

Integration in the lonely londoners



It have some men in this world, they don't do nothing at all, and you feel that they would dead from starvation, but day after day you meeting them and they looking hale, they laughing and they talking as if they have a million dollars, and in truth it look as if they would not only live longer than you but they would dead happier. Cap was a man like that. – Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Books, 2006) (page 31)

The Lonely Londoners was published in 1956 during a period of intense mass-migration from Britain's colonies to England due to the post-war situation and its demand for labour. The perspective of a possible better life filled up many people's aspirations with romantic expectation. Once they arrive there, they face a distinctive reality. The book shows how these migrants try to succeed in London among so many others of them and the British silent prejudice: "when you go in the hotel or the restaurant they will politely tell you to haul – or else give you the cold treatment" (21), Moses says about it. Each character epitomises certain features of the migrant community that the author, Sam Selvon, tries to pass to the reader.

Captain is the only black African in the group of West-Indians migrants, the "boys" portrayed in the novel. He is depicted in the story making people believe in him with his angelical smile. The way he integrates into the group throughout the plot and how this assimilation happens are two points that rise attention in Cap as a character. The first point that makes Cap a singular character among all the others, besides his origin and that he comes to study, is the specific way he is represented by the narrator when compared to the other boys. In the epigraph the description of Cap shows his aversion to work, while the others struggle to settle in London and try to find a regular

job. Inserted in such a historical context, we can consider Cap facing a double assimilation process: one into the white British society, and another into the black West Indian group. Local prejudice from the white perception is inclined to tag all the black migrants as being Caribbean. Cap serves as someone who stands in contrast to the West Indian and emphasises the distinctive characteristics of them. As a foil, he embodies an alternative way of considering the black characters of the plot.

One of the characteristics that differentiate Cap from the group is his way of speaking, which initially is not the Caribbean speech. When Cap arrives in London, the narrator affirms that “[a]t this stage in his acquaintance to the boys he does forget proper English and many times you would mistake him for a West Indian, he get so hep” (35). The passage shows how Cap becomes integrated into the group of the boys and also how it pleases him to be part of it. He seems to assimilate not only the language but also common habits from the West Indian boys, habits he sees them practicing and repeat due to his time spent with them: “‘ I will give it back to you tomorrow’, Cap say, making the sign of the cross with his forefingers and kissing it, like he see the West Indian boys do” (43). The fact that Cap does not have the same origin as the other boys excludes him from the group common “ old talk”. He does not have a nostalgic feeling; or at least he does not share it with the others. The narrator describes him as a happy person in general, as shown in the initial passage from page 31.

With his docile look, Cap manages to deceive many people to get what he wants. He convinces most of his friends to lend him money. He deceives even the least susceptible of being cheated, like Bart, another member of

the group. Despite Bart being known for his stinginess and never lending money to anyone, Cap is the only person who persuades him to lend him some money. In the beginning, at the hostel where he meets Moses, we are told that “ Cap face so innocent that the clerk start calling him ‘ mister’ and hustle to get him a room. No cheap room, one of the best [...]” (33). Another example of Cap’s deceiving feature is shown with Moses, who is seen as the most experienced of the boys. He is the one who knows all of them very well, as in the end of the book the reader is given as a possible interpretation the prospect of him being the narrator. Despite of that, Cap also takes advantage of Moses’ generosity. “ One powerful winter Cap was shivering with cold and the sight touch Moses heart. He lend Cap a camelhair coat. When spring come, Moses looking all about for Cap to get back the coat. But he can’t see Cap nowhere” (38).

The sexuality of the male characters in the book is a notable aspect. Cap is the one who has the biggest number of relationships. His charming and persuasive features also work with women of diverse nationalities, as the narrator explains: “ One thing with Cap, he love woman too bad” (33). Despite of all his laziness and repetition of his deceits, he is still able to seduce many women. They are spellbound by Cap and believe anything he says. It does not matter how fantastic his stories are. Interestingly, despite of being a womaniser, he is the only one in the book who has a long-term relationship – actually two – and even gets married.

As everyone else tries to succeed, Cap simply does not worry about life the same way the others do. Moses is driven by a melancholic sentiment considering his past years and what he made of his life during this time.

After years living there, Cap possesses the same, materially speaking, as Moses, the pioneer of the boys. They have nothing, but Cap seems to be more emotionally fulfilled. Perhaps his behaviour is a product of a different way of thinking, or at least of not spending much time reflecting about his problems, like Moses does. This seems to contribute to Moses' reflexive moment in the end of the book. " Although he does have hard times very often, "[y]et day after day Cap still alive, defying all logic an reason and convention, living without working, smoking the best cigarettes, never without women." (45)

Through Cap, the reader is exposed to the struggles of the black migrant community and its integration to society. Outside people wonder how they can be able to show some happiness, dance and sing their calypso, or say to just to " take it easy" in the most difficult moments. The reader may experience a deep feeling of pathos for Cap, the same Moses demonstrates towards him. He may also be deceived by Cap, "[b]ut still Moses have compassion on him." (39). We see in a different way how prejudice works. People are convinced to trust Cap led by his trustworthy appearance, then they realise they are being cheated.

Selvon uses a light way of writing about issues like racism and rootlessness feeling experienced by the characters. Doses of humour are recurrent in the anecdotes involving the boys, as well as their " oldtalks". They work as a softener for their daily harsh routine. As an example, we have Cap's episode in which he meets a woman who greets the boys with a " Bon soir".

Motivated by Moses, he goes out with her so he finds out when he turns off the lights " that this ' Bon soir' woman was really a test [man] who used to

dress up like a woman and patrol the area” (40). The final story of Cap also exemplifies this usage of humour in order to depict a tense moment. When jobs get harder to find and winter arrives, the situation reaches its hardest point, in contrast to the summer situation. Food becomes a difficult matter for the boys and Cap is again at the centre of a comic and dramatic scene. Noticing that seagulls install themselves on his rooftop, he seizes many of them with much difficulty in their room so that “[i]n the two weeks that Cap stay in the room, he lessen the seagull population in London evening after evening” (133)

A final element can be added to Cap’s set of characteristics that separates him from the others. His social origin is a key factor explaining his behaviour, as Cap is the only one descending from a family rich enough to pay for his education in London. Cap had a high social position already, position of which he takes advantage by, for example, being allowed to stay in the hostel after lying about the fact that he is waiting for his family to send him money, as it was seen in the passage on page 33. His initial intention differs from the others’: they arrived aiming to find work to economically succeed, Cap wants to have fun in his inconsequent way and live in a differently from his rich family in Nigeria. Therefore, it is possible to define his uniqueness, as he remains lonely in the process of double assimilation as well as in the status of descendant of a rich family among the other migrants.

Bibliography

Selvon Sam. *The Lonely Londoners*, London: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 21, 31, 33, 35, 40, 43, 45, 38, 39, 133

Susheila, Nasta: " Introduction". Sam Selvon: The Lonely Londoners, Penguin Books: London, 2006, p. vi.

Buzelin, Hélène. The Lonely Londoners en Français : l'épreuve du métissage