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Moses Migrating:
A Novel

Sam Selvon,
with an introduction
by Susheila Nasta

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1800 30th Street, Ste. 314

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USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

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Introduction

Susheila Nasta



Sam Selvon is one of the Caribbean's most popular and internationally distinguished writers. Commonly seen as a major pioneer of the Caribbean literary tradition and the father of black writing in Britain, he was to publish several highly influential works during the course of a literary career that stretched across fifty years.

Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923, the son of an East Indian dry goods merchant and a half-Scottish mother, and he grew up in a culturally and racially mixed world. He began writing during World War II while working as a wireless operator for the Royal Naval Reserve. After the war, he became a journalist with *The Trinidad Guardian* and literary editor of *The Guardian Weekly*. During this period many of his early short stories and poems were published locally under a number of pseudonyms.

In 1950, like many other Caribbean writers of his generation, Selvon left his native island for the metropolitan atmosphere of London. His first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, set among the East Indian rural peasantry in Trinidad, was partially composed as he sailed across the Atlantic. Published in 1952 to much metropolitan acclaim, it established Selvon as a major voice in international contemporary literature. It was swiftly followed in 1955 by *An Island Is a World* (one of his favorite works), a novel that explores the existential and metaphysical crises of the edu-

cated urban middle classes still resident on the island after Indian independence in 1947.

The Lonely Londoners, set among the rootless community of black immigrants in a bleak and unwelcoming “mother country,” marked the introduction of another major dimension of Selvon’s art. Published in 1956, it was the first in a series of three London novels concerning the trials and tribulations of the now iconic immigrant character Moses Aloetta, who reappears in *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983). Keen to develop a medium that would capture the experiences of these early immigrants, Selvon developed a distinctive creolized voice for the language of both the narration and the dialogue, an idiom that modified the oral rhythms of Caribbean speech into a frame that transported the trickster, calypsonian culture of his island “boys” to the “diamond” pavements of West London. Bridging the difficult gap between the teller of the tale and the tale itself, he thus created a means not only to revision the “grey world city,” but also to reshape its geography, giving his previously unlettered and voiceless characters a place to live in it. Often now heralded as an ingenious alchemist of style and the master of a new calypso aesthetic, Selvon’s work has influenced several generations of writers who have followed on. Interestingly, Caryl Phillips, now a major writer himself, has located this aspect of Selvon’s art not only in terms of its forging a tradition of black writing in Britain—a body of now well established work by contemporary writers such as David Dabydeen, Zadie Smith, and Andrea Levy—but, more significantly, as a key force in the literary reimagining of Britain during the postwar years. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the two settings of Trinidad and London formed the major focus of Selvon’s work. Yet, while the Indian sugarcane community is carefully observed in his best-known Trinidad novels—*A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger* (1957)—Selvon did not himself come from a rural background, nor was he “Indianized” in any sense. As a descendant of an indentured East Indian family, Selvon, like his contemporary V. S. Naipaul, grew up as a middle-class colonial in the multiracial world of Trinidad, a world

that reflected the layers of a mixed colonial history and was situated at the crossroads of a number of cultures—Indian, African, North American, English, French, Chinese, and Spanish. Unlike Naipaul, however, who was often unsettled by the cultural admixtures of his Brahmin East Indian/Trinidadian background, Selvon was keen from the outset to find a creative means of drawing and building on the rich potential and diversity of all of these worlds. Speaking of the Hindi language he once said: “I just ignored it. . . . I grew up so Creolized among the Trinidadians. . . . Not as an Indian, but as a Creolized West Indian as we say.”¹

The tensions implicit in the idea of creolization are a frequent preoccupation in Selvon’s fiction, whether his subject is the East Indian peasantry, the urban middle classes, the rootless street characters of *Ways of Sunlight* (1958)—a collection of stories set in both London and Port-of-Spain—or amid the enclaves of black immigrants in his London novels. Clearly the “ideal” notion of a creolized identity does not provide an easy resolution for any of Selvon’s fictional characters, who, despite their well-worn, shape-shifting strategies for survival, still struggle for self-definition and remain caught between the interstices of several different and often competing cultural worlds. In interviews, Selvon frequently articulated his own sense of the difficulties of straddling several worlds. Once commenting on the colonial history of Trinidad and his own sense of the complexities of living in diaspora, he said: “It’s all well and good to appreciate what the world is like and what people are like, but, who the hell am I? And where do I fit into it, have I got roots, am I an Indian? Am I a Negro? What is a Trinidadian?”²

Selvon lived in London until 1978, returning to Trinidad only infrequently and for relatively brief visits. His longest period back “home” was in 1969, when he visited the small rural village of Tacarigua to compose *The Plains of Caroni* (1970). In 1978, he left the UK for Canada, eventually taking up permanent resident status as a Canadian citizen. He died in 1994 on a brief trip to Trinidad.

The "Moses" Novels

Selvon's sojourn in London acted as a crucial catalyst in the development of his work: it became possible for him to move, on the one hand, toward a more fully realized picture of the world back home and, on the other, to define and establish a specifically Caribbean consciousness within a British context. Through the demythologization of the "mother country," the energy to confront the self could be released. "Only in London," said Selvon, "did my life find its purpose."³ It was "the first time that people from all the different parts of the Caribbean were meeting."⁴ This sense of the birth of a Caribbean identity is portrayed in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), where we see a black community (made up of a variety of islanders and also a Nigerian) established for the first time within the heart of the city as England begins, as Jamaican poet Louise Bennett once put it, to be colonized in reverse.

Moses Aloetta, the veteran black Londoner, is first introduced in *The Lonely Londoners* and reinvented well over two decades later in *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*. Although Selvon's Moses has today gained mythical status in the history of Caribbean and Black British fiction (much like V. S. Naipaul's Mr. Biswas), many critics have observed that the Moses figure as reconstructed in the later novels is not necessarily consistent with the figure whom we meet in *The Lonely Londoners*.⁵ This is not just because of the different periods in which the works were written, but also due to identifiable shifts in mood and tone reflecting a significant difference in the author's perspective and the nature of the comic vision (which I will return to later). At the end of *The Lonely Londoners* we find a Moses who is becoming frustrated with the repetitious lifestyle and circularity of existence that characterize the activities and experience of Selvon's picaresque "boys" in the city. The term "what happening," which echoes with comic/tragic resonance throughout the novel, comes to suggest less a calypsonian mode of survival than a dislocating sense of incoherence and emptiness. Beneath the "kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts," Moses perceives a

“great aimlessness, a great restless swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot” (*LL*, p. 125).^{*} The deliberately disjointed nature of the novel’s form and the ironic undercutting of the characters’ melodramatic but two-dimensional identities—the self-caricatures that “the boys” have created for security within the closed immigrant group—bears close parallels to the tradition of calypso and looks forward in some respects to Selvon’s drama of impersonation, when Moses returns to Trinidad for Carnival in *Moses Migrating* (1983).

It was once said of the early period for the West Indian abroad that one is either a performer or has no personality. And the need for drama as a shield from suffering recurs as a theme in several novels of migration and exile written during this period. V. S. Naipaul, for instance, treats a similar theme in *The Mimic Men* (1968), where, as Naipaul’s protagonist and narrator, Ralph Singh, frequently tells us: “from play-acting to disorder: it is the pattern.”⁶ Interestingly, Selvon made several similar observations concerning the nature of drama and the use of the comic in his work. Laughter, he once said, often acts as a “sort of protection, a defense mechanism against tribulation and hardship. . . . But every joke is made out of the facts of a tragic situation.”⁷ The conclusion to *The Lonely Londoners* captures this bitter-sweet quality with Moses’s bleak, almost desperate vision of purposelessness and stasis, despite the surface comedy of “the boys” escapades. In addition, the question posed by Moses at the close of this first novel, regarding his need to separate himself from the community and develop an individual consciousness, looks forward to Selvon’s more self-conscious attempt to explore Moses’s predicament as a Black British settler twenty years later in *Moses Ascending*. In that novel, Moses, now having “arrived,” attempts to make a mark on Britain by writing his memoirs.

In this second novel, we meet Moses actively attempting to “draw apart” from all the hustling of the early days. At an

^{*}All references to *The Lonely Londoners* (hereafter *LL*) are to the edition published by Longman in 1985.