

# Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance

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COMPARED with imaginative writing in other Commonwealth countries, West Indian<sup>1</sup> literature arrived late — behind the Dominions and India. By 1952, when Selvon's first book, *A Brighter Sun*,<sup>2</sup> appeared, the West Indies had little drama, scattered volumes of poetry, and scarcely as much as three dozen published works of fiction. These works were not generally well known; their authors also were not recognized; and it is fair to say that no West Indian writer had made a (literary) name for himself internationally<sup>3</sup> when *A Brighter Sun* was first published. It had not been widely realized either that the West Indies was an English-speaking region outside of Britain and the United States, where an indigenous literary tradition would or could evolve.

*A Brighter Sun* was preceded by Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* (1950), which had first alerted a small international audience — chiefly British critics — to the literary potential of the West Indies. Mittelholzer's novel depicts the complex relationships between race, colour, class and wealth in urban Trinidad. But *A Morning at the Office* was not, by any means, the first work of fiction to reproduce West Indian social and cultural complexities. During the first half of this century, H. G. DeLisser and Claude McKay of Jamaica, C. L. R. James and Alfred Mendes of Trinidad, Mittelholzer himself in his first published work *Corentyne Thunder* (1941), and Vic Reid in *New Day* (1949), had given similar reproductions in novels that render the surface realities of a culturally mixed society more successfully than its psychological idiosyncrasies. Maybe this psychological inadequacy deprived them of

wider appeal, or perhaps their impact was blunted by the extreme density of the artistic and cultural atmosphere of the West Indian colonies, or it may simply have been the historical accident of two World Wars, or the enforced lack of good communication between mainly island territories that impeded their popularity; at any rate, these early novels failed to make much of an impression, whether locally or internationally, either as single works or collectively as a regional body of writing. It was the literary vacuum left by this failure that *A Morning at the Office* proceeded to fill by winning an international audience for itself. The special achievement of *A Brighter Sun* was to continue this process, by extending the audience of *A Morning at the Office* so considerably that Selvon could be seen to make a substantially fresh start in virtually creating a new literary tradition.

The action of *A Brighter Sun* takes place in rural Trinidad during the Second World War. It illustrates the career of Tiger, a young Indian peasant, who acquires greater maturity as he gradually becomes aware of the need for national identity in Trinidad. Tiger's progressively maturing career forms, or is intended to form, the theoretical pattern of a "bildungsroman" in which each experience contributes, stage by stage, to his emotional and intellectual growth. In the end he reaches a sobering awareness of the need for social and cultural unity, that is to say, for national identity in Trinidad. But the stages of Tiger's partial biography are not as closely integrated with the (political) theme<sup>4</sup> of national identity as one might expect from the plot of a strict "bildungsroman". Selvon's narrative technique is more freely associative, loosely interweaving assorted episodes in Tiger's life story with occasional insights into the political theme.

The theme is implied throughout the novel on occasions when differences are indicated between members of a society that consists of Chinese, Europeans, Indians, Amerindians, Negroes, and people who are a mixture of some or

all of these races. The strongest differences inevitably occur between the two largest groups — the Indians and Negroes. These differences are illustrated, and accompanied by hints of a wider, more all-embracing Trinidadian outlook that would confirm the possibility of a truly cohesive community. There is, however, a strong feeling of regret that such an outlook has not yet emerged in Trinidad.

Selvon's treatment of national identity can be illustrated by an incident toward the end of the novel when Tiger's wife, Urmilla, is expecting her second child, and needs urgent medical attention. No public health service is readily available, and Tiger goes in search of a private doctor. His visit to an Indian and a Negro doctor, respectively, are fruitless. Tired and desperate, he finally gets hold of an English doctor who responds without hesitation, drives to Tiger's home in his own car, treats Urmilla, and charges an unexpectedly modest fee for his services. Deeply impressed by such kind treatment from a non-Trinidadian, Tiger is abjectly grateful, exceeding himself with gushing praise and intemperate promises of repaying the doctor's kindness in the future. Tiger's excess is inspired by his realization of the need for racial and cultural unity in Trinidad. So urgent is this realization that he is unable to restrain his anger at the two local doctors who rebuffed him. He searches them out once more and denounces their lack of humanity and social responsibility, qualities which, he implies, they would likely possess if they were members of a more cohesive community with a stable sense of national identity.

The English doctor's behaviour is still in Tiger's mind, later on, when Urmilla has begun labour and is being attended by Rita, their Negro neighbour. As he waits outside Urmilla's room, Tiger is inspired by another paroxysm of gratitude, this time to Rita and her husband, Joe. It leads him to confide in Joe:

"And, Joe, ain't all of we does live good? Ain't coolie does live good with nigger? Is only white man who want to keep we down, and even so it have some good one

among them. You know something, Joe, they have good and bad all about, don't matter if you white or black."

"Sure."

"Boy, one day I go become a politician. Is politics that build a country, you know that, Joe?"

"Why you don't think about going back to India?"

"What I would go back there for, Joe? I born in this country, Trinidad is my land . . . I mean, it look to me as if everybody is the same. It have so many different kinds of people in Trinidad, boy! You think I should start to wear dhoti? Or I should dress as everybody else, and don't worry about Indian so much, but think of all of we as a whole, living in one country, fighting for we rights?" (pp. 194-95)

The naiveté of the passage and of the last question particularly is disarming, almost suggesting that Tiger could create instant national identity merely by changing his clothes.

This naiveté is characteristic of the novel and of Selvon's whole treatment of national identity. To some extent, it is the result of Tiger's uncomplicated mentality with its inveterate addiction to cliché and platitude. This mentality is consistent with the hero's rural background and it confers freshness and sincerity to the social and political concerns that well up spontaneously in him. We are therefore encouraged to accept the validity of his thoughts and feelings, despite his maudlin effusiveness and oversimplification. So that, although the theme is somewhat impoverished by the absence of more sophisticated intellectual analysis, it emerges convincingly in the total consciousness of a hero who is concretely realized within the authentic locale of his rustic environment.

The environment within which Tiger moves is depicted in meticulously observed detail. So compelling are these details — of sights and sounds, of speech and manner — that the novel, in fact, assumes greater interest as a document of everyday happenings than as a story of a Caribbean youth's search for national identity. Long before the end of the novel, the reader realizes that Tiger's own story is progressively crowded out by the overwhelming mass of accumulated observations about his ordinary, day to day experiences — his relationships with friends and acquaint-

ances such as Deen, Boysie, Sookhdeo, and Tall Boy and Otto, the Chinese shopkeepers, as well as his preoccupation with the social, political and economic problems that plague most victims of colonialism.

Tiger's biography is merely the frame in which a lavish social canvas is hung. At the end of the novel, he no more reaches maturity than he understands the basic issues of Trinidad's national identity; he has merely grown a little older; and the chronology of his growth provides the intellectual pattern which shapes what would otherwise have been a formless or merely random display of local colour.

Besides the racial antagonism, ignorance, poverty and social injustices which Trinidad shares with most other colonial societies, Selvon's local colour reproduces the special flagrancy of these features in the Caribbean. In one episode, Tiger ventures into the capital city, Port of Spain, to buy a bonnet for his baby. He timidly enters a department store, and because of social embarrassment, barely summons courage to ask for what he wants. The Negro female attendant deliberately ignores him at first, then as she reluctantly decides to serve him, turns instead to serve a white woman who comes in behind Tiger. When Tiger remonstrates, as strongly as his embarrassment will allow, he is sharply reprimanded by the attendant for "rudeness". To this girl, Tiger is "a stupid coolie" (p. 93) who looks "like is the first time he come to town" (p. 93). The white woman, on the other hand, is "the white lady living in dat big house just opposite de cannon ball tree in de savannah" (p. 93). This episode exposes the flagrant practice of apartheid ethics in Trinidad (and throughout the West Indies) especially in colonial times.

But if all this sounds like a high-principled manifesto for racial tolerance, or a diatribe against colonial rule, the impression would be misleading. Although Selvon's portrait records the exact social, political and economic conditions in colonial Trinidad, the record is innocent of moral out-

rage or political commitment. It is interesting to note that the same conditions elicit scorn from Vidia Naipaul in his early fiction. No doubt differences in the authors' temperament may partly explain this contrasting literary treatment of the same subject; it is not that Selvon approves of racial intolerance and social injustice.

In the bonnet incident, for example, Selvon's disapproval of apartheid ethics is self-evident in their transparent exposure. He disapproves; but unlike the satirist, does not condemn. The incident ends with a chat between the Negro girl and a fellow attendant who readily confirms Tiger's rude behaviour with a joke about the financial meanness and social crudity of Indians generally. Then, in casual chatter that betrays their own boredom, inefficiency, and duplicity, both attendants discuss film-shows for the evening, and scurry guiltily back to work on the approach, presumably, of the store manager. The incident illustrates Selvon's characteristic method of employing humour to expose human frailty and social inadequacy without, at the same time, passing judgement on these weaknesses. While we are made to feel sympathy for Tiger, we are not encouraged to blame anyone for his discomfiture.

Selvon's preoccupation with West Indian national identity, his local colour, and his humour are the three main elements of his fiction. As suggested before, the theme of national identity serves a mainly structural function, and the author's predominant interest is in his blend of local colour and humour. To examine this blend in another episode from *A Brighter Sun*, is to indicate its central role in all of Selvon's books.

The episode describes Tiger's entertainment of two Americans whom he has invited home for dinner.<sup>5</sup> The invitation gives the author an opportunity for an elaborate account of Indian foods (achar, dhal, dhal pourri, meetai, channa) and Indian cooking. Tiger's preparations are spelled out with self-conscious and self-attracting emphasis on the most commonplace, local practices. Two bottles of the "best"

rum are bought; Urmilla also buys two over-priced, live chickens from Deen's wife, just to show that she can afford to pay extra when the occasion warrants it; the house is scrubbed clean; new clothes are bought for the family; a table-cloth, cutlery, chairs (with cushions) are borrowed from Rita who also extends a light bulb from her house into Tiger's hut. The local colour is superabundant — an end in itself.

At the same time, humour prevails, and none of these preparations is narrated to lament over the deprived circumstances of the chief characters, or to ridicule their social pretensions. In the end, Joe comes to blows with Rita for lending out their utensils and furniture; Tiger beats Urmilla for borrowing from Rita, and for wearing the cosmetics that Rita put on her. As with the bonnet incident, human weakness is exposed in everyone, and all ends in good-natured laughter and rollicking farce. The violence is entirely in the speech and gestures, as in Joe's quarrel with Rita when he says:

"Ah tell yuh already, keep out of dem coolie people business! Wat de arse yuh have to interfere wid dem for? Look, Ah going and out de damn light, man. If Tiger want electric light in 'e house, 'e cud pay for it, he working for plenty money now."

"You haul yuh tail!" Rita flared. "Dey is my friends, and I lend dem dose tings. Wat yuh making noise for? Yuh fraid yuh wares get break up? De man must make impression on he boss. You ain't even have dat ambition, so long yuh working in de base, yuh never bring an American home, to eat good creole food, calallo, peas, rice —"

"Wat de arse yuh tink, I running ah boarding house? Yuh too damn soft. Dat Indian girl only have to come and say, 'Rit-a-a, lend me ah pot, ple-a-s-e-e,' and yuh gone mad, yuh giving she everything it have in de house. Yuh won't like to move over in de hut, and let dem come and live in dis house, eh? Ah don't understand dat damn fool Tiger. He buying brick to build house, and he ain't even have furniture yet. He planning to lick down de hut and build house, and he wife ain't even have clothes to wear or shoes to put on. All of dat is damn slackness, man. Why de arse yuh have to drag me in it? Ah suppose yuh lend she ah dress to put on too?"

"Yuh ain't have no compassion! Look at yuh, yuh cud see yuh come from George Street! Yuh don't know nutting bout friend or neighbour or helping oder people —"

"To arse wid dat! Nobody ever help me. I catch me royal from de time Ah small, living de hard way. Yuh won't say Tiger ever do anything for me! Way he know how to eat wid knife and fork? Yuh don't know coolie people does eat wid dey hand? Man, look, Ah telling yuh, dis is de last time yuh get on wid dis slackness, yuh hear, if anything so happen again, I beat yuh like ah snake!"

"Beat who like ah snake? But look at he, nar! Man, go and drown yuhself." (pp. 174-75)

No one gets hurt. The bawdy vehemence and threatened violence are not only relieved by the humorous context of a familiar domestic quarrel; they are recognizably simulated, prompted as much by genuine disagreement as by a passion for bravado, exhibitionism, and exaggeration — common features of West Indian behaviour.

The whole episode describing Tiger's offer of hospitality to the Americans demonstrates the essentials of Selvon's art as a local colourist and humorist. His sharp eye gives his observations the exactness and comprehensiveness of a camera portrait, while his fine ear records the speech of his countrymen with the accuracy of a tape-recorder; and uniting observations and dialogue is a vibrant, comic sense inspired by insight into human nature.

When *A Brighter Sun* was first published, *The Times Literary Supplement* reviewer found the novel's social portrait "poetic" and "touching",<sup>6</sup> adjectives which are justly applied to Selvon's compassionate presentation of colonial deprivation. Previous West Indian novels such as DeLisser's *Jane's Career* (1914), Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933), Alfred Mendes's *Pitch Lake* (1934), C. L. R. James's *Minty Alley* (1936), Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* and Vic Reid's *New Day* had recorded conditions in the West Indian colonies just as accurately. What they lacked most of all was the humour which increases the objectivity of Selvon's portrait, and enhances its pathos. Even so, the impact of *A Brighter Sun* seems a little out of proportion. The same reviewer thought that the novel reminded him of John Dos Passos's "newsreel" technique in *U.S.A.* and of Firbank's odd dialogue in *Prancing Nigger*. It was the sort of comparison not applied to previous West



Indian novels, and it reveals more about the reviewer's own tastes than about possible literary influences on Selvon.

Extra-literary factors probably help to explain the impact of *A Brighter Sun*. Selvon's book appeared, after all, in the first half of the 1950's when the argument for decolonization was beginning to catch on the world over. The novel thus had the benefit of an international audience interested in factual reports from the colonies, in questions about national identity and political independence, and all the underlying implications of economic exploitation and colour prejudice. But, even if *A Brighter Sun* was lucky to have an audience more or less ready for it, the novel deserves credit for satisfying this audience, stimulating its expectations, and thereby promoting both its emergence and growth. If the influence of *A Brighter Sun* seems out of proportion to its intrinsic quality — and it is a distinguished piece of regional writing, if nothing else — it is because the novel focussed attention on topical issues of the Caribbean region, and stimulated their literary expression as no other single book had done before.

Not every West Indian writer was either as quick or as successful as Selvon in responding to topical issues of his day and rendering them in acceptable literary form. Mittelholzer, for instance, despite his prodigious narrative gifts, almost wilfully neglected the incipient breakthrough he had made with *A Morning at the Office*. In 1952 alone he published three novels: one had an English setting and characters; another dealt with West Indian historical subjects, remote from contemporary concerns; and the third indulged the author's penchant for scenes of physical brutality and psychological perversion.<sup>7</sup> Although Mittelholzer continued to publish regularly throughout the 1950's (and indeed published more books than any other West Indian writer), his morbid preoccupation with sexuality, death, and suicide, gave his work a predominantly sensational appeal that tended to obscure its more serious or topical elements. Roger Mais also produced three novels between 1952 and

1955, provocatively displaying dire poverty and economic injustice in Jamaica; but his artless advocacy of Christianity as a remedy for social ills seriously compromises his work.

Between 1950 and 1955 other writers emerged, of whom the most notable are John Hearne and George Lamming. Hearne in *Voices under the Window* (1955), and Lamming in *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) deal with shared colonial problems, although Hearne tends to romanticize the violence and brutality that he describes. *In the Castle of My Skin*, however, is altogether more intensely poetic than *A Brighter Sun*, offering a richness of imagery and musical phrasing that seems to capture the total, bitter-sweet complexity of West Indian social history.

It is easy to see why Selvon and Lamming, who had emigrated to London together, were such good friends: they are inspired by a similar compassion for the cultural rootlessness and political despair faced by West Indian people. To what extent Selvon influenced Lamming, or vice versa, it is impossible to say. The fact is that *A Brighter Sun* signalled a West Indian literary renaissance that *In the Castle of My Skin* quickly confirmed. After these two novels, there was little doubt that a literary and artistic evolution was taking place in the English-speaking Caribbean, along the pattern established in other colonial or neo-colonial territories.

Selvon's second novel, *An Island is a World* (1955), presents the story of two young Trinidadians, Rufus and Foster, who are perplexed by their island's cultural confusion and lack of a stable identity. They emigrate to the U.S. and England respectively, and after much over-heated soul-searching, improbable sexual adventures, and farcical melodrama, return to Trinidad even more confused and despairing than before they emigrated. The main relationships, which cut across race and colour lines, highlight the divisive tensions already seen in the first novel. The chief difference is that, by their travels and international contacts, the protagonists of the second novel extend its divisive

implications to the wider context of all the West Indian territories. The topical interest of the novel becomes evident once we recall that it appeared when a political federation of all the West Indian territories was being seriously discussed. The federation was formed and later dissolved, justifying the skepticism toward national identity that is revealed in *An Island is a World*.<sup>8</sup> For all its political intuitiveness, however, this second novel is less impressive than the first. The reason is that the social documentation and lighter touches, which carry the weight of the novel, prove more winning in *A Brighter Sun* partly because they appeared there first.

Selvon's second novel gives away the chief handicap of his intention and skills as a writer. Since his unvarying intention is to illustrate commonplace West Indian social features, his illustrations are likely to become less and less interesting, if the same features are repeated in book after book; more so if they are repeated within each book. This is precisely the trend of the author's nine books. Minor variations of setting and emphasis occur, but on the whole, the theme of national identity is constant, and the dominant subject remains a plain, comic representation of West Indian manners.

In the third book, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), the scene shifts to London and to experiences of West Indian immigrants living there. This subject was first presented by Lamming, largely in terms of historical debate and political theory, in his second novel, *The Emigrants* (1954). *The Emigrants* foreshadows the polemical sterility that was to overtake Lamming in his third and fourth novels. In this respect, ironically, the rather unsophisticated intellectual content of Selvon's fiction proves artistically less damaging, because it serves mainly as a shaping influence.

*The Lonely Londoners* again demonstrates Selvon's use of a political theme in giving shape to a collection of loosely related sketches that, in this instance, depict the gaiety, the fun-loving aimlessness of West Indians in

London. At the end of the book, after all the gaiety and fun, the author suddenly suggests that these carefree qualities are a mask for deeper spiritual uncertainties emanating from his characters' underlying sense of exile and cultural rootlessness. Moses Aloetta, who acts as a go-between tenuously linking the relationships of the various characters, contemplates the inner significance of West Indian experience in London:

Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the Spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling along the Strand, the Spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening — what? He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart. As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they afraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity.<sup>9</sup>

By claiming that the West Indian's capacity for instant laughter is really an accommodation to his volatile social and cultural conditions, the author provides a theoretical mould for the experiences of his characters. His claim itself, or its implication, that a stable sense of cultural and political identity would keep his characters from tramping the streets of London in vain search of "pussy and paradise," is simplified and repetitive. It lacks analysis or probing. The continued absence of such intellectual exploration from Selvon's fiction underlines the view that his skills are best exercised on the free-wheeling combination of social vignettes and humorous anecdotes that are the very stuff of his art.

Since his short stories by definition give shorter, self-contained studies, they suffer less damage from repetition. In any case, their sameness of content is more palatable in small doses. They are consequently the best writing that Selvon has so far produced. Of the longer works, *A Brighter Sun* and *The Lonely Londoners* are the best. A

*Brighter Sun*, of course, is undamaged by repetition. *The Lonely Londoners* is relatively undamaged too because London provides a different, non-Caribbean setting, and characters are drawn from a wide number of West Indian territories. (One character even is Nigerian). Moreover, London justifies the reproduction of West Indian manners as a means of explaining cultural differences between West Indian and British characters. (So often, especially in the novels following *The Lonely Londoners*, gratuitous descriptions of local customs in a Trinidad setting read like pages out of a travel brochure, advertising exotic scenery for purely commercial reasons).

Much of the success of *The Lonely Londoners* is also due to its wholly original language, an invented dialect incorporating linguistic elements from a number of West Indian territories. This dialect narrative imparts to the characters and events a degree of Caribbean authenticity not easily found elsewhere in West Indian literature. When this narrative is combined with the tape-recorded dialogue, what we get is as faithful a copy of Caribbean life as exists in literature. In the ensuing passage, the main characters, including Galahad, Big City and Moses attend a "fête" given by Harris, an Anglophile West Indian:

"Look at the old Five, man!" Moses say, admiring the dancers.

"Big City," Galahad say, suddenly remembering the time in Hyde Park when Big City did jockey him to stand up on the platform and address the crowd, "I bet you not as brave as Five. I bet you don't go and ask the other girl to dance — that one over there by the table sitting down with them two fellars."

"Ah." Big City say, "who want to dance with them — up people? Harris always bringing some of them iadeda here."

"I bet you don't," Galahad say.

"You talking to Big City, boy," Big City say.

"Ten like you don't," Galahad say.

"I mad go over there and ask she to dance," City mutter.

"Harris will throw you out if you interfere with his distinguished guests," Galahad say.

"You don't know Big City, boy," Moses join the jockeying.

"You really don't know Big City, else you wouldn't talk so."

By this time Big City was flying across to the table. Again, nobody ever get to find out what Big City say or what he do. Some of the boys say it was because the other girl was dancing with Five, and that give she courage. But however it was, the girl get up and start to dance with Big City. "Galahad," Moses say, standing up in the corner and watching the proceedings, "the things that happening here tonight never happen before. I have a feeling you will see a lot before this fete over. Watch yourself, and if you see fight run like hell, because if things open up hot I outing off fast." (pp. 102-103)

Here is all the forwardness and jocularity, the self-dramatizing histrionics, the improvised wit and sheer absurdity that is considered characteristic of the Caribbean.

The preeminence of the short stories and *The Lonely Londoners* in the canon of his fiction confirms the belief that Selvon's talent is better geared to short fiction — the sketch, anecdote, short story or folk tale. In a review of Selvon's fifth book, the novel *Turn Again Tiger*, Naipaul makes a similar point:

Mr. Selvon is without the stamina for the full-length novel, and he has here [in *Turn Again Tiger*] found the undemanding form which suits his talent best: the flimsiest of frames which can, without apparent disorder, contain unrelated episodes and characters.<sup>10</sup>

This judgement drew an angry retort from Lamming in his non-fictional *The Pleasures of Exile* (1961), where he hints that Naipaul is guilty of condescension to Selvon. But Lamming's loyal defence of Selvon, with perverse irony, carries hints of condescension from any educated West Indian Negro toward a "stupid coolie" writer who should not be criticized for the lack of literary sophistication that is an unavoidable consequence of his coolie background.

The truth is that Naipaul's judgement is justified not only by *Turn Again Tiger* but by each of the four novels that follow it.<sup>11</sup> *Turn Again Tiger* itself is a virtual duplication of *A Brighter Sun*, continuing the biography of Tiger at a more mature stage of his life without significant variation of the social features presented in the first novel. *I hear Thunder* (1963) and *Plains of Caroni* (1970), which are set in Trinidad, are basically collections of sketches and

anecdotes jumbled together in flimsy frames of improbably romantic intrigue; and the equally episodic *The Housing Lark* (1965) and *Moses Ascending* (1975) are duplicates of *The Lonely Londoners* that lose vigour and freshness principally because they succeed the original.

But the loose structure of Selvon's fiction is not to be regarded either as mere self-indulgence or, somehow, as revealing technical ineptitude. The type of naturalistic fiction at which he is most adept, and in which the dominant aim is plainly pictorial, thrives on the motley arrangement of short-length studies, because such an arrangement emphasizes the value of factual accuracy at the expense of a controlling point of view that derives from studied analysis of the facts. There is some evidence that suggests this species of fiction flourishes especially in the early stages of a literary tradition, when the novel in its more sophisticated forms has not yet emerged. In Britain, for example, important fore-runners of the novel as early as the sixteenth century, were writers of picaresque sketches such as Nashe and Deloney. They were followed more than a century later by Defoe and Fielding, with longer works notable for their episodic structure and vigorous display of contemporary manners. The form of Selvon's writing compares with the fiction not only of these early British writers, but of the early writers in other traditions as well — for instance, Marivaux and Le Sage in France, and Washington Irving in the U.S.

The strongest resemblances, however, are to more or less contemporary writers in colonial or neo-colonial territories where literary traditions have only recently emerged. The fiction of Canada and New Zealand, of Australia and Nigeria, not to mention the West Indies, is particularly distinguished for short-length works and longer, more disjointed "novels," of which some of the better known examples are Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Frank Sargeson's *Conversation with my Uncle and Other Stories* (1936), Joseph Furphy's *Such is*

*Life* (1903), Achebe's novels, and Lamming's own *In the Castle of my Skin*. All these writers earnestly document the social features of their local surroundings and cultures, and the short or episodic forms that they use have served them well.

But the same forms have been developed by other writers into linearly-constructed novels of manners which are more comprehensive in scope and more coherently organized. This is not to say that the works of Leacock, Sargeson, Furphy, Achebe and Lamming are incoherent. All of these writers are skilled craftsmen. Nevertheless, the coherence of, for example, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *In the Castle of my Skin* is achieved by means of linking episodes together in a more or less chronological sequence without much narrative cohesion. A more sophisticated type of narrative appears in works of greater reputation: for example, Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (1956), and Vidia Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961).<sup>12</sup> Selvon's best work does not match the studied technique in these two novels. Yet technical accomplishment is only one aspect of literary excellence, and what one misses of intellectual interest and technical control in Selvon's work, one gains in humour, compassion and ultimately pathos.

In the end we return to pathos; for that is the most appealing element in Selvon's blend of authentic local colour with compassionate humour, a blend which did more to gain an international audience for West Indian literature than any writing before Selvon's. This unique contribution to the early development of West Indian literature is certain to endure. Whether the appeal of Selvon's art will endure as long as his historical contribution is less certain. Perhaps as happened in the U.S.A. with humorists such as Hamlin Garland and Artemus Ward, his reputation may fade with time. These writers lacked the firm, intellectual underpinning which Mark Twain provided when he adapted their vernacular style and colloquial tone into an original, bril-



liantly sustained idiom that wholly reincarnates the fundamental cultural values of frontier America.

It is curious how closely the relationship between these earlier American writers and Mark Twain matches the current relationship between Selvon and Naipaul; for it is the unstable social customs first successfully reported by Selvon in a predominantly vernacular idiom, that Naipaul transmutes, by means of penetrating intellectual analysis, into the bleak satiric vision that has proved so popular with today's neo-existentialist critics. At any rate, Selvon's career is by no means finished — he is fifty-four years old — and his fiction may yet take new directions.

It may be important to emphasize the unfinished nature of Selvon's career. *Moses Ascending*, published only two years ago, reveals no decline in his mastery of concrete, documentary detail and bracing, reinvigorating humour. That this mastery imparts a limiting sameness to his whole *oeuvre* seems unavoidable. Nor is it easy to avoid the feeling that, with these nine books behind him, his fiction can develop only in quantity. Even within the limitations of its sameness, however, the appeal of Selvon's fiction is likely to last. It is unlikely to fade as quickly as the reputation of Garland and Ward, whose humour is not accompanied by similar knowledge of human nature.

The American writer, in fact, who most closely resembles Selvon is neither Garland nor Ward, but Bret Harte, whose reputation as a local colourist and humorist has stood for more than fifty years after his death. Among Commonwealth authors, the closest parallel is with Stephen Leacock, whose *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is a Canadian counterpart of *The Lonely Londoners*, and exposes with the same compassionate laughter the social foibles and human weaknesses of Leacock's countrymen. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* has proved a minor classic that no teacher, nowadays, will wish to omit from a university course that surveys Canadian literature. It cannot be long

before *The Lonely Londoners* enjoys a similar reputation in the West Indies.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>The "West Indies" (or "West Indian") is used throughout this essay in the sense of the English-speaking Caribbean.
- <sup>2</sup>Samuel Selvon, *A Brighter Sun* (London: Wingate, 1952). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>3</sup>Although Claude McKay had won fame as a poet and novelist in the 1930's, his work was regarded as belonging more to an American (the Harlem Renaissance) tradition than to West Indian literature. And while C. L. R. James and George Padmore had a reputation in international circles, they were known mainly as writers on political subjects.
- <sup>4</sup>Selvon's theme admittedly is the latent *cultural* nationality of Trinidad, and in some of his later work, of the entire English-speaking Caribbean. But the theme necessarily implies the formation of a political nation based on a Federation of all the English-speaking Caribbean territories.
- <sup>5</sup>Tiger was employed by the Americans who were surveying land for building a road.
- <sup>6</sup>*The [London] Times Literary Supplement*, (February 15, 1952), p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup>The three novels, in the order mentioned, are *The Weather in Middenshot*, *The Children of Kaywana*, and *Shadows Move Among Them*.
- <sup>8</sup>Between 1956 and 1961 proponents of the Federation of the West Indies had succeeded in drawing up a Federal Constitution, selecting a capital site, holding elections, and having the Federal idea almost universally accepted. But internal rivalries and tensions prevailed, and the Federation did not survive the withdrawal of its two most populous members, Jamaica in 1961, and Trinidad in 1962.
- <sup>9</sup>Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Wingate, 1956), pp. 125-26.
- <sup>10</sup>*New Statesman*, (December 6, 1958), p. 826.
- <sup>11</sup>In his book, *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 12, Landeg White points out that Lamming also may have had a personal reason for attacking Naipaul who had reviewed his novel *Of Age and Innocence* "in terms which even today seem patronising."
- <sup>12</sup>Rene Maran's *Batouala* (1921) provides a useful comparison: it achieves coherence despite interpolated anecdotes and evocative description. Similarly, *Moby Dick* retains unity despite lengthy pauses of philosophical reflection and whaling lore. It is significant that *Batouala* and *Moby Dick* do not fit comfortably into the literary history of their respective countries. They are isolated works of genius, whereas *The Tree of Man* and *A House for Mr. Biswas* seem to come at a more predictable stage in the history of Australian and West Indian fiction.