

Cultural Consciousness and Gender Identity in Moses Ascending and Moses**Migrating**

Singh, Preeti

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, K.L.S.M.M., Meerut.

Abstract

Samuel Selvon's literature lays emphasis on the development of a consciousness that moulds the entire issue of identity into a new shape. His literature comprises the story of West Indian immigrants in London and through his central characters, one can learn about Caribbeans' realities in England. The arrival of commonwealth subjects in England after World War II was considered, by the protagonists as well as other characters in Selvon's novel, as a possibility to form positive inter-racial relations to cope with the problems of decolonization, yet it signals the progressive failure of such possibility. His protagonists are subjected to cultural consciousness, existential struggle, crime, gender issues, love and hate, betrayal and death that lurk behind the city's glimmer. Samuel Selvon outlines how their experiences and action influence the formation process of their identity and defines their behavior. This research paper endeavors to explore the cultural consciousness shared by Selvon's protagonists as well as the issue of gender identity experienced by them, also aims to analyze the experience of exile commonly shared by Selvon's main characters.

Keywords: Immigrants, Exile, Racial discrimination, Commonwealth, Exile, Homelessness, Homeland.

Introduction

Whitney Balliett in "Introduction" of *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* by Susheila Nasta observes that the "issues of language and consciousness, national identity and

social class are inalienable and important concerns in Selvon's novels (9)."

Samuel Selvon as a nationalist writer exhibits the authentic West Indian culture in his novels as he reflects on cultural

consciousness and identity of West Indians' socio-cultural way of living, economic activities and religious cultural inclinations. In the novels *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*, Selvon specifically portrays how post-colonial influence reshapes Moses' attitude and sense of culture while preventing him from sustaining West Indian cultural consciousness and identity.

The issue of migration, identity and cultural consciousness is always present in Selvon's novels. Migration, deliberate or undesired, has created a new way to view identity. It has contributed in making identity a crucial theme in post-colonial literature. For, the loss or crisis of identity comes out of the strong link between the self and the place. Cultural consciousness on the other hand refers to a situation where a person or a group of people use their senses and mental power to understand and uphold the beliefs, customs and traditions of their respective group, community, society and the country that they live in. Moreover, cultural consciousness is simply related to the state of an individual's awareness of the cultural values inherent in the society that they belong to. These values are innumerable such as language, mode of dressing, houses, marital customs, food

items, occupations, natural vegetation, delicacies, natural resources, landscape, plants, religion, social lifestyle, music and societal laws are highlighted as aspects of the cultural values in Selvon's novels entitled *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*. Culture therefore is the ways of life of a people within a specific society or country. It is also the sum total of the creations of that particular society.

Moses Ascending along with *Moses Migrating* and *The Lonely Londoners*, forms a trilogy of Selvon's London novels, In *Moses Ascending* Moses the protagonist, emerges as the central character. There are some similar minor characters too. *The Lonely Londoners* explores the first phase of 'Britain's Black community', when they arrived as West Indian migrants, *Moses Ascending* traces their transition to 'New Ethnicity'; as Galahad one of the characters of the novel say:

'The old days, the old days,' Galahad say patiently. 'It is just as I thought'. You don't know that the black man these days is a different creature. He realizes that if he doesn't co-operate and cling together, all is lost.... 'You see what I mean? Man Moses,

you are still living in the dark Ages! (Moses Ascending, 42-43)

Moses belongs to a generation that lost its cultural, religious and physical identity and virtually surrender to the white value system. Moses Ascending picks up the threads of Moses' life of twenty years later. He is now able to buy a house after being a tenant for so many years. He also decides to write his memoir. Moses' house soon becomes a multicultural ferment of London in the 1970s. Local 'Black Panther Party' uses his basement as their headquarters and two Pakistanis run an illegal immigration ring from his first floor, that later caused him a lot of trouble. Moses witnesses the transition of Caribbean migrants into 'black Londoners' as emergence of 'Black British identity':

We are all in the same boat. You can buy a house or a limousine...., but you can't get a white skin if you beg, borrow or steal. Things not like the old days, Moses.... At last, the Black man is coming into his own.... The time is ripe now. Long ago we had to stand up and take the blows, but these days we have a chance to fight back. Black Power! All over the world the cry is going up. Power to the people. (12)

Moses is identified as a non-political, retired landlord by the younger generation of Black people as he isn't politically active and all he wants is 'retirement' and 'peace'. Galahad encourages him to join the 'Black Panther Party': "Yes. What qualification do I have to have in order to join the party? 'Your blackness entitles you to membership'.... 'It is a universal struggle, Moses. As long as you are black no matter what part of the world you are in you belong to the brotherhood" (82).

Moses belongs to the generation that directly faced colonization, freedom and migration. He is a protagonist with affected psyche as if his mind is still colonized. He is not free from his past. He has a feeling of alienation and homesickness. His bitter experiences in London inspire him to write a memoir. He now owns a house, and a servant Bob 'a white man', and is happy about that thing. In his newly purchased house 'which is actually on lease for three years', he leaves all the responsibility of running the penthouse on Bob. Moses begins to compose his memoir on Black people about whom one can "only hear stories of their plights and sorrows, tales of tragedy whispered on the wind" (10). He migrated to England when he was young and

he spend best years of his life in the mother country. He had a kind of sad feelings that all black people were doomed to suffer, reason enough for him to take up writing his memoir. He takes an initiative to write 'on the privileges of black people in Britain' thinking that, "they [White Londoners] can avoid the rush hour as millions of white mice dart to and for, by they are actually paid higher wages that if they worked in daylight!" (8-9). He is well aware of the problems and difficulties of writing literature for the black writers. He dreams to create history and wish to be a pioneer for 'black literature'. He says to Bob: "You don't even know that we have created a Black Literature.... The whole world realizes our existence and our struggle" (43). Moses wants to write in a realistic way. He is aware of the sufferings of black people in London. He identifies himself with his people through his writings: "These are my people.... I know all the failings and shortcomings of my people, their foibles and chicanery, their apathy and disunity" (97). He says: "I longed to get back to my philosophizing and my analyzing and my rhapsodizing, decorating my thoughts with little grace notes and showing the white people that we too, could write book" (101).

A typical form of irony is used against Moses when the narrator remarks that "he was in fact unaware of the absurdities he is writing, being fully convinced that he is a talented writer" (251).

Moses, traces of the process of realization, through acculturation and assimilation of different cultures. It was a time when new immigrants populations, from all over the world came to England, met fresh hostility and got settled there. The children of these immigrants are now 'natives' born and raised in England. So, all the immigrants become a part of London and Moses asserts that "black people is human too" (5).

Moses Migrating by Samuel Selvon is a novel that discusses the ambivalence of Moses Aloetta in Britain and Trinidad. Samuel portrays Moses as a migrant who has spent almost thirty years in London. Gradually, Moses acquires British culture while neglecting his West Indian native cultural lifestyle. Selvon described him as an anglophile who ironically believes he is a Briton. Although he mimics English lifestyle and attitude but he remains a Black man in color. Moreover, Selvon as a nationalist writer wants Moses to remember his original cultural roots and lifestyle, therefore, he

drags Moses back to Trinidad during the carnival. As a West Indian man, Moses is conscious and aware of who a West Indian is by his cultural identification of the manner that he speaks, jokes and laughs. It is this cultural consciousness and national identity that Selvon exposes and preserves in these novels. Selvon exemplifies this on Moses' first meeting with Dominica in the ship the manner that Dominica laughs remind Moses of where he comes from even without proper identification. This intuitive recognition of the West Indians laughter by Moses accounts for what sociological approach identifies as cultural standard of etiquette, behavior and way of life of a given society and it corresponds to the manner that West Indians laugh. Moses the Protagonist states that "in a short dialogue, I was trying to identify him. He laughs. It was a kind of West Indian laughter, derisive and mocking, what put you in your place. I was affected. I stiffened. Where you from, I asked. Dominica, he says" (26). Selvon uses these expressions of Moses to establish the fact that West Indians have a peculiar cultural way of laughing which distinguishes them from the people of other countries. In *The Lonely Londoners* this laughter was describes as "kiff kiff laughter"

(56)., but in *Moses Migrating* Selvon calls it "Dominica laugh" (27), severally in the novel.

Frank Birbal Singh in *Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance* opines that Selvon's intention in his novels is to illustrate "commonplace West Indian features, themes of national identity and the dominant subject remains a plain, comic representation of West Indian manners" (23). The novel, *Moses Migrating* portrays the life of Moses, Brenda, Bobby, Galahad, Jennie and Dominica and how their attitudes exhibit the picaresque nature of West Indians especially during the carnival and their lifestyle in London. Selvon, asserts Susheila Nasta, writes with a clearly "distinguishable West Indian sensibility, preoccupation with national consciousness and effects of colonization" (7). Susheila Nasta also asserts that "literature is a reflection of its environment as Selvon depicts in his novels and this affirms the concerns of the sociological approach. It is the concept of national consciousness which leads to the exposition of cultural consciousness in Selvon's novels, so Selvon satirises Moses for abdicating his West Indian natural cultural values in favor of British culture." (7)

Moses who spent almost all his life in London, does not feel that he belongs to the West Indies anymore. His ambivalence causes psychological trauma to him because he inadvertently decides to visit Trinidad after so many years. He only gets relief when he decides that "he will be an ambassador not only of goodwill but good manners to Britain" (30). Through this, Moses' only intension is to show that "Britain is the onlyest country in the world where good breeding and culture come before ill-gotten gains" (30). Moses is entangled in British culture and maintains that foreign cultural consciousness. He is directly influenced by British culture. This love for Britain is culminated when Moses plays "Britannia" during the carnival but the novel in reality portrays Moses' actions as a paradox.

Apart from the carnival, West Indian habits and way of life, Selvon also depicts the vista of West Indian landscape as a place with different beautiful flowers, rivers, beaches and beautiful immortal trees. The beaches like "Maracas Bay, Mayaro, Manzanilla, Toco and Balandra Bay are good" (76). Selvon advocates the image of lack of cultural consciousness by the mockery of local drink in his novels. Selvon believes that

without cultural consciousness no society can boast of identity and contribution to the world. He further points to the sociological condition of the people who are poor as despicable. Even Moses feels his home-coming from the perspective of his visit to John Street, where he feels that it is, "a craggy bit of hillside with broken down houses where the poorest elements of the city live in" (86). Ironically this is where he grew up as a boy. Moses asserts that seeing the homeland makes him to feel that he has come home in true sense, because it reminds him of the cultural lifestyle of his community and the inherent poverty which has not changed even after thirty years. Poverty, hunger and misery are a cultural reality in the West Indies as Selvon's novels indicate.

Conclusion

This paper investigates cultural consciousness and issue of identity in Samuel Selvon's *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*. The paper made use of the sociological approach of literature as postulated by Kelly Griffith Jr., since the main issues under investigation are on the culture, customs and traditions of West Indians in the select novels by Samuel Selvon, also indicates the major culture

inherent in the West Indian society which have never been given prominence by some scholars assessing Selvon's novels. Selvon's cultural consciousness and the issue of identity that he deals with in his creations, as his novels portray is beyond the use of Creole language for what he is popularly known for. The cultural consciousness, as he successfully portrays through the minute descriptions of material cultures like food items, housing, landscape, religion, supernatural beliefs, social attitudes, marital customs, violence, music are an integral part of his culture which he presents through his protagonists. His novels, therefore, reveal the authentic West Indian cultures, also indicate that West Indies is a natural society that influence the attitudes of the people. This spirit of cultural consciousness portrayed through his protagonists encourages the people to know and also respect the traditions and customs of the society that they live in, while directing the individuals code of conduct and etiquette within and outside the West Indies. This spirit finally creates national cultural consciousness and national identity which sets them apart in terms of language, personality, attitudes, lifestyle and

social behavior from people of other countries all over the world.

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Received on: May 12, 2024

Accepted on: July 30, 2024

Published on: Oct 01, 2024

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