
Self Acceptance In The Lonely Londoners By Sam Selvon

The book *The Lonely Londoner* written by Sam Selvon, depicts a bittersweet story of a group of West Indian immigrants living in 1950s London. The book takes an evocative look at the city through the jaded eyes of a black man, Moses Aloetta, a veteran Londoner who somewhat reluctantly welcomes newcomers from his homeland and shows them the ropes. One such newcomer being Henry Oliver. Oliver, better known as Galahad, is a high-spirited Trinidadian man who comes to London seeking economic opportunities. The book follows the difficulties of Galahad and others who, like him, arrive in London thinking the roads are paved with gold but who later discover that life as an immigrant is tough. Everything is expensive and the white population is wary of black faces (or “spades” as they are called throughout the book) despite the “open door” policy of letting citizens from the colonies settle in Britain. In an attempt to come to terms with the whites’ attitudes towards Galahad and other Caribbean immigrants, Selvon delves in a deeper discussion of the disassociation from one’s skin colour. This further demonstrates not only a level of racism in the text but it also shows how this discrimination has made these black men self-conscious and questioning their self-worth because of the discrimination they have endured at the hands of white Londoners.

In the book, Galahad experienced what can be regarded as the disassociation of skin colour or the splitting of oneself. This theory suggests that the self becomes fragmented into the 'self as human' and 'self as black'. In the case of Galahad, he views the colour of his skin as the primary cause of all of his pain. Thus, he begins to dissociate 'self from skin'. He begins thinking of and relating to his racialized self, represented by his skin, as a separate being that could be blamed for the trauma and the atrocities cast upon him. The colour black has become a thing of hatred for him; something that has cast him out of the society he desperately wants to be a part of. Because of this, he would want to be anything but this colour. He stated very ferociously, “Why the hell you can’t be blue, or red or green, if you can’t be white?” In this line, Galahad indicates that he would have wanted to be anything but black if he could not be white; because he knows of the privileges awarded to those with close proximity to whiteness even if they are not fully there. Ultimately, he longs to have white skin because those that display a lighter skin tone seem to be treated fairly and they lived an advantageous lifestyle because of it. This is observed through Bart, the light-skinned immigrant who uses his proximity to whiteness for economic and social advancement. Bart refuses to work menial jobs like most immigrants and instead finds himself working a clerical job that he grows extremely proud of. He also dates a white woman and is weary of being seen with people who he deems as “too black”. This is because there are greater job prospects, opportunities for financial stability, access to higher education, better living conditions and healthcare for whites or close to white.

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The idea of being treated unfairly is another effect of this disassociation of skin colour that is indicative of the treacherous power of racism. A common definition of racism is the belief that 'race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race'.

“Racialism is the unequal treatment of a population group purely because of its possession of physical or other characteristics socially defined as denoting a particular race” (Sociology Oxford Dictionary, 2005). Key attention being paid on the words ‘socially defined’. Because racism is not a natural occurrence, as some may believe, and it does not exist at all times to the same extent for the same reasons. Racism exists when people create and allow it. It may vary in different countries, amongst different nations and within different societies. In text, Selvon strategically set in place scenarios that displayed racism, so as to reflect the era in which the text was written. Being that it was written in a time when it conspicuously exposed the predicament of black immigrants in London. One of the scenarios that show evidence of racism is in the scene where a little girl shouted 'Mummy, look at that black man!' referring to sir Galahad. This is indicative of how segregated this society is because had this been regular occurrence of whites and blacks cohabiting in the same community the girl would not have been so inclined to point out the colour of his skin. Consequently, the mother responded by telling her that she must not say that; trying to address her child behaviour. Galahad excused the incident and said that she was such a sweet child, which caused the mother to react by showing a sickly sort of smile implying she was disgusted by the exchange. She was especially conscious of those around her and did not want to anyone to see her with a black. This racial discrimination portrays Galahad as someone distasteful and unworthy. He is prejudged based on the colour of his skin and is never given an opportunity to correct these negative premonitions of his character. Combined with the act of racism and the splitting of oneself, there lies the issue of self- acceptance throughout the text. Because Galahad's is unable to understand the concept of racism, he tries to distance himself from the colour of his skin. Black being a major part his identity.

Galahad is a Trinidadian, and one of the most prized possessions Trinidadians have is their dark sun kissed skins. This skin that is a representation of their origin, and creates ties to their history. The black Trinidadians are a “creation” of the Europeans who destroyed the Amerindians during the colonial period. In fact, their existence is historically marked by violence, slavery and destruction; that is who they are. That is who Galahad is. Yet he so easily despises his skin due to the ill treatment it has brought him while forgetting this blackness is what symbolizes the fight that his people had to make throughout history. This colour being the very thing that enables him to be a part of a fellowship, that is between him and Moses and the other men mention in the text. He blames the colour as if it can take responsibly for its own actions. Failing to realize that the same speaking so passionately of is a part of him, it is a part of his identity, a part of what identifies him as being from the Caribbean, as being a part of the

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brotherhood that is between him and Moses and the other men mention in the text. The colour is him and he is that colour. So then, they are both equally responsible for each other. In a society where racism is so predominant, it is much wiser for Galahad to try to win in his own merit instead of focusing on his colour.

Instead of trying to find a problem within himself as a way to justify the treatment that the whites bestow upon Galahad and others like him he needs to understand that his skin did not warrant this. The racism they experienced is rather a reflection of the hatred and ignorance the whites had towards those they perceived as different. Galahad should counter this energy and inform his people by giving them practical information for surviving in London as an immigrant. He can also encourage those who are willing to listen to acknowledge each other's differences and not judge one's character based on those. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by bad people but the silence over that by the good people". He also said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that". Therefore, Galahad obvious hatred towards his colour is not very beneficial to him nor his people. If he would learn to love and accept himself then he can teach others to do the same.

The idea of skin dissociation by placing a distance between who one is as oneself and the colour of one's skin has been passed down from generation to generations originating in African slave communities. The white slave masters convinced black slaves that they deserved to be treated poorly because of the way they looked. Being that the average black person looked dramatically different from the typical blonde hair, blue-eyed white person, they quickly convinced their slaves that their look was the norm. White slave masters who raped their female slaves would often produce mixed children whom were allowed to live in their masters' quarters and carry out domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, babysitting etc. while dark-skinned slaves were forced to work from sun up to sun down in the fields, build structures etc. As a result, a lot black people developed an inferiority complex; and they began to hate themselves for the way they looked. In part, the strategy was unconsciously transmitted to later generations via intergenerational processes that are embedded in society.

In conclusion, I can include Tanty to show that she embraced racism and tried to counter it. Tanty, who tries instead to caribbeanise the motherland. She tries to pathologise characters like Cap or Five Past Twelve who embrace the racist stereotypes of blackness they encounter, a strategy that Fanon also identifies in the strategic essentialisms of the Negritude Movement. As Galahad is analysing this discussion, he addresses his colour as though it were something separate from himself. So vividly did Selvon depict this scene, so as to show Galahad wanting to have a sort of divorce between himself and his colour. The disassociation of skin colour can also be viewed as a metaphor for a divorce. This divorce being with Galahad and his colour, of course. 'People in this world don't know how other people does affect their lives', say the

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narrator, “they just don't like black people” (Moses) - matter-of-fact, feel as if they just have to accept the racism present in England despite it being unprovoked. Galahad does not understand the concept of racism - trying to distance himself from the colour of his skin instead of acknowledging that this was never his fault to begin with. The discrimination he experiences in England is the fault on the whites and their reluctance to recognise those different from them as human. In light of the wariness that whites have to blacks, Selvon offers a quite interesting look at Galahad’s theory of his situation. Galahad blames his own race for the actions of the whites.

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