

Trapped in the Spider's Web: Black Man's Experience in *The Lonely Londoners* and in *Native Son*

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ABSTRACT

In naturalistic sense, man is the product of his heredity and environment. Man is trapped in a vicious circle where the same conditions which humiliate him also tend to reduce the quality of his life and eventually triumph over him. The society, as it were, spins these intolerable, extremely suffocating and self abasing conditions which dog man's footsteps in all his endeavours. Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* are novels which chronicle, among other things, the harrowing experiences of blacks as they struggle relentlessly to survive in a racist society. In such a society, the black man is trapped and forced to lead a suffocating life of misery and poverty. To Selvon and Wright, wishful escapism is a form of survival from a social organization which inflicts pain on her citizens. Our major aim is to reveal that although the black man has a free will to exist or the right to make choices, social and environmental forces do threaten and influence these choices thereby contributing further to his entrapment and disillusionment. Therefore, the injustices in the social structure in America, Europe and in the West Indies are social threats which Selvon and Wright have written about and are protesting against in their works.

DISCUSSION

The sociological and formalistic approaches, which examine the relationships between literary works and their social contexts, are very basic to the appreciation of African, Caribbean and African-American literature (Eko, 10). In Selvon's and Wright's novels, life is a constant struggle between Blacks and Whites. The black man specifically faces formidable obstacles and finds himself trapped by a vast web of circumstances of which escape, senseless diversions, sexual escapades or wanton destructions are his major preoccupation. The crippling effect of the environment does not help matters at all. We encounter characters that are constantly struggling against societal impositions, restrictions and prejudices and are made what they are by forces which appear to be beyond their

control. They, inevitably, fall prey to the same horrible conditions and harrowing experiences which dog their lives from start to finish. According to Larry Rubin:

Most books written from the naturalistic point of view have trapped protagonists who can expect no sympathy from the external world about them. Nature and society seem not to care (409).

The blacks' experience of life in African, Caribbean and African-American literature has been that of an embattled people found at various levels of struggles, demanding diverse adjustments (Eko, 6). *The Lonely Londoners* and *Native Son* are, interestingly, informed by their authors' background of acute poverty and bitter racist experiences. Therefore, the novels frankly portray the tension and the frustrations in the lives of the blacks who are, in addition, condemned to live pitifully amidst the affluence of the whites. The society seems not to give a hoot what becomes of the black man. As for the black characters, 'nothing could be more excruciatingly painful than to be singled out by colour and marked for life in an environment made up of people from diverse cultures and races' (Eko, 16). And so, the black characters continually battle daily with hunger, untold deprivations and racial discrimination.

Native Son, like *Black Boy*, is a novel of childhood. Maxwell Okolie tells us that 'very few people recall their childhood without a flutter of emotion...(29).' This happens to be the case with Bigger. Bigger Thomas' childhood in *Native Son*, for instance, is a ghastly example of the lifestyle of the African-Americans. Bigger is a pitiful character; a victim of a harsh environment. His sordid life is further captured in the novel as 'lowly, extremely dirty, intolerably suffocating' and even shameful. Similarly, his fellow blacks are condemned by the racist environment where, according to Barack Obama, 'the children of blacks... grew up being told they wouldn't amount to anything...(252). In the words of Okolie, the blacks are best described as:

A people without history, without civilization, without culture; a people who wrote nothing, invented nothing and contributed nothing to world culture... the greatest agony was that of being reduced to nothing and made to feel so (Okolie, 30.)

Africans, African-Americans and West Indians, share a common history of enslavement and colonization. It is no wonder, then, that their common commitment is to use their literatures as a potent vehicle for self discovery and recovery (Eko, 6). Selvon vividly portrays the frustrations and the disappointments of Moses Aloetta and his friends in *The Lonely Londoners* with the aim of drawing attention to their plight. In the city of London, the friends are forsaken and poverty stricken. Like many West Indian emigrants, they struggle to eke out a living in the backstreets of London. London, with its racist intolerance, is described to us by Moses Aloetta as:

A lonely miserable city.... It is not like home where you have friends all about... Nobody in London does really accept you (Sic). They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their houses and eat or sit down and talk.... Look how people does deal and nobody don't know nothing (sic) until the milk bottles start to pile up in front of the door (114-5)

Ironically, life in the Caribbean is not as rosy as Aloetta would lead us to believe in the excerpt above. Compared to London, life in the Caribbean is equally rough; a factor necessitating the massive emigration of people to greener pastures. Indeed, one cannot really understand Selvon's novel without taking into account the history, the culture and the types of life which is led by the wandering Caribbeans who escape in droves from the harsh realities and untold sufferings in their home country in order to settle in foreign lands. We are taken into the poverty, the misery, the degradation and the disgraceful lives of these characters and cannot help but pity them.

The West Indians and the African-Americans tend to share a lot in common as earlier mentioned. There is a linkage in their experience of chronic unemployment, widespread malnutrition and disease. High mortality rates are made worse by poor sanitary and health conditions, unhygienic and cramped living quarters, massive illiteracy and chronic starvation. This largely accounts for the destitution of much of the two societies. In addition to this, sexual perversion and criminal activities are rife (especially as pastime) in both societies as Selvon's and Wright's novels reveal. This is due, of course to the high level of disgruntled and overtly restless youths who are found in both societies. It is against this background that Caribbean and African-American Literature must be studied or understood.

The pervasive themes of Caribbean and African-American Literature are, therefore, those of poverty, slavery, race and migration. It is particularly the large exodus of West Indians (especially to Britain) in the early twentieth century that informed the London setting of Samuel Selvon's novel, *The Lonely Londoners*.

What we have in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, however, is a more pathetic, more humiliating and definitely more tragic account of the experiences of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Bigger inhabits a very hostile environment where the whites lord it over the blacks and both races live in mutual suspicion of one another. Yet Bigger is blamed for all his transgressions. The Naturalistic School of thought, for instance, emphasizes the environment as a primary influence on man's behaviour. Naturalists also believe that 'man's fate is his environment.' To further illustrate this, Naturalists tend to believe that man can be reduced to sinful ways by necessity. In Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, this view is further expatiated. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is a character who becomes roguish and commits crimes in order to survive in a stifling environment. Moll exonerates her actions by the reason she gives for stealing in the novel. Her exact words are: 'poverty hardened my heart and my own necessities made me regardless of anything' (167).

By Naturalistic inclination, the American society produces in Bigger, a remorseless killer, who at the end of *Native Son* avows that 'what I killed for, I am' (461). Bigger feels that the society necessitated his behaviour. The racist society views him as a monster with a repulsive skin colour. As a result, he is doomed (for life) just because he is black. He, therefore, feels that it is only through committing murder that he can, prove his manhood and also his civil rights... Bigger finds justification in smothering the white girl, Mary Dalton, when he tells us that:

I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry. *They wouldn't let me live and I killed* (461).
[Emphasis Mine]

Wright's major objective in *Native Son* is to express the social crime which the racist American environment has perpetrated on the black masses and thus reveal the effects of such crime on the life and personality of the African-American. Racism in America is as severe as the consequences are grave. Painful experiences of racism include denying the blacks access to education and to any meaningful participation in governance. According to Ebele Eko, 'the cloud of sorrow which

racism hung over the lives of Blacks accumulates into storms that burst into self hatred and bitterness as witnessed in Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*' (17) . This is how racism is further captured in the introductory notes to *Native Son*:

In Dixie there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and, black graveyards and, for all I know, a white God and a black God (13).

The society, as portrayed above, forbids an African American from looking at a white man in the face. It is assumed that the only time a black man dares to look at a white man in the face is when the black man is drunk! Everything about a black man is seen as repulsive. Blacks and whites are segregated! In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), Obama makes the harrowing experiences of the blacks even more glaring when he tells us:

We know the statistics: on almost every single socioeconomic indicator, from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership, black and Latino Americans, in particular continue to lag far behind their white counterparts... (232). I Know what it's like to have people tell me I can't do something because of my colour, and I know the bitter swill of swallowed-back anger...(233)...None of us-Black, White, Latino, or Asian-is immune to the stereotypes that our culture continues to feed us, especially stereotypes about black criminality, black intelligence or the black work ethic (235).

A similar situation obtains in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* as narrator of the story tells us:

London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds (sic), and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers...(58)

Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk (144).

Images of pain and endless strife are graphically painted in Selvon and Wright. The black man is extremely frustrated in both authors. It is worthy of note that though the geographical location of both authors' works are different, the experiences which they depict of the black man are exactly the same. In *The Lonely Londoners* and in *Native Son*, the environment mounts heavy restrictions on the black man and determines the cause of his actions. There is no freedom of movement for the black man, no decent employment, no affordable or proper housing for him and no recreational activities to enable him to reduce stress. Therefore, inferiority complex is deeply ingrained in Selvon's and Wright's characters; causing them to resort to violence and criminal activities in order to prove their worth.

The same inferiority complex, mingled with what Okolie refers to as 'psychosocial handicap' (33), triggers the animalism in Bigger and causes him to kill Mary Dalton, even though the murder is an accident. For this transgression, Bigger loses his life. The state attorney shows no mercy at the trial and quickly encourages his electrocution. This state attorney, Buckley, who fails to hide his racism, pleads with the judge to condemn Bigger to death. His hatred of Bigger is shown in the adjectives with which he describes him. Apart from calling him a 'black lizard, whose 'woolly head' must be crushed, (441), Buckley venomously describes Bigger as a 'human fiend', a 'black mad dog', a 'sly thug', a 'sub-human killer', a 'hardened black thing', a 'piece of human scum', a 'half-human, a 'black ape', and a 'black cur'. Buckley's recurrent use of the word 'black' in his castigation of Bigger suggests that he not only abhors or condemns Bigger for what he has done but condemns-by extension-the whole of the black race to which Bigger belongs.

Judging by the Naturalists' proclamation, we must not overlook the fact that the environment truly affects the quality of man's life just as it shapes man's actions. Man is further entrapped by the harshness of his environment thereby necessitating the types of decisions that he makes and takes. Selvon and Wright have portrayed wishful escapism as a form of survival for man in a social organization which inflicts pain on her citizens. Wishful escapism may not necessarily be the best option for man at this point but it becomes his only choice of action. Wright shows us precisely through Max's defence of Bigger, what he perceives that the American society has done to the likes of Bigger and especially to African Americans:

The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence. Every time he comes in contact with us, he kills! Every thought he thinks is potential murder. Excluded from and unassimilated in our society, yet longing to gratify impulses akin to our own but denied the objects and channels evolved through long centuries for their socialised expression, every sunrise and sunset make him guilty of subversive actions. Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest...his very existence is a crime against the state! (434).

Therefore, a web of societal disillusionment entraps Selvon's and Wright's characters in their works, causing them to embrace flight. In Wright's *Native Son*, escapism takes the form of violence which, leads to many deaths. In Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, escapism takes a migratory nature. Moses Aloetta, Henry Oliver, Tolroy and their friends, flee from their home country in order to escape from starvation, deprivation and poverty. They also resort occasionally to violence, sex and illicit drugs in order to survive in the lonely city of London. Ironically, 'all that glitters fails to turn gold' for them as they weather the different storms in the hostile town. The friends also discover that London is not bursting with opportunities for them to better their lives. Frustration sets in and dogs their every step till the end. Even at the end of the novel, Moses realises that:

He could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same sport. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in country (sic). 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 (126).

It is widely acknowledged that 'the idle mind is the devil's workshop.' When one is unemployed, there is every tendency for one's morale to be low. Unemployed youths like Bigger and Gus in Wright's *Native Son* are easily lured into crimes, riots, drug addiction and other anti-social behaviours. Violence, therefore, becomes a permanent pastime for them. It becomes the only means which Bigger knows of

escaping from the harsh conditions that shape his life. When, at the novel's denouement, he hits back in trepidation at the most sensitive point of American society which is, the white woman, he pays with his life. His penalty for accidentally smothering Mary Dalton, the rich white girl, is instant death!

As dismal as the story of the black man may seem in these pages, the future looks pretty promising and bright. But 'this isn't to say that prejudice has vanished.' However, it is worthy of note that things have improved a lot for blacks since the days of slavery and Jim Crow. For instance, the cities of America are rapidly filling up with 'black doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals...blacks also occupy some of the highest management positions in corporate Chicago..., they own restaurant chains, investment banks, PR agencies, real estate investment trusts, and architectural firms (Obama, 240). It is even more amazing that on the 20th January, 2009, the history of America changed forever and for good! Barrack Obama (an emigrant son of a Kenyan) defied all odds to rise to the very top as the first world African-American President of the United States. The world watched his inauguration in stupefied amazement. This represents 'the quintessential journey of Africans and African-Americans from degradation to acclamation (Eko, 8). With the inauguration also, America has gained more respect and admiration from the rest of the world. The entire world looks up to the First African-American President with awe and wonder.

Conclusion

The Lonely Londoners and *Native Son* are novels of protest which have explored the black man's devastating experiences. The authors have made us to realize that escaping from problems is inevitable for man as a result of the stifling nature of his existence-especially in a harsh and racist, environment.

We can conclude therefore, that Selvon's and Wright's personal experiences of racism have given them impetus to document the oppressive and the miserable conditions which work together to rob the black man of his dignity and the right to lead a normal life. However, rather than take sides or pass condemnatory judgement on their racist societies, they have merely painted true pictures of the conditions which trap the black man to a point of rendering him useless. Their intention is to allow the black man to confront his debilitating problems and thereby encourage him to seek redress.

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