

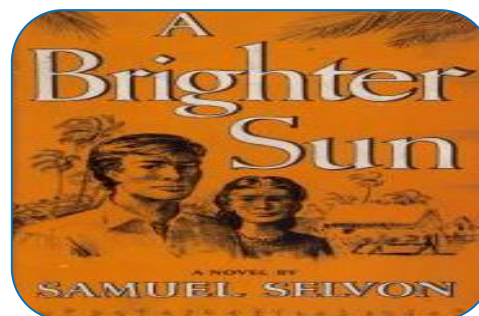


## THE THEME OF PERPETUAL QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SAMUEL SELVON'S *A BRIGHTER SUN*

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### ABSTRACT:

*In this article, an attempt has been made to explore the theme of perpetual quest for identity in Samuel Selvon's novel "A Brighter Sun." Identity is regarded as never fixed or constant, especially, in the postcolonial Caribbean society. It is fluid and constantly in the process of evolving with the passage of time (Stuart Hall, 110). Similarly, Tiger, the young protagonist of "A Brighter Sun" goes in search of prosperity, awareness and to top it all establish his identity in the society. He leaves Chaguanas, and suburban Barataria at the age of 16 along with his child bride, Urmilla. He begins his journey of life very early with meagre resources like a cow, a mud hut and 200 dollars. In the beginning of the novel, Tiger is naive, illiterate and innocent. He represents the Caribbean man, who is a victim of colonization, rather than a creator of history. Selvon portrays Tiger as overcoming all the obstacles that come his way and taking challenges head-on with the help of awareness, knowledge, wisdom and experience. He also depicts the West Indian man in the form of Tiger as a brighter sun, who eventually goes on to achieve a lot and thereby establishes his identity as an enlightened and humble person. In "A Brighter Sun", Selvon wants to give a new identity to Tiger, who represents the Caribbean man, through the process of Creolization. Creolization is the amalgamation of many cultures and traditions and it is also regarded as 'new ethnicity.' Selvon himself admits : "I was creolized from an early age, which is a good thing, in my opinion as a mixing of tradition makes for a more harmonious world." (Michel Fabre, "Critical Perspectives on Samuel Selvon", 70) Tiger finally reaches a stage, where he looks forward to politically independent and racially integrated Trinidad. He establishes his identity through masculinity, self education, knowledge and wisdom.*

**KEYWORDS:** *quest, racism, naive, creolization, Caribbean, post-colonial.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Literature is an artistic work which reflects the culture, the way of living, economic and socio-political conditions of the people. Caribbean literature is no exception. It depicts the sensibilities and experiences of the Caribbean society.

Samuel Selvon is a distinguished Caribbean writer, who projected the problems of identity and racism among a host of other issues plaguing the Caribbean society. In "*A Brighter Sun*", Selvon highlights the problems of the crisis of identity in the Caribbean society and how it torments and tantalises his protagonist, Tiger. He also provides the solution for the same in this novel. Therefore, this article makes an attempt to focus its attention on this theme of perpetual quest for identity in "*A Brighter Sun*." The search for identity begins when the person becomes conscious of his real status in the society. This search for identity motivates the person concerned to surmount the problems which surround and suppress him. This identity crisis drives and propels the individual to unleash his

potential and makes him go for the jugular. Therefore, in "*A Brighter Sun*", Tiger in order to make an impact and create his own vibrant and distinct identity, spares no effort in acquiring as much knowledge and experience as possible. In this context, Roydon Salick aptly remarks : Tiger's journey is a courageous quest for knowledge, for this is what makes him an atypical, unique peasant hero. Selvon invests Tiger with his own keen desire for greater knowledge[.....] because it pivots on Tiger's all consuming desire for knowledge. "(Roydon Salick, "*The Novels Samuel Selvon*", 22)

This article deals with the theme of perpetual quest for identity and other themes of *A Brighter Sun* (1952). Roydon Salick called this a peasant novel as it vividly presents the way of life of the peasants, especially indentured labourers who are brought from India. Selvon is essentially a peasant at heart with a peasant sensibility. In this novel, there is plenty of focus on the peasant community and the part played by an individual. It also focuses on his attachment to the land. The peasants mainly work on sugar plantations.

Trauma and violation have been the constant features of the West Indian history, due to which the colonizers gained economically and the indentured labourers and slaves got degraded. Hence, the West Indian is a victim rather than a creator of history. In *A Brighter Sun*, there is Selvon's response to the problem of the Caribbean man and his history. Selvon has depicted the Caribbean man as having accepted and transcended the traumas of history and went on to make his place in a new West Indian society, at the same time keeping himself in touch with his roots. Selvon has presented a perception of growth for both the individual and his society in both *A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger*. This perception of growth in Caribbean man can be seen at many levels namely physical, mental, intellectual, psychological, political and moral. The perception of growth for the society is political, religious, cultural and social. In the process of transformation and progress, the individual reaches the next higher level of maturity. The progress of individuals shows the progress of society. In *A Brighter Sun*, this process of progress and transformation is clearly evident in the Caribbean man represented by Tiger in the Trinidadian society in particular and West Indian society in general. Tiger transforms socially and intellectually from a state of naivety, innocence and lack of responsibility. He goes on to create his personal and cultural identity. The character of Tiger mirrors the situation and predicament of the Caribbean man in Caribbean society.

The title of the novel also indicates "The importance of the Sun as a controlling symbol in the novel, underscoring the sense of growing optimism and confidence that impels the narrative." (*The Novels of Samuel Selvon*, 16). Salick's further observation reveals the crux of the novel that :

"at the end of the novel, Tiger, chastened and humbled by experience, looks forward, as does the country he is made to represent, to a brighter sun, shedding its lambent light of independence, racial harmony and increasing knowledge [...] Tiger, at the end of his commendable struggle, is a brighter son of his homeland." (*The Novels of Samuel Selvon*, 16).

Tiger finally hopes to find light of enlightenment, racial harmony, nation identity, creolization, friendship and self-awareness at the end of the tunnel.

Regarding the illiterate peasant playing a pivotal role in *A Brighter Sun* by Selvon, George Lamming's observation is splendid and inescapable:

..... the West Indian novelist did not look out across the sea to another source. For the first time, the West Indian peasant becomes other than a cheap source of labour. He became through the novelist's eye a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality." (Lamming, George, *The Pleasures of Exile*: Allison & Busby, 1960, rpt 1984, 38-39)

*A Brighter Sun* is a *bildungsroman* like George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, deals mainly with the personal, social and racial awakening of a newly-married Indian i.e., Tiger, who leaves his peasant family in Chaguanas, a sugar-cane area to settle with his wife, Urmilla in the suburban Barataria community.

Tiger has only a cow, a mud hut and two hundred dollars in cash to embark on a new journey and to confront the harsh world in Barataria. Tiger wants to take land on rent in Barataria for which he needs to sign a contract. He is very anxious and concerned about the negotiation as it is the first time he

is going to do such a thing especially without the parental guidance. He yearns for support as if he is not a man but a child. The forced transition from a boy to a man leaves Tiger high and dry and finally makes him determined to take the challenge head-on:

He was worried about the negotiation; he wished his father or one of his uncles was there with him. *But the thought made him ashamed.* He was married, and he was big man now. *He might as well learn to do things without the assistance of other people.* (ABS, 13) (my emphasis)

Tiger learns from experience what being a man mean to him and his community :  
"I used to think", he tells Joe, with unabashed naïveté, " as long as you have wife and child, you is a man. So long as you drink rum and smoke, you is a man." (ABS, 109)

But he eventually discovers that "it take more than". (ABS, 109) Tiger finds that being a man means not only learning "more about everything" (ABS, 15), but also means achieving self-awareness. It means coming to an awareness of one's identity as an unique person.

But here, we find the symptoms that, Tiger has the capacity for growth and independence. Tiger has to grow into a man, with his own efforts, without the guidance of his parents or uncles. Therefore, Selvon projects Tiger with full of doubts and uncertainties when he arrives in Barataria. In this context, Salick aptly remarks:

"Tiger's journey is also one from adolescence to adulthood, from innocence to experience, from freedom to responsibility.....Tiger and his wife are forced to leave the 'sweet wonder of childhood' to enter the complex world of married life." (*Novels of Samuel Selvon*, 20)

The theme of Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* projects the image of the West Indian as a natural emigrant who is perpetually in search of a brighter sun in the shape of brighter hopes and opportunities and his search for the essence of existence and his efforts to gain manhood, maturity and identity. The Africans are colonized and the West Indians are enslaved. This results in total loss of their personal and cultural identity.

Since Tiger is a metonymic character, the word, sun, also signifies a better life and opportunities for all the West Indians. Tiger's growth and search for change are in parallel to the entire West Indian society because this was a period of change in the West Indies. Change between colonial dependency and independence. Tiger's personal war against the old order happens exactly at the time of Second World War.

Tiger is not given a family name but was called *Tiger* indicates his metonymic role. This indicates that he is the representative of the entire West Indians. Selvon presents the West Indian response to the loss of culture and personality. The culture in the Caribbean reflects the culture from various countries. The racial division and racial tension are important in this multi-racial and multi-ethnic society. Selvon portrays Tiger as trying hard to overcome the loss of identity.

Tiger, despite his tender age, ignorance, illiteracy and early wedding thrust on him by his father, plans to conquer the loss of identity by reaching the higher level in terms of literacy and awareness. He does this to create an identity for himself. Tiger's determined quest for bright opportunities in a new society is being presented by Selvon in this novel.

Tiger's journey from Chaguanas to Barataria is an attempt to get away from working in the fields of cane to growing vegetables on some plots. This indicates Tiger's necessity to grow and become financially sound. This he says to Urmilla, "is to get land. We go grow crop and sell". (p. 13, ABS) It is also a move to get away from the unpleasant experience of sugarcane. Sugarcane is the most visible image of racial history of the West Indies. For the Indians of the past generation, Cane is the symbol of hope and survival. But to the new generation of Indians whom Tiger represents, Cane is an ambivalent image. Cane is a grim reminder of disgrace and problems. In an attempt to avoid sweating and toiling in the canefields of Chaguanas, Tiger departs to Barataria. There he wants to grow vegetables on his own by leasing some land. This action of Tiger indicates his desire to achieve both mental maturity and financial freedom. This move of Tiger is also an attempt to break free from the hard and bitter experience of sugarcane. Cane is an all-pervasive symbol of the racial history of West Indies. The diligent and traditional Indians are brought as indentured labourers to toil in sugar canefields deserted by the African slaves. But the Indian labourers are 'caught in a web of historical circumstances.' (*Novels*

of Samuel Selvon, 20) The area witnessed sweeping racial tension between Indians and blacks, because of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers.

The arrival of Americans and building of a road at the naval base gives Tiger an opportunity to take his growth and self-awareness to the next level. Tiger is destined to scale dizzy heights in terms of positive change and progress, which the Americans and the road symbolise. For Tiger, building of the road by Americans is a pleasant and welcome news. He is pretty excited to work with Americans as he wants a refreshing change from his routine work of farming the land:

"Tiger had a premonition his garden would go. He wanted it to go, he wanted things to be different. If even the road was going to be built away from his garden, he had no intention of continuing to farm the land; he was going to give it up and work with the Americans." (ABS, 118-119)

This indicates that Tiger has unquenchable thirst for new things and new knowledge.

At the end of the novel, Tiger boasts to Urmilla of never getting back to canefields:

"You think I going back to work in canefields again? Not it is the last thing in the world to do! We have plenty money still, so don't worry". (ABS, 209)

Tiger has ways to progress like education and creolization. But these two are like double-edged weapons. A plenty of older Indians are doubtful about the value of education. Because education helps one to question and interrogate everything including customs, traditions and rituals. Education leads one to the attractions of a city because many and major schools are located in Port of Spain and San Fernando. This suspicion is somewhat valid.

Tiger's journey is a strong quest for knowledge which makes him a unique peasant hero. Like Selvon, Tiger has a gargantuan appetite for knowledge. Tiger's search "for knowledge encompasses his quest for independence, for creolization, for self-actualization". (*Novels of Samuel Selvon*, 22) Therefore, Tiger begins to question everything and anything. Initially, Tiger's first question to his wife: "What you name?" then to Ramlall about his marital life, "What I must do?" to the persons in the liquor shop, "You living in Barataria?", to Sookdeo, "how ships sinking, and why people fighting war, and all that sort of thing?" and to Boysie "Is you Boysie?" are all timid questions reflecting his ignorance but on the other hand suggesting his desire for enlightenment. Tiger's last statement in *A Brighter Sun* is one of wisdom and confident affirmation: "Now is a good time to plant corn". The transformation from vague questioning to final declaration is a sign of Tiger's gaining self awareness, confidence and maturity.

Tiger's greatness represents in his long struggle to comprehend and transcend the lot that the colonial past has made as his destiny. Knowledge has driven Tiger away from the land but it only multiplies his appreciation for it. Knowledge gives him more confidence and a new self-assurance. Knowledge is a potent weapon for Tiger with which he tries to conquer the demons of darkness, ignorance and poverty.

Tiger wants to change the entire complexion of the chaotic conditions in the Caribbean society and to provide a golden era for his much beleaguered people who already suffered hell under the colonial rule. Tiger nurses this political ambition to achieve national unity and identity, and to eradicate all the problems like unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, racism and provide good facilities and proper infrastructure. Unlike the present politicians, who are power hungry, Tiger has honest intentions in establishing a new society and a new world of peace and prosperity that is, perhaps, Selvon's imagined brighter world full of opportunities and a better way of living. Perhaps, through Tiger, Selvon wants to wake up the Caribbean youth from their political slumber. Selvon suggests that life bereft of politics and lack of vision to govern in itself a kind of colonization and slavery. Hence, Selvon jolts the conscience of his society to sit up and think hard about the terrible consequences that result from being mere spectators to the kind of governance they have. It has the potential to spell doom for the Caribbean society and creating a new society becomes a distant dream for the West Indian.

Selvon seems to remind the Caribbean youth that merely taking up petty jobs and agriculture is not the panacea for their trials and tribulations. They have to go beyond their traditional occupations and it is crucial to take up politics as a career to set right the unbalanced equation in their society. He also emphasises that it is worth sparing a serious thought about getting in to governance, framing suitable laws and taking decisions which can put their society on the right road to recovery.



Tiger wants to acquire as much knowledge and wisdom as possible to unleash the same both for his personal benefit and for the benefit of his entire community. He wants to use his knowledge and wisdom as a balm to heal both psychological and physical wounds inflicted on his community by the colonial rulers.

Tiger wants to empower the Caribbean man by fighting for everybody's rights. This demonstrates Tiger's broad outlook and magnanimous nature: "Want to fight for Indian rights?" "Everybody rights, not only Indian." (ABS, 203)

Tiger tries to blow the cobwebs away and take the road less travelled by the Caribbean man. Simon Gikandi remarks, "in order to subjectify himself in *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger must raise a new knowledge against the over determined world of both colonialism and Indian culture." (Simon Gikandi 1992, 118)

Selvon conveys the simple story about the future progress of the new Caribbean society with the help of Tiger's developing personality and identity. In the last passages of the novel, "Selvon brings together the war, the road, and the land, to summarise the living experience of the chastened Tiger over the course of the novel." (Kenneth Ramchand in *Critical Perspectives*, 171)

Tiger's relationship with the land is strong and robust. But Bruce F. MacDonld in his article "Land And Consciousness in Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* contends that Tiger moved away from the land to work for Americans to get more income. MacDonld points out that Tiger's relationship with the land is only an economic necessity and nothing else. But, I agree with Harold Barratt's view expressed in "*Dialect, Maturity, And The Land in Sam Selvon's A Brighter Sun: A Reply*" that:

"But Tiger's bond with the land is considerable more than an economic necessity, and while he is indeed happy to give up small farming in order to earn a fairly good salary working for the Americans, his attachment to the land is intimate and permanent. References to this mysterious and very potent bond are written deep into the idiom of a number of crucial scenes. (Harold Barratt, *Critical Perspectives*, 191)

## CONCLUSION :

In "*A Brighter Sun*", Tiger leaves no stone unturned in establishing his identity in the society. He begins his journey as a naive and ignorant man, but gradually overcomes myriad problems that are integral part of the Caribbean society to create his identity. In order to elevate his position and status, Tiger feels the need to equip himself with more knowledge and wisdom. He thinks that knowledge, wisdom and rich experience are the weapons to get rid of his and his community's backwardness, ignorance and illiteracy, which in turn refurbishes his and his community's identity and image. Selvon depicted Tiger as a metonymic character representing the whole Caribbean society. Therefore, Tiger advocates literacy, knowledge and experience for all the members of his Caribbean Community to create a distinct identity of their own. Selvon seems to suggest that without the requisite knowledge and wisdom, it is not possible to achieve a Caribbean identity and also not possible to achieve a brighter Caribbean Society. Selvon asserts that Tiger with his distinct identity will shine like a brighter sun. Finally, he lays great importance on gaining identity in the society.

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