiasm for returning to their roots. While they "kept some of India hidden in their hearts" (*Island* 211)—one thinks here of Seeta's grinding stone handed down from generation to generation, a vestige of Indian culture (*I Hear Thunder* 68-69)—Foster sees that there is a hollow in his heart. This hollowness is remarkably similar to Zampi's sense of his—and for that matter other West Indians'—nothingness. "The clock had stopped in the Caribbean," Zampi complains, leaving only "the flotsam behind" (*Obeah Man* 22). Rebellng against this nothingness, Zampi sets out on a journey to fill the gap in his soul that "yawns like new music hungering for a scale" (*Obeah Man* 105). Zampi partly succeeds; Foster, however, cannot fill the hollow in his heart, notwithstanding his marriage to Jennifer who is presumably Isabel Quigly's "right girl." So each man's search is really an attempt to find a secure place in a world that has confined him to its periphery. Foster and Zampi seek a self-affirming identity, a self-definition that will help them to transcend the emotional, spiritual, and cultural no man's land they inhabit.

Neil Bissoondath is one of many of the new generation of expatriate West Indian writers who continue to explore Selvon's themes and preoccupations. In his collection of short stories

*Digging Up the Mountains*, Joseph of "There Are a Lot of Ways to Die" is the quintessential West Indian. He feels confined and isolated, "a man in an island on an island" (95). Joseph shares with other Bissoondath characters, and many of Selvon's—Foster and Rufus notably—an unstable connection with home which is merely "a point at which to pause in brief respite from the larger search" (81).

This larger search also drives Selvon's characters. (Here again one thinks of Khan's Zampi whose life of debauchery with Zolda has done nothing to assuage his hunger to know himself, to discover his place as a unique individual in the larger world.) Foster's displacement reinforces his sense of rootlessness and lack of identity. This is also true of several of Bissoondath's men and women. In "A Life of Goodbyes," Alicia, a small town Ontario woman, is hemmed in by the claustrophobia of an island, the metaphorical island created by her own restlessness (Joseph's metaphorical island in "There Are a Lot of Ways to Die"), by her search for a fulfilment she herself cannot define, but which is nonetheless the source of her chronic dissatisfaction. Foster is plagued by a similar dissatisfaction.

Bissoondath's Alicia and Selvon's West Indians share the same colonial predicament: uncertainty about who they are, but convinced that they can discover themselves in what they have been persuaded is a superior elsewhere to which they are drawn by the fantasy of their illusions. London for Selvon's West Indians (like Toronto for Bissoondath's) does not fulfil its promise. In London, Selvon's West Indians are "swallowed up" and disappear "behind a million white faces." For these invisible men and women there is "no hope of making progress in the old Brit'n" (*Island* 153). Like Bissoondath's dislocated men and women, refugees fleeing their own demons, the characters of *An Island Is a World* are chronically plagued by self-doubt and rootlessness. Flight: this is the obsession linking several of Selvon's protagonists and even his minor characters. In *An Island Is a World*, Patrick, Johnny's apprentice, flees Guyana for Trinidad, which, he imagines, is "the irresistible mecca of the colonies where . . . life was on a higher level" (14); and Rena, undaunted by the failure of her marriage to Rufus, flees Trinidad for Venezuela,

which for Selvon's generation of Trinidadians was no less the embodiment of El Dorado than it was for European adventurers of past centuries. Foster, "the lost soul groping in the dark" (73), flees Trinidad and his pregnant girl friend Marleen for England where he hopes to find "a way of living that has a purpose" (154).

Rejecting the limited and cramped vision which Trinidad offers, Foster finds in England—the centre for the colonial of all things true and good and beautiful—an even worse alienation and hopelessness. His life there confirms what he already knew or suspected: Trinidad is not part of the world that counts. "Of what material loss would it be to the world," he asks Andrews, "if the island suddenly sank under the sea?" (212). If, as Mark, the black doctor of *I Hear Thunder* says of colonials, Foster escapes to England believing that in the Mother Country "there were benefactors awaiting with splints and bandages and antidotes" (88-89), he is disillusioned by a society that can also be trivial and superficial, one furthermore, that is ignorant of the West Indies. Andrew Salkey, a contemporary of Sam Selvon, makes a similar observation of Johnnie Sobert in *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*. Having "escaped a malformed Jamaican middleclass," and attained his autumn pavement, Johnnie Sobert discovers that he has merely "created another kind of failure . . . in another country" (145). After his unfulfilling sojourn in London, Foster returns to Trinidad still restless, still searching.

The story of Rufus, Foster's somewhat feckless, less introspective brother, is an excellent example of Selvon's treatment of the stasis and entrapment inherent in small, colonial societies. Rufus flees a loveless marriage for the greener pastures of America in search of a profession. Instead of setting him free, however, America becomes the source of another kind of entrapment, for determined to remain in America permanently, he commits bigamy when he marries his American girlfriend. Eventually, Rufus returns to Trinidad to seek a divorce from his first wife. V. S. Naipaul, discussing this section of the novel on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* in 1955, remarked that Foster and Rufus, returning to Trinidad, "have found that the bigger world, despite its glamour, cannot give them what they want, that when all is said and done *An Island Is a World*" (*Caribbean Voices* 111). But Foster

has not returned to Trinidad a wiser man fully cognizant of his place in the world. He is still lost, still puzzled, still unfulfilled, and still "completely adrift" (218). At this stage in his life, Foster bears a striking resemblance to the constantly intellectualizing Ray of Claude McKay's *Banjo*. Yearning to be irresponsible like Banjo and "the beach boys" but unable to thrive in a society for which he has no instinct, Ray, who cannot come to terms with the fact that "he was a child of deracinated ancestry" (137), is forever doomed to chew the cud of his bitter displacement.

The search for a home, spiritual or physical, continually eludes Foster and Ray. And Rufus's situation is even more desperate: until Rena, his first wife, gives him a divorce, he is forced to remain in Trinidad. Rufus, it is worth noting, blames Trinidad, not just Rena, for his problems. He "felt a dull hatred at having to remain in the colony. . . . he had washed his hands of it long ago and now he was back and stuck" (200). When the American authorities discover Rufus's bigamy and deny him permission to return to America, Rufus flees in desperation to Venezuela, hoping to enter America through the back door. We hear nothing further about him: Selvon consigns him to the void of a precarious and uncertain future of disaffected colonials.

Another similarly disaffected and dispossessed dreamer is Johnny, the Indian jeweller and father of Jennifer and Rena. Alienated from his family and society, he sublimates his failures and frustrations in excessive drinking and truculence. But he, too, having no sense of belonging "in this place [where] you is nobody" (188), searches for a better elsewhere and is drawn to the Trinidad government's scheme to return disaffected Indians to Mother India. Although Selvon does not ridicule Johnny and his desire for repatriation, he does suggest in the rather obvious metaphor of the fire which destroys Johnny's shop and the "notes" for his invention for harnessing the force of gravity—a fire which he himself sets for the insurance on the eve of his departure for India—that Johnny's search for fulfilment elsewhere is another chimera doomed to failure. This is virtually assured, since Prime Minister Nehru, to whom the returning Indians have written for support, responds with no encouragement and in fact sees no place for Johnny in postcolonial

India. So Johnny's flight to an imaginary fulfilment matches Randolph's flight from Trinidad in search of the ultimate chimera—perpetual youth and sexual passion in “a temperate climate . . . where young flowers forever bloomed, bursting out in shapely contours of soft breasts and curving thighs” (*Thunder* 155).

Father Hope is another dreamer. Having killed a man in London while defending a woman being attacked, Father Hope arrives in Trinidad where he sets himself up as the preachy, at times tediously patronizing, self-appointed spiritual saviour of Veronica, an isolated, bucolic hamlet from where he expects to dispense spiritual peace and salvation. But his London past reappears in the person of an English detective who on a visit to Trinidad becomes suspicious of Father Hope. Father Hope's dream of a new, less restrictive, more liberal religion—another naive chimera—is shattered by his mysterious death—whether it was suicide or an accident, Selvon leaves deliberately ambiguous—which matches the nebulous resolution with which the story of Rufus ends.

It was Father Hope who said sententiously to Foster: “An island is a world, and everywhere that people live, they create their own worlds” (*Island* 73). For Foster, however, that island world is too small, too restrictive, and he can create nothing worthwhile. (Again one is reminded of Bissoondath's Joseph. Returning to his West Indian island after a six-year sojourn in Canada, Joseph discovers that “a life was not to be constructed here” [*Mountains* 96].) Even Andrews, creative artist and optimistic politician, is fully aware of his world's smallness and sees that if a brighter sun is in the offing it can be realized only through a federation of the islands. V. S. Naipaul, writing about the failed revolutionary Francisco Miranda, who was born in Venezuela (of which Trinidad was a part before its conquest by the British in 1797), describes Miranda “as a very early colonial, *someone with a feeling of incompleteness*, with very little at home to fall back on, with an idea of a great world out there, someone who, when he was out in this world, had to reinvent himself” (*A Way in the World* 243-44; emphasis added). “Someone with a feeling of incompleteness”: this is a succinct description of Foster and other Selvon colonial



characters. It also aptly describes Selvon himself, who fled Trinidad in search of something more substantial, more self-fulfilling. To say so is not to gloss over the fact that the society he fled shaped his growing sensibilities. Indeed Selvon's five or six years as fiction editor and writer for the *Trinidad Guardian* helped him to find his distinctive voice and some of the themes he would develop in his later work.

But Selvon, unlike Rufus, did not burn his bridges, nor did he share Rufus's contempt for Trinidad. Although in exile, he continued to visit Trinidad at every opportunity. And there is more: Selvon may not have been certain about his ethnic, cultural, and national identity (*Foreday Morning* 224); this uncertainty, however, is matched by his own assertively confident statement: "This island is my shadow and I carry it with me wherever I go, and my roots are the same as the mango tree or an immortelle" (*Foreday Morning* 224-25). The interrelationship of amorphousness and stability, so obvious in Selvon, and undoubtedly one of the sources of his exhilarating fiction, is also noticeable in Foster. For instance, it is only a brief, but telling, moment in the novel; but it conveys simply and effectively, Foster's ambivalence: as the ship taking him to England clears the Dragon's Mouths, Foster is moved by the island's beauty: "The hills rose green and irregular. The sky was blue with fleecy clouds. He thought it was very beautiful" (87).

This nagging ambivalence gives *An Island Is a World* its distinctive tension, a tension that mirrors the condition of the colonial society Selvon knew so well. Because it distills the essence of this society, *An Island Is a World* is not only historically important, it is also one of the most substantial and satisfying of Selvon's ten novels.

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