

# The Analysis of “Hybridity” in The Lonely Londoners from the Perspective of Postcolonial Theory

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**Abstract:** This article gives an analysis of “hybridity” in Samuel Selvon’s novel *The Lonely Londoners* from the perspective of postcolonial theory, which depicts the lives of West Indian immigrants in post-World War II in London, as well as their negotiation of identities within a new cultural landscape. The “hybridity” discussed in this paper includes linguistic hybridity, naming hybridity, culinary hybridity, and hybridity in spaces. These multidimensional features of “hybridity” reveal the wisdom and strategies that characters demonstrate in the process of constructing identity and seeking a sense of belonging. Drawing on postcolonial theories of hybridity, this thesis analyzes how characters adeptly employ strategies of “hybridity” to negotiate identity and regain a sense of belonging, thus presenting the diversity of belonging and subjectivity in the postcolonial context through characters’ exploration and negotiation of hybrid identities.

**Keywords:** The Lonely Londoners; Postcolonial Theory; Hybridity; Identity; Belonging.

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## 1. Introduction

Samuel Selvon, as a distinguished Caribbean novelist and short-story writer of East Indian descent, he is known for his vivid evocation of East Indian’s life, who live in the West Indies and elsewhere, and he came to public attention during the 1950s along with a number of other Caribbean writers, including V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming.

Selvon is a prolific writer, who is best known for his novels *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and *Moses Ascending* (1975). *The Lonely Londoners* details the life of West Indians in post-World War II London, a city the immigrants consider the “center of the world”. Covering a period of roughly three years, it has no plot in the usual sense of the term. The novel follows a limited number of characters of the “Windrush generation”, and all of them are “coloreds”, through their daily lives in London city. The various threads of action form a whole entity through the unifying central character of Trinidadian Moses Aloetta, who after more than ten years in London, has still not achieved any success and whose homesickness increases as he gets older. *The Lonely Londoners* is groundbreaking in its use of creolized English, or “nation language”, for narrative as well as dialogue. Like most of Selvon’s later work, following a cast of Caribbean migrants striving to make their lives in London, this groundbreaking novel established Selvon as an important voice for Caribbean literature in Britain. Selvon also illustrated the panoply of different subcultures that exist within London, as with any major city, due to class and racial boundaries. Owing a large quantity of classic literary works, he had earned the title of “the father of black writing” in Britain.

## 2. Literature Review

The status quo of *The Lonely Londoners*’ studies abroad are concluded from these following aspects: the narrative technique, the issue of immigrants’ identity, the issue of gender and sex relations, and the study of theme. In the first place, part of the experts put their focus on Selvon’s writing techniques, especially the narrative language, and non-standard English that Selvon applied. Some critics regard

non-standard English as narrowing the gap between black immigrants and the whites. Nick Bentley (2005) claimed Selvon manipulated creolized linguistic forms in his novels to convey an ideological implication in a postcolonial context. Creole English, as he argued, functions as refusal and resistance to the dominant White culture and even to the English ideology. Apart from the narrative language, migrants’ sense of identity is a thought-provoking issue. Bentley (2003) buried himself in political representation related to race, class, and gender in the novel to probe how black immigrants constructed a distinct collective subcultural identity. The fiction is radical, relying on stereotypical representations of black identity. Thirdly, experts pay attention to the controversial arena of sexual relations in the novel. Rothfork (1991) emphasized that Caribbean migrants ought to promote sexual abstinence in the search for values and authentic identity. However, as males were predominant in the number of immigrants to London before 1955, black migrants were seen to have threatened racial purity and national identity. There are also critics who give great concern to the theme of the work. John Rothfork (1991) believed that the theme of the novel is the representation of the life of Caribbeans. He suggested in the essay “Race and Community in Sam Selvon’s Fiction” that one of the motifs of Selvon’s fiction is the production of the psychological sufferings confronted by the immigrants who consciously search for better material lives in the metropolis.

In contrast to foreign studies, the domestic researches on this novel lags behind. Studies at home are presented in the following categories: the writing style and narrative language, the loss and crisis of identity, and the construction of identity. Ren Yiming (2000) focused on a broad view of Selvon’s works and has produced critical ideas about the unique writing style that Selvon applied. She mentioned in her article “Black Whirlwind from the Caribbean—Works of Contemporary Caribbean Postcolonial English Writers” that Selvon adopts a multilingual writing style to express national characteristics and enrich English expression. At the same time, it is also through the manifestation of diverse mixed cultures to combat the white’s cultural centrism and bridge cultural differences. The loss of identity of the West Indian

immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners* was also investigated by some researchers. Wang Hui (2016) analyzed the reasons for immigration identity loss from multiple perspectives and innovatively conducted a series of discussions from the hostile London urban space and the lack of immigration community, as well as low-income jobs. From this, it can be concluded that the fear and anxiety of immigration influx in British society hinders the construction of immigration status. Some scholars also concentrate on the research on how the colored migration sought and constructed their identity. Ding Xiaojing (2019) put forward an idea that, in order to reconstruct their own identity under the context of multi-ethnic integration, Caribbean immigrants needed to retain the memory of their hometown, but also singled out one way to adapt to the culture of the suzerain country. In sum, the collective memory of the region was an effective measure for black youths to internalize the mainstream culture, instead of being assimilated.

Although there are several essays that have done researches on the identity as mentioned above, the article attempts to survey the identities of Caribbean immigrants from a different perspective, namely, by exploring the identity construction and belonging negotiation of Caribbean immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners* with the application of the postcolonial theory of hybridity. Critical analysis of hybridity strategies of Caribbean immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners* receives insufficient attention, so this article will set forth literary methods used by immigrant groups to overcome sense of culture and belonging loss and to achieve identity affirmation.

### 3. An Overview of the Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory sprang up in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is deeply influenced by Postmodernism, Deconstruction, Feminism and other theories, mainly studying the relationship between culture and imperialism, orientalism, racism, globalization, cultural identity and other issues, as well as class, race, gender, culture and other aspects. Postcolonialism “denotes a collection of theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the culture (literary, politics, history) of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world” (Zhu, 2001). Unlike colonialism, postcolonialism is a discourse theory that focuses primarily on the discourse of minority groups. It attempts to eradicate Eurocentrism and the binary relationship between self and other by destroying Western imperialism (Sheng Anfeng, 2011). In addition, it tries to rebuild the subjectivity of minority groups, and to help them make their voices heard in postmodern society.

Hybridity plays an important role in Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial criticism theory. It is defined by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* as: “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (114). Following the ideas of Fanon, Said, Bakhtin, and Lacan, Bhabha frees the concept of hybridity from its old pejorative nature in a purely biological sense and explores the subversive potential of cultural hybridity. There are many forms of hybridity: linguistic, cultural, political, racial and other aspects. Examples of language include the “pidgin” language produced by postcolonial societies in the Caribbean and

Africa, and the “creole” language in Latin America. On the basis of Said, Bhabha blurred the border between Eastern and Western cultures with the concept of hybridity. He applied psychoanalysis to study ambivalence in the colonial discourse, and he pointed out that ambivalence embodies the colonists’ anxiety even delusion about the colonized, and this ambivalence threatened the identity and authority of the colonists (He Yugao, 2012). Lacan’s dialectical relationship between “self” and “other” forms the basis of Bhabha’s mixed theory, that is, the disintegration of binary opposition between colonists and colonized people. On the basis of Lacan’s mirror stage theory, Bhabha studies the dependence of colonists’ cultural identity on colonized people (He Yugao, 2012). Bakhtin’s hybrid theory constituted the direct ideological source of Bhabha’s hybridity theory. Bhabha emphasized the heterogeneity, transaction and fracture in the process of hybridization like Bakhtin, and he regarded hybridization as the basis of cultural differences (He Yugao, 2012). Bhabha believes that the colonized can be influenced by the colonists in many different ways. In the process of cultural exchange, hybridity will inevitably occur. Robert Young (1995) pointed out that hybridity exhibits a particular time in which the discourse of colonial authority can no longer cling to its unambiguous meaning and resigns itself to the trace of the language to others, thus empowering the critic to go back to complicated movements of disarming alterity in the colonial text.

## 4. An Analysis of Hybridity in The Lonely Londoners

### 4.1. Hybridity in Language

The utilization of language, as an intricate instrument for the exploration of hybridity, stands as a testament to the profound intersection between ancestral heritage and the contemporary milieu. The linguistic performance made by the characters in the narrative transcend mere communication, emerging as emblem of their dual cultural identities. The textual landscape thus created is a multifaceted text interwoven with linguistic hybridity, effectively mirroring the complex amalgamation of diverse cultural strands.

Through linguistic hybridity, Samuel Selvon constructed a distinctive discursive domain of migrant narratives in *The Lonely Londoners*. In the narrative structure, he abandoned the standard English writing style, instead adopting a hybrid language that blends Creole and standard English, with embedment of this mixed linguistic register even within the characters’ dialogues. This linguistic hybridity endows the characters with greater vitality and a distinct cultural imprint of the Caribbean community, transforming them from mere colonial subjects under the hegemonic discourse of the British metropole into vibrant, autonomous individuals. Selvon strove to narrow the gap between narrator and the story itself, submerging the perspective into the subject positions of the characters, thereby enhancing the text’s authenticity and readability. The use of Creole enables a more accurate conveyance of the characters’ inner feelings, deep emotions, and nuanced expressions of desire. For Caribbean migrants, language is not merely the luggage they have brought across the ocean to London, but a crucial weapon in their struggle for survival and resistance. Through their language, they ward off the infiltration of the colonizer’s discursive power, steadfastly preserving the unique memory of Caribbean nationhood. In the passage, Selvon employed Creole

vocabulary (such as “rab”, “lime”, “fella”), abbreviated forms (such as, shortening “Britain” to “Brit’n”), and non-standard English syntactic structures (such as, the non-normative subject-verb agreement “it ain’t have”), authentically rendering the discursive style of Caribbean migrant subculture. This strategy aims to dismantle the old and reconstruct new structures of ethnic identity, establishing a post-colonial discursive space with black subjects at the narrative center, allowing the marginalized migrant community to voice their own experiences and underscoring their active negotiation and quest for a sense of belonging.

Central to this exploration is the character Moses and Sir Galahad, who emerge as salient figures adeptly maneuvering through the linguistic realms of Caribbean Creole and English. The characters’ linguistic exchanges between these two language modes serve as a compelling manifestation of the constant negotiation between vernacular expressions derived from their place of origin and the linguistic conventions of their adopted domicile. This linguistic fusion operates on a level beyond mere linguistic proficiency; it encapsulates the intricate equilibrium between the imperative of preservation of their own language and the tendency towards assimilation by other language. As exemplified by Galahad’s vivid description of London’s climate conditions, which he articulates with the vibrant idioms of the Caribbean, the language used to narrate climate create a hybrid space wherein two seemingly divergent worlds are connected linguistically. This linguistic fusion stands as an apt reflection of the significant theme of “hybridity” within the narrative.

Beyond the surface-level of language use, the characters navigate through a labyrinthine terrain of linguistic performance, utilizing language hybridity as an effective instrument to bridge the gap between their inherited cultural foundations and their existing life realities. This strategic engagement with linguistic hybridity empowers them to articulate their innermost selves while concurrently adhering to the linguistic norms prevalent in their new milieu, thereby facilitating a profound sense of belonging. This ingenious negotiation of linguistic “hybridity” becomes an avenue for the preservation of their cultural essence, at the same time facilitating their meaningful engagement with the unknown fields of their contemporary surroundings.

## 4.2. Naming Hybridity

The diversity of names indeed reflects the hybridity of individual identity and the phenomenon of cultural integration. In a multicultural social environment, people’s names often change with the variations in their living conditions or shifts in cultural identity. Such changes typically reflect an individual’s efforts to adapt to a new environment or a tendency to seek cultural identity and acceptance.

For example, Henry Oliver, full of confidence and courage, arrived in London. His new name, Sir Galahad, was not his original name but a nickname given to him by Moses based on his personality traits and aspirations. Galahad is a knight in the Arthurian legend, pure and idealistic, who successfully finds the Holy Grail, symbolizing perfection and sacredness. The bestowal of this new name symbolizes Henry Oliver’s hope to display a resolute and confident side in the new cultural context, striving to find his own place in the white-dominated mainstream cultural society and to gain recognition and acceptance. Another example is Big City from a remote town in Trinidad, who named himself “Big

City”, directly expressing his yearning for the bustling metropolitan life of Western imperial capitals. Through this name change, he embodies his aspirations and ideals, aiming to stand out in international metropolises such as New York, London, or Paris, realizing personal worth, and finding a spiritual sense of belonging and success there. The alterations in their names are not merely symbolic replacements; they carry the psychological changes, aspirations, and social adaptation strategies of individuals in the process of cultural migration, reflecting the dynamic process of the reconstruction of personal identity when different cultures collide and merge.

## 4.3. Culinary Hybridity

The narrative crafted by Selvon is full of profound combinations of different cultural elements. The West Indian immigrants’ struggle to survive in the marginalized but also multifaceted society in London offers readers a way of revealing the intricate nuances of “hybridity”. In these cultural encounters, the co-existence of Caribbean customs against the backdrop of British conventions reveals a hybrid status that range from complete assimilation to the unwavering preservation of native traditions. Significantly, these interactions are far from unidirectional; rather, they transform into nuanced channels through which the characters, as cultural intermediaries, introduce British society to the grand Caribbean festivals, the intricate fabric of folklore, and the opulence of culinary traditions. When examined through the lens of postcolonial analysis, these interactions turn into symbols innate to cultural crossroads which merges different cultural elements.

It is through their culinary practices that the characters adroitly navigate the balance between preservation and adaptation. “Hybridity” emerges as a strategic tool, through which the west Indian immigrants’ culture is not only conserved but also invigorated by adaptation. The resulting fusion cuisine becomes a tangible embodiment of their strategic approach, aptly harmonizing tradition and evolution. Thus, this culinary journey emphasizes the strategic employment of “hybridity” as a mechanism to redefine and narrow cultural boundaries. Furthermore, the characters’ engagement with British society and their enthusiastic introduction of Caribbean customs exemplify the strategic employment of “hybridity” to assert their identities while concurrently participating in a broader cultural exchange. Through these interactions, they adeptly negotiate their roles within the unfamiliar social framework, affirming their sense of belonging through the preservation and dissemination of their cultural imprints. Consequently, their interactions serve as a conduit through which they cultivate a profound sense of belonging by actively shaping the cultural identity of their own specific customs.

## 4.4. Hybridity in Spaces

### 4.4.1. Hybridity in Spaces through Nostalgia

The pervasive nostalgia of the novel assumes a pivotal role within the narrative discourse of “hybridity”. The immigrants’ strong yearning for their Caribbean homeland promotes them to construct the hybrid spaces within the bustling metropolitan city in London so as to endow themselves a chance of belonging acquisition. Through the way of nostalgia, London itself transmutes into a tapestry upon which the threads of the past and present intricately interweave, facilitating a profound harmonization of the immigrants’

identities. These hybrid spaces provide a emerge as crucibles nurturing their sentiments of belonging, where the confluence of memory and contemporary existence forges an unparalleled tableau of lived experience.

These liminal spaces provide immigrants a temporary respite and solace for their weary hearts. Scarcely able to assimilate into mainstream London society, and bereft of a sizable diasporic community, they can only construct an in-between space in a confined locale, analogous to Moses' house functioning as an enclave for immigrants to vent their hearts and console each other. The immigrants have ritualized a weekly sojourn to Moses' abode, congregating in this third space, recapitulating the events of the week and reminiscing in unison, akin to Christians in worship. Through fabricating such liminal spaces that nourish their sense of belonging, the fusion of memory and lived experience engenders an unparalleled rendering of their life narratives.

In this context, nostalgia serves as a strategic tool of "hybridity", allowing the characters to adeptly navigate the complex terrain of identity formation by creating spaces that transcend geographical boundaries. Within these spaces, the intersection of nostalgic memories and current realities takes tangible form, providing an embodiment of their rooted sense of belonging. The characters skillfully harness the evocative power of nostalgia to infuse their present setting with the essence of their Caribbean origins, seamlessly blending disparate worlds into a coherent, resolute identity. This adept manipulation of nostalgia-forged "hybrid spaces" enables them to cultivate a sense of belonging that goes beyond physical places, encompassing instead an amalgamation of diverse experiences.

#### 4.4.2. Transcultural Hybridity of Urban Spaces

The transcultural hybridity of urban spaces, as demonstrated by Tanty and Harris's practice, closely aligns with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Tanty and Harris astutely utilize features of hybridity, such as credit mechanisms and cultural activities, to achieve identity negotiation and a sense of belonging, thereby constructing a new identity that is both diverse and inclusive.

As a passionate advocate of Caribbean culture, Tanty tenaciously championed and propagated the unique cultural values stemming from Trinidad. Her aim is to infuse local vibrancy into the global metropolis of London, thereby showcasing the dynamic fusion and innovative recreation of cultural spaces. The dimension of hybridity initially becomes evident through the revitalization of consumer customs. Faced with inherent biases and distrust toward impoverished communities from shopkeepers due to economic disparities, Tanty challenged and overturned these prejudices through tangible actions. She skillfully employed a credit mechanism and demonstrates integrity by promptly repaying debts every Friday, gradually earning the trust of the shopkeepers. This prompted a fundamental shift in their perception of the impoverished population. Departing from the symbolism of material opposition represented by the notions of "Mr. Credit" and "Mr. Cash", the shopkeeper transitioned towards deeper symbols of social harmony and inclusivity. Ultimately, he removed discriminatory imagery and replaced it with an image of the crowned queen, symbolizing a profound understanding and respect for Caribbean credit traditions and the image of Black immigrants. Tanty's series of actions serve as vivid examples of mechanisms for negotiating individual identity. While steadfastly adhering to and promoting her own cultural roots, she successfully constructs a new identity that

is both diverse and inclusive in an exotic environment. This not only solidifies her positioning within the Caribbean immigrant identity but also paves a feasible path for other immigrants in the community to seek and establish a sense of belonging.

Moreover, another character Harris compellingly illustrates the strategic wisdom derived from cultural syncretism. Assuming the guise of an English gentleman, he penetrated the heart of British mainstream society and proactively embraced and adapted to the London cultural milieu without compromising his dedication to upholding and disseminating his native cultural heritage. Harris ingeniously orchestrated various social functions, such as banquets and dances, thereby fashioning a significant platform that spotlighted Caribbean musical arts and traditional culture. Exploiting these opportunities, he not only introduced the culture of the Black to the Whites' but also guided fellow Blacks to acquaint themselves with and engage in White's culture. This effectively created a "third space" bridging the divide between colonizers and the colonized. Throughout this process, Harris's identity formation manifested a striking blend of influences; he emerged as both a Black elite adeptly assimilated into the imperial culture and a steadfast custodian committed to safeguarding and perpetuating his indigenous cultural lineage. The nuanced negotiation and consolidation of these dual identities reinforced his sense of belonging, while simultaneously providing a thought-provoking framework for other Caribbean migrants seeking to navigate their paths towards identity assertion and societal integration.

## 5. Conclusion

In Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, the concept of "hybridity" emerges as an influential approach through which Caribbean immigrants intricately develop their identities. This multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing linguistic performance, naming choices, culinary practices and hybrid spaces through nostalgia as well as transcultural hybridity of urban spaces, provides nuanced insight into how these immigrants navigate their sense of belonging and ownership in a foreign country. The complex narrative of the novel reveals how "hybridity" goes beyond basic blending of cultures; it serves as a tactical tool for characters to navigate the complicated postcolonial environment. Through their negotiation of hybrid identities, they acquire belongings that extend beyond material possessions, encompassing a profound sense of agency and self-determination.

In conclusion, *The Lonely Londoners* stands as an enduring example of how "hybridity" is essential for understanding the complex negotiation of identities within a postcolonial setting. Selvon's characters navigate the fluid intersections of cultures, adapt their language in new contexts, and long for the past, creating a multifaceted depiction that rejects simplistic categorization. Their strategic use of "hybridity" empowers them to assert their sense of belonging, push back against stereotypes, and reshape cultural environments. As they make their way through the intricate web of hybrid identities, Selvon's characters encapsulate the constant change and fluidity of the postcolonial world, solidifying *The Lonely Londoners* as a timeless masterpiece of postcolonial literature.

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