

Introduction

Samuel Selvon: The Racial Dilemma and Philosophical Problems
about the Condition of Man.

Samuel Selvon, prominent West Indian author, deals with the issue of race relations in much of his writing. Many of his characters are stereotyped, representative of a particular race or culture, as the author strives to paint a realistic picture of the racial situation. In the novels set in Trinidad, his older characters are mainly flat, adhering to a tradition which serves to divide, or to keep divided the various racial components of the land. In their blind and faithful attachment to their cultural heritage, they remain stagnant, their spiritual inertia acting as a barrier to change, to development, to any kind of moral growth.

The central character in Selvon's Trinidad based stories is of Indian descent - a peasant character. His physical environment is usually rural. The author's negro characters frequently belong to the socially depressed class and live in the town. Selvon, however, usually presents his protagonist as young and different, trying to break out of the bonds of tradition and custom and embrace a changing reality. Even as his main character experiences cultural change, and moral and psychological development, the country is undergoing a period of national growth, attempting to free itself from the apron strings of the mother country and make its own tottering first steps. The process of individual creolisation, therefore, is matched by the spirit of nationalisation. Selvon's characters who seek a new identity, find themselves caught up in

a perplexing predicament. Their quest usually entails interaction with other races and the racial dilemma triggers off new experiences of pain, conflict, uncertainties and tensions which threaten to snap the cord of existence.

In the England based stories, the case is similar. Again his protagonists are mainly Trinidadian, but now it is the Trinidadian negro, urbanised and more outgoing, who is involved in a racial situation which creates pain and suffering, conflict and tensions. Here, the West Indians are forced to keep close because there is little opportunity for interaction. Stagnation and inertia are not self-imposed, but forced upon them as a result of social conditions. Here, too, there is stereotyping of characters, persons who ape English manners and customs, who operate from an inferior stance, whose hankering after white female skin speaks of a slavish mentality. Sometimes, however, the character is forced to make a careful appraisal of his condition. Like Tiger in A Brighter Sun and Moses in The Lonely Londoners, Selvon's characters, through problems of race, stumble upon greater difficulties of existence.

This essay attempts to show that the racial dilemma unearths serious philosophical problems about the condition of man. Emerging from a particular cultural and racial cocoon and thrown into a wider universe, man finds himself in a state of bewilderment, his mind reeling, trying to make sense of life's chaotic condition. First he must know who he is and what he is and then he must know how to cope with his realisations. What should he do and what is required of him? Man discovers that the world

in which he finds himself, is a world which seems meaningless and chaotic, a world which offers no comfort, no solace, no protection, no sense of security. On the contrary, it is a world which threatens one's very existence, which may destroy one's humanity, which can dehumanise and annihilate the very brain.

Am I master of my own destiny? This is the question facing universal man. Or am I being swept along by a spate of events over which I have no control? Do I ford it or swim or am I too inadequate for the situation? There are more questions than answers, and man is trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. He is therefore dogged by fear, a sense of dread, the existential angst. The freedom to act, if he has it, carries with it the burden of the responsibility for one's actions. He is afraid of being too inadequate for the situation, of making the wrong decision. He is afraid of change for better or for worse. He is terrified by anything and everything which threatens his sense of self, which heightens this feeling of being unnecessary. He is afraid of death.

Selvon's protagonists experience a profound encounter with self and between self and the other. They are catapulted on to a path of exploration and discovery, on a quest for knowledge and for truth and on to a journey into the mysteries of existence and reality. How they grapple with the problems confronting them, is all part of the drama that is Selvon's writing.

"Daniel Selvon: A Brighter Son of the Soil," Trinidad
Mag. 12 Oct. 1985, p. 11.

Daniel Selvon, A Brighter Sun (Hong Kong: Sheik Wah Tong
Press Ltd., 1983), p. 4.