

SELVON AND MULTICULTURAL LONDON

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Özet

Bu makalede, Sam Selvon'nun *the Lonely Londoners* adlı romanı baz alınarak çokkültürlülük teriminin bir ütopya mı yoksa erişebilir bir gerçeklik mi olduğu tartışılmaktadır. Sam Selvon bu romanında birçok etnik kökenin, ırkın ve dinin buluşma noktası olarak bilinen Londra'da yaşamanın olumlu ve olumsuz yönlerini detaylıca tasvir etmektedir. Ayrıca, Londra'daki göçmenlerin karşılaştığı sorunları ve Anglo-Saxon toplumuna entegrasyonuna mani olan engelleri ve bu engellerin kaldırılabilmesi için nelerin yapılabileceğine dair okuyucuların kafalarında soru işaretleri uyandırmaktadır. Sam Selvon çokkültürlülük konusunu (çeşitlilik içinde uyum mu, çeşitlilik içinde kargaşa mı konusunu) *the Lonely Londoners* adlı romanda gündeme getirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çokkültürlülük, etnik köken, göç, Londra, İngiliz kültürü.

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze whether multiculturalism is a utopia or an accessible reality by referring to Sam Selvon's *the Lonely Londoners* since Sam Selvon depicts the pros and cons of living in London where the intersections of many races, ethnicities and religions can be seen. Moreover, problems faced by the non-Anglo-Saxon people and the obstacles which do not allow them to integrate with the Anglo-Saxon culture and how these obstacles in the way of a multicultural society can be removed are depicted in detail and some questions are raised in the mind of the readers. Thus, the issue of multiculturalism; harmony-in-diversity /chaos-in-diversity is put on the agenda in *the Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, ethnicity, immigration, London, English culture.

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Selvon tells the experience of West Indian expatriates by 1950s in *the Lonely Londoners*, since he has firsthand experience of these days as he himself moves to London in the 1950s, when there is a big wave of immigration from the newly independent colonies and the number of the immigrants from West Indies is more than 25 000 in 1956, when the novel is first published (qtd.in <http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/worldlit/caribbean/Selvon.htm#background>). This annual figure may help us to grasp the hugeness of the immigration wave, and the Caribbean is not the only place, where immigrants come from. There are also immigrants from India, Pakistan and Africa and all over the world. Moreover, there are asylum seekers from Russia, Germany and Italy for political reasons. Britain welcomes all these immigrants because she is in need of labour power after the World War II to reconstruct its economy. Therefore, she makes a call for her citizens in the ex-colonies to come and to work in Britain. Upon this call, many people from the Caribbean come to England. Afterwards, most of them settle in London and in the Midlands, which are the industrial areas. Thus, London becomes a place where many people from different races, nationalities or ethnic backgrounds come together with the hope of finding better jobs, better educational facilities and better life-styles. Consequently, London becomes a multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural city.

This paper aims to analyze whether multiculturalism is a utopia or an accessible reality by referring to Sam Selvon's novel *the Lonely Londoners*. Sam Selvon depicts the pros and cons of living in London where the intersections of many races, ethnicities and religions can be seen. Thus, the issue of multiculturalism is put on the agenda. To have a clear idea about multicultural London, first of all Multiculturalism should be explained. It may be defined as "the eradication of racism and the recognition of cultural diversity" (Bonnett 90) or briefly harmony-in-diversity. In relation to cultural diversity, E. B. Hobsbawn explains that cultural freedom and pluralism are certainly better safeguarded in large states which know themselves to be plurinational and pluricultural than in small ones pursuing the ideal of ethnic-linguistic and cultural homogeneity (Hobsbawn 254-255). Accordingly, to establish a harmonious and a peaceful relationship, Britain tries to adopt new multicultural policies to enable and to encourage "migrant communities to maintain their own language, culture, identity and especially their history" (qtd. in Töngür 7). Hence, every year Notting Hill carnival is held for the celebration of the cultural diversity of Britain. Notice that Notting Hill is the center of the Caribbean community in London because of their dense population there.

Though, Multiculturalism is a good policy in theory, it seems to be impossible in practice taking the number of the immigrants and the variety of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds into consideration. Keeping all this in mind, it may be said that the Caribbeans get disappointed after seeing that there is a great gap between their expectations about London and the real London. Thus, what they expect and what they find in the Mother Country is very different. First of all, they

face the language barrier and then they are exposed to race discrimination. They are excluded from the mainstream society to the peripheries to lead an isolated life in ghettos and they become lonely as the title of the novel suggests. They begin to suffer from both physical and psychological segregation. In the 1960s, at every corner, one may get across signs written on them “only Europeans” or “Keep the water clean”. A survey in 1967 shows that 66 per cent of the West Indians and Asians are exposed to race discrimination in housing (Hiro 215). As a result of racial discrimination, some of the black people may also feel hatred against the white people and may become racists. Parallel to this, Selvon draws a character whose nick name is Big City and who deconstructs the white racism by saying, “Keep the water coloured, no rooms for whites”.

Apart from the problems between the English and the Caribbeans, there are also problems among the immigrant groups themselves. They race with each other to attract the attention of the mother country, that is England. In the novel, it is stated that although West Indian people are the ones who join to the war on the side of Britain and give their blood for Britain, they become the outsiders. However immigrants from Poland and from Europe achieve a higher status than the West Indians in Britain. This situation is very paradoxical, but it also shows that whatever you do or whoever you are, you are not welcomed by British society unless your skin colour is white.

In relation to this, English people do not want to be in close contact with the black immigrants. They prefer not to mingle with the black people and this results in the establishment of small ghettos like China towns in America. From the standpoint of the immigrants, living in these ghettos have some pros and cons. On the one hand, ghettos provide the immigrants with cheap housing and with the opportunity to live with their home folks. Hence, they build a close-knit and unified community in a foreign culture and may have a sense of belonging to somewhere. On the other hand, these ghettos separate the white and non-white population physically and psychologically and decrease the chances of interaction with the other culture. Therefore, it delays the integration of the immigrants to the WASP culture by building walls between different cultures. Descriptions of the places where immigrants live are striking: “The houses around the Harrow Road, old and gray and weather beaten, the walls cracking like the last days of Pompei, it ain’t have no hot water, and in the whole street that Tolroy and them living in, none of the houses have bath” (Selvon 73). The passage exhibits the poverty of the immigrants and the harsh conditions they have to live in. However, there are the descriptions of wealthy streets of London in the novel as well. Thus, Selvon juxtaposes the wealthy scenes of London with the poor ones to show the contrast between white and black people’s housing.

After coming to London, in a short period of time, immigrants realize that they are called for the continuation of colonization in another way; they are no longer slaves, but they are made cheap labourers. They end up either in service

industry or in blue collar jobs which require only manual skills. For instance, Galahad, an electrician, can not perform his job as he could not find a work in this field in Britain. Therefore, he works in the least desirable jobs and at the least desirable hours. After work, he becomes totally exhausted : “his eyes red and bleary and his body tired and bent up like a piece of wire and the shoes have a big hole” and he passes without taking any salutations due to the lack of energy. Keeping Galahad’s situation in mind, it is evident that race is a very crucial factor in determining one’s place in the British society and we can learn more about the race issue by having a look at Galahad’s experiences in Britain. One day, walking down the street Galahad wants to speak with a child, but the child immediately begins to cry. Upon this, Galahad feels very sorry and the reaction of the child’s mother is much more interesting and it tells a lot about the race issue. It is revealed that she would speak with Galahad if only the street were empty. This case illustrates the white people’s attitude towards the black people very well. The norms of society are very important for them and even a child has these norms in his brain and would carry it into future. This event leads Galahad to question the race discrimination and he becomes the mouthpiece of black people; they just want to live like a humanbeing and have the human dignity. The passage in which he talks with his hand is very significant and heart- breaking at the same time:

And Galahad watched the colour of his hand and talked to it, saying, Colour, is you that causing all this , you know . Why the hell you cannot be blue or red or green if you cannot be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know is you! I ain’t do anything to infuriate the people and them is you! Look at you, you so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world! (Selvon 88).

Things go for worse for him in the following days because of the shortage of labour and he has to catch pigeons to eat: “That particular winter, things was so bad with him that...hecatch[ed] a pigeon in the park to eat (Selvon, 123). In relation to the shortage of food and work, in the novel it is stated that in England, people prefer to see a man starving than a cat or dog. But if they wish, they should give money to black people as if they were beggars, but they should not talk with them or exchange ideas because they do not consider them as humanbeings who are capable of thinking. As an extension of this attitude, immigrants are confined to low paid manual jobs and are excluded from the administrative jobs, that is from power circles. Sometimes policies of affirmative action or positive discrimination are supposed to be carried out, but mostly they remain insufficient and the vicious circle cannot be broken as all these problems are interdependent to each other.

Roy Jenkins, who is the Home Secretary of Britain in 1966, calls for the integration of the immigrants into the British society by saying,

Integration is perhaps a loose word. I do not regard it as meaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own national characteristics and culture. I do not think we need in this country a 'melting pot', which will turn everyone out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman...I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. If we are to maintain any sort of world reputation for civilised living and social cohesion, we must get far nearer to its achievement than is the case today. (qtd.in Töngür 24)

Roy Jenkins, the Home Secretary, suggests the salad bowl theory, which becomes the basic metaphor for multiculturalism, instead of the melting pot theory. But it should not be forgotten that all these things cannot happen in one night and would take time. Meanwhile, racial discrimination goes on in the streets of London, as it is expressed by Moses in *the Lonely Londoners* in these words, "they just do not like black people, and do not ask me why, because that is a question that bigger brains than mine trying to find out from way back" (Selvon 39). Though, Moses does not find any logical explanation for the hatred of white people against the black people, in fact there are some reasons that lead them to behave in that way. First of all, Britain has an imperialistic culture due to her sovereignty in the previous decades. Hence, the English people are not used to the idea that these black people who are once their slaves can be treated on equal terms with themselves. Secondly, they begin to perceive them as rivals in the working arena and in housing. They believe that many unemployed white people could find jobs, if only the black people would not be in England. Black people are the ones to put blame on for the unemployment and for the unhappiness of the white people. They reflect these ideas into their behaviours and they cause the black man to have the inferiority complex. Fanon in his book, *Black Skin-White Masks* argues that it is the white men who implement the seeds of inferiority complex upon the black men by insulting them and by expressing derogation towards them. In *the Lonely Londoners*, one of the characters called Bart becomes the embodiment of inferiority complex. He has a light skin and this gives him the opportunity to hide his own nationality,"...telling everybody that he is a Latin American"(Selvon, 61). Besides, he avoids from the company of the black people and this ironic situation is described by Selvon in these words: " Many nights he think about how so many West Indians coming, and it give him more fear than it give the Englishman, for Bart frighten if they make things hard in Brit'n . If a fellar too black, Bart not companying him much" (Selvon 63). It is seen that Bart is not happy with his race and with his national identity. He seems to be ashamed of his race and his colour-consciousness makes him miserable. Therefore, in order to cross the boundaries between the cultures, he attempts to marry an English girl but he fails to do so. His girlfriend's father throws him out by saying that he does not want any "...curly – hair[ed] children in the family"(Selvon 65).

Apart from Bart, most of the characters like Harrison and Galahad want to have a white girl friend and it shows their desire to unite with the other side, with the other culture. It may be interpreted as an attempt to be like the other. Frantz Fanon brings a psychological explanation for this case and we hear the voice of a black man in his book, he says,

By loving me (the white woman) proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realisation. I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine (63).

Parallel to this, there is an interest and curiosity for the black men on the side of the white women too, but it is not a long-lasting interest. In the novel, the Caribbean men say, “[t]he only thing is them white girls does want to kiss you. They say if the first thing they do for the new year is see a spade, they will have luck for the whole year. Them bastard!” (Selvon 132). Apart from these, Selvon also touches upon the issue of hybrid marriages and it is expressed that they do not bring happiness to the couples. Moses says to Galahad,

They go back with English wife and what happen? As soon as they get there, the places where their white wife could go, they can’t go. Next thing you hear, the wife horning them and the marriage gone puff. Look what happen to that Indian fellar what married a German girl and went back after he study. He kill the girl, cut she up and put she in a sack and throw she in the sea (Selvon 133).

Thus, if you cross the racial and cultural boundaries, you are doomed to fail and you are to be punished by the society sooner or later.

In the light of all the information given above, it may be concluded that in Britain, your chance of survival is strictly linked to your skin colour. The whiter it is, the luckier you are. In Cynthia Willett’s book *Theorizing Multiculturalism*, it is claimed that white middle class male is privileged in Europe. Likewise, in Britain since WASP culture is dominant, then white Anglo-Saxon-Protestant middle class males are privileged and their ideas are given privilege. Thus, Britain is a multicoloured multicultural country, but in it some colours and cultures are privileged over the others as George Orwell states: “some are more equal than the others”. Hence, as it is illustrated in *the Lonely Londoners*, most of the immigrants lead a lonely and isolated life on the fringe and there is along way to go in order to establish an egalitarian multicultural society and it is evident that it will take time.

For the time being, as it is stated by Selvon London is divided up in little worlds. You stay in the world [where] you belong to and you do not know about what is happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers (Selvon, 74). After having exposed to the British way of life and British culture, immigrants begin to suffer from a sense of disbelonging to nowhere and feels alienated and uprooted. Despite long years passed in Britain, they still feel as strangers and dream about returning home. Thus, they realize that the streets of London are not paved with gold, they see the reality that it is not a land of dreams.

However, despite all these obstacles, in *the Lonely Londoners* there is still hope for the future. For example, when Bart gets ill, it is an Englishman who helps him “A English fellar wearing glasses come in the room with a cup of Oxo and give it to Bart and back out”. Therefore, in the novel it is stated that in Commonwealth everyone is your enemy and your friend. It “[i]s a kind of place where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up” (Selvon 45).

Consequently, the clear cut distinctions between good and bad, friend and enemy begin to disappear which may also lead to the disappearance of the long-lasting conflicts between different races, religions and classes as well.

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