

A study of space in "small island" and "the lonely londoners"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As a human there are certain rights we believe we have. It is not uncommon for one group to believe themselves superior to another, or for each group to believe they have certain rights and the other group to disagree. This was the case when large numbers of non-Caucasian individuals migrated to England from the Caribbean believing that the mother country was going to welcome them and supply them with more opportunities than they had at home on the islands. Some of these individuals had even helped to fight with England in WWII and were now to the country they had fought for. Others who made the trip had family that had made the move to England before them and they were now coming to meet them, believing that the transition would be smooth and a place to call their own would be waiting for them since another had somewhat paved the way for their arrival. With all these new arrivals came anger and frustration among the prior residents of London. They felt threatened and thought that this group was intruding on their space. In both *Small Island* by Andrea Levy and *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon characters struggle to find the place in London where they will fit in, and spaces in which they will be welcomed and accepted. In this paper I will examine the importance of having a space to belong to, regardless of the colour of one's skin, and will argue that while England may not have been ready to have a place for everyone upon arrival, those who made an effort could make space for themselves.

There was a clear power struggle in England between the whites who were already residing in London, and the newcomers who were making the voyage in search of better lives. This struggle is greatly represented in a quote by George Lamming, '...imagine waking up one morning and

discovering a stranger asleep on the sofa of your living room? You wake this person up and ask them “ what are you doing here?” and the person replies “ I belong here” ‘. The white population, who had already been residing in England, felt that there was a whole group of uninvited people who were now showing up and intruding on their space. No one had bothered to ask the native Englishmen how they would feel about these strangers making a place for themselves in the city and therefore felt the strangers had no right to what had been theirs. Meanwhile, the non-white individuals who made the journey did not see themselves as strangers; this was the motherland. Rather, they saw themselves as welcomed to make a place for themselves and begin their lives anew. They were so sure they belonged on this sofa, which is a metaphor for England. Each group believing something different led to raised tensions among them. Some of the native Englishmen saw the need to state their control over the strangers and the land they had come to make their own, making it clear that they did not belong in London. The native Englishmen wished to keep their space the same as it had been prior to the war and the mass movement of those of other ethnicities while the new arrivals were trying to make a place for themselves to live the life they had come to England in search for.

In the novel *Small Island* by Andrea Levy there are many examples to reinforce the idea behind Lamming’s quote. The idea is that some individuals arriving in the country believed that England had a space waiting for them and they would be accepted with open arms, the sofa was theirs to sleep on. This is the case with Hortense who travels from Jamaica to England after her husband had made the journey a couple of months before. Prior to her

arrival, Hortense had an image of England in her mind which included a big house with a door bell and being greeted at the docks by her husband Gilbert. Upon disembarking the ship there was no sign of her husband welcoming her, and she soon realised life in England would not live up to her expectations. After struggling to communicate with the taxi driver and upon finally finding the house, her place in England, the welcome she received was less than warm. When the door was opened to reveal Hortense standing there, Queenie the owner of the house, was 'puzzled' to see this woman waiting outside with a large luggage. Queenie was the individual waking up to see a stranger, Hortense, sleeping on her sofa. Queenie was mystified at the woman standing there with her luggage and stating that she belonged in the house. Once all the confusion was cleared up Queenie told Hortense, 'I hope you are not bringing anything into the house that will smell'. Queenie was actually not trying to be rude though, she was welcoming Hortense into her house and helping her make her own place in London. But at the same time, she did not want to be inconvenienced in her own home by the smell of something from Hortense's home. So even though Hortense was welcomed, and even belonged in this house, she should not expect to make it completely hers. There were regulations set in place by the white, native Englishwoman that Hortense was expected to obey.

While a large amount of native Englishmen represented in Small Island were not welcoming of the country's new residents, others individuals were open and ready to welcome them and help them find their place like Queenie. Queenie opened up her home to rent out rooms to anyone who needed them including those of colour. Her relationship of those with colour offered them a

safe space while in her presence and in the privacy of her house. Just because Queenie was accepting of coloured individuals did not mean others would tolerate it. Just by allowing coloured individuals to take up space in her house strained Queenie's relationship with her neighbours who did not want their neighbourhood diminished. An example the conflict of having a space in private but not in public was when Gilbert accompanied Queenie to the movies. When he attempted to sit down next to Queenie in the theatre, the usherette stopped him and told Gilbert that he would have to sit in the back due to the colour of his skin. Gilbert was shocked at this example of segregation stating that, ' This is England...This is not America...I will sit anywhere I please' referring to the Jim Crow Laws in place in the States. Gilbert thought he knew England as a space with no segregation, especially after being welcomed by Queenie, a white Englishwoman. But the events at the cinema showed that segregation was very much alive in England. Even though Queenie had no issue with making a place for Gilbert in the seat next to her, the theatre had designated his place to be in the back, separated from the white crowd and the white GIs who were seated in the front. Gilbert was the individual stating that he belonged there, in the seat next to Queenie, while the rest of the cinema saw him as an intruder in their space. Not only were there no segregation laws in England, but Gilbert was also a GI who was fighting to help England in the war. None of this mattered in the eyes of native Brits though who were not willing to share their space with Gilbert's type. They saw themselves as the rightful residents and therefore had the right to say they did not want to sit near an individual of colour. Both groups, the whites and the coloured, were fighting to define and protect their place in England at this time. While the newcomers were attempting to make

<https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-space-in-small-island-and-the-lonely-londoners/>

a place for themselves that was next to, and equal to, the white population, the white natives were trying to keep their space separate and send a message saying that the colours were only visitors in their space. This struggle between the two groups was its own type of war being fought.

As previously stated, the biggest struggle over 'place' in Small Island was between those who had already been residing in England and those who had just arrived. Bernard, Queenie's husband, had been someone who had already been residing in England and upon returning from war believed he knew what would be waiting for him back home. But when he returned to his house Bernard was in for quite a surprise. While he was gone Queenie had rented out rooms in the house to anyone in need of a place which included multiple residents of colour. When Bernard answered a knock at the door he was not prepared to come face to face with Gilbert who asked Bernard, 'Who are you?' to which Bernard replied, ' "Who are you?" is more the question'. This was Bernard's house and being asked this by Gilbert, a guest, made Bernard feel like the uninvited and unwanted stranger. This meant that Bernard now had to state his dominance over the house and make it clear that this place was his. However, Gilbert believed the house was his place in England since he had been living in it for months. Bernard was now the one intruding on a structure that had been built. The conflict came to a head when Bernard asked all the residents to leave the house. But the residents had made a place for themselves in the house, and felt that since Bernard had been absent for so long, he had no right to the place and no right to tell them to leave. Both Bernard and Gilbert believed they had a place of their own in the house, only to have that idea challenged upon

meeting each other. It was once again a struggle between a white and a coloured. Who's place was it really and how would they decide? There is no exact answer to this conflict. Both individuals did have a right to the space, but neither would have been satisfied with coming to that agreement, so they instead found themselves in a hostile, uncomfortable environment that was now their England.

While all new arrivals in England struggled at some point to find their place in the large city some were able to adjust better than others, like the characters in *The Lonely Londoners*. The characters in this novel each fought hard for a place and a space in the big city to call their own, and their dedication to this proved triumphant in the end. James Procter points out that in the opening of the novel, the narrator is on his way to pick up a new arrival in London and is describing the fog covering the city as 'alienating territory'. This can be seen as how the newcomer will at first be experiencing London, as since he is new to the city he will not yet feel at home or know his way around. And as this is just the beginning of the book, readers are also newcomers to this narrator's London. Procter then points out that the way in which London is described shifts as we see the city not as a newcomer, but as the narrator Moses. Procter states that, 'This shift between alienation and belonging is most clearly articulated through the naming of the landscape'. Since Moses is not a stranger to the city and knows exactly where he is going and what he is doing, his descriptions are more detailed than the first description of London, and include the specific bus he rides and exactly where he is headed. These details cement the idea that Moses is not a newcomer and has mastered London in some way. Moses has found his

place and become a Londoner and now he is attempting to help others to do the same. Procter emphasises how important the naming of locations in the novel is as it really represents the boys' settlement in the city. When telling the newcomer that they are heading to where Moses lives, Moses refers to it himself as the Water but informs the new arrival, ' Bayswater to you until you living in the city for at least two years, '. The slang is reserved for those who have worked for it, those who have successfully made a place for themselves in the city and those who the city has accepted.

It seems characters in Small Island had more trouble making a place for themselves in London than the characters in The Lonely Londoners. I feel this is because characters in Small Island did not fight as hard for their place in England and rather expected it to be there for them. An example of this is the character Hortense, instead of trying to make her own place she attempted to fit in. She thought that by making one change to herself she would be accepted by the city. Hortense thought that she would gain respect and more if she talked in her accent that had, '...taken [her] to the top of the class in Miss Stuart's English pronunciation competition, '. She did not realise that a change in her dialect would do little towards acceptance by the native Englishmen if she could not change the colour of her skin. Unlike Hortense, characters like Tanty in The Lonely Londoners decided that rather than change their ways to fit in, they were going to fight to create their own unique spaces. One example of Tanty making her own place is when she introduces the use of credit to some of the shops in London. Tanty was unhappy when a shopkeeper in London did not accept credit as a way of payment like they would back home in the islands. Instead of adjusting her

way of living and making a small change to fit in to the already set up structure, she worked to change her surrounding to suit her. Tanty did not give the shopkeeper much of a choice when she took control and told him to write down her name and amount she owed him and that she would be back on Friday to pay. After keeping her word and shocking the owner, the shopkeeper began accepting credit as a way to run his business with all his customers, entirely thanks to Tanty working to make herself comfortable. She made a space for herself because she did not have to change her ways, and at the same time she was accepted by the shopkeeper. Instead of trying to fit into the pre-set structure of London, Tanty acted in reasonable ways that demanded attention and admiration. She was respected and accepted by the city and those who knew her. She created a space for herself in London which was similar to her space back home and this made her feel comfortable, confident, and like she almost entirely belonged in London.

Even though she made her change on the shops in London, some things were too big and structured to change in a way that suited her. This did not stop her from creating her space within them. Tanty felt she could not truly belong to the city until she mastered all its ways of transportation. While she was first uncomfortable by both the tube and the bus system, she gave both a try and felt triumphant after her successful journeys. Instead of expecting the city to accommodate her, she made the effort to respect what was already in place. So while it took effort and she couldn't change the transport system to her liking, Tanty did not give up simply because it intimidated her or confused her. Instead, she accepted that using these forms of mass transportation was a part of being a Londoner, and she embraced them. Tanty fought to make

her place in the city. Whether it was changing something to suit her, or changing herself for the city, she did not give up or accept defeat. She was determined to be comfortable in London and create her space in the city and she was rewarded.

One of the most important spaces for the characters in *Lonely Londoners* was a private space that Moses was unknowingly creating. It was his room, which he had originally created as a space for himself, but ended up being a space for the boys he had become acquainted with. While each boy individually made spaces for themselves throughout London, Moses' room was a place they kept being drawn back to. Just like they each had originally been strangers to London, they were also originally strangers to each other. But through their time spent in London they worked to create a place for themselves in which they would feel comfortable and which they could call their own. Moses' basement is one of those places. The basement becomes a small place in London for just them where they could talk about anything, especially of their times and experiences in London. Their settlement of London is especially represented in this room through the boys' language and descriptions. As Procter mentions the way the boys refer to location around London truly represents their settlement in the city and here in this room the boys are using nicknames and shorthand terms to refer to a London which has accepted them and made a space for them to live. This being one of the final spaces and scenes mentioned in the book really exhibits the progress the boys each made since arriving in London. Each character was able to come a long way from Moses having to share his space when they were new

in London, to them visiting his room as a meeting place, but being able to leave it and return to their own places and spaces in London.

It was clear that London was not ready to have a place to those who didn't work for it, regardless of the colour of their skin. In both *Small Island* by Andrea Levy and *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon the characters must work to gain a place in the city rather than just expect it to be given to them. And while London was not kind to them all, making it seem for some impossible to find a space for themselves, those who worked hard and did not settle were rewarded in being able to call London their city and to have a place especially for them within it.

Bibliography

Lamming, George, 'The Coldest Spring in Fifty Years', *Kunapipi* 20: 1 (1998).

Levy, Andrea. *Small Island* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), pp. 14-16.

Procter, James 'Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing' (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 53.

Selvon, Sam. *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 16.