

Sam Selvon "Moses in London"

Sam Selvon moved to London from Trinidad in 1950. In his novel The Lonely Londoners he describes the experiences of some of the early immigrants from the West Indies in the 1950s. The narrator's use of Trinidad dialect adds an element of authenticity to his story. – Sam Selvon, The Lonely Londoners (London: Alan Wingate, 1956), pp. 7ff.

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping rest-
lessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place
on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and
5 Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train.
When Moses sit down and pay his fare he take out a white handkerchief and blow his nose. The
handkerchief turn black and Moses watch it and curse the fog. He wasn't in a good mood and the fog
wasn't doing anything to help the situation. He had to get up from a nice warm bed and dress and come
out in this nasty weather to go and meet a fellar that he didn't even know. That was the hurtful part of
10 it – is not as if this fellar is his brother or cousin or even friend; he don't know the man from Adam.
But he get a letter from a friend in Trinidad who say that this fellar coming by the ss Hildebrand, and if
he could please meet him at the station in London, and help him until he get settled. The fellar name
Henry Oliver, but the friend tell Moses not to worry that he describe Moses to Henry, and all he have
to do is to be at the station when the boat-train pull in and this fellar Henry would find him. So for old
15 time sake Moses find himself on the bus going to Waterloo, vex with himself that his heart so soft that
he always doing something for somebody and nobody ever doing anything for him.
Because it look to Moses that he hardly have time to settle in the old Brit'n before all sorts of fellars
start coming straight to his room in the Water when they land up in London from the West Indies,
saying that so and so tell them that Moses is a good fellar to contact, that he would help them to get
20 place to stay and work to do.
"Jesus Christ," Moses tell Harris, a friend he have, "I never see thing so. I don't know these people at
all, yet they coming to me as if I is some liaison officer, and I catching my arse as it is, how I could
help them out?"
And this sort of thing was happening at a time when the English people starting to make rab about how
25 too much West Indians coming to the country: this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one
you bound to bounce up a spade.
In fact, the boys all over London, it ain't have a place where you wouldn't find them, and big
discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp
down on the boys or to do anything drastic like stop them coming to the Mother Country. But big
30 headlines in the papers every day, and whatever the newspaper and the radio say in this country, that is
the people Bible. Like one time when the newspapers say that the West Indians think that the streets
of London paved with gold a Jamaican fellar went to the income tax office to find out something and
first thing the clerk tell him is "You people think the streets of London are paved with gold?"
Newspaper and radio rule this country.
35 Now the position have Moses uneasy, because to tell truth most of the fellars who coming now are
real hustlers, desperate; it not like long time when forty or fifty stragglin in, they invading the country
by the hundreds. And when them fellars who here a long time see people running from the West
Indies, is only logic for them to say it would be damn foolishness to go back. So what Moses could do
when these fellars land up hopeless on the doorstep with one set of luggage, no place to sleep, no place
40 to go?

Vocabulary

blur (n.): s.th. whose shape is not clearly seen - **fellar** (n.): (CarE) fellow, man - **he don't know the man from Adam**: he doesn't know the man at all - **ss**: abbreviation for 'steamship' - **vex** (adj.): (CarE) angry (vexed) - **liaison officer** (n.): an official who works with two or more different groups to establish contacts between them and help both sides - **I catching my arse as it is**: (CarE slang) I'm getting enough trouble in any case - **rab** (n.): (CarE) a fuss, trouble - **ten to one**: very likely, you could bet on it - **bounce up a spade**: (slang) meet a black person - **to clamp down on** (v.): to be more strict with (prevent them immigrating) - **the streets ...gold**: it is easy to get rich in London - **hustler** (n.): a person prepared to use any method to sell s.th. or obtain s.th.

Explanations

the West Indies: The English-speaking West Indies include the islands of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Dominica, St Vincent, St Lucia, Grenada, the Bahamas and a number of smaller islands. The mainland states of Belize in Central America and Guyana in South America are often included. - **Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove**: an area of London in Notting Hill, just North and West of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park - **Waterloo**: Waterloo Station in Southwark, on the opposite side of the Thames from Westminster, is the terminus for trains arriving from the port at Southampton. - **Trinidad**: island in the West Indies (see above) - **the Water**: the Bayswater area of London, North of Hyde Park, between Edgware Road and Notting Hill - **the Mother Country**: Trinidad was a British colony from 1797-1962, other West Indian islands for even longer. Britain was therefore seen as the 'mother country' and often portrayed in this way in, for example, school textbooks. Empire and Commonwealth citizens had free right of entry to Britain until 1961. (Before the 1950s most migration was away from Britain to the colonies.)

Caribbean English

The dialects of Caribbean English as they are used in the West Indies and Britain all differ from one another, but have certain elements in common:

Pronunciation

The words used are English but with African phonetics. This affects nearly all the vowels and certain consonant combinations (th, ng, wn, nt, etc.). Intonation patterns are also different. Within words primary and secondary stress are often placed on different syllables than in standard English.

Grammar

There are many grammatical differences in the various dialects. Here are some examples: Continuous (Progressive) tenses often lack 'to be':

the fellars who coming now

Simple tenses are often replaced by an Infinitive:

Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus

Pronouns have subject forms in the object positions and sometimes vice versa: is a shame to leave she alone to dead in Kingston

Object forms are often used as possessives:

Dis ting teas yu idea

Subjects may be left out of sentences altogether:

is only logic to say it would be damn foolishness to go back

'So that ...' for purpose is often replaced with 'make + object + do':

You coon turn de light on mek the see?

'Pan' (upon) is often used instead of 'at' or 'on':

dean expect me to come look pan no more house

Plurals are often made by adding 'den' (them) to the noun:

A not gwine mek no decision tit a look pan de inside room den

'Second-generation' Afro-Caribbean people, who were brought up and educated in the U.K., do not share these dialects to the same extent, usually adopting the language forms of the area they live in.

Awareness

- 1 Gather opinions and statements from people who came from other countries to live in your country about their first impressions.
- 2 In either a dialogue or a short story imagine someone in a poor country, unable to find work, who decides to try to emigrate to a richer part of the world. Make it clear what pressures are on him/her, both to go and to stay.
- 3 What do you know about the 'West Indies'? Who lives there, and what are their connections with Britain?

Comprehension

- 4 Why is Moses going to Waterloo Station to meet someone he does not know?
- 5 What attitudes does Moses observe in Britain with so many new immigrants arriving?
- 6 What reason do older immigrants give for not returning to the West Indies?

Analysis

- 7 Go through the text and 'translate' parts of it into standard British English. Try to establish what elements of Caribbean dialect are used.
- 8 a) Distinguish between author, narrator and protagonist.
b) Comment on the 'voice' of the narrator as it appears in the descriptions (e.g. of London, Moses blowing his nose, the sources of racial tension, etc.)
- 9 What does the text reveal about why immigrants came to Britain from the West Indies, and how they might have been disappointed?

Opinion

- 10 "So what Moses could do?" (II. 76f.) What advice could you give to an immigrant arriving in these circumstances?
- 11 In what ways do you agree or disagree with Moses' opinion about the power of the media? Give evidence for what you say.
- 12 Comment on the significance of the choice of name for the protagonist.
- 13 Does the text seem to be written for British or for immigrant readers?