

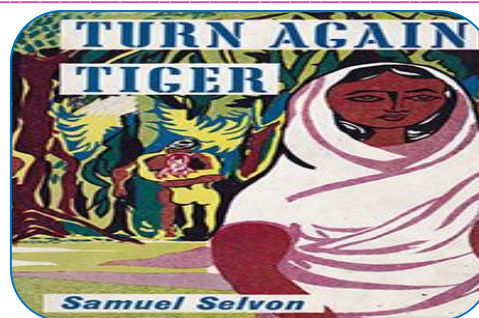


THE THEME OF HOMECOMING IN SAMUEL SELVON'S *TURN AGAIN TIGER*

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ABSTRACT:

This article endeavours to study the attempt made by Samuel Selvon to portray the theme of homecoming in his novel *Turn Again Tiger*. The theme of homecoming or tracing the roots is one of the important themes in the postcolonial Caribbean literature. In *Turn Again Tiger*, Selvon highlights Tiger's need to reconcile himself with his peasant roots in order to understand his present situation. This novel begins with Tiger in dilemma, both attracted and disgusted to his unpleasant past i.e., the experience of *Cane*, where his Caribbean community has shed lot of sweat, blood and tears. Tiger, eventually, returns to his peasant roots which is completely opposed to the stand taken by him in *A Brighter Sun*, which is a sequel to *Turn Again Tiger*. Trinidad is the background of the story of Tiger who returns to the canefields of Five Rivers to help his father to manage an experimental cane project, keeping aside his experience, knowledge and wisdom acquired in *Barataria*. He even sacrificed his political ambitions to return to his roots in order to confront his past and also to set right the equation. He, in fact, wants to challenge the persisting ghost of colonialism, which is the root cause of all the evils that plague his Caribbean society. By working along with other cane workers, Tiger comes to understand his own current position and the world around him in a better way.

KEYWORDS: Caribbean, peasant, multi-ethnic, cane.

INTRODUCTION :

This article deals with the theme of Tiger's homecoming i.e., Tiger going back to his peasant roots in Selvon's *Turn Again Tiger*. Tiger returns to the canefields of Five Rivers which is diametrically opposed to the stand taken by him in *A Brighter Sun*. With this, Tiger's life comes a full circle.

At the fag end of *A Brighter Sun*, the thought of going back to the canefields crosses the mind of Tiger. But the very thought makes him shudder and he laughs away the bitter feeling. It reveals Tiger's feeling of liberation from the bitter experiences of cane. Here, Tiger feels, "He (Tiger) considered going back to the canefields in Chaguanas, but the thought of it made him laugh aloud" (ABS, 215) *Turn Again Tiger*, a sequel to *A Brighter Sun* projects a widened perception of Selvon's first novel.

Towards the end of *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger bluntly rejects the very idea of going back to the canefields when Urmilla asks him about the same. In this context, he vehemently remarks:

"You think I going back to work in canefields again? Not if is the last thing in the world to do! We have plenty money still, so don't worry. *It hard to plan for the future*, things does happen and change everything. Let everything go as it going, we will see later." (ABS, 209) (*my emphasis*).

Whenever Tiger gets upset in *A Brighter Sun*, he often uses to take comfort in recollecting his carefree days in the canefields of Chaguanas. But Tiger immediately dismisses the idea of going back to Chaguanas on the ground that it tantamounts to accepting defeat. In order to prove his manhood, he

wants to take everything in his stride. He is ready to face any adversity with courage justifying his name Tiger.

Though Tiger is determined not to go to his oppressed past, yet towards the end of *A Brighter Sun*, he does not rule out the possibility completely. Here, Selvon clearly hints at a possible sequel to *A Brighter Sun*.

Turn Again Tiger begins with Tiger in a state of dilemma. He is indeed in a catch -22 situation. He is both interested and disinterested in the matter of cane. At the end of *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger armed with education, knowledge and money, thinks of further education. He feels he 'might get a job with the railways in Port-of-Spain, where Joe working' (ABS, 213). He also has the ambition of becoming a politician to help and serve his entire community and not just Indians. He also sends a short story about the newly constructed highway to the *Trinidad Guardian* in order to establish himself as a writer. Amidst all this, Tiger is pretty perplexed as to how he should go about his life and career. Going back to canefields is certainly not on his agenda.

Tiger's dilemma about his future coupled with the earnest request made by his aged father, Babolal, to come and assist him in overseeing an experimental cane project, makes him weigh all the options. Tiger cogitates and is plagued by the Hamletian dilemma.

Tiger's father tries his best to motivate Tiger by saying that "But it have money in cane, you know". (TAT, 2). Babolal also says that he is offered a better job of a supervisor and not the ordinary job of a cane-cutter. He also fervently requests and pesters Tiger in a subtle way to understand his plight of managing the job alone at this old age. He also says that Tiger is his only son and there is nobody else to help him:

"The thing is, you was the only boy-child I ever had, and I ain't have nobody to help me out with this new plan. What you think about going to Five Rivers with me and helping with the cane? (TAT, 3)

Tiger strongly feels that a change is the most desirable thing in life. He believes that change is the only constant and one must embrace change in whatever direction it leads us to. Even if it means a step backwards, one must not hesitate and Tiger observes:

"But a change always good, it makes for progress. All the books what I read say so, and I know it for myself. You rotten if you stay one place all the time like that". (TAT, 6)

Tiger is sandwiched between his aspirations and the need to help his father in Five Rivers and realizes that he cannot obtain a new identity unless he deals with his oppressed past in all its forms and manifestations.

Tiger, leads a very comfortable life in Baratavia, selling the vegetables cultivated in his garden. He enjoys the good company of his neighbours, Joe and Rita among other things. But Tiger has that insatiable appetite for change which brings many thrilling challenges in his way. Unlike his friends, Tiger is never satisfied with the status quo. He has the passion and zeal to challenge the status quo and scale dizzy heights, even though pushed by compelling circumstances to take a step backwards:

"Sometimes a step back better than staying in the same place: the next time you move forward you might be able to make a big stride and go way pass where you was before". (TAT, 7).

For Tiger, taking a step backward is better than not taking any step at all. He detests complacency, inactivity and inertia. This trait of Tiger is evident in Selvon also. Selvon too disliked complacency and left for London to achieve something extraordinary.

"The reason why I left is that I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become very complacent and easygoing; [...] and things like that, is a part of the life in Trinidad. And I felt myself getting in to it....So I left." (Susheila Nasta, *Critical Perspectives*, 82)

Tiger's fight with the circumstances in *A Brighter Sun* was tough and the present fight with the same in *Turn Again Tiger* is much tougher. For Tiger, going back to the canefields means abandoning his dreams, ambitions and aspirations abruptly. Apart from this, Tiger has a strong desire to establish contact with the outer world to widen his mental horizon and improve his life vastly. Tiger thought this education and knowledge would better his life, but fate has other plans for him. Now, he is faced with a situation where all of this will be back to square one. After a lot of introspection and soul-searching, finally the truth dawns on him that he cannot so easily avoid his roots where his Indo-Trinidadian

community has shed lot of sweat, blood and tears. He cannot but reconcile himself with his peasant roots for a meaningful existence. Perhaps, Tiger feels his return to cane may facilitate a new innings and a new experience with his culture and roots-in Five Rivers.

Finally, true to his culture, Tiger, like a fiercely loyal and obedient son, obliges his father and decides to join him in Five Rivers. Tiger is cheated by his father regarding the position he holds in managing an experimental cane project. When Soylo informs Tiger about the presence of white supervisor and that his father, Babolal, is only a work foreman in the cane project, his morale gets shattered. Now, having come all the way from Barataria, along with his family, he cannot immediately go back to the same place and stop the work abruptly. Because Tiger will be ridiculed by his friends and others if he returns to Barataria leaving the job and his father high and dry merely for this trivial reason. He was encouraged and given a grand farewell to go to Five Rivers by his friends and also the community in Barataria. So, he feels badly trapped and stranded in Five Rivers. There is literally no escape route available to him. Now, "Tiger has to stay and confront this monstrous but concrete apparition from the past". (Grace Eche Okereke, Sam Selvon's Evolution from *A Brighter Sun* to *Turn Again Tiger*, 42). So, Tiger decides to take the challenge head-on. When Tiger keenly observes the palatial residence of the white supervisor, Robinson, he gets back the painful memories of the white supervisor bossing over him and his community in the canefields of Chaguanas. While in Barataria, Tiger thought he had successfully escaped from this devastating past, but due to unexpected turn of events, sadly comes face-to-face with the same unpleasant past of working in the canefields. This really disappoints Tiger. Tiger's high expectation about his father's position and his own position gets shattered.

In *Turn Again Tiger*, Five Rivers enables Selvon to deal with political and economic history that influenced the Caribbean experience for centuries. Selvon dealt with it without flouting the rules that guided Tiger's individual struggle to liberate himself from the shackles of psychological and physical indentureship to cane which created that past history. The peculiarity of unequal development in Trinidad allows Selvon to create Five Rivers as the necessary model of the past that exists side-by-side with the present. In this context, Tiger struggles to find a solution to his utter hatred of cane. Selvon highlights that it is desirable for the Caribbean community to deal with the history of indentureship to an economy based on cane and unpleasant inheritance of that past which affects the current situation.

Selvon depicts cane as a powerful symbol and also a reality. Tiger along with his family goes to Five Rivers to help his father. But his father, Babolal moves to Five Rivers in order to work in the canefields. So, cane is the influencing factor here. Cane determines their connection to Five Rivers and the standard of life it provides. In Five Rivers there is no school, no running water, no electricity and no public transport, speaks volumes about the backwardness of the village and the grinding poverty of the cane workers. They have no presence at the government level. They have no voice due to their illiteracy. The cane workers' economic and socio-cultural base is shaped by cane. Cane's impact is all pervasive and ubiquitous.

In Five Rivers, Tiger's journey is measured progressively by the growing season of cane. The novel begins with the planting of cane and it ends with the harvest of cane. It also assures a new season of growth and accomplishment. In this background, Selvon delves into the meanings of Cane as a, "controlling value-cultural, social, economic-in the lives of the Five Rivers community." (*Introduction*, TAT, X). This theme is explored by Selvon at various levels and is related to many characters in this novel. The main characters are Tiger, Urmilla, Soylo, Otto, Babolal and More Lazy. The personal experiences of all these characters supplement each other. Like a team, they all experience the transformation of cane as a way of life.

Tiger's nightmarish history of Chaguanas where he had a devastating experience with cane, is revived in Five Rivers. He is tantalized and tormented by the resurfacing of his spine-chilling past. Tiger decides to get liberated from his earlier memories and his father's 'grovelling respect for the white man' (TAT, 49) Tiger establishes his superiority over other cane workers because of his high-ranking job of a timekeeper and his self education, knowledge and awareness acquired in Barataria. Because of his education, Tiger feels self-assured and somewhat superior to other cane workers. His superiority

complex takes a severe beating when he accidentally finds Doreen, the wife of the white supervisor, Robinson, bathing naked in the river. Tiger displays some degree of nonchalance towards Robinson, but it is not the same with his white wife, Doreen. When Tiger finds Doreen naked, the complexes of the slave mentality of his past reemerges. Despite his literacy and other attainments, he surrenders to age-old anxiety that his life in Chaguana's canefields has taught him about the sacredness of the white woman. The naked bathing by Doreen at the river reminds Tiger "That he is still tied to the fears and inhibitions of a debilitating respect for a value system that makes the white woman different from any other." (*Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, 200). The very sexually provocative scene makes Tiger shudder and shiver in his shoes as this is the first time he faces this kind of situation. He is totally nonplussed and has no clue as to how he can deal with this peculiar situation:

There was danger here, his thoughts were jumbled as he tried to reason it out, flashing across the years to his childhood, keep off the white man's land, don't go near the overseer's house, turn your head away if you see the white man's wife. Such were the warnings of old men who in their youth had labored in the fields and passed their experiences to their own sons. (TAT, 49)

Tiger tries his best to hold his ground but yields to the cultural conditioning. Tiger, unable to stand the sight, turns his head away and starts walking straight so nervously. Then he feels uncomfortable that she has noticed him "as if he were the naked one in the water." (TAT, 50) Tiger accelerates his pace and when Doreen shouts and calls him, he panics and takes to his heels like a thief: Tiger ran. He stumbled around the corner and kept on running, his bare feet thudding lightly on the trail, the sound deadened by dry leaves. He stepped blindly on a horsewhip snake sunning itself in the path, and it wrapped itself around his foot with the speed of a taut spring suddenly released. Tiger grabbed it and pulled it away and flung it in the bush, still running in a kind of one-legged madness. (TAT, 50)

The horsewhip snake seems like a symbol of the overseer's whip that can still bring shame and vanquish Tiger's claim to masculinity. The whip symbolizes the untouchability of the overseer's wife. Doreen is a symbol of the sacredness of the white woman that Tiger was taught in his childhood. Tiger flees from Doreen's sexually tempting 'hallo' like a man paralyzed 'in a kind of one-legged madness.' (TAT, 50). Tiger repents his panic and flight but feels helpless to repair the damage done to his reputation and image of servility he has created in the mind of Doreen:

He had run away like a little boy scared, because a white woman had called out to him. He, Tiger, who had his own house, who had a wife and a child, who worked with the American's during the war, who drank rum with men and discussed big things like Life and Death, who could read and write. Better if he had cringed, if he bowed and stooped and blurted out good morning like some ordinary illiterate labourer and asked if there was something he could do. But to run away, to panic as if the devil were at his heels-for that there was no forgiveness. (TAT, 51)

Tiger's heightened sense of shame, remorse and inadequacy triggers a humongous crisis in his life. His mental turbulence finds a distinct echo in his social relationships and in all his activities. He gets agitated, drinks a lot and alienates himself from his family. He starts humiliating himself by doing undignified jobs as a yard boy for Doreen. He virtually submits himself in the service of Doreen. Besides being a symbol of whip, Doreen is also a direct threat to the position of Urmilla as the wife of Tiger. She remains a symbol of that psychic threat to Tiger's masculinity as well. She also assumes the symbol of his indignity and loss of self-respect of his community. She is sexually enticing, very much desirable and yet a forbidden fruit for Tiger. Subsequently, Tiger thinks rationally about his crazy and childish flight and comes to the logical conclusion that:

"it was her, her whiteness and her nakedness, her golden hair and her proud, pointed breast. And the truth came to him thus, and it had nothing to do with colour or the generation of servility which was behind him. He had fled because she was a woman, a naked woman, and because he was a man." (TAT, 52)

Salick aptly comments on the status of Doreen as:

“somewhat like the bulldozers in *A Brighter Sun*, is the intruder that destroys pristine relationships; she is the agent of humiliation and profound “shame” that Tiger confesses to. Here, Tiger’s fall is not from grace but from an accustomed contentment.” (The novels of Samuel Selvon, 35)

As Doreen is the traditionally forbidden fruit, Tiger starts prying on her. His sexual desire for Doreen increases as he wants to reverse the stereotype of “the white overseer screwed the young Indian girls in the cane, and nobody could do anything about it.” (TAT, 47). Tiger’s desire is surely a deliberate act of revolt against colonial domination. He wants to take revenge on the white colonizer who has been outraging the modesty of the Indian girls from time immemorial. Tiger decides to give the white overseer and by extension the white colonizer a bit of his own medicine. Therefore, his desire for Doreen escalates manifold. It also heightens his sense of revenge and revolt against the white colonizer. Tiger starts disobeying the rules of the white man. He also refuses to be subservient to the white colonizer.

Tiger is deeply disturbed at what happened at the pool. The sight of Doreen bathing naked in the pool was too much for Tiger to handle. He suddenly fled from the scene as if he were a kid. Even after acquiring a lot of knowledge and awareness, he could not deal with the situation properly. This very incident drove Tiger mad. He goes on to strongly question the relevance of education and the benefit of reading plenty of invaluable books when they cannot help him to deal with his problems, particularly the crisis of his passion for Doreen. He gets disillusioned with his education and knowledge. His knowledge makes him realize the yawning gulf between the practical wisdom which he gets from his daily life and the knowledge he gains from books. Tiger realizes that much wisdom brings much sorrow. Tiger worked hard in acquiring knowledge because he thought that it would enable him to achieve his goals. But this belief left him high and dry. Tiger finds the knowledge acquired from books is not in tune with the harsh realities of the canefields. He realizes that complete knowledge is an unachievable ideal. So, he goes inside his house and brings out all the books. He sits on the steps and crushes all the pages. He throws them all in a heap in front of his house and sets them on fire and gives away his radio to Otto. Then Tiger exasperatingly says:

“No more books”, he told himself, watching them burn, “they only make me miserable. Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, the lot. All them fellars dead and gone, and they ain’t help me to solve nothing. You study this, you study that, and in the end what happen?” (TAT, 112)

The novel comes to an end with the completion of one pattern of growth and harvest in the prospect of another. This pattern mirrors an identical sequence in Tiger’s life and also in the lives of the members of his community.

In this changed scenario in Five Rivers, Tiger expresses satisfaction and takes pride in his own personal achievement: “I learn a lot in this year that gone by, nothing exact that I could put my finger on, but is almost as if *I didn’t take no step backward, and it was forward all the time*”. (TAT, 181) (my emphasis) Tiger fully reconciles himself with his peasant roots. He gets fully involved in the reaping of the cane manually keeping aside his timekeeper’s job which bridges the yawning gulf between him and his roots in the canefields. Tiger bridges this huge gap created by his creolization and self-education. Initially, fresh from Baratavia, Tiger bluntly rejected cane and cane community therefore, he says, “I ain’t no cane labourer either. I only come here to help out my old man [...] That’s why you see I ain’t much-up with the people here too much. You Soylo is about the only friend I make”. (TAT, 166)

Selvon does not idealise or glamourise the peasant life in Five Rivers. He narrates peasant experience with clinical precision and admiration. He realistically assesses the hardships and tensions of peasant community’s dependence on cane. Selvon does not even glamourise Tiger’s reconciliation with his peasant roots. He nevertheless, presents Tiger’s life and character in a very compassionate manner.

Turn Again Tiger records the journeys of the various characters on the way to development and growth. Tiger faces a lot of obstacles in his life in Five Rivers which brings about a drastic change in his perception of things, both traditional and new. Tiger’s attitude undergoes considerable transformation. In this novel, it is very astonishing that Tiger decides to return to the canefields which he hates so strongly. Tiger’s decision to directly participate in the cane cutting activity further astonishes the

readers. It is even more surprising to discover his desire for the white woman, Doreen, which brought him a lot of suffering and emotional turbulence. Further, it is rudely shocking to see Tiger burning his books which he used to treat as a treasure. *Turn Again Tiger* reveals the other side of Tiger. His burning passion for Doreen definitely surprises the readers as he was quite against the whites. Nevertheless, his heavy drinking does not surprise anyone. Because of his emotional turmoil he starts drinking heavily and it looks natural.

CONCLUSION :

In *Turn Again Tiger* Tiger encounters a very huge hurdle in the form of the persisting horror of colonial past, but, eventually he conquers the same by fine-tuning his behaviour and attitude. Initially we get astonished by Tiger's decision to return to his oppressed past because this is exactly the opposite of what he said towards the end of *A Brighter Sun*. It is further surprising that he actually participates in the cane-cutting activity along with other workers.

The novel begins with the planting of cane and ends with its harvesting. Tiger suffers like hell with a determination to explore and go beyond the memory of the life of his oppressed past symbolised by the overseer with horse and whip. It is important that Tiger's sexual encounter with Doreen when it finally happens on Doreen's initiative, is meant as an act of violence on Tiger's part.

Tiger's emblematic cleansing in the poor after his sexual encounter with Doreen shows his expurgation of the weakness in himself that remained susceptible to the white woman representing white power. Creolization and self-education at Baratavia had somewhat alienated Tiger from his roots. But in *Turn Again Tiger*, he reconciled himself to his peasant roots.

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