

**RACE AND RACISM IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE:
A STUDY OF Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Ian
McDonald's *The Humming Bird Tree*, and Edgar
Mittelholzer's *A Morning At the office***

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ABSTRACT

The Coloureds, most especially the Blacks in the West-Indies, do not fully comprehend the reasons that trigger the incessant discrimination against them, by the Whites. But all they know is that they should simply adhere to the status quo of being black men or coloureds, which of course is expected of them by the "assuming" White men. These issues of race and racism, as practiced in the Caribbean islands, are the major thematic pre-occupations of this paper, as vividly explored in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*; Ian McDonald's *The Humming Bird Tree*, and Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office*.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

'The Caribbean Islands' refers to the chains of middle American Islands that extend from the North to Southern America and dividing the American Mediterranean from the Atlantic Ocean. This conglomeration of Islands is equally called, "The West Indies".

At first many European nations discovered and settled in these Islands: the Spaniards, Portuguese, Britons, Dutchmen, Germans and the French. The prominent Islands of

this region are Puerto Rico; Sancto Domingo; Anguilla; Antigua; Bahamas; Barbados; Bermuda; Barbice; Grenada; Jamaica; British Honduras; St. Christopher; St. Lucia; St. Vincent; Trinidad; Tobago; Surinam; Guadoloube; Martinique; St. Dominique; Guyana; St. Martin; Cuba and Hispaniola. Among the multitudinous Islands, three main Islands groups are recognized: the large islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Jamaica are jointly called the Greater Antilles; the chain of smaller islands from Aruba to the Virgin Islands is the Lesser Antilles and the numerous islands north of the Greater Antilles form the Bahama Islands.

Before Columbus 1492 voyage of discovery, indigenous people were living in the various Islands; these are the Ciboney (Guahautebay), the Taino Arawak and the Caribs themselves. At present, other groups that inhabit the Islands came from Europe, Africa and Asia.

Social - Political Structure

The social stratification portrays the Europeans as the dominant group, closely followed by the Mulattoes, with the Africans and Asians behind in the third and fourth positions, respectively. As a result of this, the racial structure tends to be heterogeneous, with the Negroes out-numbering other ethnic groupings in the Islands. It is not only the Caribbean that is conglomerate in nature but also the various Islands in their own entity. But the racial structure of Trinidad is unique in the sense that herein, the Asian Indians (43%) tends to equate the Negro population. (53%). Again, this heterogeneous nature of the Islands created strong roots for the emergence of a social - cultural pluralism. The European and African cultural features tend to dominate each other. A

case worthy of note is the upper class existential struggle for supremacy based on their allegiance and royalty to the powers that be, in this case, the English, French and Spanish cultures.

Furthermore, there is usually the absence of the middle class group in the social hierarchy in most of these Islands. This probably must have been the result of the British and French plantation systems and the Spanish feudalism of the colonial era.

The result of this colour integration is that the Negroes and coloured people are relegated to the background, with the Europeans as the superior overlords, masters and rulers. Africans in order to survive do or take to menial jobs like, cleaners, home-keepers, gardeners, washer-men, porters and taxi drivers, etc.

The Concept of Caribbean Literature

The literature known as and called the Caribbean literature is a recent phenomenon, despite its long historical background and existence. This is based on the fact that its reputation, achievements, the number of reputable writers and influence, remain disputable.

The early Caribbean literary works of the 15th and 16th centuries were done, mostly by wives of the colonial administrators, the colonial masters themselves and other writers who were explorers. These works were mostly autobiographies, diaries, Journals and documentaries of explorers' ventures and encounters with the aborigines of the Islands.

Although the West Indian literature began in the colonial period, its emergence as a world literature (imbued with major literary artists), was after the Second World War, as a result of the socio-political and cultural changes that occurred in the early 1930^s and after the exit of the British Empire.

The major themes and subject matters of this kind of literature include: the problems of Colonialism and independence; race and racism, the quest for freedom, roots and identity, social and cultural injustices, orderliness, feelings of alienation, revolutionary impulse and nationalism, among others.

The characteristic features of West Indian Literature include: the re-creation of past myths, the recourse to local sceneries and study of peasant life styles, the emphasis on nation and race, portrayal of archetypal or stereotypical individuals and the modification of English language, via the employment of Creole varieties laden with incandescence. Some of the major Caribbean literary writers are Edward Kamau Braithwaite, the author of *Odale's Choice* (a play) 1964, "Masks" (1968) "The Awakening" (1967) and "The Arrivants" (1967); Derek Walcott, the author of *Franklin* (1973) *In a Fine Castle* (1970).

Joker of Seville (1974), *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* (1954) and *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958) all dramas, among others; Samuel Selvon, who authored *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) etc.; Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, the author of *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *A Bend in the River* (1979),

etc; Michael Anthony who authored *A Year in San Fernando* (1965), *Green Days by the River* (1967) and *Streets in Conflicts* (1976) etc; George Lamming, who authored *In the Cattle of my skin* (1953) *The Emigrant* (1954) and *Native of my Person* (1972), etc; Ian McDonald, author of *The Humming Bird Tree* (1969) and Edgar Mittelholzer who authored *Courantyne Thunder* (1941), *Children of Kaywana* (1952) and *A Morning at the Office* (1950), among other numerous writers. Most writers of the Caribbean extraction (Samuel Selvon, inclusive) are double-exiles, because of their mixed blood, which often make them to embark on self-exile, being the non-aborigines in the Caribbeans.

Racism in Caribbean Literature

Based on the notion of racial multiplicity in these Islands, the various groups tends to believe in their innate superiority over the others, and as such, antagonism, coupled with unhealthy rivalry become the order of the days. As such,

Expatriate English, Coloured Creoles of various shades, Chinese, East Indians and Trinidadian Blacks (and a sympathetically presented gay man), all find ample scope for schemes and fantasies - and wounded feelings when they think their positions on the scale of colour and class are being incorrectly categorized, or when those at the bottom are reminded of their position. (Google: A Review of Edgar Mittelholzer's AMATO, 2019)

All these breed racism in Caribbean islands. This idea of race and racism is vividly portrayed in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Ian McDonald's *The Humming Bird Tree* and Edgar Mitteholzer's *A Morning at the office*.

Biography of Samuel Selvon

Samuel Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923, by an Indian mother and a European father. He migrated to London in 1950, where he died in active literary career.

As a result of his poor family background, Selvon left secondary school to acquire a living as a journalist. He uses the Creole language in his writings, as a mark of self-identification and defining the status of an authentic West-Indian: a West-Indian who is a Creole, like himself. He identifies with the folks and the literates, not because of his literary aspirations, but for self-realization. He sees Creolization, both as positive and inevitable, therefore a must-be embraced by all West and East Indians, so as to bring about the much desired development of the Caribbean islands (i.e. the West-Indian Federation).

Selvon's works include: *Ways of Sunlight* (a collection of short-stories), 1957; *Brighter Sun*, 1952; *An Island is a World*, 1955; *The Lonely Londoners*, 1956; *Turn Again Tiger*, 1958; *I Hear Thunder*, 1963; *The Housing Lagne*, 1965; *Carnival in Trinidad*, 1964 and *A Drink of water*, 1968, among others.

The Lonely Londoners - An Exposition

The Lonely Londoners is an exposition of the life, struggles and experiences of West Indians in the city of London, England. This group of people - immigrants from Trinidad, Grenade, Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua and British Guiana, throng the streets of London, in search of the flowing gold. The themes of the novel, as depicted through the individuating experiences of the distinct characters include, Racism in London, loneliness and hopelessness of West-

Indians in London, and hardships as encountered by these same West-Indians in London.

The central figure in the narrative is Moses, reminiscent of the Biblical Moses and God's promise of the Holy land - through this character, the reader becomes abreast with most of the events in the novel.

Selvon wanting to capture and depict the picaresque height racism has attained among the Caribbeans transcends the Islands' boundary and plants it on the soil of London (Britain). In London, the blacks or coloured people always find it extremely difficult to secure good jobs, due to racism. The only favourable jobs reserved for them are menial and tasking - factory workers, road sweepers, house cleaners, porters and taxi drivers, among other numerous degrading jobs, that attract weekly salaries between six and ten pounds. Galahad as a new man in London sweated it out in his bid to get a job and a house. Always he comes across menial jobs, even jobs that has nothing to do with his profession as an electrician. He went through a lot of intricate processes but was only consoled with an unemployment card and brain-washed with empty promises.

Even the endless queues at the employment exchange vividly represents the frustration, hate and disgust faced by West-Indians in search of jobs. The J-A, Col. Idea of allocating vacancy to the unemployed negroes is nothing but racism at its apex (Pg. 28, 29, 30 and 82). In the long run, the frustrated job-seekers resort to subsist on the state welfare package, called 'dole', or adopt other survival strategies (some of these, mischievous); for instance, "Big

City", who perpetually gets involved in shady deals and plays pools, in the hope of winning 75,000 pounds. Galahad had to steal pigeon from Trafalgar square for food, due to unemployment, and "Caps", a Nigerian law student in London runs after girls and hunts for seagulls, in order to survive. Even the boy "Five" often borrow from anyone that comes his way: "... Lend me ten shillings till Friday, please God," he always prompt passers-by.

The unemployment problems apart, it is also rare for a negro to acquire an accommodation in London. The coloureds find it extremely difficult to secure and pay for (a) good accommodation (s). For this reason, most of these coloureds find it convenient to lodge in lowly-rated hotels or rent tight rooms in dilapidated houses, with leaking roofs and oozing conveniences. The 'spades', i.e. the poorly placed coloured, for example, "Tolroy", live in Harrow Road and Notting Hill, which house the working class, while the rich live in Belgravia, Knightsbridge and Hampstead, among other unique London Cities. Unlike in America where racism is an open practice, Blacks in London are made to realize the open-secret that the whites hate them with passion. For instance, the Blacks are forbidden to patronize some exclusively reserved restaurants, due to their colour, even when no sign-post exists to such effects. They are usually debarred with the information: *keep the water white, no rooms for Blacks, etc.* Galahad's experience at the Gate house and with the two white fellars at the public toilet stand to buttress this issue. In his (Galahad's) words he says,

"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 then find it so hard to give? A

little work, a little food, a little place to sleep". (P. 72).

He never stopped at that but went far to taunt his colour: *Colour is you that is 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!* (P. 72). Even the greedy fellow that lives at Brixton and owns a house there is a good case of dog bit dogs.

Selvon, in order to show the gravity of discrimination, portrayed the case of the "innocent" child informing the mother about the presence of a "black man", Galahad. Even when Galahad intends becoming friendly, he was bluffed and the child cowered, shrunk and began to cry. The mother felt very uneasy when she discovered that Galahad hesitated to quit the sensitive scenery (Pg. 71-2).

The only good thing about the black man is his prowess in matters concerning sex. But even at that, he is despised by the Whites who see him as an unequal partner, which informs the little stipend paid to him at the end of every sexual engagement. The more reason "Lewis" is unable to keep a wife for the fear of her being unfaithful, while Bart's dream of marrying a White could not materialize, because the supposedly father-in-law would not accept a black man as a son-in-law. Bartholomew - is chased away from the home of his white girl friend, by the girl's father, in order not to have any curly-haired children as grand children. Tolroy wishes his dependants - his aunt, Tanfy, mother and siblings were all dead, so as to survive amidst the competitive lots in London. Moses' words in the concluding section of the novel sums up

the issue of racism in London, when he says that the Whites in London will "really [not] accept you [but] only tolerate you [as a black or coloured man]."

Biography of Ian McDonald

Ian McDonald was born in Trinidad, into a White West-Indian family of power and privilege, on the 18th day of April, 1933. He was educated at Queen's Royal College, Port of Spain and later at the famous Cambridge University, where he obtained his B.A Honours in History and later on, an M.A degree. Trinidad and Tobago Junior tennis champion for many years, he played at Wimbledon, captained for Cambridge, and was Guyana's 1957 Sportsman of the Year. In 1955 he joined British Guiana's Booker Group and made his career in the sugar industry until retiring as Director of Marketing and Administration for GuySuCo in 1999. In 2000 he became CEO of the Sugar Association of the Caribbean. His poems and short stories have been widely published and anthologized, and his play *The Tramping Man* has been frequently staged. His award-winning text. *The Humming Bird Tree* was first published in 1969, and in 1992 was made into a BBC film shot in Trinidad. McDonald is a Caribbean writer who describes himself as "Antiguan by ancestry, Trinidad by birth, Guyanese by adoption and West Indian by conviction" - (Google: biography of Ian McDonald,2019).

***The Humming Bird Tree* - An Exposition**

This text explores the love relationship of two young children, "Alan Holmes (a White Creole Trinidadian boy of eleven), and Jaillin, the slightly younger East Indian kitchen-girl of his mother, who share a first love that is predestined to" die or crumble. This was the result of "the Caribbean history of race

and caste prejudice and the adults who maintain this history" through "transmission" - Gordon Rohlehr's "Introduction" to text (P. i)

All throughout the text, parallelisms were drawn and reasons were advanced for the discontinuity of what to them is an unhealthy relationship between two opposing parties. Alan was always rebuked, cautioned and warned by his parents to desist from playing with Kaiser and Jaillin (Pg. 33) This spurred him, each time to assuming the role of a social overseer and to abhor Kaiser's maturity in boyhood reasoning.

In the choice of friends for their son, shades of complexion plays a vital role. This is glaring in Alan's birthday party where Kaiser and Jaillin were debarred from entry, even when they are workers of the family. Their invitees include Lee and Tanner Evans (both coloured) Pg. 48-49.

The controversy of Alan's possession of an Indian blood generated a kind of tense atmosphere that tends breaking the solid relationship between Kaiser and Jaillin on the one hand and Alan on the other. (Pg. 112 and 113). It should be noted that Alan's assumption of lordship was always resented by the more matured and bold Kaiser, who never sees Alan and his race (the White race) as superior (Pg. 115).

Racism is explored and exposed when Alan plans to go to the village fete. He at first doubted his acceptability into the Negro group and admitted his odd colour being out of place (Pg. 97). At the village, he was even afraid of what might befall him and things people would say about him, especially

when seen by this white friends and parents carrying baskets of loaves (Pg. 80-81).

Even the socio-cultural aspects of the text portrayed the white masters as dwelling in the towns and cities (the likes of the Holmes), resorting to these places (e.g. Mayaro) for their holidays, while the Negroes, e.g, Old Boss, Kaiser, Jaillin and others, live in the villages - Pg. 8. It is also the Negroes that celebrate the Carnival festivities as an expression of Black consciousness. At one of these occasions, Jaillin taunted Alan by saying "No white woman could wear a Sari, you know that?" (Pg. 146).

Racism as a theme in this text came to a climax during the scene of the sea bath at night. Here, Alan claimed to be the best and despised Kaiser and Jaillin (Pg. 140). But before then the father has ordered Alan out of the sea and as was expected, the aftermath was Kaiser and Jaillin's dismissal in order to ensure the welfare of the Holmes. (Pg. 142). This eventually provided the loopholes to the disintegration of the formal "triangular" relationship. Allan felt bad and,

As he speaks to Jaillin for what may [probably] be the last time, Allan feels a sense of loss and longing for what could have been. Jaillin and Alan seem to accept their places in society and simply exchange pleasantries, neither wanting to crumble with longing and surface from their façade. The ending of the novel is truly melancholy, leaving readers with a sense of depression and pining for what may have been; between the three friends and the budding romance between Alan and Jaillin (Titre, P. 3).

Biography of Edgar Mittelholzer

Edgar Mittelholzer was born in British Guyana (Guiana) in the year 1909, He had more than twenty novels to his credit. These include, *Courantyne Thunder* (1941), which "brought [the attention of the literary world] to the urban middle - class Creole", *Children of Kaywana* (1952), an inception of "an epic trilogy about the mixed, confused cultural and racial past of Guyana" - (Bruce King, Pp. 26 and 28) and *A Morning at the Office* (1950), among others. Mittelholzer migrated to and settled in England, where he lived and died in the year. 1965.

***A Morning at the Office* - An Exposition**

In *A Morning at the Office*, Horace Xavier, a negro is portrayed as an office boy who so wish to become a Mayor in Port of Spain where colour and class are no barriers to Political success in Trinidad. He is in love with Nanette Hickson. But being a negro, he lacked the courage to say so and resorted to writing an anonymous Shakespearian love verse in her absent. When his intension was later known by the others, he was despised, tauntingly. Even Nanette, his object of love, "*Could not fall in love with men fashioned*" in Horace style: an office-boy, young, black, intelligent, and ambitious (Pg. 110)

The case of colour bar can be seen when Nanette Hickson's Uncle, Jim, debarred his son, Albert, from identifying himself with any negro; though he should fight and champion their cause. But on "*the day you[i.e Albert] identify yourself with a negro you're lost!*" (Pg. 158). Bruce King sees this text as an index exploration of the problems emanating from mixed

blood and the evils associated with different races and cultures in the region (Google: Shodhganga)

Even this racial problem buttresses the point that a fairer complexion is still the prerequisite for high social positions among Mittelholzer's characters. It is only possible for a negro or coloured man to ascend the social rung after adopting the European ways of life, and marriage, choice of friends are dependent on shades of complexion. Succinctly, Google says:

From four minutes to seven, when the aspiring black office-boy, Horace Xavier, opens up the premises of Essentials Products Ltd in Port of Spain in 1947 and leaves a love poem in the in-tray of the unattainable, high-brown Nanette Hickson, to noon when the poetic Miss Jagabir is the last to leave for lunch, the reader is privy to the interactions and inner feelings of the characteristics who make up the office's microcosm. (Google: A Review of Mittelholzer's, AMATO 2019)

Racism can be envisaged in the conflicting ideas between Mrs. Hickson and Mr. Waley, over the demonstrations by the Dock-strikers. Mrs. Hickson, being a coloured, was against European exploitations and neo-colonialism, while Waley insisted that the blacks cannot fill the important posts and as such should be satisfied with their merge salaries (P. 185)

Moreover, Portuguese in the West Indies are never looked upon as Whites. The French creoles and Coloured middle-class looked on Portuguese creoles as inferior people (and on the same level with the Chinese and East Indians). The case of

Karl Labelle (a French creole) and Teresa Roheiro (a Portuguese) who are Laura Labelle's parents, is a good example. Karl's family insisted that their son should never marry a common Portuguese girl, even if she had an issue for him (Labella) (Pg. 216 - 217).

Furthermore, Mrs. Murrain's insistence on the dismissal of Miss Henery is all based on racism. She saw Lersey as being lowered and challenged by a coloured woman who in all ramifications was an inferior and was supposed to worship her. "Do you know who you're speaking to?" said Mrs. Murrain to Henery (Pg. 144). Americans and Englishmen always thought the West Indies to be superstitious. This to Mr. Murrain (the Chief Accountant and Assistant Manager, also an English man) can be seen in Henery's day dreams. Even Benson, the Chief Clerk's hatred for Mrs. Murrain (an English) and Kathleen Henery (Coloured) is all based on racism (Pg. 166).

This is not all. Racism is given a human face when we remember that Mr. Murrain belong to the Capstan club, which existed exclusively for white business men (Page 149).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the issues of race and racism as the troubles in the Caribbean since their early historical existence would always draw the attention of writers and critics of the Caribbean "History" and "Literature". This is based on the fact that bi-racial relationship usually comes with multitudinous hardships and socio-political cum cultural repercussions, most especially in societies where the workings of the state's machineries are dependent on colour and class; and Blacks are usually the victims, which of course will inform

the choice of what to write and how best to go about writing it -the literary expositions of racial relationships between Whites and Blacks and other coloured people in a society that seems concocted by executive fiat.

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Google: For the information on Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office*, check the following websites:

- i. Google. <https://www.answer.com>>what is
- ii. Google. <https://www.books.google.com.ng>>books
- iii. Google. <https://www.goodreads.com>>show

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