

AFFIRMATION OF 'SELF' IN SAMUEL SELVON'S

A BRIGHTER SUN

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Abstract

The novel *A Brighter Sun* (1952), a debut novel by Samuel Selvon narrates the story of a sixteen-year-old ambitious Trinidadian of Indian ancestry, Tiger for self-affirmation of his identity. The novel deals with the social, racial and personal struggles of a young man, Tiger who settles in Baratavia with his wife, Urmila. The story revolves around how Tiger and his wife come to terms with the creolized society, Baratavia. The couple's Creole neighbors Joe Martin and Rita help Tiger and Urmila in the process of adjustment. Their stories are set against the broader background of the political situation in Trinidad. The building of the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway is described through the eyes of Tiger. The novel covers the period of the World War and is larger than just the personal lives of Tiger. By the end of the novel, Tiger comes to affirm his self very positively.

Keywords: *Samuel Selvon, bildungsroman, social, racial, struggle, creolized, self, affirmation.*

The contribution of Samuel Selvon to Caribbean literature is tremendous. A prolific novelist of immense caliber, Selvon created some interesting and unforgettable characters in the Literature of Caribbean in general and in his works in particular. He experimented with language and innovated a unique feature in his fiction. Born to East Indian parents in Trinidad, Selvon encountered the multiculturalism in his homeland. The West Indian Poet Derek Walcott called Selvon as 'one of the most multicultural writers in the world'. The memorable experiences of Selvon growing amidst farmers on sugar plantations in Trinidad laid a great impact on his writing career. His debut novel, *A Brighter Sun*, deals with themes of dignity innate in the peasants and sensitive portrayals of African Trinidadians.

Samuel Selvon started his career with the peasant novel, *A Brighter Sun* (1952). This novel is a bildungsroman, like George Lamming's "In the Castle of My Skin". Tiger settles in Barataria with his wife, Urmila. How they come to terms with the creolized society, Barataria that forms the rest of the story. Tiger's constant urge to prove his manhood and partly due to this, a quest for knowledge also forms an important part of the novel. The couple's Creole neighbors Joe Martin and Rita help them in the process of adjustment. Their stories are set against the broader background of the political situation in Trinidad. The building of the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway is described through the eyes of Tiger. The novel covers the period of the World War and is larger than just the personal lives of Tiger and co. He has apprehensions about helping coolies, but become good friends with Tiger through the course of the novel.

The novels *A Brighter Sun* (1952) *Turn Again Tiger* (1958) deal with the private and public lives of the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry, with special emphasis on the laborer. The people work on sugar plantations producing a wide range of vegetables. The plot deals with the social, racial and personal coming-of-age of the principal protagonist, Tiger. Tiger's constant urge to prove his manhood and partly due to this, a quest for knowledge also forms an important part of the novel. The couple's Creole neighbors Joe Martin and Rita help them in the process of adjustment. Their stories are set against the broader background of the political situation in Trinidad. The building of the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway is described through the eyes of Tiger. The novel covers the period of the Word War II and is larger than just the personal lives of Tiger and co. He has apprehensions about helping coolies, but become good friends with Tiger through the course of the novel.

The peasant novels are a very important set of novels and a characteristic West Indian genre. Kenneth Ramchand in *The West Indian Novel and its Background* quotes George Lamming in the following words:

Unlike the previous governments and departments of educators, unlike the businessman importing commodities, the West Indian novelist did not look out across the sea to another source. He looked in and down at what had been traditionally ignored. For the first time, the West India peasant becomes other than a cheap source of labor. He became through the novelist's eye a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality (150).

A Brighter Sun is Sam Selvon's first novel that catapulted him to fame. The novel was first titled as *Soul and Soil*, and suggests the sun as a symbol of controlling everything in the novel,

underscoring the sense of growing optimism and confidence that impels the narrative.

By the end of the story humble Tiger looks forward to a bright sun which will shower its light of knowledge and racial harmony. Roydon Salick is of the opinion:

that the mature and socially responsible Tiger is also 'a brighter sun of his homeland (3).

Salick also says that Tiger's journey from darkness to light is not just a universal archetype such as Ulysses in the *Divine Comedy*.

This is a novel set in the multiracial society of Barataria in Trinidad and Tobago. The novel deals with the lives of the people of Barataria. It is a study of the tremendous urbanization of Barataria and the emergence of the Indian peasant in a Creolized culture. The protagonist of the novel is a young Indian, Tiger. The novel begins with the account of his marriage. Tiger is just sixteen, but is married young according to the Indian system. His wife is Urmila, who is of the same age. Both are from the cane community of Chaguanas, but are given a plot of land along with a cow in Barataria. The couple go to Barataria, naive and inexperienced, with no clue what to expect, of both their independent life and of each other. They get to know each other gradually. Tiger works in the fields while Urmila sells milk. Their friends, mentors and neighbors are the Creole couple Joe and Rita, but Joe comes to Barataria for work in the American naval base. Both of them live with Henry, Rita's sister's son and grow to love him like a son, as Rita cannot have children. Tiger's sparse hut with almost no amenities is a contrast to Joe's living abode that is a proper house, with electricity. Rita becomes Urmila's best friend and looks after her like an elder sister.

Joe does not have such an uncomplicated relationship with the Tiger family. He has apprehensions about helping 'coolies', but becomes good friend with Tiger through the course of the novel. Urmila is pregnant and Rita takes care of her. She even brings the bed from her own house to make Urmila comfortable. Urmila has a girl child, Chandra. Both Tiger and Urmila's parents and relatives visit them. Tiger takes a tour of Port of Spain with another Indian, Boysie, where he is discriminated against and learns the hard truths of life. Meanwhile, the government decides to build a road that passes through the town of Barataria and wants to acquire the lands of the residents for the purpose. This road is the Churchill-Roosevelt highway that actually exists. Tiger gets a job at the site and is elated as he thinks he would be helping in the building of a historical road that would open up frontiers. Tiger learns to read and write. He wants to gain more knowledge. He neglects his family in the process. He is away from home most of the time; he is grumpy and irritable. Urmila conceives again, but tells Tiger a few days after she gets to know. Tiger is upset and kicks up a row.

Tiger impresses the higher officials by his earnestness and his literacy. He invites two American officers to dinner. Helped by Rita, Urmila spruces up the place and herself. However, when the officers actually arrive, there is a lot of unease in the air. The Americans are indifferent to Indian customs and want to show themselves liberal. After they leave, a drunken Tiger admonishes Urmila for putting on make-up and borrowing things and beats her, leaving her unwell. These ruins Tiger completely and he starts drinking regularly. Her delivery time approaching, Urmila is in acute pain on a rainy night and Tiger goes to fetch a doctor. He asks a Creole doctor and an Indian doctor for help, but they refuse. A white doctor obliges and lessens Urmila's pain. Urmila delivers a stillborn child. Tiger sends Urmila away to her parents' place and builds a house. The war gets over and Urmila returns, refreshed with her holiday. The war ends and there is hope in the air. Tiger sends an account of the road-building to a newspaper. There are other characters who appear in the novel, such as Tall Boy the Chinese grocery shop owner and Sookdeo the lazy Indian farmer.

The novel has as its focal point on the lives of Caribbean peasants, who are close to nature and the land. V.S. Naipaul opined about *A Brighter Sun*:

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“If a stranger read *A Brighter Sun*
and went to Trinidad expecting
to meet people like Tiger and
Urmila and Rita, he would not
be disappointed” (Finding the Centre, Two Narratives, 1989: 34).

The typical response to this situation is again a racist one. The people assembled in the Creole doctor's clinic are mostly Creoles and one of them says, “He own people let him down! Yuh went and curse de coolie doctor too?” (Selvon, 1952: 189). They do not get the point about discrimination and only want to prove that no fingers are to be pointed towards their Creole doctor, as the Indian doctor did the same. Somewhere in the middle of this long episode, Tiger confronts the Negro doctor and rebukes him and the Indian doctor. This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the passage: “[...] It is a Trinidadian like yourself, and it was a white man who had to come to poor Tiger hut to see he wife, while you and that nasty coolie man who say he is a doctor too didn't want to come” (Selvon, 1952: 188). First of all, Tiger himself has caused his wife's illness by beating her up brutally. This itself is a ‘West Indian’ practice picked up from Joe and others. This leads to the brutal indifference of the West Indian doctor. Secondly, Tiger does not say Indian, but uses the word ‘nasty coolie man’, a derogatory phrase that would have been used by a Negro to describe an Indian. In fact, Joe uses the word ‘coolie’ early in the novel to express his disapproval of Rita's help to his neighbors. Tiger either forgets that he is also a nasty ‘coolie man’, or he is beyond national boundaries and is ‘Trinidadian like yourself’. This indicates that the

Creolization process is ‘partly an exercise in colonial
self-contempt, even when one is in the act of claiming
one's rights as a full citizen’ (9)

Incidentally, violence is deeply embedded in West Indian culture. This is not a racist remark, but a fact.

The tradition-bound and hard-working Indians were made to work in the cane-fields. To the older generation, cane meant survival and hope; but the younger generation, represented by Tiger, Cane represents pain and humiliation. This is evident in Tiger's resolution at the end of *A Brighter Sun* never to return to Chaguanas again. The move to Barataria, thus, is a move against racism and towards Creolization. Creolization is the solution to Racism, and as Joe says, as long as one interacts with everyone and lives in harmony, there should not be a problem. In the fictional world of Samuel Selvon, it is possible to hear the distinct accents of the blend of many linguistic traditions, as the creolized man, Tiger, tries to fashion a linguistic idiom that is capable of absorbing, reflecting and articulating creolized experience. Both *A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger* show protagonist's process of self-discovery. Tiger makes use of his newly developing language skills not only for the purpose of self-education, but also to observe racial prejudices. The incident of the doctors brings to the fore open commitment, something rare in Selvon's novels. Tiger is the spokesperson of the class that wants to eschew racism. Tiger makes an unconsciously political statement. "I am Trinidadian". Selvon believed that Trinidadian, or indeed any national identity, should not be confined to narrow racial borders. *A Brighter Sun* and *Those Who Eat the Cascaduras*, thus, embody Sam Selvon's ideas about Creolization and Racism.

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