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Calypso Music and Postcolonial Masculinity in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

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[Abstract]

This article explores the masculine construction of West Indian immigrants in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon represents the cross-racial relationship between the black male immigrants and the white British women in the novel in ways that illuminate the interlocking space in which black masculinity is revised and negotiated. The protagonists' masculine struggle shows highly complex dimensions of the cross-racial gender economy; sexual relations become an anticolonial struggle to reach the mainstream British culture, and this sexual self-assertion of the black male protagonists interrupts British culture's hegemonic power. Moreover, the sexual quest in the novel becomes even more interesting, given the structural presence of Calypso, an Afro-Caribbean music genre in colonial Trinidad. *The Lonely Londoners* consists of various ballads that imitate the structure of calypso music. As the calypso symbolizes hegemonic misogyny and homophobia in the male-centered Trinidadian culture, the allusion of calypso music reflects phallic and homophobic self-affirmation

against social castration. This reading, placing black men's sexual quest toward white women in the context of the Trinidadian calypso tradition, explains the contradictory self-construction of black male immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners*; by alluding to the vernacular folk tradition and thus by contextualizing the social standings of ethnic minorities in multicultural London within the patriarchal culture of the West Indies, the novel explores the intersection wherein the mythic postcolonial black masculinity becomes visible.

Key Words: black masculinity, Calypso, postcolonialism, Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*

1. Introduction

The Lonely Londoners represents black masculinity as a site of negotiation wherein minoritarian agencies and their anticolonial struggles are mediated through racialized female sexuality. The interracial relations between the West Indian male immigrants and the white British women in the novel illuminate highly complex dimensions of the cross-racial gender economy. As Ashley Dawson argues, "the sexual conquest" of the black male immigrants shows a "paradigmatic way of asserting their masculinity in the face of the myriad forms of humiliation and alienation meted out by racist discourses and institutions in Britain" (47-48). Along with the presence of white female sexuality, Selvon contests the essentialist male centrism and patriarchal multiculturalism in the postcolonial antiracist discourse, calling into question the location of cultural authenticity and agency.

It is worth considering the cross-racial relationship and phallic symbolization of

white women in *The Lonely Londoners* in relation to the homosocial bonding of the protagonists, Cap, Galahad, and Moses, in particular in terms of their social and racial otherness. The homosociality of black male immigrants forms at two different levels, wherein the black female presence disappears while the white female becomes visible as its sexual substitution. Male protagonists' social standings become far more visible in this rupturing process of racial and sexual substitution. Masculine construction of black men is not simply a manifestation of black machismo; instead, these dynamics show the way in which anticolonial experience occurs at the interlocking space. In such a space, black masculinity is revised and negotiated.

Selvon's representation of black masculinity in *The Lonely Londoners* becomes all the more interesting, given that Selvon designs the novel's structure in an imitation of the calypso, an Afro-Caribbean music style in colonial Trinidad. The structural presence of calypso music, which symbolizes hegemonic misogyny and homophobia in the male-centered Trinidadian culture, provides some important evidences to understand how black masculinity survives in postcolonial Britain. As Giselle Rampaul argues, the calypso structure in *The Lonely Londoners* implies the male characters' "attempts to empower themselves" (311). The calypso allusion reflects phallic and homophobic self-affirmation against social castration.

This reading, which places black men's sexual quest toward white women in the context of the Trinidadian calypso tradition, explains the contradictory self-construction of black male immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners*; by alluding to the vernacular folk tradition and thus by contextualizing the social standings of ethnic minorities in multicultural London within the patriarchal culture of West Indies, this article contends, the novel explores the intersection wherein the mythic postcolonial black masculinity becomes visible.

2. Colonial Black Masculinity

In his groundbreaking work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores the psychological impact that Western colonialism has made on colonized countries. His work mainly focuses on the type of human consciousness that is psychologically distorted and reconfigured by the colonial experience. While focusing on the psychic phenomenology of the colonizer and the colonized and investigating the interplay of cultural, national, and racial experience in the formation of the colonized identity, he pays close attention to the material conditions that determine the psychological dysfunction of the colonized. This is how Fanon revises Hegelian dialectics in the human spirit in similar senses to how Karl Marx analyzes the history of class struggle, placing himself outside traditional psychoanalysis like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan.

As Fanon clarifies in the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Oedipal formulation in a single patriarchal family structure is inadequate in exploring the psychology of colored people in colonized countries. Since the psychic development of those who internalize traumatic emasculation is not symmetrical to the colonizer, the black man, who is infected with "extremely toxic foreign bodies," "embodies a new type of man" (Fanon 19) and "his phenotype undergoes an absolute, definitive mutation" (Fanon 3).

Fanonian dialectics revises Hegel's formula, in which the absolute reciprocity constructs self-consciousness only under the condition of the existence of other self-consciousness. In this revised formula, the asymmetrical mutual recognition fails to attain authenticity under the condition of colonialism. Since an enslaved black man does not have the opportunities for self-development that Hegel's slave has, the black man sees himself only as a negative of the whiteman. The doubled status of the

enslaved spirituality gains its colonized form.

Fanon explains that the social conditions of the colonized countries play a crucial role in establishing the colonial psychology. "After portraying the initial 'quest for absoluteness' within each self-consciousness which leads to the struggle for mastery," Nigel C. Gibson states, Fanon "reintroduces the physical struggle into the later discussion after the master and the slave have been established" (37). In this social formulation, one's skin color "determine[s] the outcome and ma[kes] it absolute" (Gibson 37). The colonized man internalizes the homogeneous ideology of the dominant imperial culture.

The Lonely Londoners begins with a metaphorical description of the unstable identity of Moses Aloetta, the Trinidadian protagonist. He is waiting for his co-ethnic friend, whom he has never met, coming from Trinidad on a "grim winter evening, when it [has] a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet" (Selvon 23).[1] The inhospitable weather reminds Moses of his unstable situation. In this "extraterrestrial trope," which Selvon designs to "convey the sense of [the] bewildering transposition," as Roydon Salick argues, the obscurity of "fog becomes a central metaphor in the novel for the immigrants" (122). It prevents the protagonists from envisioning their future lives in the new circumstance.

Such a description of metaphoric invisibility of immigrant life invites us to see the negative self-awakening of Galahad, an independent and optimistic black immigrant, in a similar process of cultural internalization. When he is walking out to the road, he meets a little child saying, "Mummy, look at that black man" (87). Looking at the color of his hand, Galahad thinks

> Colour, is you that 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! Look at you, you so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world! (88)

Selvon's description on the skin color and the cultural interpellation mirrors the following passage from *Black Skin, White Masks,* wherein the colored experience of the colonized takes place:

> "Look! A Negro!" It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile.
> "Look! A Negro!" I was beginning to enjoy myself.
> "Look! A Negro!" The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself.
> "Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" Scared! Scared! Now they were beginning to be scared of me. I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question. (91)

Galahad's experience in *The Lonely Londoners* represents the Fanonian ontology of the colonial subject. In the white world in which "an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" negates one's own body, the "unusual weight"of the white gaze "robs" them of their "share" of the real world (Fanon 90). The black man's identity is determined as a permanent other.[2)]

Whereas the white culture stands as normativity, the black culture is reduced to the deviation of that norm. The only way to escape from being objectified by the white gaze is to become white, through which process black men seek the recognition of the white man.[3)] Black men's self-recognition disappears. Fanon's theorization of the colonized self-negation revises the Hegelian dialectics that have underlain the tradition of Western philosophy of the self and the other and their

reciprocal interplay. The illusionary salvation of being white, "the secret wish of all black Antilleans," is the only "solution to the painful circumstances ... divided into clearly demarcated regions," in which the "specific values," the white and the black, respectively corresponded to "the world of wealth, beauty, strength and virtue," and "the world of poverty, sexual prodigality, primitivism and worthlessness" (McCulloch 65). Whereas the dialectical process constructs one's selfhood in the western philosophical tradition, the black man wants to turn white or negate himself in Fanon's formula.

3. Interracial Gender and Sexuality

Fanon's study on colonial psychology assumes the black male as a theoretical norm. Through this male-centered theorization, Fanon explains the relationships between the white woman and black man and the white man and black woman. In the colonial world, the colonized man encounters a subjectivity crisis, which in turn leaves him in need of mental rehabilitation and makes him desire a white woman. In Fanon's rhetoric, women are an object of the male gaze and desire, "the psychological elements that can alienate his black counterparts" (Fanon 61). The blackman seeks the white woman for the rehabilitation of masculine selfhood. In this male fantasy, in which sexual relations with a white woman become a phallic symbol, the cross-racial dynamics of sexual relationships manifests in an imaginary authorization of white gaze.

Selvon's depictions of the sexual relationships between black men and white women in *The Lonely Londoners* revolve around Fanon's theorization in *Black Skin, White Masks*. For the West Indian men, the sexual indulgence with white females is a kind of phallic adventure. In the confusing city of multicultural London, the black

male protagonists become "sexual conquerors" who "move nonchalantly and predatorily from woman to woman, yielding whatever sexual innocence or reserve they possess to an insatiable white appetite" (Salick 124). The sexual mission claims their own spaces in the foreign landscape of London.

Selvon's descriptions of the perverted sexual relationship in *The Lonely Londoners* —perverted in the sense that black men's potent sexuality is reduced to a foreign cultural practice—reinscribe the Fanonian notion of sex and race that configures women's agency as dependent on the male desire. As Anne McClintock points out, for Fanon, "women's agency was null, void, inert as the veil" (291). Fanon's notion colludes "not only with the stereotype of women as bereft of historical motivation," McClintock argues, "but also resorts, uncharacteristically, to a reproductive image of natural birthing" (291). In this sexual fantasy, Fanon's black male/white female relationship is deconstructed.

As the formation of sexual relation in *The Lonely Londoners* highlights, the cross-racial sexual economy is intrinsically complex. If black male masculinity and white female sexuality collude with each other under the colonial circumstance in which certain stereotypes are produced, how should Selvon's text be read? Is it within the anticolonial struggle to reproduce hegemonic patriarchal masculinity that the black protagonist in *The Lonely Londoners* seeks? Or how does Selvon deal with the violence of patriarchal desire in the black community in London?

As Harold Barratt points out, "Selvon's immigrants rigidly maintain (as their counterparts in the West Indies do) a closely knit male community" (250). Home, women, and family are reduced into the periphery of this male bonding; they ridicule those who get married. In the Creolized narration that revolves around Caribbean vernacular culture, West Indian black masculinity replaces the very centrality of the vernacular culture. "Postcolonial resistance" of the male protagonists in *The Lonely*

Londoners is constructed through such male bonding, which evokes what Eve Sedgwick calls "male homosocial desire" (1), a same-sex relationship "structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle" (21). This triangular male bonding is "as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). For Sedgwick, this relationship, which "links two rivals" (21), is ideological, because the patriarchal structure has been maintained and transmitted by virtue of the heterosexual marriage that the socially internalized homophobia constructs.

However, Sedgwick's formulation of homosocial reproduction cannot fully explain the male bonding or the black males' sexual quests toward white women in *The Lonely Londoners*, because the socio-sexual bonding is not triangular in the novel; instead, the sexual relationship between white women and black men presupposes the white male presence. The black protagonists are not patriarchal fathers, and white women do not serve the black men as a reproductive mother. This multi-layered black male fantasy, wherein black female sexuality disappears and white female sexuality fills this absence, shows the "secret wish" (McCulloch 65), "the psychological elements that can alienate his black counterparts" (Fanon 61). Because of such multiangular relations among white men, white women, black men, and black women, many critics have explained the black protagonists' sexual quests in *The Lonely Londoners* as a kind of strategy to gain access to the dominant metropolitan culture. As Ashley Dawson puts it, *The Lonely Londoners* suggests that

> success in the metropolis was signified for many of the predominantly male migrants during the first decade of mass immigration from the Caribbean to Britain by sexual conquest. . . . Selvon depicts, sexual conquest was the paradigmatic way of asserting their masculinity in the face of the myriad forms humiliation and alienation meted out by racist discourses and institutions in

> Britain. (47-48)

Sexual relations become a substantial part of the struggle to reach the mainstream British culture. The fear of denigration in the foreign culture is transformed into the contradictory amusement and anxiety in this sexual adventure. The sexual self-assertion of the black protagonists interrupts the hegemonic power, while reclaiming their sense of selfhood.

4. Black Machismo and Calypso Music

Another spectrum of black machismo in *The Lonely Londoners* appears in the structural presence of the calypso. This appears in the episodic form of the novel. *The Lonely Londoners* consists of various "ballads" that imitate "the structure of the calypso in its social commentary on the motley assortment of West Indian immigrant characters in London and their experiences" (Rampaul 311). Giselle Rampaul explains West Indian texts' imitation of the calypso structure in a broader context of colonialism:

> Calypso itself was born out of colonialism and slavery, when the slaves used the song to ridicule and satirize their white masters, attempting to empower themselves. The only weapon to which they could lay claim was the voice, and song was used as an important social instrument that demystified the power of the masters and revealed the reality of the condition of the slaves. The suggestion that [some] West Indian novels may have calypso structures therefore associates the discourse with themes of colonialism and resistance but also signals identification with the local popular folk culture. (311)

The structural allusion to the calypso, as Rampaul points out, can be read "as part of a discourse of social and cultural interrogation of the conditions with which the immigrants are forced to deal" (311). The struggling of black male protagonists in *The Lonely Londoners* illuminates their attempt to enter into the British culture, within which music functions as one of the keys used to assert regional identity across the transnational boundary and against the homogeneous British culture. The calypso, therefore, unites the dispersed and displaced black immigrants and creates a new sense of nationhood. The novel's form thus affirms the resilience of black immigrants amid the metropolitan city. Music is not simply part of the "cultural celebration; they are context for engineering strategies for survival and for performing subversive counter-culture behavior" (Rahim 2). It serves to critique the homogeneous British culture, one that underlies the Western sense of civilization.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that vernacular language is effective for the survival of immigrants "not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave," but "it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation" (37). This linguistic possibility forms "a place of hybridity," in which "the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates [the] political expectations, and changes ... the very forms of [the] recognition of the moment of politics" (Bhabha 37, original italics). When the calypso is celebrated in the regionalized performance of the West Indian immigrants' cultural practices, it undermines the authority of the hegemonic practices of British culture. The narrator of *The Lonely Londoners* is, as Rampaul argues, "seen to take on the responsibility of the calypsonian as social commentator" (312). Therefore, the novel's structure itself "becomes the medium through which [racial] problems and survival strategies are articulated through the 'voice' of the narrator" (Rampaul 312).

Even though *The Lonely Londoners* appreciates the value of vernacular culture and its function to undermine the homogeneous British culture, as Dawson insists, *The Lonely Londoners* "also lays out the flaws of a resistant cultural nationalism grounded in misogynistic, homophobic bonding between men" (34). Dawson points this out in two levels: first, the calypso music tradition is based on misogynistic West Indian culture, and, second, the celebration of multiculturalism romanticizes the vernacular culture itself. All types of violence and marginalization becomes natural in this process of romanticization. Jennifer Rahim similarly contends that any collective paradigm has a "tendency to enforce a reductive, homologous logic that usually compresses and blurs a series of variables that include race, ethnicity, age, class and sexuality in the interest of promoting a notion of the whole" (9). "Popular expressive mode" of Calypso music "emerge[s] as a signifier for a particular brand of cultural nationalism," which is "symbiotic" to a "collective identity" (Rahim 9).

Black male immigrants' phallic struggle in *The Lonely Londoners* becomes even more interesting if one takes into consideration that calypso singers usually depended on "female backers ··· for economic support" due to the economic sterility of calypso music industry in Trinidad (Dawson 35). When the West Indian male immigrants arrive in London, they accept the most menial jobs to stay in the city. They are aware of the importance of having a job, because to get a job is "all the security a man have" (45). It means a "place to sleep, food to eat, cigarette to smoke" (45). The protagonists' economic struggling, along with their sexual life in London that epitomizes their psychological struggle toward a phallic symbol, becomes replaced with the mission of sexual predation of white women. This symbolic substitution is worth noting because it follows the male-centered gender dynamics in the Trinidadian calypso tradition. In spite of the economic dependency of calypsonians on women, "self-inflating descriptions of masculine sexual superheroism" and its "stinging attacks

on women" were conspicuous in the calypso music practice (35). Women were

> consistently treated solely as sexual objects and denigrated with wittily cloaked put-downs and punning scatological catalogs of their supposed physical and hygienic deficiencies. If a woman sought to assert herself by abandoning her philandering boyfriend, she was subjected to harsh attacks and violent threats for her perceived infidelity. The calypso song thus became a way of disciplining women, who feared the opprobrium that would be brought upon them were they to become the subject of a blisteringly satirical attack. (35-36, emphasis added)

Calypso music functions as a barometer of sexuality and sexual practice, celebrating male bonding in the patriarchal Trinidadian society. The black male immigrants' predatory sexual relations in *The Lonely Londoners* are contradictory in this regard. The black immigrants' sexual desire not only reproduces the devastating male authority in Trinidad, but also centralizes the decentralizing strategy of anticolonial struggle. Moreover, it transplants the male-centered vernacular practice of Trinidadian culture in the hegemonic homogeneity of British culture.

The West Indian immigrants' predatory sexual quest in *The Lonely Londoners* illuminates the anxiety and crisis of postcolonial black masculinity. The anticolonial struggle of male protagonists emerges from this rupturing process in which the phallic symbol becomes reinscribed with social and cultural negotiations. The manifestation of masculinity therefore does not simply rely on the black machismo of the calypso music tradition of Trinidad; instead, Selvon represents the anticolonial struggle of black men through the inversion and reversion of hegemonic gender subordination in postwar Britain, wherein the self-assertion of black male immigrants shows the painful irony of their socio-economic standing.

5. Conclusion

In the last lines of the novel, the narrator describes the inner mind of Moses, who is standing by the banks of the Thames: “It was a summer night: laughter fell softly: it was the sort of night that if you wasn’t making love to a woman you feel you was the only person in the world like that” (142). Moses’s monologue shows that his melancholia and anxiety are in fact constructed alongside the white male gaze. Meanings in the cross-racial relation are doubled, and the sexuality of West Indian immigrants comes into being under complex dimensions of black psychology. Selvon participates in the postcolonial discourse by recapitulating the psychological consequence of colonialism in the manifestation of black male sexuality in postwar Britain in *The Lonely Londoners*.

The Lonely Londoners does not simply reinscribe the relationship between the black men and the white women in the colonial context, but it contests the hypermasculinity and misogyny of black male immigrants by bringing the Trinidadian calypso tradition into the episodic structure of the novel. West Indian masculinity manifests itself at the expense of the sexualized minority. This is the way that Selvon’s representation of black male masculinity in the novel gives a highly political scope to current racial discourses, which rely on idealistic visions of pluralism and diversity, providing an important view on immigrant life in postwar Britain.

Notes

1) Subsequent quotations from *The Lonely Londoners* will be marked in page numbers.

2) John McCulloch reads what Fanon calls “affective erethism,” the sensitivity toward European norms, as a “negative restatement of one of the fundamental propositions of negritude,” “a pathological condition arising from the colonial experience” (67).

3) Fanon explains this pathological condition with the term “lactification,” the internalization of inferiority and the consequential desire to “whiten the race” (47).

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국문초록

샘 셀본의 『외로운 런던인들』 속에 재현된 칼립소와 탈식민 남성성

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본 논문은 샘 셀본의 『외로운 런던인들』 속 흑인 남성 이주민들의 남성성을 연구한다. 인종과 성의 관계가 복잡한 차원에서 맺어지는 이 소설은 흑인 남성성이 백인 여성들과의 관계에서 변화하고 수정됨을 보여주는데, 런던이라는 공간에서 맺어지는 사회적 관계에서 백인 여성들과의 성적 관계는 흑인 이주민 남성들에게 있어서 주류 문화로 진입하기 위한 하나의 방편이 된다.

특히 소설의 전체적인 외형이 트리니다드의 전통적인 음악 장르인 칼립소를 따라 구성되고 있다는 점을 고려하면 소설 속에 드러나는 인종적, 성적 역학관계는 더욱 흥미롭다. 트리니다드의 남성중심적 전통문화에서 칼립소는 가부장적 이성애를 찬미하고 동성애를 혐오하는 전통적 남성성이 문화의 중심인데, 이런 의미에서 본다면 『외로운 런던인들』이 보여주는 칼립소와 런던의 조합은 전후 런던이라는 공간에서 사회적으로 거세당한 흑인 남성들의 남성성 회복이 상징적으로 이루어지는 모순적 양상을 보여준다고 볼 수 있다.

주제어: 샘 셀본, 『외로운 런던인들』, 탈식민주의, 흑인 남성성, 칼립소

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