



Samuel Dickson Selvon

Mr Chancellor,

While we may debate loud and long about the individual achievements and influences of Caribbean writers whose work commenced in the 50's, there is little dispute that this decade saw an unprecedented flowering of West Indian literary talent and the emergence of West Indian literature as a recognisable entity. How can we account for these extraordinary achievements at a time when there were neither West Indian publishers nor a significant reading public? Had we not heard the voices of McKay and De Lisser, James, Cameron and Mendez? Why had this band of writers succeeded where others had failed? Perhaps it was the sheer weight of their output, their exploration of common themes, their preoccupation with and sensitivity to West Indian social conditions which ignited our consciousness and placed West Indian writing on the international stage. For this outburst of creativity which signalled a challenge to the attitudes and values of a common heritage, was part of the social and political ferment of the time. Out of the painful struggle had at last come the confidence of writers to reveal the essence of the real West Indian condition on their own uncompromising terms.

There were those like Roach and Walcott who remained at home, confident among their roots. Others, choosing exile, carried with them the momentum of their experience. The Caribbean remained the root of their inspiration. As Lamming put it:

'The substance of their books, the general motives are peasant.'
It is from among the exiles that we today welcome and present the celebrated novelist and dramatist, Samuel Dickson Selvon.

Samuel Selvon was born in 1923 and grew up in middle-class comfort in a Presbyterian home in San Fernando, against the backdrop and echoes of the bitter sweet hills of Naparima. At school he was known for an unbridled exuberance — about everything — a quality which endeared him to teachers and pupils alike. His passion for literature and an ability to write creatively, even at an early age, were recognised and encouraged by his teachers at Naparima College, but he was an unwilling subject to the discipline of the scholarship contest and, with the achievement of 'Senior Cambridge' status, left school in 1939 at the age of sixteen. The young Selvon was a product of his environment — creolised, urban middle-class, cosmopolitan, carefree, free of racial feeling. Even the lurid racial epithet slung in the anger of the moment was of little consequence. Despite his ancestry and the fact that his mother, half Scottish, half East Indian, was fluent in Hindi, the culture of the East Indian was almost as remote from him as it was from his friends of other races, something seen at a distance, part of the rural scene. Much later he was to recall with astonishment his childhood outrage at seeing a white man in a socially inferior position and to wonder at the subtleties of his indoctrination. But he had witnessed the gathering clouds of social unrest in the 30's, seen them break in the storm of strikes and riots, and felt the shadows of Butler and Rienzi on the move, strident figures larger and more real to the communities of the island's south.

The Second World War intervened and saw him serving in the West Indian Branch of the Royal Naval Reserve as a Wireless Operator. He began writing poetry and after the war moved north to Barataria when he secured a job with the Trinidad Guardian as a journalist and Fiction Editor of the Sunday Magazine, which published short stories and poems. His writing continued. Short stories were accepted for publication in BIM and other occasional West Indian journals, and by the BBC's Caribbean Voices programme which gave him a wider audience and provided substantial financial rewards.

Success in journalism came quickly and with it the prospect of an easy life — now possible with a steady and rising income. He married. Presently he found himself drawn into a life of complacency. Although having the company of a few kindred spirits in Port of Spain, he felt himself being seduced into the Trinidad way of life — the aimless socialising, the 'malaise' which dulls the senses. He had to escape. Escape was the only solution. His departure from Trinidad for England in 1950, therefore, had nothing to do with ambitions of becoming a professional writer. Rather he saw himself as a journalist, who wrote fiction compulsively, primarily for himself, an act of self discovery and self clarification in which he brought order to ideas and ideals which otherwise would have remained inarticulate.

For a time he lived precariously, like the less educated immigrant then pouring into Britain, with whom he developed increasing and close contacts. Certain aspects of life in England came as bitter disappointments. He discovered an astonishing ignorance of the Caribbean. All West Indians, as far as the English were concerned, were 'one kettle of fish and classified as Jamaicans'. After three hundred years of colonial presence in the Caribbean, nothing of significance about the region had entered the consciousness of the British. Even more devastating: while there was a semblance of a common front, made imperative by the discrimination and hardships suffered in a politely hostile society, the fragmentation of West Indians continued — island from island, class from class, race from race.

The reading public commonly expects the novelist to base his first book on a vivid recall of the awakening passions and wounded ideals of his youth, but when *A Brighter Sun* appeared in 1952 it betrayed no such autobiographical theme, deriving little from the events of the author's early life. Its genesis was in Barataria where Selvon had observed, at close quarters, people of the urban working class and peasant class indiscriminately thrown together. Tiger, a newly arrived peasant, is its central character, around whom the book explores a number of themes: the maturing and creolisation of a rural Indian, race relations, the importance of keeping faith with one's own roots, while using Tiger's life and experiences as symbolic of the fragmented but emerging West Indian society.

At once Selvon developed with singular success the use of appropriate language. As Ramchand observes:

... We can begin to measure the achievement of 'A Brighter Sun' by recognising that the shaping of an appropriate language for the characters is not a separate problem from that of making effective adjustments in the language of narration.

Succeeding novels extended and refined his technique of modified dialect which he developed as a means of releasing his own creative energies as much as reaching a wider European audience, to whom authentic dialect might well have proven an insurmountable barrier. *A Brighter Sun* was a success but two years later writing was still a part-time occupation, increasingly difficult to sustain while in regular employment. The two were incompatible. Clearly the time had come for him to earn his living as a writer or forget about writing. With the completion of his second novel, *An Island is a World*, and the help of a Guggenheim Fellowship, he took the plunge. His third novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, about working class West Indians in London is now regarded as a classic. Here, Selvon deals sympathetically with the 'treadmill' existence of a mottley group, fighting in loneliness in the metropolis against overwhelming odds, in an endless search for jobs, housing and women, but never really moving forward. His injections of comedy reflect the defensive shield of the group:

As if the boys laughing but they only laughing because they afraid to cry.

Nostalgia for home, although strong, is curiously untinged with racial bitterness, but the will to action steadily recedes.

*I don' min' white people staring at me
Dey don' want me here? Don't is deir country?
You won' catch me bawlin any homesick tears
If I don' see Jamaica for a thousand years
Gal I'm telling you, I'm tired fo true
Tired of Englan' tired o' you
I can' go back to Jamaica now
But I'd want to die there anyhow*

A publisher's note says it best:

Samuel Selvon's brilliant; deadly-accurate novel tells more about the transplanted warmth, gaiety, colour, passion, humour, insecurities, fears, fashions and foibles of the coloured immigrant than a dozen weighty sociological tomes.

The years after the publication of his first novel witnessed an impressive output: nine novels and a collection of short stories: *Ways of Sunlight*, short stories in leading journals and in textbooks for schools, poems for the BBC and the CBC, articles to the prestigious Sunday Times and Evening Standard. There are book reviews and books for schools. His consummate artistry extends to radio, the stage and television and even films: in 1978 he wrote the script for a film, 'Pressure', which featured at festivals in London, Chicago, Toronto and Nigeria.

Throughout the progress of his novels, he retains, undiminished, a dynamic interest in language, evolving his modification of dialect in consonance with real developments and contemporary tensions. His mastery of Standard English is, however, never in doubt, as he shows us in his short story, *My Girl and the City*. Betraying an emotional feeling for London, this beautifully written piece, with its lyrical poetic quality, lets us know that his feelings transcend regional bias and reach out to the widest horizons.

For his outstanding achievements, Samuel Selvon has enjoyed worldwide acclaim, being the recipient of several scholarship and fellowship awards, including two from the Guggenheim Foundation. His service as a teacher and lecturer on Creative Writing are in great demand. Much of his time is spent at Universities throughout the world, including our own University where he has been Writer in Residence on all our Campuses. In 1969, for his outstanding contributions to literature, he was awarded the Humming Bird Medal (Gold) by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Selvon is quick to say he has no message, yet his message is clear. He speaks to us in our own language, yet his truths are universal, not so much by what is written as by the mystical quality of what is perceived. His humanistic vision connects with the essence of our real condition -- the confusion and pain of division. Like all great writers his art finds what is true -- the 'essential grains', the 'true impressions' the essential unity of mankind. Even as we grapple with our latest experiments in nation building we would do well to heed his counsel for patience -- like a plant, brick by brick. As Tiger says:

A man should hold on to what he have, he shouldn't want too much thing. He shouldn't plan too much about the future because he can't tell what going happen. Not true? He shouldn't want to do big things right away, he should take time.

I request you Mr Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council, to admit Samuel Dickson Selvon to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.