

# ***The Lonely Londoners and the Quest for the Ho(me)ly Land***

by Valeria Taddei

DPhil candidate, Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages

## **Abstract**

*Samuel Selvon's The Lonely Londoners (1956) narrates the experiences of a group of West Indian immigrants in London after WWII. It pictures the characters' journey between their expectations upon arrival and the clash with reality, as well as their way to cope with adverse social and cultural circumstances. In so doing, it establishes a multilayered dialogue with its literary tradition, echoing T.S. Eliot's modernist portrayal of London in The Waste Land and referring further back to some of Eliot's own models, the medieval legends of the Matter of Britain. It can be argued that these echoes have a double function. On the one hand they inscribe Selvon's work (and his heroes) firmly in the English literary tradition, reclaiming the place of colonial citizens in the culture of the country. On the other, they evoke an anthropological perspective that connects the characters' efforts to settle in with an ancient and profoundly human quest for home.*

\* \* \*

## **Introduction**

The title alone does not allow to identify Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* as a work about migration or as postcolonial literature. Despite that, the novel's subject is precisely the experience of immigrants from the Caribbean colonies in the mother country's capital city in the decade past the second world war. Published in 1956, six years after the author's arrival in England from Trinidad, it belongs to a substantial trend of narrations on this topic composed by West Indian migrant writers of the so-called Windrush generation. However, if the title is the first clue readers are given about a book, it is striking that, unlike other works belonging to that current, the name of 'the definitive novel about London's West Indians' (as a *Financial Times* review declares on the book's

29 back cover) does not make any reference either to migration or to the West Indies. This  
30 discrepancy is relevant in several respects. By surprising its early readers, who opened a  
31 book about Londoners and encountered characters of colonial origin, it effectively  
32 foregrounded the fact that black Londoners were there, despite being wilfully ignored. At  
33 the same time, it suggested the complex relationship of belonging and estrangement that  
34 linked colonial immigrants to the mother country, and put centre stage their dimension of  
35 existence in the modern capital.

36  
37 The phonetic similarity between 'lonely' and 'London' creates an impression of subtle  
38 connection between the two terms. This links the book to a British literary tradition,  
39 ranging from Dickens to the Modernists, concerned with the alienating power of the  
40 modern city, while the adjective 'Londoners' foregrounds a sense of belonging. The title  
41 seems thus to highlight the centrality of the metropolis in the novel's construction and  
42 suggests to consider its role in relation to the characters' experience. What did they expect  
43 from the city? What did they find, how did they deal with it? And how does Selvon  
44 picture this world?

45  
46 Selvon embeds the representation of the city and of his characters' adventures in a layered  
47 set of literary references. One is the ancient literary motif of the quest, which was linked to  
48 the medieval legends of the Matter of Britain about the knights' search for the Holy Grail.  
49 This myth was then famously echoed in association to the twentieth-century city in T.S.  
50 Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), one of the pivotal texts in the modernist tradition about  
51 London. These literary models play a significant part in the construction of *The Lonely*  
52 *Londoners*. Selvon repurposes the motif of the quest both in the medieval version and in  
53 Eliot's darker interpretation to picture his characters' expectations about Britain and their  
54 clash with a very different reality. At the same time, the high-modernist tradition of the  
55 London text, with its ambiguous emphasis on social alienation and, on the other hand, on

56 the ineffable communion of all beings, accompanies the characters as they settle in and  
57 become an integral part of the city's social fabric. Having explored how these echoes  
58 appear in the novel, the conclusion will argue that Selvon uses a personal mythical  
59 method to embed his characters' experience in the international tradition of modernism  
60 and, above all, to foreground its universally human quality.

61

62

### 63 **A Holy Land in the Waste Land**

64

65 The novel begins in the full swing of colonial immigration to Britain. Since the aftermath  
66 of the Second World War, when Britain had been in great demand of labourers as it began  
67 to rebuild her devastated cities, the arrivals of citizens from the colonies, among whom  
68 were many West Indians, had constantly increased. They were students, workers in search  
69 of a higher wage, budding artists; as Lamming recounts in *The Pleasures of Exile*, England  
70 for them was first of all an expectation, the land of 'a better break' and self-fulfilment. As  
71 these hopes added to the poetical aura of the capital - heart and emblem of the Empire -, to  
72 the eyes of the migrants London acquired the charm of a promised land, and their journey  
73 took the flavour of a quest.

74

75 The sub-text of the quest permeates Selvon's novel at the level of both content and  
76 structure. The narration is episodic and digressive, presenting the life of a group of  
77 immigrants in the city in a succession of humorous adventures, interestingly called by the  
78 slang term 'ballads'. These fragments are apparently unrelated except that they all happen  
79 to, and circulate in, the same group of characters: the veteran immigrant Moses and the  
80 circle of his acquaintances, including the newcomer Henry Oliver (immediately  
81 nicknamed Sir Galahad), the Jamaican Tolroy with his numerous family, and many other  
82 black men from English colonies. The 'ballads' about them that Moses has on record, for

83 all their being disparate, make sense when read as stages of the initiation of a young and  
84 bold Sir Galahad, just arrived from Trinidad, to the new life in London. The minister of  
85 this initiation ceremony is precisely his compatriot Moses, who, since his arrival ten years  
86 before, has been welcoming his West Indian fellows in the capital:

87

88 he hardly have time to settle in the old Brit'n before all sorts of fellars start coming  
89 straight to his room in the Water when they land up in London from the West Indies,  
90 saying that so and so tell them Moses is a good fellar to contact, that he would help  
91 them get place to stay and work to do. (TLL: 2)

92

93 The biblical resonance of this Moses in the Water ('Bayswater to you until you living in the  
94 city for at least two years' (TLL:16)) helping his people settle down confirms the idea of  
95 London as a Holy Land, here presented in very concrete terms as 'place to stay and work  
96 to do'. In this early depiction of the two pivotal characters, the biblical myth of the  
97 promised land and the ancient literary *topos* of the quest that inspired Medieval knightly  
98 cycles seem to come together to convey the mood of highest expectation that surrounded  
99 the migrants' idea of London.

100

101 However, Moses' attitude toward the newcomer is abasing: 'All right Sir Galahad [...] Take  
102 it easy. London will do for you before long' (TLL: 15) . Why is the veteran's message to the  
103 young man so cautious? Although they didn't really expect London streets to be paved  
104 with gold, the hopeful immigrants soon found out that their longed-for Holy Land was, in  
105 effect, largely a Waste Land both in a historical sense — due to the heavy consequences of  
106 bombardments — and metaphorically. Again, this is made clear through explicit literary  
107 references. A description of London's atmosphere occupies the very first lines of the novel;  
108 in a sense, it welcomes us into the story as it welcomed the migrants to the city:

109

110 One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog  
111 sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if it is not  
112 London at all but some strange place on another planet [...] (TLL: 1)

113

114 This description is both inauspicious and familiar, as it paraphrases the famous 'Unreal  
115 city | under the brown fog of a winter dawn' of T.S. Eliot's poem (Eliot 1922: ll.60-61). In  
116 Selvon's narration, however, the typical picture of a foggy, cold and dark London  
117 immediately takes on a specific significance in opposition to the clear-skyed, warm and  
118 sunny Caribbean islands the protagonists left behind. The size of the city, as well, makes it  
119 hostile: coming from small, country realities whose intimacy was at times almost  
120 suffocating, the enormous London, with its thousands of unknown people hurrying  
121 somewhere and minding nothing but their own business generated at first a feeling of  
122 disorientation and loss. Precisely this sense of displacement overcomes Galahad once he  
123 finds himself alone in the street, with no idea of where to go and no landmarks to guide  
124 him; and it is after this experience that he abandons his 'big talk', recognising that he had  
125 largely underestimated London's scary potential.

126

127 As the novel develops, the city is progressively portrayed as a whole alien universe, a  
128 valley of no return where it is easy to get lost: 'You don't know that does happen? Fellars  
129 don't see one another for years here' (TLL: 25). The physical law of this universe is  
130 partition: 'London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the  
131 world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other  
132 ones except what you read in the papers' (TLL: 60). Little world can mean one's room,  
133 one's house or a whole metropolitan area identified according to a class distinction; it is  
134 only in the backward and degraded 'Working Class' quarters — Bayswater, Harrow Road,  
135 Notting Hill — that most of the migrants could find their new London home.

136

137 Moreover, the initial notation about the inhospitable climate, rather than being a mere  
138 setting matter, serves as a symbol — or, in Eliotian terms, as an objective correlative — for  
139 another kind of coldness and inhospitality: that of English people. The rapid and massive  
140 increase of the immigrants' population had led to an exacerbation of xenophobia and  
141 discriminating tendencies in the white self-proclaimed 'landlords', so that, in addition to  
142 the common difficulties in securing a home and a job, black people — including the  
143 majority of West Indians — also had to confront the problem of rejection on the ground of  
144 race. As Moses clearly summarises:

145

146 'It was a time when I was first here, when it only had a few West Indians in London  
147 and things used to go good enough. These days, spades all over the place, and every  
148 shipload is big news, and the English people don't like the boys coming to England  
149 to work and live.'

150 'Why is that?' Galahad ask.

151 'Well, as far as I could figure, they frighten we get jobs in front of them, though that  
152 does never happen. The other thing is that they just don't like black people, and don't  
153 ask me why, because that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find  
154 out from way back [...]'. (TLL: 20)

155

156 Racial discrimination, although disguised under the 'old English diplomacy', doubles the  
157 alienating effect of the city, and again it is faithfully mirrored by geographical oppositions:  
158 blacks are made to fit into London (and London society) in a way that we could say  
159 complementary to the whites. They face the hidden side of the city: 'The people who living  
160 in London don't really know how behind them railway station does be so desolate and  
161 discouraging. It like another world. [...] It look like hell' (TLL: 35). But in contrast with  
162 common sense, this proves to be the more authentic aspect of the 'unreal city': 'this is the  
163 real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday  
164 come' (TLL: 59). The view of England as the 'real world' that colonial education had

165 instilled in these young men is thus confirmed in a bitterly ironical way. Far from being  
166 the Promised land of real opportunities for personal fulfilment, it hits them with  
167 unexpected harshness, and in so doing discloses for them the real rules of its functioning  
168 in depths that the well-off whites cannot reach.

169

## 170 **Community and Belonging**

171

172 Surprisingly enough, Selvon's narrative moves precisely from this hostile environment in  
173 order to 'shape a poetics of belonging' (Simpson 2011: 193). As C.L. Innes notes:

174

175 Through their stories [...] this diverse group of Africans, Jamaicans and Trinidadians  
176 comes into being as a gathering of people who find their identity less through their  
177 different places of origin than through their mutual presence in London. This new  
178 group identity is expressed through an ambivalent sense of longing for 'home' and  
179 belonging to London. (Innes 2007: 180)

180

181 Indeed, the characters resist the threat of dispersion and isolation by recreating a  
182 community: 'This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and  
183 then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell' (TLL: 126), Moses  
184 comments. And paradoxically, their very communal displacement favours the recognition  
185 of a collective West Indian identity, according to a process that Selvon's friend Lamming  
186 famously analysed:

187

188 No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees  
189 himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign territory.  
190 [...] In this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England. The  
191 category of West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes  
192 cultural significance. (Lamming, 1984: 214)

193

194 Thus, the superficial white-English assumption that 'everybody who come from the West  
195 Indies comes from Jamaica' (TLL: 7) unintentionally helps recognising a sense of  
196 communal root. However, this process of identification by way of absence, familiar to  
197 migrants of all times, does not contradict the implications of the title: on closer inspection,  
198 it is the West Indian community as a whole that is socially isolated on the scene of the city,  
199 ignored and 'lonely'. Significantly, throughout the novel whites are absent from Selvon's  
200 London, featuring only as looming representatives of an oppressive system. No  
201 communitarian bond can evidently be established with them, since they refuse to face the  
202 fact that black Londoners exist and live in the city with their same rights. This obstinate  
203 disregard is the snapshot of a wider historical situation: thousands of West Indians had  
204 been present in England since the end of the eighteenth century but seemed to have left no  
205 trace in the British collective memory, and writers like Selvon were committed to stopping  
206 this omission (Ledent 2007: 2).

207

208 This sort of social loneliness is both denounced by the indignant Moses and challenged by  
209 other characters in various ways. From the very beginning, Galahad's unusual  
210 physiological reaction to the climate — he is warm in the full blast of English winter —  
211 contests the colonialist assumption of England as a place for northern people. And indeed,  
212 despite all the physical and social hardships, his attachment to the city is unwavering:  
213 'whenever he talking with the boys, he using the names of the places like they mean big  
214 romance [...]. Jesus Christ, when he say "Charing Cross", when he realise that is he, Sir  
215 Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about...he  
216 feel like a new man' (TLL: 71). On the other hand, Tolroy's old aunt Tanty Bessy, despite  
217 suffering the cold, manages to transfer into the grim suburbs of London the warmth and  
218 liveliness of her island, to such an extent that she turns Harrow Road into 'the market  
219 place back home' and, what's even more relevant, she 'became a familiar figure to

220 everybody, and even the English people calling she Tanty. It was Tanty who cause the  
221 shop-keeper to give people credit' (TLL: 65).

222

223 Nevertheless, incidental notations throughout the novel point to the effective possibility of  
224 a contact with the standoffish whites: the presence of a 'Galahad junior in Landbroke  
225 Grove' (TLL: 15) the recognition of 'a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class  
226 and the spades' (TLL: 61) and, most of all, the account of the summer sexual hunting,  
227 which in a ten-pages stream-of-consciousness monologue presents the race- and class-free  
228 zone of the park. Here we have a double revelation, polarised in the two main characters:

229

230 oh it does really be beautiful then to hear the birds whistling and see the green leaves  
231 come back on the trees and in the night the world turn upside down and everybody  
232 hustling that is life that is London oh lord Galahad say when the sweetness of  
233 summer get in him he say he would never leave the old Brit'n as long as he live and  
234 Moses sigh a long sigh like a man who live life and see nothing at all in it and who  
235 frighten as the years go by wandering what it is all about. (TLL: 101-102)

236

237 Galahad and Moses channel the two opposite reactions that the accelerated pulse of  
238 modern metropolitan London is literarily associated to: jumping enthusiastically in the  
239 thrust of life or contemplating with anguish its lack of any evident meaning. The dilemma  
240 is acknowledged and left unsolved, but it is interesting that being part of both the  
241 liveliness and the aimlessness of this hustle the characters participate in a general  
242 movement where all social boundaries are forgotten. This is reinforced by another explicit  
243 reference to one of the most famous modernist celebrations of London:

244

245 For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up,  
246 building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest  
247 frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do

248 the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very  
249 reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow  
250 and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling  
251 and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the  
252 strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London;  
253 this moment of June. (Woolf 1923: 5)

254

255 Woolf's scene is significantly also set in the proximity of Hyde Park, but at the  
256 Westminster end, on a sunny morning and on the way to buy flowers for a party of  
257 diplomats. Thus the arch-famous echo has again the effect of highlighting both the  
258 communality of feeling that links all Londoners, from the high-bourgeois Woolfian lady to  
259 Selvon's working class knight, and the fact that the second is confined to the specular  
260 opposite space: in the darkness of the night when the world turns upside down.

261

## 262 **Conclusion**

263

264 As we have seen, references to literary landmarks accompany Selvon in the picturing of  
265 his characters' romanced expectations, their clash with modern reality, and their life- and  
266 identity-affirming reactions. Stretching between the Medieval Matter of Britain and the  
267 twentieth-century tradition of the 'London text', Selvon adds interpretive layers to his  
268 work by placing it in dialogue with English high modernism. The stream-of-consciousness  
269 technique, together with the fragmentary narration and the experimental language, are  
270 part of a style that characterizes Selvon as 'a strikingly Modernist writer' (Sandhu 2003:  
271 166). The representation of this 'black London' in modernist terms was a plausible option  
272 for a citizen of the British Empire educated to the English classics, and the example of  
273 modernist experimentalism allowed Selvon stylistic leeway to give an appropriate voice to  
274 his West Indian perspective. Yet, it can also be argued, more specifically, that Selvon

275 deliberately plays with some cornerstones of the 'London text' with the double aim to  
276 claim a space for himself in that tradition and to shed light on some of its blind corners.

277

278 In parallel to the start, the very end of the novel evokes some lines from *The Waste Land*:

279

280 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

281 I had not thought death had undone so many.

282 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

283 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Eliot 1922: ll.62-64)

284

285 In his desolate final cogitations, the picture that Moses gives of 'the black faces bobbing up  
286 and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling along the Strand'  
287 looks very much like a revision of Eliot's image in order to include 'the spades jostling in  
288 the crowd, bewildered, hopeless' (TLL: 139). Selvon thus appears to apply Eliot's mythical  
289 method in a double layer, using the sub-text of Bible stories and of Arthurian romance in  
290 order to interpret the experience of his characters in the contemporary world - as Eliot  
291 himself had done - and adding to these ancient narrations the myth of modern London as  
292 it had been construed by Modernist texts themselves. This appropriately frames the  
293 experience of immigrant Londoners inside concentric challenges: those posed by the  
294 modern metropolis, land of opportunity and alienation for any of its citizens, and those  
295 added by a host culture whose practices and narrations infallibly tended to obliterate  
296 them.

297

298 Through these echoes of ancient and modern myths, the specific struggles of Selvon's  
299 characters are linked to the timelessly human search for a home and a people. The story  
300 thus positions itself between a specific socio-historical level and a universal,  
301 anthropological level. The circumstances that met the migrants with hostility and

302 segregation are analysed in necessary detail, and thus placed in the historical – therefore,  
303 by definition, temporal – dimension. On the other hand, through the focused use of  
304 references the quest for identity and belonging is firmly located on the anthropological  
305 plane. It is connected to the inexplicable life impulse that associates all humans and that,  
306 in the celebration of summer, is shown to open a possibility of reconciliation. This  
307 possibility does not obliterate specific circumstances – social boundaries are still very  
308 much there – but the human impulse that drives the search of belonging is shown to be  
309 deeper, and ultimately more resilient than the hurdles it encounters.

310  
311 The initial impression is thus confirmed: modern London is, for the migrants as well as for  
312 the Englishmen, a waste land through which they have to find their way, facing threats  
313 and obstacles, in order to fulfil themselves and give sense to their lives. Rather than the  
314 goal of a journey it is a ground for a pursuit of meaning that associates all humanity,  
315 regardless of geographical background or skin colour. By describing his characters'  
316 adventures in the London of the latest avant-garde English poetics, *The Lonely Londoners*  
317 affirms the right of black colonials to be recognised by their white fellow citizens not only  
318 as full members of the modern city — and of the British Empire — but within the  
319 community of human beings in quest of happiness.

320

321

## 322 **Bibliography**

323

324 TLL: Selvon, Sam. 2006. *The Lonely Londoners*. London: Penguin

325

326 Eliot, T.S. 1922. *The Waste Land*. New York: Boni and Liveright. Available at  
327 <https://archive.org/details/wasteland01elio/page/n8>

328

329 Innes, C.L. 2007. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literature in English*. Cambridge:  
330 Cambridge University Press

331

- 332 Lamming, George. 1984. *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Allison & Busby  
333
- 334 Ledent, Bénédicte. 2007. 'Caribbean Literature: Looking Backward and Forward'. *Vetas*  
335 *Digital* 5.78-79, available at  
336 [https://orbi.uliege.be/bitstream/2268/16383/1/Ledent\\_Caribbean\\_Vetas\\_English.pdf](https://orbi.uliege.be/bitstream/2268/16383/1/Ledent_Caribbean_Vetas_English.pdf)  
337
- 338 Sandhu, Sukhdev. 2003. *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City*,  
339 London: HarperCollins  
340
- 341 Simpson, Hyacinth M. 2011. 'Race, Diaspora and Identity: *The Meeting Point, Brown Girl,*  
342 *Brownstones* and *The Lonely Londoners*', in Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (ed.),  
343 *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. Oxon: Routledge  
344
- 345 Woolf, Virginia. 1923. *Mrs Dalloway*. New York: Modern Library. Available at  
346 <https://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.14581/page/n5>  
347