

Construction of Hybrid Identity in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*

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Abstract—Samuel Selvon (1923-1994) is an outstanding figure in Caribbean literature. His Moses trilogy is very famous because of his preoccupation with issues of identity and culture. His two representative works *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending* giving a vivid description of Creole immigrants' life in London, have a far-reaching influence on postcolonial literature. The thesis attempts to employ Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity to elaborate the formation of cultural identity. The thesis consists of three parts. Part One is Introduction, which gives a brief introduction to the author, his two works, the theoretical framework. Part Two presents the dilemma in which the Creoles have to face on cultural identity. In the aspect of cultural identity, the Creoles experience the process from identical crisis to the construction of hybrid identity. Part Three is Conclusion. Based on the above analyses, the thesis draws the conclusion that different cultures can influence each other. The effective way to solve identical crisis is to build the hybrid identity

Index Terms—Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, hybrid identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Broadly applied in different kinds of English texts written by postcolonial writers like Lamming and Naipaul, Homi Bhabha's theory of Hybridity is essential to conduct postcolonial literature. His major theories have been elaborated in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). In his opinion, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal..." (Bhabha, 1994, p.159) He gives a definition of hybridity as "the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative." (Bhabha, 1994, p.159)

Cultural identity is a person's essential attribute. There is an obvious transition in cultural identity of the Creole immigrants from *The Lonely Londoners* to *Moses Ascending*. Generally speaking, the Creole immigrants have firstly met with a severe identity crisis. Then they begin to experience the hybridization in cultural identity. During this period, they gradually get assimilated by London culture and keep negotiating between their original culture and host culture. Finally they have constructed a hybrid identity. As a result of a hybrid identity, they are both people of Creole and London. They still keep a lot of their Creole traditions. Meanwhile, they speak English, live a Londonized life and are deeply influenced by western lifestyles, ideas and values.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF HYBRID IDENTITY

A. *The Crisis of Identity* — *The Lonely Londoners*

The Creole immigrants living in London always suffer not only the physical displacement but also psychological isolation and uncertainty, which is definitely a dilemma for them. Selvon's "innovative use of the Trinidadian vernacular enables him to express the nuanced sensibilities of a diverse and fragmented immigrant population in London, post-World War II". (Okawa, 2013, p.18) They are in a dilemma where the values, languages, ritual habits and social needs are totally different from theirs. Most protagonists have experienced the cultural shock. Then they have to face the conflict between Creole culture and London culture. On one hand, the London culture keeps permeating into every detail of their life all the time in the aspects of social status, living style and consuming way. They are eager to be recognized by the local Londoners. So they comply this trend. On the other hand, they are desperately trying to keep their traditional culture. They want to hold the dignity of their own culture. A Saturday night dance at St Pancras Hall is an impressive example. Moses's friend, Harris, organizes the dancing party. "An example of how the Caribbean culture of calypso dance and steel band music has been transported to the city of London". (Okawa, 2013, p.18-19)

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Galahad locates himself as the universal subject of the city. He comes to London full of dreams and ambitions. In his opinion, London is a city paved with gold. It can provide a lot of possibilities. But after living and working in London for a while, he experiences the cultural shock and racial discrimination. He begins to have the awareness of his status of an outsider and the sense of alienation and difference. With the social supremacy, the immigrants' subordinate cultural identity is under the shadow of the dominant identity. The dominant London-culture

identity is hegemonic and arrogant. It despises Creole culture and tradition, endeavoring to deprive all the factors of Creole culture and forms a cultural supremacy. Under the overwhelming influence of the dominant London culture, Creole culture is struggling. The Creole identity exists roughly. All these immigrants are facing the identical crisis: to stick to their original cultural identity or to rebuild the new cultural identity, becoming one of Londoners? What's more, these local Londoners will or will not admit their new identity and treat them as their fellows? Samuel Selvon describes the experience of Galahad in detail. His encounter shows their dilemma of identity and the attitude from the host culture.

But the child mother uneasy as they stand up there on the pavement with so many people around: if they was alone she might have talked a little, and ask Galahad what part of the world he come from, but instead she pull the child along and she look at Galahad and give a sickly sort of smile, and the old Galahad, knowing how it is, smile back and walk on. (Selvon, 1985, p.87)

From this we see the protagonists begin to present themselves as an out stander. The Creole identity gets reduced to the corporeality of his pigmentation. Galahad even scrutizes his black body.

And Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, "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 misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you!" (Selvon, 1985, p.88)

This is the first time Galahad has realized his problem of identity. He is now facing a dangling identity. Before this time, he hasn't realized that his trouble in job-hunting, in living all come from this. Evidently, identity dominates even the most intimate relation in the city, making these immigrants difficult to blend into the society and to have a real life. This is the same with other people.

The identity crisis also finds its expression in their relationship with females. In general, white girls seldom fall in love with them. Most Creole men only can pay for white prostitutes. In everyday life, those London girls are unwilling to be with them. Even the girl herself would like to, her parents would never allow this. Bart is a typical example. When his girl takes him home to meet her parents, her parents have showed all kinds of hostility: shouted at him and asked him to get out.

Another character, Harris from Trinidad, adores and respects western values, attempting to blend himself in the dominant culture. He goes to the opera with the principal aim of mixing with the upper classes and being seen as cultured. He is described as "A fellar who likes to play ladedda, and he like English customs and things, he does be polite and say thank you and he does get up in the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which is a thing even them Englishmen don't do." (Selvon, 1985, p.111) book *The Location of Culture* (1994). From his point of view, it is inadequate to use center or margin to define the relationship between the colonists and the colonized because they are mutually exclusive and depend on each other. He notes that "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal..." (Bhabha, 1994, p.159) Bhabha defines hybridity as "the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative." (Bhabha, 1994, p.159) Harris who wants to be identified as white and English is very uncomfortable among these immigrants. He represents a subjectivity that identifies absolutely with the dominant culture, leaving no room for his own culture. Harris keeps trying to build a space between London culture and Creole culture. Harris is a cultural broker who uses Homi Bhabha's theory of "in-between space". (Bhabha, 1994, p.85) The difficulty of this in-between position is definitely the factor that makes the Creoles and other black immigrants racially ambiguous and puzzled with their cultural identity.

B. *Building a Hybrid Identity — Moses Ascending*

Under the overwhelming influence of London culture, the Creole immigrants yield to the metropolitan culture. Their identification is actually based on the assimilation, then from the negotiation to hybridity. Some of them are abandoned by the host society; these people have to leave London and go back to their hometown. The rest of them are gradually assimilated by the London culture. Some of them even live a life that belongs to London middle class like Moses. In *The Lonely Londoners*, the plot and structure are developed around two lines: Moses and his fellows. And Selvon focuses on description of Moses in *Moses Ascending* (Selvon, 2008). From Moses and his fellows' experiences, we can gradually recognize the subtle change of their cultural identities and get an understanding of the hybrid identity. After all kinds of identity crisis, these immigrants begin to realize they should construct a new identity by negotiating the Creole culture and London culture. Moses himself is a typical example in constructing hybrid identity. He "typifies to my mind all that happened among that older generation and he also spoke in the voice, in the idiom of the people which was the only way that he could speak to express himself. I think that in spite of all his presumptions to be English, that he still remains basically a man from the Caribbean". (Nasta, 1985, p.5-6)

There are two aspects in Moses's construction of hybrid identity. The first aspect is his shift in living habit. When he first comes to London, he enjoys the feeling of a big community and a big family. He attaches great importance to brotherhood. So every time the Creole fellows come to London, he goes to pick them up. He helps them to adapt to London life, a life away from his culture as soon as possible. He organizes the gathering every week in his living place. But after years' living in London, he begins to become independent and begins his own life. Just like the Londoners around, their lives are centered on themselves. They care more about themselves. When Moses decides to move into the

new house, he is going to free from his old fellows and free from his Creole identity. In his new location, he is in a hybrid situation: he is “dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling”. (Clifford, 1992, p.108)

The second aspect in Moses’s construction of hybrid identity is reflected in his relationship with women. In *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses doesn’t have any connection with women. His view of women is traditional and rude. He never appreciates the beauty or wisdom of women. Women mean nothing to him. He could barely imagine that he could develop any relationship with women. His opinions towards women are confined to the Creole circle. At that time, the Creole women around him are not well educated. He doesn’t have any chance to develop any relationship with white females. But in *Moses Ascending*, he begins to know how to appreciate a woman from different angle. He begins to run after the woman he likes with strong passion. He even has relationship with a white woman. All of these behaviors result from his awareness of new identity, which has triggered his masculine strength. Brenda is a typical new woman, a representative of beautiful and brilliant woman. Her physical appearance illustrates her gender identity. Her ability, strong willingness and wisdom illustrate her cultural identity. These qualities arouse Moses’s dominant desire, making him fall in love. But Moses’s affection towards Brenda is not merely sexual. He helps Brenda in her process of dream pursuing out of his appreciation. He donates his money to her party and newspaper. He offers his house for her to have political meetings. And finally he takes part in the political activities she has organized. His viewpoints of women become more open, complete and mature just like the London gentlemen. After his passion towards Brenda runs out, he knows Jeannie, Bob’s girl friend, Jeannie, a white girl. He appreciates this girl and has subtle affection for her. He makes Jeannie live together with them in his house. He thinks that the atmosphere of the house is good when Jeannie is in. He enjoys this atmosphere. Different from the traditional Creole women, Brenda and Jeannie represent the new type of London women. He begins to develop new relationship with these women. This process also helps him to reconstruct his hybrid cultural identity.

III. CONCLUSION

According to the Theory of Identity, the immigrants are always seen as “the other” (Bhabha, 1994: 36) by local people. Western world imagines and describes the situation of the colonized subjectively and emotionally. From their point of view, the images of immigrants are associated with words like poor, savage, uncivilized and illiterate. The white people’s sense of superiority and distorted view of the immigrants are the primary reason of every form of prejudice, gradually leading to cultural barrier. Although most of the immigrants want to maintain their Creole cultural identity when they first arrive in London, they cannot stick to Creole tradition any more. The metropolis despises their culture. The immigrants are isolated from the mainstream society and begin to experience every kind of discrimination. They have to directly face their problem of cultural identity for their traditional identity becomes more and more challenging. In order to seek a sense of belonging, the immigrants start to adjust to the traditions and the life-style norms of the white culture. Their association with the traditional Creole culture increasingly weakens. They begin to seek a new identity, not like their old identity, or like the local Londoners. And this change is inevitable. Cultural identity is not something fixed or stable, but a matter of becoming. In Homi Bhabha’s opinion, that is a negotiation between the immigrant culture and the host culture. During the process of the negotiation, a new different culture forms which is often described as “hybrid”. (Bhabha, 1994, p.100)

Trapped between the London culture and Creole culture, “the issue of multiculturalism is put on the agenda”. (Kalpakli, 2008, p.245) In order to survive physically and realize their dreams, these immigrants have formed a hybrid identity. On one hand, they keep accepting the assimilation of the host culture and changed their original identity positively. On the other hand, they have rebelled against Western culture when they are in dilemma. they won’t treat themselves as complete Londoners. Deep in their hearts, there flows the Creole blood. Their Creole identity is their source of power and comfort. As a result of a hybrid identity, they are both people of Creole and London. They speak English, live a Londonized life and are deeply influenced by western lifestyles, ideas and values. The two novels engage with “the construction of black identity as formed through the perspective of the dominant culture in Britain in the fifties”. (Bentley, 2003, p.42) Selvon provides a hybridized narrative that expresses “the human’s spirit for a cross-cultural relationship”. (Glissant, 1989, p.98)

First of all, the hybrid identity helps the Creole immigrants to construct their new cultural identity. On one hand, they accept the assimilation from the London culture. On the other hand, they struggle to keep the treasure of the Creole culture. As immigrant of hybrid identity, they are both London people and Creole people. They begin to live like Londoners. They begin to do some decent jobs. They begin to have relationships with white girls. They begin to have their own industry in London. They even begin to pursue their different rights just like ordinary local people. But at the same time, they are not totally Londonized because their inner resistance and their identification of their original identity. We can say that hybridity is a bridge between host culture and home culture.

Secondly, the construction of hybrid identity aims to get rid of the cultural barrier. It is inevitable. Although most of the immigrants coming to London want to keep their national tradition and cultural identity at first, they gradually find it too hard to stick to and finally give up. At the very beginning, in order to maintain their culture and identity, they live together as a community. They gather to have a meeting every week. They help each other to look for jobs and living place. They take care of those who just arrive in London to get familiar with this city. They are desperately attempting to maintain their origin language, habits, and values. They treasure their boyhood friendship and their hometown. This

kind of affection unites them. They form a kind of cultural circle apart from London culture. They differentiate themselves from the white people during the process of identification. But as time goes by, they find it impossible for them to stick to their Creole identity because London culture is the mainstream and the local Londoners belong to the ruling status. These immigrants feel the cultural alien and cultural isolation even the cultural threatening. They are kept away from the mainstream and experiencing the cultural discrimination by people in London. For the sake of living and pursuing a sense of belonging, they change their way. They begin to adjust to the traditions and life-style norms of the white London culture. Their attachment to the traditional Creole culture weakens simultaneously. Thus, we may say that cultural identity is not fixed and unchangeable. It is a matter of becoming. According to Homi Bhabha's view of identity, this is a negotiation between the immigrant culture and the host culture, during the process of negotiation, a new different culture forms which is the hybridity. Homi Bhabha regards the hybrid identity as a product of cultural translation. The transformation of cultural identities is inevitable. But these immigrants couldn't attach to one identity and reject another. And there is no need and no possibility for them to form such a stable and single identity.

Thirdly, the emergency of hybrid identity conforms to the contemporary cultural trend and has many kinds of strengths. Firstly, hybrid identity helps the immigrants rapidly adapt to life and customs in London. At the beginning, they are unwilling to be Londoners, living in small groups isolated from mainstream, which is negative for their own development. After they really accept this new pattern of identity, they assimilate into London society. They endeavor to build their own life. On many aspects of life, hybrid identity helps them experience a decisive transform. Secondly, hybrid identity helps them combine the strengths of two cultures, free from the control of the superiority of the white's culture. Hybrid identity is built on the basis of the original cultural identity. This is the intrinsic part any one of them could never give up. Immigrants who have experienced two kinds of cultures can be more reasonable to both Creole culture and London culture. Keeping the good and tossing the wrong from both sides help them improve themselves and step forward. Last but not least, hybrid identity endows them with a sense of belonging. Immigrants who leave their hometown and live in a new environment are always feeling insecure and homesick. They don't have an identity in London. Hybrid identity is a fixed certificate of identification. They are to some extent accepted. Hence they get the sense of belonging, taking London for their second hometown.

Nowadays, many former colonized countries are struggling to get decolonized. They want to get away from both political control and the control of colonial economy, history, culture and psychology. The colonial powers have not only built their political supremacy, but also brought their racial superiority into the colonized places. They disdained all the original things in colonized places and aimed to destroy them and replace them with their own culture. Their ultimate purpose is to establish the cultural superiority and implant their own values. The decolonization of culture and psychology is rather difficult. The centralized ideological culture and colonial rule have left a deep imprint on the colonized people. Although all the colonized countries have successfully got rid of the colonial rule, they haven't got the real independence. Because of the deep influence from the colonial power, they begin to lose their original traditions and national cultures. But the Creole immigrants in these two novels have given us confidence. They keep struggling against the negative effects from the colonial culture as well as accepting the positive aspects. They have launched on a series of hybrid activities. Based on their Creole traditions and culture, they keep forging on. They use their own experiences to make the process of hybridization more persuasive and feasible. They not only keep the traditional Creole identity but have some characteristic of London people. In a word, they are influenced by London culture as well as keeping their own culture and values. As an immigrant of hybridity, they are both London people and Creole people. But they are not totally Londonized because of their inner resistance and their sense of belonging to their original culture. Most colonized countries have walked a long way in the process of decolonization and achieved some preliminary results. But decolonization is an arduous task whether in politics, economy or in culture and psychology. And the trend of cultural globalization even makes decolonization more difficult. How to preserve their own culture as well as conform to the theme of cultural globalization is the way out for the former colonized people. Creole immigrants' example has turned out to be practicable. In Homi Bhabha's opinion, hybridity has coordinate function upon different culture. It makes cultural diversity possible and helps form a cultural prosperity nowadays in our world. Hybridity helps them find adequate room in London society both materially and mentally.

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