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**Samuel Selvon`s *The Lonely Londoners*: A Significant Example of World Literature Written in English.**

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**Abstract**

World literature is seen as a mode of reading across national boundaries. The Eurocentric nature of world literature in the post-colonial era has made *The Lonely Londoners* a good example of world literature as it is originally written in English. It is recognized as a text whose reception extends its local readership. This is so because immigrants from around the world relate to the problems encountered while trying to be upwardly mobile in the British center as highlighted in the novel. This study is interested in the discussion of the novel *The Lonely Londoners* as a significant example of world literature written in English. The study adopts textual analysis as its method. This is done within the theoretical framework of post-colonialism as proposed by scholars. The study shows that *The Lonely Londoners* is a literary work that is embraced globally and exists as a genre belonging to the literary period of postmodernism. It focuses on the ideas of migration, integration, and post colonialism. Also, it unveils the realities of immigrants in the post-war immigrant communities of the British capital. The author has

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written many books in which he mostly explores the experience of immigrants from different parts of the world. The novel is considered a world literature because it has been translated into major languages of the world and transcends the culture and civilization of its country of origin to showcase the events and practices in a different society.

**Keywords:** World literature, Postmodernism, Post colonialism, Eurocentric, Migration.

### **Introduction**

The turns and events in the Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoner* made it to be considered as a world literature which is studied globally. World literatures are literary works that go beyond the frontiers of their original countries to be accepted and studied globally. World literatures are comparatively studied and enabled through translations into many major languages of the world. In *The Lonely Londoner*, Selvon tries to improve the experience of readers across the world by creating the mirror image of the daily lives and experiences of immigrants in post-war immigrant communities of the British capital. Also, the novel fictionalizes some of his early life experiences with a group of black immigrants who lived and interacted with him when they newly moved to London as immigrants. As an adept writer, he uses imagery as a literary device to paint pictures to the awe of his audience. Before we launch into the subject matter, it is adequate to examine post-colonial theory as literary theory which serves as the framework of the study.

## Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their people as its subject matter. Post-colonial literature also includes literatures from the Britain`s former colonies in the Caribbean Islands, Africa and India. Many post-colonial scholars and writers, write in English as a result of Eurocentrism in post-colonial literature in which literary works, literary histories and cultures of non-Western societies are viewed from a European or Western perspective. These scholars focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood experiences. Postcolonial theory is centered on the concepts of otherness and resistance. Edward Said`s book *Orientalism* (1978) has been credited as being the founding work of post-colonial theory, hence he is renowned as the father of post-colonialism. In the book, he argued that the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. West uses the word, Orient in its relation to the East as a mirror image of the inferior, alien or the other people. He posits that such representation is aimed at colonizing and controlling them. Also, Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist by profession and a scholar of post-colonial theory, after the Second World War in 1948, reveals the psychic brutality of colonialism. He found that the maladies of some patients he treated were as a result of colonialism. His post-humous book, *The Wretched of the World* was a piece on decolonization. Fanon believes that the only way for the colonized man to be decolonized is by

revolutionary decolonization that is to erase the seeds of colonial culture in the minds of the people. Samuel Selvon was greatly influenced by Fanon's thoughts and works in *The Wretched of the World* and also *Black Skin White Masks* which was published in 1952 before he published his *Lonely Londoners* subsequently in 1956. Other major post-colonial theorists include the likes of Jamaica Kincaid, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Homi .K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Salman Rushdie, Rey Chow etc. These major proponents of the theory in their literary works examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers.

### **Samuel Selvon`S Bibliography and Works**

Samuel Selvon was born in 1923 to Indian parents in San Fernando, a small Caribbean island of Trinidad, which at the time was a British colony. After attending school in his hometown, he started working for the Royal Naval Reserve when he was only fifteen. After five years as a radio operator for the Reserve, he relocated to Port of Spain, where he was a reporter and occasional literary writer for the *Trinidad Guardian*. It was during his time as a newspaperman that he started writing seriously, though he often used pseudonyms. In 1950 he made his journey on a ship to London alongside his writer friend George Lamming, a journey which was made possible by the British Nationality Act of 1948. This parliamentary act granted British citizenship to everyone living in the United Kingdom and its colonies. The act therefore also enabled colonials like Selvon to pursue new opportunities at the center of the British Empire. In London, he took a

job as a clerk at the Indian Embassy and wrote during his time off. He wrote many poems and short stories that eventually went on to be published in various British journals. In 1952, he published his first novel, *A Brighter Sun*. Four years later, he published his book, *The Lonely Londoners*. In 1976, twenty years after he wrote *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon co-wrote *Pressure*, a movie about a black boy born in Britain to Trinidadian parents. Forty-one years later, *The Telegraph* declared the film the forty-second best British film in history. Throughout his career, he wrote thirteen books and two collections of plays. He also married twice and had four children from both marriages. In the 1970s, he moved to Canada, where he lived until he died at the age of 70 during a visit to Trinidad.

### **Summary of the Plot**

*The Lonely Londoners* traces the realities of immigrants as they struggle to eke out a living in London. The narrator follows an episodic character-oriented manner of storytelling to portray the daily life of characters from different races. The main character, Moses Aloetta, is a Trinidadian who becomes a night labourer in London but has little to show for the years he has spent working and living in the British capital, and who grows more homesick with each passing year. He goes to Waterloo Station to welcome **Galahad**, a young Trinidadian man arriving in London for the first time. On his way, he runs into a Jamaican friend named **Tolroy**, who is there to pick up his mother. Apparently, Tolroy has saved up enough money to bring her over from Jamaica, a fact that astounds Moses, who can't fathom being able to save so much money from his meager paychecks. Surprisingly, Tolroy sees his family

barreling out of the train even as he expects only his **mother**. He laments this fact, asking his mother why she brought so many people with her, but she and his aunt scold him for not embracing his family and they choose to ignore his protests that there isn't enough money and lodging to accommodate the entire family. Galahad finally descends wearing nothing but an old grey tropical suit with no luggage. When Moses asked, he said that he decided to not bring any luggage because he'll simply buy new belongings once he starts working. Because of Galahad's optimism, Moses views the young man as headstrong and naïve. Shortly after, the two men get to Moses's small apartment, where they have dinner and Moses finally relaxes, allowing himself to reminisce about life in Trinidad.

The narrator goes on to describe a Nigerian immigrant called Captain. He originally came to England to study law, but soon became consumed by life in the city, spending all his father's money on “woman and cigarette.” As a result, his father eventually stopped sending money, and so he started borrowing from his friends and lovers. When he doesn't have anywhere to stay, he endears himself to white women, moves in with them, and spends their money. Galahad meets **Bart**, a light-skinned black immigrant who tries to convince people that he is Latino and avoids lending money to friends at all costs. Bart works in a “clerical job” and holds onto it as if it were gold, not wanting to have to work in a factory. He also worries about the fact that so many new immigrants are coming to London, fearing they'll “make things hard for him in the country. In keeping with this fear, he also doesn't like to be seen with people who look “too black.” When he falls in love with a white woman named **Beatrice**, he decides to ask for her hand in

marriage, but is shouted out of the house upon meeting her father. One night, while working with Lewis, Tolroy's relative, Moses decides to have a little fun with him, telling him that women often sleep with other men while their husbands are off working the nightshift. Deeply worried, Lewis tells his boss he has a headache and rushes home, where he beats Agnes even though she's alone. Unfortunately, this doesn't settle the matter, and he continues to physically abuse her and accuse her of adultery until she finally leave him.

As Galahad spends more time in London, he becomes enamored of the city's beauty and its intoxicating and addictive qualities. He meets a woman with her child. He stoops and gives the child a kindhearted pat on the cheek, but the child shrinks away and cries. Uncomfortable with his closeness, the mother slowly backs away with her child. The next day, Galahad looks at his own hand and reflects that the color of his skin causes all his troubles. Also, the narrator gives an account of **Hyde Park** in the summertime, where white and black people alike congregate to find sexual partners. In fact, the summertime is so appealing, it seems, that people like Moses are willing to endure grueling winters with almost no heat and very little food, constantly questioning whether they should return to their home countries, where life is warmer and easier.

### ***The Lonely Londoner as a World Literature***

David Damroach explained world literature to encompass all literary works that circulates beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in the original language. (*The Challenges of Comparative Literature*, 38). In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work

that has ever reached beyond its home base. He also affirmed the assertion made by Claudio Guillén that a literary work only has an effective life as a world literature whenever and wherever it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture. Furthermore, he claims that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is applicable to individual works as to bodies of materials, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. One of the greatest strength of a work is when the work is well presented and read well and its greatest vulnerability is when it is mishandled or misappropriated by its new found foreign friends (the readers). He posits that a work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature, second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin.

*The Lonely Londoners* is considered as a world literature that belongs to the postmodernism era as it was set in the 1950s in the post-war British capital. It is an episodic novel that focuses on character sketches and anecdotes instead of a straightforward plotline. The characters in the novel who are immigrants from the colonized countries suffer the Orientalist stereotyping by the West as explained by Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) to be a representation of barbarism, loudness, tradition, untrustworthy, rude, dirty and worthless. The characters navigate the numerous obstacles inherent to the immigrant experience ranging from grappling with London's entrenched racism and otherness to trying to attain upward mobility and so on. The immigrants from other colonized countries thrive to find their feet in the capital which often seems to be a mirage. Other books like George Lamming's *The*



*Emigrants*, talks about the Caribbean migration to London and the various trials and tribulations that people face when trying to acclimate to new cultures, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which examines the flipside of integration, focusing on what happens to a culture when its colonizers suddenly leave. Also, Frantz Fanon's work of postcolonial theory, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* unveil the psychological torture of colonialism and made a rousing call for national revolution which is needed to restore back the humanity of the people. He also advises against trying to catch up to Europe, economically and culturally, instead the new nations should go forward on their path. This is just to mention but a few. Many authors try to interrogate the psychological effects of colonialism on formerly colonized people of the world.

The Lonely Londoners as a significant example of a world literature is relatable to people from more than one culture, ethnicity or society. It allows readers from various origins to understand history, other worldviews and current challenges. It transcends its original culture and that of the author who documents mostly from his own perspective to further showcase the life experiences and situations of people from other nations and that is one of the major attribute of a world literature. This is seen in the novel when Moses who is from Trinidad talks about his Jamaican friend named **Tolroy**, who is there to pick up his mother at the station. Apparently, Tolroy has saved up enough money to bring her over from Jamaica, a fact that astounds Moses, who can't fathom being able to save so much money from his meager paychecks. This analogy goes to show that Moses may be accustomed to a lifestyle of living independently without his family so it seems strange to him to see a man

looking to welcome his mother all the way from his home country. He also queries how a man could work tirelessly to save up all to lavish it in bringing his mother over. On the other hand, Tolroy who is from another clime, sees it as a thing of pride to bring his mother over as against what Moses thinks. This is the reality of many people from some parts of the world especially the older generations from Africa, Asia, Latin America etc. They see family as a unit that should be celebrated and nourished. They are mostly family oriented and work for the sole objective of building large families. Tolroy is one of such people so he tries even as he struggles to be family oriented. He is also reminded of his root through the verbose mother and his aunt.

The Nigerian immigrant called Captain, who relocates to London to study law soon became consumed by life in the city. His lifestyle in the city is an imagery of the life of some black immigrants who travel abroad to study but with hidden agendas to find their feet in the country for greener pastures. Sometimes, they find themselves engulfed in vices and end up in debt as seen in the case of the character. Similarly, **Bart**, a light-skinned black immigrant tries to convince people that he is Latino. He tries to hide his black identity so that he can be accepted by the white but at the end, he was disappointed. Also, **Harris** who dresses and behaves like white Englishmen and tries to erase blackness, investing in colorism. These instances portray the innate attitude of some black immigrant from around the world who decide to assimilate and integrate themselves into the society. At the long run, they usually suffer alienation, racism and otherness from their perceived white people. Hence, it is safe to say that the novel made its merited entrance

into the world literature as it demonstrates sketches of daily life experiences from people of different origins, culture and society.

The novel features many traits of an exemplary of a world literature. The language of the characters in the novel reflects their origins as the novel features characters who migrated from the West Indies, Africa and from other colonized countries. The blend of British and creolized English used by the author facilitates the translation of the novel into different world languages. Also, racism and discrimination is relatable to many races around the world especially when they find themselves in another clime. It is seen in the novel as an antagonist that interferes with the immigrants' quest for better life in London. Racism makes it difficult for them to survive and achieve their aims. This is made overwhelmingly with the presence of institutional racism where black immigrants find it so hard to secure good jobs. Selvon sheds light on the emotional toll the process of immigration can take on an average person. Although Moses has acclimated to life in London, he often reminisces about Trinidad and hopes to return to his home country one day. Selvon shows that the idea of transition from one country to another invites strong emotions for even the most seasoned immigrant. In the novel, **Moses** points out that all of the city's "soft clerical jobs" are given to white people, leaving only blue-collar jobs for black people and these jobs seem not to guarantee that an immigrant will become upwardly mobile. The author highlights the disillusionment felt by immigrants when they try to climb the city's socioeconomic ladder but find out that their dream for a better life is nothing but an illusion. Most times, they are disappointed and end up finding ways to integrate themselves into their new society.

**Conclusion**

*The Lonely Londoner* is a significant example of a world literature written in English as it allows readers from various origins to understand history, societal challenges and other worldviews. It goes beyond the frontiers of its original country to touch on other civilizations and values especially that of immigrants of color from colonized countries. Postcolonial theory is centered on the concepts of otherness and resistance. These concepts are reflected in most post-colonial literatures as seen in *The Lonely Londoner*. The author, Samuel Selvon successfully portrayed the daily experiences of immigrants from different colonized countries who migrated to the British capital in the era and are faced with discrimination (racism), alienation (otherness), segregation etc. He goes further to unravel the harsh realities of immigrant life in London as they try to climb the London's socioeconomic ladder. This is evidenced in many countries of the world even till this day. Selvon has succeeded in creating a space for his work in the literary world. Therefore, *The Lonely Londoner* remains relevant and well received globally.

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