The Search for El Dorado is the Search for Masculinity: Critiquing Afro-Caribbean Male Sexuality in Samuel Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners

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Male sexuality is openly privileged and its many tenets socially endorsed, as depicted in The Lonely Londoners male characters’ adherence to the phallus as a symbol of power over women (Brittan 1989). Androcentrism and sexism seemingly characterize the resultant social and cultural constructs of masculinities, and multiple sexual conquests and the notion of reputation become a collective marker of Caribbean male immigrants across nationalities, binding West Indian men to overcome differences in geography, language and politics.

The pattern of Caribbean migration from the 1950s to 1970s saw Caribbean men flocking to the motherland of the plantation owner, emblematic of an affected psyche whereby the Afro-Caribbean man became a victim of West Indian colonial sensibility, characterized by the perception that local is inferior and foreign is superior. Selvon’s trilogy of immigrant novels – The Lonely Londoners (1956), Moses Ascending (1975) and Moses Migrating (1983) – depicts the Afro-Caribbean man’s emigration to London as an inverse search for El Dorado. Here, the black ‘conquerors’ go in search of an elusive golden lifestyle at the centre of the empire, generating a romanticized discourse of Empire. The novels are a literary presentation of the West Indian psyche whipped by the rod of colonialism that establishes the need to leave one’s birth-land in hope of leading a fulfilling life in the land of the white conquistador.

But the African man encounters a vacuum in his adventure, forcing him to assert his masculinity in a manner that will not reflect his failure in finding the mythical El Dorado. And the most practical manner that Selvon’s characters adopt is one underpinned by intense polygamous heterosexual relations, particularly with white women. Using dimensions of feminism, reader-response, contemporary social constructionism and post-colonial theory, this paper’s focus is a two-pronged textual analysis of Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners. First, it interrogates the construction of male Afro-Caribbean sex and gender identities in the metropole within a specific temporal frame. And, second, it critiques these masculinities’ new-found agenda to sexually exploit and overpower white female flesh as a subconscious retribution for European slavery and emasculation of African men during Imperialism.
Samuel Selvon’s immigrant novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), bears witness to the Afro-Creole man negotiating his masculine identity in white London as a variable that impacts profoundly on his legacy for the creation of Afro-Caribbean masculinities both within the Caribbean crucible and abroad in metropolitan landscapes. If geographical location – in this case, the former slave territories of the Caribbean – are a variable responsible for cultivating the urban Afro-Caribbean man’s sexuality along lines that both valorize and demerit the white conquistador figure’s masculinity in turn, then it would prove necessary to transplant these Afro-Caribbean men across time and space in the metropole to examine its impact on the constructions of their masculinities. This was the pattern of migration in the 1950s and 1960s as Caribbean men flocked to the motherland of the plantation owner in search of a more productive way of life. Critic Kenneth Ramchand says, “By 1956, when *The Lonely Londoners* was first published, the annual figure for migrants from the West Indies had reached over 25,000” (91). Emblematic of an affected psyche whereby the Afro-Caribbean man became a victim of the West Indian colonial sensibility, the decades witnessed an onslaught of the perception that local was inferior and foreign was superior. In this paper, such an assertion becomes obvious through critical analysis of Selvon’s first novel in his trilogy of immigrant novels, *The Lonely Londoners*. And although this paper does not profess to adopt a feminist framework, attention to feminism’s cultural situatedness as a critical dimension of underscoring social realities and lived experiences of the transplanted Afro-Caribbean man, supplements the methodological approaches of textual and literary analyses. Further, elements of contemporary social constructionism, reader-response and postcolonial theories as well as an epistemological framework that allows for the creation of new ways of knowing and understanding phenomena, form the basis for addressing the themes of this paper.

The novel depicts the Afro-Caribbean man engaged in the dichotomy of the artless leisure of Trinidad versus the artful hardship of London. It is a literary presentation of the West Indian psyche in an alien land that succumbed to the need to leave one’s birth-land in the hope of leading a fulfilling life elsewhere. The novel’s theme is diametrically opposed to its immediate predecessor, *An Island is a World* (1955), in which Trinidad is characterized as an island world that offers all men ample opportunities for self-actualization and therefore negates the need to find it anywhere else. It captures man’s quest for rewards, for shelter of security and for creative activity, resulting in a work that explores the relationship between exiled man and a foreign urban landscape. British-born critic and literary activist, Susheila Nasta, whose research interests include modern literature and contemporary writing and study of the diasporic migrant writer, supports this notion:

> The sojourn or exile in London allowed the possibility of a bridge between two worlds: between the past – a history of racial admixture, cultural disorientation, and economic exploitation – and the present, which posited a need to establish a Caribbean ‘cultural pedigree.’ (1988, 4)
Emigration to London by the Caribbean man is seen as an inverse search for El Dorado where the black ‘conquerors’ go in search of an elusive golden lifestyle at the centre of the empire, generating a romanticized discourse of the imperial impulse. But just as the white man’s original quest for gold in the New World had yielded empty hands, so too the black man encounters a vacuum in his adventure, calling on him to assert his manhood in a manner that will not reflect his failure in the metropole. And the most practical manner that many of the characters in Selvon’s fiction resort to in asserting their masculine identities is one underpinned by heterosexual relations, particularly with white women. Hintzen accounts for this through his hypothesis of amalgamation that “has become integral to the historical reproduction of Creole identity. It calls for an abnegation of purity through sexual and cultural immersion” (97). And all of Selvon’s male characters certainly immerse themselves in a sexual ideology that speaks to the power of the Afro-Creole man in his conquest of white female flesh. Reddock gives credence to this by declaring, “Masculine ideologies are discursive constructions, which are dominant in societies structured on asymmetrical gendered and power relations...Asymmetrical relations are established when the masculine domain is privileged, with the subsequent subordination and devaluation of the feminine domain” (ix).

For the protagonist Moses, and many of his comrades, life becomes void of meaning. The novel becomes one of reminiscence as it allows an understanding of the therapeutic aspect of art – when life has no meaning, man must forge a structure that fills the abyss of despair. Nasta recognizes this ontological position of these men and states that, “Through the demythologization of the ‘mother-country’ the energy to confront the self could be released” (1988, 5). And often, the release for these men was sexual but devoid of intimacy. Moses, whose name becomes a parody of the Biblical leader of the wandering Israelites as he assumes an unelected leadership position of the transplanted Caribbean man in London, echoes an anthem of ‘take it easy’ throughout the narrative as his solution to all woes, be they financial, familial, material, emotional or physical. His oral performance is juxtaposed to the sheer humour, improvised wit and dramatic disposition of the other male characters as they move along a banal existence marked by volatile social and cultural conditions. Nasta argues that the novel represents a comi-tragic attempt to subvert and demythologize the colonial dream of a bountiful city with its streets paved with gold. Characteristically, Selvon’s reversal of the original myth – a myth linked to the European voyages of imperialism and the quest to discover and inhabit a golden land – has several important reverberations as far as the economic base of empire and Caribbean colonial history are concerned. But Selvon’s world faced by the Londoners is not gold, but grey; his questers may be led and even supported by Moses as a sage figure but they are limited to the bleak reality of surviving in the wilderness of an alien and alienating ‘mother-country’ (83).

Moses perceives that, “Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot” (The Lonely Londoners,125). Selvon engages a sense of pathos and compassionate irony to reveal the humorous faux pas of the black
West Indian in London, as from early in the novel, the romance of the city is counterpointed by a traumatic sense of dislocation and alienation.¹ A resultant complicit masculinity is socially constructed as the male characters lack the power of the dominant white English hegemonic masculinity but accept the patriarchal dividend of benefits and privileges that complement being male. In so doing, a hypermasculinity is fabricated and socially endorsed among these men in order to prove themselves men. It is a hypermasculinity that is not particularly related to violence or aggression but rather one that is heavily attributed to licentious male hetero-sexual behaviour, devoid of love and intimacy thereby echoing Ramchand’s declaration that Selvon’s characters very often “indulge in sexual exploits that seldom include anything other than sex” (92). Reddock sums it up nicely: “In gender studies, masculinity is considered a multidimensional construct and not a normative referent, and special attention is paid to the interaction of power and sexuality in the construction of masculine identities” (ix).

Indeed, replete with a cast of ordinary characters that boast the West Indian sensibility of extraordinary names, *The Lonely Londoners* depicts the sexual gaiety and fun-loving disposition of men as they attempt to prove their sexual prowess by engaging in a host of sexual conquests. Androcentrism is realized as Cap questions, “How is it that it have women, no matter how bad a man is, they would still hold on to him and love him?” (37). Nixon seemingly answers this by speaking of a ‘black masculinity’ that is equated with hypermasculinity. He claims that the use of black masculinity to signify hypermasculinity has a long history, shaped by a pathologizing of blackness, and has been the site historically of profound fantasies about black men’s sexuality and physical prowess (305). Moses himself experiences this as he relates his encounter with “party bags” of white women who “fling their legs up in the air” and who “feel they can’t get big thrills unless they have a black man in the company” (*The Lonely Londoners* 93). Such a scenario becomes the white woman’s early and exploratory response to the creation of a black London with tendrils in the imperialism saga. The inverse relationship between the black man who is seduced and the white conquering woman has been alluded to in Lamming’s *Natives of My Person* as the white colonizers,

never allow their wives to travel as company or otherwise along these coasts, fearing that a similar spell of lust might excite them to entertain the heathen blacks who go naked everywhere like beasts, though some in imitating our own discretion do try to decorate their organs with various articles of nature like leaves or grass, and thereby hide the grossness of its size, for they be creatures with truly massive instruments which they can erect at will, and without

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¹ The failure of the transplanted Afro-Creole West Indian man in the metropole is marked by a degree of trauma in him not being able to live the expectant life there. Such trauma is labelled achievement and self-actualization trauma, “generated by the failure to achieve personal goals that are perceived as central to the individual’s survival, progress and advancement. It can be generated by unemployment, underemployment and loss of money, health and prestige. This is intensified if inequity in achievement is supported by perceived inequity based on race and gender.” Morgan and Youssef, 130.
encouragement from the other sex, causing all Christian men a most terrible fear for the safety of their lawful wives. (125-126)

According to Ramirez, “Penis size is also a symbol of masculinity and power and it is a source of pride for those with large members and it is a source of anxiety for those with small ones” (53). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the dominant lower strata Afro-Caribbean’s complicit masculine figure engages in performing sustaining and capricious sexual relations with white women everywhere as a means of subconsciously reversing the process of colonization. Lewis argues that, “Part of what we understand to be masculinity is manifested through performance, that is, the way we act out our maleness. It is in this acting out that we exteriorize the gender-specific which we have been taught” (2004, 245). The apparent ease with which these Afro-Caribbean men is able to perform in acts of sexual relations with women in London, regardless of their (un)employment or financial status, promotes the notion of male dominance among these men who are secure in their construction of woman-as-pawn ideology. Cap’s hasty marriage to a French girl reveals this. Without a job, home or prospect, Cap marries the young lady and leaves her on their wedding night to continue his sexual quest of other women: “Cap carrying on the same sort of life like when he was single. He there with the French girl in the night, and when she fall asleep he putting on clothes and going out to hustle just as he used to do before he get married. It don’t make no difference to him at all” (The Lonely Londoners 44). The significance of this reaches beyond the mere physical act of sexual intercourse. Rather, it celebrates the acquisition of the white female as the prize for the black conqueror in his subconscious quest for retribution against the white man for his conquest of his African sisters, as well as for the emasculation he endured at the hands of the white man. Nasta perceives The Lonely Londoners as depictive of an immigrant enclave with its own language and terms of reference established within the heart of the city and England begins to be colonized in reverse (1988, 5). Such agents of reverse colonization are not characterized by the conquistador’s material guns, artillery and whips; but, rather by the black man’s phallus as a symbol of weaponry, warfare and victory over white women, and the indirect metaphoric emasculation of the white man in the latter’s growing inability to sexually satisfy his females.

The business of naming in Selvon’s imaginary is crucial to masculinity and relates to the Caribbean’s cultural, carnival and creative culture in understanding the identity of the Afro-Creole. Men are given colourful identities such as Cap, Sir Galahad, Big City and Five Past Twelve, reflective of a Caribbean authenticity found in the Carnival/calypso culture of the West Indies and contributory to Selvon’s ballad style of writing. In exploring the characters’ names, Guyanese literary critic and researcher Frank Birbalsingh claims, “Here is all the forwardness and jocularity, 2 According to Nasta, Selvon’s writing style shifts between an oral and a literary tone and bears many correspondences with the native tradition of the Trinidadian calypso. The oral calypsonian ballad is well known for its use of subversive irony, the melodramatic exaggeration of farcical anecdotes, racial stereotyping and repetition for dramatic effect. The Lonely Londoners becomes a Carnival text and reflects a marketplace culture of Carnival (1988, 86).
the self-dramatizing histrionics, the impoverished wit and sheer absurdity that is considered characteristic of the Caribbean“ (155). Converse to this acute sense of male identity which pivots the Afro-Caribbean man as the reverse colonizer who is known and revered, the women in the novel lack a real identity owing to non-descript labels such as “the girl,” “a sharp piece of skin,” “the thing,” “a number,” and, in the case of Cap’s wife, “Frenchy”. Not only does this reek of colonialism’s thrust in promoting the identity of the colonizer while simultaneously invisibilizing that of the colonized, but it also underpins the sexual themes of the book from a male perspective reflecting conformity and a parallel to the classically chauvinistic attitude characteristic of patriarchy and its attendant privilege. Lewis (1994) recognizes this power and privilege which masculinity confers on Caribbean men and the resistance they have to losing ground and concedes that Caribbean masculinity has been conceived primarily in negative terms. It is that patriarchal attribute of male dominance and female subservience that is adhered to in order to give some men a false sense of security that Nasta critiques in surmising that, “Rather like the ultimately reductive and self-denigratory effects of their nicknames, their view of women as ‘pretty pieces of skin’ reflects ultimately the boys’ uncertainty and insecure sense of self” (1988, 86). In the same vein, it is this notion of insecurity that contributes to a role reversal of traditional functions and expectations that supplements Cap’s sexual ideology as well as that of his wife who becomes the economic provider in the marriage:

Eventually Frenchy had to get a work in a store, and nothing please him [Cap] better. He sleeping all day while she out working, and going out in the night. He make she buy a radiogram and he get some of the latest bop records to keep him company, and now and again he having a little party in the room....Cap with women left and right – he have a way, he does pick up something and take it home and when he finish and she ask for money, throw she out on the streets...day after day Cap still alive, never without women. (The Lonely Londoners 44-45)

Brittan (1989) anchors Cap’s sexual attitude as phallocentrism, with the penis as phallus – a symbol of male generative power and domination – locating men in the social relations of gender and, by extension, legitimizing their view of themselves as having authority over women. And according to Ramirez, “The penis and the testicles are symbols of power and are highly valued while female genitals and the anus, objects of pleasure, are devalued” (64). This assumption is heralded throughout the novel as in the case of Sir Galahad who is advised by Frank, his Caribbean compatriot, that “Boy, it have bags of white pussy in London, and you will eat till you tired” (74). The significance of this sexual attitude among the characters lies in reclamation of sense of self as the Afro-Creole engages in a sexual bricolage to rise from subservience under the white man and emerge as dominant over the white woman. Bolland declares that, “within relations of domination, the subtle art of bricolage enables the oppressed to avoid repercussions while making innumerable transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (33). And this is the premise upon which Selvon’s male characters’ search for El Dorado, marked by irresponsible masculine sexual
behavior, is anchored. Ramchand’s assertion that the novel abounds with examples of “irresponsible non-moral behaviour” (94) adds to this critique and also lends credibility to Patterson’s earlier claim that the post-colonial Afro-Caribbean man’s masculinity exhibits irresponsible parental and sexual attitudes, as a result of emasculation and forced powerlessness during imperialism, that are to be found even today (168). Mohammed prompts the reader to refrain from trivializing male performativity in polygamous sexual conquests of white women as a behaviour devoid of cause by asking, “What are Caribbean men if they are not irresponsible and emasculated as a result of their history of colonization?” (57). Indeed, it is a male gender identity that emerged post-empire and one that was seemingly nurtured in the metropole during the wave of Caribbean migration as is depicted among Selvon’s characters in this novel.

Immersed in London, the Afro-Caribbean man is acutely aware of skin colour as an indelible scar that is repulsive to white English sensibility in the socio-economic realm, the indisputable legacy of the racial tensions associated with colonialism. Conversely, it becomes a cultural index to be exceedingly proud of, to be fiercely protective of, in the arena of sexual conquests of white women. Sir Galahad becomes a microcosm of black men everywhere in London who depict a social consciousness of the process of colonization reversed, at a time when the socio-cultural context of a hybridized London was at its pinnacle with immigrants from across the Commonwealth arriving in search of “streets paved with gold” (The Lonely Londoners, 8). It is with a sense of sanctity that the black man ensures that he ‘conquers’ the white woman and nurtures her in the art of love. This metaphor of war underpins sexuality as is reflected in the characters’ accounts of sexual exploits. Sir Galahad assumes his role of soldier in his conquest of white Daisy. The next day he tells Moses, “it was battle royal in that basement, man…and he went on to give a lot of detail, though all of that is nothing new to an old veteran like Moses” (The Lonely Londoners, 77).

It is an unspoken understanding for the majority of the transplanted Caribbean men that they create their masculine identity and achieve status in the eyes of their fellow men by being with white women rather than their black sisters. Of greater significance, however, is the black man’s attainment of his personal goal in the sexual subjugation of these white women as defining his masculinity marked by a subconscious reclamation of his sexual emasculation during slavery. Hintzen’s dictum about the principles of hierarchisation of Caribbean-Creole society as intimately tied to notions of European civilisation and African savagery supplies a rationale for the preference for white women as sexual partners over black women as, unquestionably, in the eyes of the West Indian immigrant, when creolisation is applied to Africans, “it implies a brush with civilization” (94). The Caribbean is the socio-cultural and politico-historical location where civilization and savagery meet and where both become transformed. In this regard, forging a new Creole nationalism underpinned by success, achievement and laying claim to the offerings of England becomes the quest for these men in London. More often than not, this is translated into rampant sexual conquests of the white daughters of the motherland. This quest for white female flesh, perpetuated by alienated psyches cultivated in the imperial encounter, does not go
unnoticed by the adopted Caribbean matriarch, Tanty, who is well-known for voicing her sentiments:

‘White girls,’ Tanty grumble as she put the kettle on the fireplace fire, ‘is that what sweeten up so many of you to come to London. Your own kind of girls not good enough now, is only white girls. I see Agnes bring a nice girl friend from Jamaica to see us, but you didn’t even blink on she. White girls! (The Lonely Londoners, 57)

White and black significance is not lost on Sir Galahad who gradually develops the consciousness that skin colour, beyond its benefits in matters of sexuality, becomes a devastating identity marker for black men everywhere. In other facets of life, he sees it as a prohibitive force that weighs down the capacity of black men to achieve social status. He laments, “Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so? What it is we want that the white people and them find it so hard to give? A little work, a little food, a little place to sleep” (The Lonely Londoners, 72). He personifies colour and Selvon’s use of the apostrophe device is evident as his character watches his hand and declares, “Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can’t be blue, or red or green, if you can’t be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you!” (72). The distancing technique³ used becomes a means of self-defence here, while simultaneously leading these characters to claim a self-essence divorced from skin colour, as Sir Galahad tells the colour Black that, “it is not he who causing botheration in the place, but Black, who is a worthless thing for making trouble all about” (72). Hintzen responds to such a sentiment by indicating that although cultural and racial insertion has contributed to a historical reformulation of Creole identity, “Dark skin continues to retain the signifying power of inferiority” and “Blackness continues, by and large, to retain its association with Africa in an ongoing counter discourse to Creole construction” (99). And Fanon neatly surmises, “The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority” (93).

The novel is intensely charged with the Afro-Caribbean man’s preoccupation with sexuality, as the characterization of every male character seems incomplete without attention to his sexual identity. The implied author is severely critical of the dominant lower strata Afro-Caribbean masculine identity as being less than holistic, with overriding focus on his sexual identity. The narration of the text supplements the actions, words and thoughts of the characters as character is read and comprehended. And a continuous passage, devoid of punctuation, is embedded in the narrative that reveals the unending and institutionalized culture of male sexuality in the novel:

Oh what a time it is when summer come to the city and all them girls throw away heavy winter coat and wearing light summer frocks so you could see the legs and shapes that was hiding away from the cold blasts...and see all them pretty pieces

³ This concept I have borrowed from Paula Morgan.
of skin taking suntan... and on a nice day every manjack and his brother going to the park with his girl and laying down on the green grass and making love... (85)

Thorn (1990, as cited in Ramirez) avers that society’s phallocentric behaviour becomes a cultural code in which the erect phallus or penis symbolizes power, and its articulation with pleasure (49). *The Lonely Londoners* certainly projects this cultural code as the author provides a theoretical mould for the experiences of his characters who tramp the streets of London in vain search of “pussy and paradise” (Birbalsingh, 153). The novel is potent in its value of helping to determine the nature of man and his masculine identity – the sexual identity – of the transplanted lower strata man of Afro-Caribbean ethnicity in a postcolonial, metropolitan environment. The prominent and ever-present London fog becomes a central metaphor of the novel that blurs man’s vision when it comes to his sexuality. This impedes his immigrant sensibility as his one-dimensional focus is on sexual performativity at the expense of growth and development in any other facet of life. Nasta argues, “Whilst the energy and optimism of the group are presented as great positives, a defensive regression into a protected and protective world does not present possibilities of growth for the individual consciousness” (1988, 11). Perhaps the reason for this lies in Hintzen’s assertion that each challenge for the Afro-centric man represents a specific instance of multiple and competing claims to his development of a masculine identity. Each challenge represents itself as an assault against the rituals, symbols and institutions of Caribbean self-representation affecting the Afro-Creole’s claims to privilege and power (105). He therefore attempts to counter personal ethnic and gender rejection born out of historical practices of marginalization and displacement, represented by the thick London fog, which itself is symbolic of the Afro-Caribbean immigrant’s aimlessness in an alien land⁴, in the only manner known to him – through a predatory sexual hypermasculinity. The novel’s closing words serve as just testimony of this assertion: “It was a summer night: laughter fell softly: it was the sort of night that if you wasn’t making love to a woman you feel you was the only person in the world like that” (126).

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⁴ Morgan cites Victor Turner’s argument that all rites of passage or transitions are marked by three phases: separation, margin/limen and aggregation. These three phases may be applied to the transplanted Afro-Caribbean male in London who engages with an internal struggle to find himself and forge an identity in the metropole:

(i) The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behaviours signifying detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions or from both.

(ii) The intervening liminal period depicts an ambiguous subject as he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.

(iii) The third phase of reaggregation or reincorporation sees the passage as consummated.

Works Cited


