

Embedding History: A Perspective of Sam Selvon's *The Housing Lark*

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Abstract: Sam Selvon interfuses the history of the Empire and reconstructs the Caribbean history. The Caribbeans move towards nationhood in spite of their differences and the Mother Country's hostile attitude. Histories get embedded and interrogated.

Keywords: Imperial, Mother Country, reconstructing, Demythologising, colonials etc

*History moves forward to gather in the future as well as
looking backward to gather up the past.* -Bill Ashcroft

Postcolonial Writing, setting a different trend, tends to cross over borders. Literary text carries within itself several functions and coheres varying disciplines that a reader can decode the text from multiple points. Representation and misrepresentation in a text conjure and build worlds of illusoriness and reality, which can in turn be a tactic to impose and unravel certain specific truths and factualities of happenings. A literary text making an inscape of historical happening testifies to the reality of the time/period. Bill Ashcroft claims 'History, indeed temporality itself, is a construction of language and of culture, and, ultimately, the site of a struggle for control which post - colonial writing is in a particularly strategic position to engage' (83). At the same time, he is conscious of the fact that 'post-colonial interpolation of history occurs in ways that refuse to leave it intact' and also positions 'the problematizing of the boundary between literature and history' (99). Such is the intermixing of genres in the hybridized world to express resistance. Resistance enables to interrogate, to disprove, and to redefine the imposed identity.

Edouard Glissant perceiving the acute consequences of the western history for such societies as the Caribbean comments 'History is highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made the history of the World'. If Hegel relegated African peoples to the ahistorical, Amerindian peoples to the prehistorical, in order to reserve History for European people exclusively, it appears that it is not because these African or American peoples 'have entered History' that we can conclude today that such a hierarchical conception of 'the march of History' is no longer relevant'. His rejection of Western History which has held the status of the master narrative, the Imperial History that recognised none other country's history, paves way for interrogation. In fact, he assures that 'History [with a capital H] ends where the histories

of those people once reputed to be without history come together' (qtd in Bill Ashcroft 98-100). Histories of different societies from a postcolonial perspective invade the center to reallocate center-margin positions. Transforming History has begun with the writers inhabiting the third space and reclaiming representation, which has been denied to the other. And Bill Ashcroft points out the remedy lies not in re-insertion of a nation's history into the Empire history but re-vision of history from a differing stance.

Sam Selvon, a Trinidadian in his novel *The Housing Lark* (1965) interfuses the History of the Empire with that of the Caribbean and India. Michel Fabre says 'Experimenting in dialogue and dialect it is a farcical novel about the working and housing conditions of the black immigrants in London' (122). The immigrants, Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans, displaced and dislocated, have a hard time in finding a house in London due to the stringent enacting of the policy 'Keep Britain White'. The dichotomy in the attitude of the Mother Country is apparent but goes unnoticed and unquestioned. In an interview Selvon remarks, 'I had troubles finding a place to live. I had doors slammed in my face. I had difficulties finding a job, odd jobs here and there, because of my colour, because the prejudice and discrimination against this "invasion" as they called it in England, of Third World people coming into the Country, and taking up jobs, and looking for accommodation, and things like that' (96). As a writer and an immigrant he has voiced the problematic issue faced by the people from the Caribbean. Jana Evans Braziel posits that 'race is a cultural construct that is historically malleable and differently deployed at different moments in time and in varying national contexts'. It is 'deployed as a discriminatory rubric across multiple geographical settings and historical periods' (133). How do the diasporans carve their histories within the national history of so called the Mother Country, Britain?

Making a critique of Kitchener invading England with his calypsos, Hugh Hodges presents the prominent problem of the days 'Refused housing in better neighbourhoods by the extremely unsociable English, West Indians were crowded into the most run-down parts of Brixton, Notting Hill, Hammersmith and Bayswater' (25). He continues that they had to pay four even five times more than the actual rent. Naturally what they saved to send home to Jamaica or Trinidad disappeared into the pockets of their landlords. Bat, Syl, Poor and all the boys face the problem of housing in Britain where the policy of 'No Kolors, sorry! europeans only' (29) is followed.

Paradoxically the islanders land up in London not on their own volition but on demand, once again for the gain of the Empire. Susheila Nasta, corroborates over 40,000 West Indians immigrated to Britain. 'Originally invited to the 'mother-country' by the post-war government as an attempt to solve the immediate labour crisis following the Second World War and commonly known as the 'Windrush generation' these islanders moved to Britain expectant to improve their standard of living' (78). On

arriving, they face disappointment and disillusion. Racial discrimination is so sharp that they feel thwarted. Economic deprivation, social ostracisation and unemployment feature their lives that they appear to be aimless wanderers and perpetual hunters and remain caught- up in a tangle of troubles.

Helen Tiffin, besides drawing a parallel, dwells upon the ostensible distinguishing features between the European migration and the Caribbean migration. Two primary motivations geared the massive migrations in the last four centuries. Europeans undertook the voyage to the Caribbean because they had the impelling force of economic gain. The mass migration of the colonised to Europe in the twentieth century, were similarly 'sponsored by a hope of economic improvement'. Two powerful myths underpinned both the migrations. The English were in the quest of EL Dorado in the Caribbean islands. The Caribbeans were after the imperial myth that the streets of metropolis were paved with gold. Both underwent the experience of de-mythologising their in-built myths. However, the Europeans economic gain and extension of territory are rewards that they reaped beyond the scale.

The Caribbeans, on the other hand, suffered loss beyond redemption at political, economical and social levels. They undergo psychic trauma and violence even after the Empire departed. Helen Tiffin conjoins 'But a second imperial mythology underlay colonial migrations to 'Britain-the myth of the 'mother' country with all its implications of welcome and affiliation which had been sponsored by the nineteenth and twentieth century rhetoric of empire (mother and children, sisters and brothers) and deliberately fostered in the twentieth century in the educational curricula' Naturally, it ensues that the empire's ideology does not promote the practice of racial differences. 'But as the colonial chickens came home to roost in the imperium, however, their experience was, well, a horse of a different colour'. (135) The continual clamour of the white people for maintaining purity of race has got spearheaded. They receive the children as unwelcome and uncivilised colonials. The colonials are strangers, foreigners to be wary of and rough people to be kicked. They cannot be accommodated for fear of invasion. Manipulating ideology for its gain and conveniently throwing it overboard at confrontation but at the same time exercising ideological power have become the reigning force.

Some West Indians talk with their English friends about 'the waves of immigration and deplore the conditions immigrants live in' (109). However, they try to win the favour of English people at the cost of despising their own people but they never succeed. Their trustworthiness is exploited and their simplicity is taken advantage of. Fearing that Battersby may drop him out of the scheme of buying a house, Gallows goes out to spy. He chances to meet Alfie who leans on a wall with a camera strap on his shoulder. An Englisher has told him that he made plenty of money on selling a snap of an accident to the newspapers and so he is on the lark now. When Alfie attempts to verify it with him, the

Englischer says 'I don't tell lies like you people' (51). The stereotypical image of the colonised pervades. The situation is cleverly contrived for without any further implication it is apparent who the liar is in the context. Alfie has been duped and walks around with the camera with an undying hope of making money. The Englishman's illusion falls upon him permanently. At another occasion, the boys discuss on how hard life is for them. Alfie expresses a wish to be back home. Another responds that life is too hard in London and all the time they have 'to live hand to mouth' (125). Life is so harsh for them that one even thinks of life in jail that may supply meals regularly. As the conversation prolongs, someone suggests to Syl to go back to India, his mother country. Syl, unwaveringly ascertains 'Brit'n is my country' (126). Another teases him for not wearing the south Indian costume of dhoti and turban. At the next instant, he doubts whether the Indian High Commissioner will help him if ever he gets into trouble or he will send him back to the Trinidad office. Belonging neither here nor there they are in the Trishanku position, always floating upwards. The claim they make on Britain denotes their loyalty only to interpellate the disloyalty of the Empire. They have been coerced and conscientized all along to look upon the mother country but in experience they see the dark reality behind the facade of magnanimity. The concept of mother country envisages evergreen memories, cherished ideals and abiding values. Markarand Paranjape remarks, 'the tug of the Motherland is subtle but powerful. It is almost obsessive and mystical in some cases' (92). The assimilationists and the traditionalists carry the motherland either in imagination or in a toolbox. Imaginary home has its origin in the land. But the Caribbeans both the Africans of slavery and the Indians of indentured labour have neither known nor seen the motherland except for their feeble and fragmented knowledge of it. In Selvon's terminology it is 'the third race', be black or Indian, that grew up Westernized and 'who have adopted a way of life which tries to work and operate between the two races and who are Creolized as it were, and who see themselves more as West Indians than as perhaps belonging to people who originally came from India' (120) and they are in a strange position. As they have been dominated by the benevolent coloniser, they possessing no history of their own, for it has been consciously obliterated or the mother land itself has at times deserted them, they have been cultivated to believe in the image of Britain as the mother country. Dilemma arises particularly for people from Third World countries because of their colour who move into white society to settle and they cannot 'build a future without using the past' (121). Sylvester cannot go back to India for history tells us that the Indians in the Caribbean islands clamoured to return to India on its Independence. The then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to the West Indian official that the Indians remain there and build up the Country and India is in its formation process after a long spell of imperial regime. Yet, they cannot but have passing glimpses of India. All the histories intertwine in the lives

of people, especially the West Indies immigrants in London. History travels, along with the travellers. As the different histories meet, the juxtaposition of differing worlds emerges with the benevolent and malevolent growth. Susheila Nasta words it well: 'somewhere between the two on a continuum alongside' there is 'a place of resistance deeply embedded in the process of history' and she clarifies that she does not refer to 'history as possession of space or place but as a possession of time and the migrant is not travelling as light as might sometimes appear' (42). Histories have been embedded in history of the West Indies. To go back to its origin, the Caribs and Arawaks are fossilized in the land. At the next stage, colonisation calls in the middle passage and *kala pani*. Grace Eche Okereke presents 'The history of the West Indies has been characterized by a lot of violation and trauma, consequent upon colonization and latifundia which insured the economic enrichment of the colonialists and the degradation of the slaves and indentured labourers. This has presented the West Indian as a victim, rather than a maker of history'. However each writer has tried to depict the West Indian man as a unique 'creator of history in his own right' (35). Africans, brought as slaves, occupy a place and leave traces of their own history. The brutal attacks and the inhuman treatment they have faced can never be sunk in the sea of oblivion. Songs bemoaning their alien primitive soil, hearts whispering in pain and the daily ordeal of life suck them in but their hope is their succourer.

Indians arrive in Guyana in 1838 and in Trinidad two years later. Helen Tiffin narrates, 'By 1879 the era of European empire slavery was over, but in the 1840s both the psychic memory of slavery and its institutional apparatuses were immediately available to the indentured laborer, and Indian labor was expected to occupy the old slave niche in the plantation economy. The Indians of Trinidad thus inherited a system designed centuries earlier for African slaves' (88). The Indians, subjugated under the white masters, have also to face the inimical attitude of the blacks or to adjust with the social life of the blacks. Severance from the mother country and dislocation disrupt the life of people. They have to adopt willingly or enforcedly the history of the ruling class. It is no more a distinct or separate history but a collective history of its peoples. The boys in the Housing Lark, though they are blacks and Indians do not fanatically cling to their roots. Instead, they look upon themselves as West Indians. As West Indians, they have their own petty prejudices and do not maintain an all embracing gesture towards one another. Battersby wants a Trinidadian to share his room to lessen the rent but not any other. Charlie Victor suggests that a Jamaican is on the look out for a place and preaches to Bat 'we have so much of prejudice with the white people and them, and don't like a fellow-country man in Brit'n'. Bat, of course, replies that he could be a 'missionary to the white races if it pay off' (17). Harry Banjo, a Jamaican Calypsonian has a promising future. When Nobby asks if Harry is in the housing lark scheme Harry confronts them boldly that it is he who gives the idea and all Trinidadians cannot think

for themselves. All the same he is generous to pay the rent for the basement room and buying rations too for Bat. Consequently, Bat is free of worrying about rent and food. Gallows accuses Poor 'you send Harry Banjo to jail. Harry was a nice fellar, nicer than you, don't mind he was a Jamaican. The man only in the country a short time and you get him in trouble and save yourself' (116). In the alienating and hostile atmosphere, they have not made an erasure of their differences but assert it as the occasion arises. In an interview Sam Selvon emphasises that a national feeling needs to be cultivated and attributes the fall of the Federation in the late forties to the following cause: 'There was all this bickering. Trinidad feels that it's a better island than Jamaica, and Jamaica feels it's the biggest English-speaking Island. They want everything to happen over there, and Barbados doesn't want to have anything to do with it. That sort of petty rivalry that goes on has been keeping us apart for years' (124). The historical background gets manifested in the characters. But, as Selvon points out, there is a shift in attitude that the islanders tend to overlook such differences and work towards nationhood. The immigrants too express their differences with each other but come together inevitably as they float in the sea of loneliness.

As the narrative progresses they discuss the land's history, which stays silently as a silhouette. Makarand Paranjape reviews that the Caribbean islands derive their name from the Caribs and they have been practically wiped out. 'Other indigenous populations that were decimated in the wake of European colonisation include the Ciboneys and the Arawaks' (126). The Caribbean history has been, as Helen Tiffin affirms 'atleast since European contact long, bloody and spectacular. The virtual extermination of the native Caribs and Arawaks, the rapacious race between the European powers to find the legendary EL Dorado, and the subsequent rise of the slave plantation system gave the area "a history" long before the arrival of Indian indentured labor' (89). The boys surprise others with their 'historical knowledge' but one remarks it is mixed up and it is English history. One refers that they were not taught any other history in school. Another responds 'That's because OUR PEOPLE ain't have no history' (125) and doubts when they have history whether the children in English schools will be under compulsion to learn it. Some other person refutes the established notion of the West Indies having no history and says 'who say we ain't have history? What about the Carib Indians and Abercomby and Sir Walter Raleigh?' (125). Helen Tiffin comments on this passage that the English history is so humorously, ironically, yet lovingly and familiarly presented (92) but the infusion is rather ironic. The massacre of the natives by the coloniser that has resulted in almost wiping off a race from the face of the earth comes alive. Two indigene groups, the peaceful and the aggressive known as Taino and Carib respectively have been the original dwellers. The Arawaks are mainly agriculturists. The Carib drive out The Antillean Arawak or Taino out of the Lesser Antilles shortly before the appearance

of the Spanish (480). Peter Hulme specifies 'the native Caribbean diaspora which is a not a glorious story of survival but a desperate story of trauma and adaptation in which many hundreds of thousands died but out of which emerged a recognizable Carib nation forged in the crucible of colonial struggle' (297). The West Indians cherish the Caribs indigeneity and are consciously aware of the land's birth pangs. Resistance against the oncoming onslaught, even threatened extermination, has coursed its way through the soil and the land has buried the agonising cries of the people.

Conquest causes destruction and one man's gain is another man's loss. Juxtaposing Raleigh and Abercromby, representative of imperialism against the Caribs, excavates the ruthless hunting after lives. The encounter evolves in endless struggle and resistance. Sir Walter Raleigh, (1552-1618) favourite of Elizabeth I imprisoned for life in the Tower of London gets released in 1616 to find a gold mine in Guiana. Of course, the expedition fails in its gold quest. It signifies the covetous heart of the king of England and also the people's adventurous spirit and the dream of discovering and conquering new land. The renaissance trend of individual's uniqueness and his/her potential gets unleashed in such crossing over seas and entering unknown territories. Sir Ralph Abercromby (1734-1801) was 'appointed to the command of British forces in West Indies when he seized the French sugar islands' (20). The two soldiers represent warfare and invasion, which ring death knell to the islanders, both the natives and the settlers. The historical stereotypes are reinstituted to acquiesce with the master narrative with the underlying purpose of throwing it back. While Syl hunts for residence, Bat directs him to an English landlord who takes Indians and not any West Indian. Though Syl protests that he is a West Indian and prefers not to live with an Indian, Battersby quietens him. Helpless in his search, he approaches the landlord who looks at him suspiciously. In a foolhardy manner, much to the amusement of the reader, he blurts out 'I am straight from the banks of Ganges' 'I am a student from the orient seeking a roof over my head' (30). The landlord plies him with queries for not wearing national garments, he philosophies that when one is in Rome he has to be a roman and claims to hail from 'West India' and he is a student of life as all are and identifies himself as Ram Singh Ali Mohammed-Esquire. And that reaches the climax. When they both stand there talking, an Indian tenant, Ram with a big beard and wearing turban gets inside. Syl succeeds in his endeavour of getting a room. But he cannot rest at peace after the wild hunting because he has to avoid Ram who may get him into trouble. Syl to guard his safety goes to the landlord and confesses that Ram is not from India. Besides, he chants all the time and creates a nuisance to the other tenants. The Englisher verifies and knocks at his door. Syl hurries to the corner to prove his Indianness, stands in the corner on his head and asserts to him that he practises his 'yohour'. However, the Englisher accuses that he is 'flying under false colours and he is from West Indies and gives him a week's notice to vacate. Once again Syl reiterates that he is a born Indian who grew up on the banks of the Ganges and worked on

the rice and tea plantation' (32). Later, when he discusses it with Battersby, he identifies Ram by his costume and shocks Syl that he sent him there and he is from Jamaica. The Ganges meanders in the residual memory and the cult of 'Yoghourt' stands aloof signifying the mystical aspirations of a human being in the land of the East. Out Of desperation to get a room both Syl and Ram have duped the English man. One mimicking certain strategies claims to be an orient and the other alters his appearance to conform to the oriental outward look in order to move around unscathed. But it is in constructing these images the irony gets sharpened. It indicates the image fixity of the Englisher who is unable to see through the pretentious acts for his preconceived and unaltered notions of the East block his perception.

Unearthing of past in a rather flippant way exemplifies the narrators', who are not professional historians, dexterity in alerting the memory and knowing the history of the coloniser. The dominant's imposing of history, from the narrator's view, shows ambivalence and claims sense of superior culture and thereby provides space to show resistance and colonial struggle. Jean expresses a wish of going on a picnic as back in home. Battersby implements and executes that the party looks like they are setting off for an expedition to the North Pole or something. With all possible pandemonium, they reach Hamdon Court, a historical site, which becomes a space for the immigrants to dehistoricise the historicity of place and people. As the boys near the palace bedroom, the narrator visualises as if king Henry stands there: 'the old bird watching his chicks as they stroll about the gardens, studying which one to behead and which one to make a stroke with' (117). The narration continues that he had about three Catherine's, two Annes, one Jane and others and when he called out 'catherine' how the three of them would have wondered which one he was going to send to the Tower for beheading. Fitz warns Teena, his wife, who tries to teach their children some history there, 'Don't teach the children no wicked things! Henry Eight was an evil character living with ten-twelve woman' (118). And he ascertains that this place does not belong to him but Wosley has built and given it to him as a present. Further he tells her not to shout for Anne of Cleves might be 'catching up on some sleep after a heavy night' (119). It is said in Britannica that king Henry VIII was a 'despot under the forms of law' and 'had elastic conscience which was always at the beck and call of his desires and he cared little for principle'. The immigrants lovingly mixing with a note of humour express their opinions and resistance to the historical record. The Englishers may not be able to distinguish the territory of Jamaica from that of Trinidad yet the colonised possess an accurate knowledge of the coloniser's history of even remote past.

Talking of mediaeval period, they reminisce the great days of the Knights of the Round Table and Richard with a lion heart. Another interjects about Robin Hood and the Merry Men and travel over to the Battle of Hastings when the man looked up in the air, an arrow fell and damaged his eye. Immediately another, as if in a quiz competition, answers that

was William the conqueror (1026-1087), who as the annals say in Senlac he, with his Norman army, defeated the English in 1066 which came to be known as the Battle of Hastings and he became the king of England from 1066. The reference to one-eye person reminds them of Nelson and one jumps up with the Battle of Trafalgar and concludes with the current news that Charles Laughton, who as an actor proved his brittle when he acted as Nelson. Horatio Nelson won crucial victories in the Battles of Nile and Trafalgar and is still regarded as Britain's most appealing national hero and from 1784 to 1787 he commanded a frigate in the West Indies. He was killed by the enemy fire during Battle of Trafalgar, which established 'British naval supremacy for more than a century' (298). In the above narration, history is revisited. Royalty and commonalty alike emerge. The truly valiant and the kind hearted traverse through. The despots and the chivalrous chart their life. The turbulent period of battles and the ordinary cowardly time commingle. It occurs in flashes but carry with in the potency of historical trauma and glorious moments. Bill Ashcroft postulates that the postcolonial discourse adopts three modes in transforming history namely rejection, interjection and interpolation (100-102). Sam Selvon does not refuse to recognize history. Instead, he incorporates thereby avoiding the problem that arises with such exclusivity which results in a kind of 'group insularity'. When it comes to the point of West Indian history whose experiences are omitted from imperial history, he inserts them, which is termed as interjection. Caribbean mind, which he has consciously wanted to develop and project to the world, comes afresh through his writing.

Paul Ricoeur turns on Augustine's concept of time in confession to solve the problem of any narrative having the essence of history and speaks of human time as a threefold present. Bill Ashcroft analyses it thus: a present of things past (memory), a present things and a present of future things (expectation) (87). The temporal experience structures for a slippage of the past into the present and the present of the future into the present and makes the present of the present come alive. The West Indian immigrants bring back the past and the past of Caribs and Arawaks slip into the present and the past monarchs and great warriors with full gusto spring up and the past routine life of people evinces two geographical boundaries collapsing. In addition to these, there is also an expectant future that forms part of the narrative, *The Housing Lark*. Engaging the strategy of narrativity, the postcolonial discourse can reinscribe the historical representation and also interpolate history. Interpolation of history is as Ashcroft explains, not 'an oppositional discourse but a tactic which operates from the fractures and contradictions of discourse itself' (102). It becomes a tool to insert and revision history. It offers room for contestation, radical perspective and disrapture of history. In fact, 'it turns its status as a record to the task of self-determination and cultural empowerment' (92). Histories of different nations echoing the disrapture and difference progress towards distinct identities.

In colonial situations, Helen Tiffin attests 'history frequently becomes

the source of psychic affirmation and continuity, or, as group genesis, becomes the focus of a developing communal self-consciousness. History and cultural self-consciousness are necessarily aligned, and the idea of history is often closest to the hearts of those whose tradition and legends have been disrupted' (89). She points out five ways of a colonial tackling history. First he looks back to his ancestral homeland and then has either willingly or enforcedly adopted the history of the ruling class. He/she has been transported to another land which cauates to opt for the history of the new place and to go in for the collective history of its people. Another is a resistance mode of establishing the history of the race. Finally, the colonial invokes the legends and traditions of the new land and tries to close the gap between his own exile and that of the people of the land. In the case of Selvon's characters, they look upon England for shared roots of West Indian history, which of course does not offer a promising scope. They tend to adopt European and African history of the Caribbean as their own and also at the point of having a shared Indian and black history. However, there evolves the Caribbean history that is racially collective through its complex relationship between British history and the Indian indentured labourers and their generation and the black slaves with their progeny in integration in the islands and in England.

The glowing tribute paid by Ismith Khan comes in adequately. He records that the Caribbeans lack in possessing a record of its past and writes 'The great gap of historical past has not yet been filled in by historians or social scientists, it has been filled in by our writers of fiction, poetry and drama. Sam Selvon was the first writer to fill those empty spaces of history not as historian or social scientist but as novelist, poet and dramatist. While his early works give us a picture of the roots and origins of our culture, his later works -the Moses novels -trace, with accuracy not only where we come from but where we are headed' (59). He adds that it takes a writer like Selvon to crystallize their 'complexity'. Indeed he has woven histories within history dexterously and in a masterminded way that does not descend to bitter cynicism but maintains a genial humour. Pain and laughter parade, gentle humour and sordid pathos permeate and irony and details tend to subvert and interrogate to portray the truth, the facts which add up in the colossal construct of history.

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