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### Abstract

In an attempt, to use the author's own words, 'to project my part of the world onto the map because I found when I went to live in England that people never knew where Trinidad was', Samuel Selvon has created a literature of short stories and novels that portray the lives of essentially three kinds of character - country-bound peasants, middle-class Trinidadians living in Trinidad, and lower-class West Indian immigrants, lured to London by the grandiose expectations of an inverted El Dorado myth. Criticism has, to a large extent, neglected the middle - class Trinidadian who appears in *An Island Is a World* (1955) and *I Hear Thunder* (1963), the former considered by the author to be his most ambitious, and in some ways his most important work. These two novels have as their protagonists mainly creolized Indo-Trinidadians, who in an attempt to find themselves, experience 'the existential and metaphysical crisis of an educated and professional group of middle-class Trinidadians in post-war years'<sup>1</sup> .

ROYDON SALICK

## Selvon and the Limits of Heroism: A Reading of *The Plains of Caroni*

In an attempt, to use the author's own words, 'to project my part of the world onto the map because I found when I went to live in England that people never knew where Trinidad was', Samuel Selvon has created a literature of short stories and novels that portray the lives of essentially three kinds of character - country-bound peasants, middle-class Trinidadians living in Trinidad, and lower-class West Indian immigrants, lured to London by the grandiose expectations of an inverted El Dorado myth. Criticism has, to a large extent, neglected the middle - class Trinidadian who appears in *An Island Is a World* (1955) and *I Hear Thunder* (1963), the former considered by the author to be his most ambitious, and in some ways his most important work. These two novels have as their protagonists mainly creolized Indo-Trinidadians, who in an attempt to find themselves, experience 'the existential and metaphysical crisis of an educated and professional group of middle-class Trinidadians in post-war years'. The bulk of criticism has focused on the peasant novels and the immigrant novels. The peasant novels are about the Indo-Trinidadian peasant in his local milieu, and the immigrant novels, except for one, are all set in London and its environs, and are generally about the Afro-West Indian, and specifically about the Afro-Trinidadian.

The lush rural landscapes of the peasant novels are decidedly different from the sombre, hazy backdrop of London. The warmth and colour of the former give way to the cool, grey shades of the immigrant novels. Moreover, a sense that life consists of a constant struggling for and away from land and cane pervades the peasant novels, while humour, sexual indulgence and hustling characterize the immigrant works. A consistently overlooked aspect of the peasant novels is the noticeable absence of the quality of humour that is, in a real sense, at the heart of the immigrant novels. The difference, I believe, is a sure indication of the cultural disparity between the two largest ethnic groups that are, in one way or another, the primary focus of much of Selvon's writing. No other writer devotes so much of his fiction to the implications and modalities of the relations between Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians.

In the immigrant novels - *The Housing Lark* (1965), *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Moses Ascending* (1975), and *Moses Migrating* (1983) - there is an obvious, perhaps intentional irony that substantially undercuts the possibilities of real achievement in the lives of the protagonists. *The Housing Lark* is not easy to assess, simply because it is difficult to know exactly what Selvon was trying to do in it. There appears to be some attempt to vindicate the primacy of the human imagination, but the novel remains too much of a *jeu d'esprit* to comfortably accommodate a reading centred around achievement or heroism, in spite of the fact that the house is finally secured on the strength of the painstaking saving of the group of six West Indian immigrants, and more significantly, on the projected earnings of calypsonian Harry Banjo. It is worth noting that Selvon accords the women, especially Teena, a pivotal and decisive role in the novel.

There is, as well, something obviously anti-heroic about the immigrant novels, especially when considered contextually. Thus at the end of *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses after all the fêtes, the constant counselling and the sexual indulgence, is at his loneliest, threatening to be overwhelmed by a massive meaninglessness:

Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling along the Strand, the spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered hopeless. (p.141).

Kenneth Ramchand is right when he alerts us to 'Moses' individuation and his emergence as a thinking creature',<sup>2</sup> but this does not gainsay the awful loneliness of the narrator's final comment: 'it was the sort of night that if you wasn't making love to a woman you *feel* you was the only person in the world like that' [my italics]. Indeed the sentence only increases the frightening loneliness; and there is a deliberate moving away from 'cogitations' to feeling.

When Moses reappears, some twenty years later, in *Moses Ascending*, the reader is struck not by the similarity but by the difference between the new Moses and the Moses of *The Lonely Londoners*. Although Selvon takes great pains to convince us that it is the same character, we are not easily convinced. Our difficulty springs from Selvon's attempt to work backwards; for in a real sense the Moses of *The Lonely Londoners* appears an older, wiser, chastened and reflective character. Indeed, he is the composite of all three protagonists. If I may be permitted a musical metaphor: *Moses Ascending* is the *scherzo*, *Moses Migrating*, the *brio*, and *The Lonely Londoners*, the *adagio piu grave* of Selvon's metropolitan opus.

*Moses Ascending* plots the simultaneous rise and fall of the protagonist:

we watch as Moses becomes materially comfortable, while at the same time we sense his moral and spiritual decline. Moses can hardly be Ramchand's 'thinking creature' in this work, because he cannot grasp his moral decline. The final and centripetal irony shows Moses descending into a basement apartment, becoming in the process an improbable mixture of landlord and tenant. The view from his basement window suggests the bleakness of his future prospects, and the imagery invites our scrutiny: 'I surveyed the miniature jungle I could see out of the window, wondering if I should start all over again, forage among the undergrowth and grub for acorns and truffles' (p.138). Selvon's chastisement of his protagonist is markedly clear: Moses has permitted a diminution and corruption of his humanity. Although the fictional contexts are, *prima facie*, quite different, Moses' journey is somewhat like that of Kurtz, regressive and atavistic.

*Moses Migrating*, the most critical of the trilogy, reveals the inability of Moses to return to meaningful living in his homeland in spite of the love of a good woman and the support of a caring aunt who raised him. Although Carnival is open enough to encourage and allow any mimetic experiments, Moses' obsessive desire to masquerade as Britannia is not without its trenchant irony. The final image of Moses, standing at the London immigration counter holding 'the silver cup he won as first prize for his impersonation of Britain', is made more resonant by the comparison with the Holy Grail. The deliberate comparison serves to suggest the chasm separating true epic heroism and Moses' mere mimicry of such conduct. It also suggests the distance between the significance of glorious achievement attendant upon arduous struggle and the commercial rewards of masquerading.

The Moses trilogy then shows quite patently the rootlessness of many characters, especially of the protagonist, Moses Aloetta, who is unable, because of a profound confusion of values, to find either peace of mind or spiritual or emotional fulfilment anywhere. London continually rejects him; although he finds love and warmth there, he rejects, somewhat wilfully, his homeland. Morally bankrupt and culturally marooned, Moses must forever face the 'great aimlessness'.

In the peasant novels, however, *A Brighter Sun* (1952), its sequel, *Turn Again Tiger* (1958), and *The Plains of Caroni* (1970), Selvon treats of the theme of the possibilities of heroism, for in these three novels, especially in the first and the last, we sense the apotheosis of the Indo-Trinidadian peasant. I have argued elsewhere that Tiger Baboolal may be seen as a latter-day, Caribbeanized version of the epic heroes of old. For Tiger has, along with an obsessive desire to know as much as he can, an epic longing to found a racially integrated and politically independent Trinidad. Although there is the occasional admonishment of the hero, there is also the general approbation of Tiger's painful journey out of insignificance and illiteracy into the harsh but rewarding light of manhood

and knowledge. Fortunately, his academic pursuit, still inchoate but categorically not banal, do not take him away from the land, the source of pride, of livelihood and of anguish for his kind. As Tiger faces a future limitless in promise, he is a chastened young man with the sure knowledge of the planting cycle and significantly with the secret mystery of words. Tiger's confident odyssey is unobtrusively but perfectly adumbrated in the final affirmation of the novel, 'Now is a good time to plant corn'. The careful reader remembers that Tiger's first words to Sookdeo, to Urmilla, to Ramlal, to Boysie and to the men in the rumshop were all questions. The calculated shift from initial question to final assertion is an index of Tiger's growth in self-assurance and knowledge.

In *Turn Again Tiger*, written six years after *A Brighter Sun*, Selvon, after a novel about the middle-class professional Trinidadian, and another about immigrant life in London, returns to the peasant as hero. *Turn Again Tiger* is quite a surprising novel, since it is meant to be a sequel to *A Brighter Sun*. Indeed, Selvon, who admits to working quickly, appears to have trouble with sequels. Naipaul may very well be right in his assessment that Selvon does not have the stamina for a full-length novel.<sup>3</sup> Selvon is at his best in short stories and vignettes; and this accounts for the brilliance of individual portions of novels and for a lurking dissatisfaction with the whole. In *Turn Again Tiger*, Tiger against his vow to his wife, made at the end of *A Brighter Sun*, returns to the cane-fields, not in Chaguanas but in Five Rivers, as a bookkeeper/foreman of an experimental cane plantation. Against his better judgement and against all that his bitter struggle in *A Brighter Sun* signifies, Tiger agrees to help his father manage a cane plantation. It may be that Selvon's point is that the Indo-Trinidadian peasant, represented by Tiger, who, we recall, comes from Chaguanas, the Indian area of Trinidad, cannot *voluntarily* eradicate the cane experience from his life. He must first come to terms with what sugar cane, the most ubiquitous existential symbol of Caribbean race relations, really means. He must first come to terms with the inherent ambivalence of cane, the means of livelihood and honest toil for generations of Indians, but also the great impediment to their progress in a plural society, an ambivalence so well illustrated in the short story *Cane Is Bitter* and in *The Plains of Caroni*. The pivotal incident in *Turn Again Tiger* is quite a surprising one - the sexual encounter between Tiger and Doreen Robinson, wife of the white plantation overseer. Nothing in the development of Tiger prepares us for this. To be inflamed by stumbling on a white woman bathing naked in a stream is one thing, but to pursue and virtually rape her is another altogether. Selvon sacrifices realism here for symbolism, albeit a heavy-handed symbolism, and thus relinquishes his strength as a writer: the ability to create characters and situations rich in idiosyncratic life.

Nothing comes from this encounter - neither pleasure, nor peace of mind, nor satisfaction. In fact, Tiger is far more troubled than he ever

was; his inner turmoil resulting from this gratuitous act is so great that it compels him to perform another surprising act, that of burning all his books. We are meant to accept that such a hard-earned and jealously-guarded prize as knowledge, symbolized by books, can be so easily destroyed. Tiger also begins to drink heavily, and this coupled with his admixture of guilt, revenge and anger over his encounter with Doreen, leads him away from everything he holds dear. Tiger sees his promise to his father through, and so the experimental case is harvested, though not without unforeseen problems. We leave *Turn Again Tiger* feeling that Tiger's integrity has been compromised.

It is a curious fact that while Tiger plunges into despair and futile doubt, Urmilla, his wife, comes gradually into her own. Surprisingly, Tiger, maturing more slowly, senses Urmilla's need for self-assertion, and he is moved by her leading the village women to force a reduction in the consumption of alcohol and to demand more attention from their husbands. Where the other women fail, she succeeds. At the end of the novel, she is rich with her second child, having established some measure of self-assurance and confidence. Though we may not see her as an earth goddess, as one adventurous critic does,<sup>4</sup> we sense that she has matured sufficiently to know what independent life entails.

The Tiger saga, in an important way, continues in *The Plains of Caroni*, a book that resulted from an eighteen-month stay in Trinidad, when Selvon was paid by Tate & Lyle, the British sugar conglomerate, to write a book about the sugar industry in Trinidad. Although Selvon spent his longest return visit in Tacarigua, where incidentally *Turn Again Tiger* is set, he chose to set his new novel in Wilderness, more than likely a fictionalized version of Warrenville, a village six miles north east of Chaguanas. It was here that an incident over the introduction of the mechanical harvester occurred in 1968, an incident in which shots were fired without injury. This is the historical quarry from which Selvon partially drew his material for his most heroic, and sadly, his most neglected novel, since to date, only a few short reviews have appeared. *The Plains of Caroni* was republished in 1985 to introduce a recently-migrated Selvon to the Canadian public. Evidently, the event went unnoticed, for the Canadian literary world was silent. This, therefore, is the first sustained analysis accorded *The Plains of Caroni*, which one reviewer calls Selvon's 'finest book'.<sup>5</sup>

The heroic impulse which impels *A Brighter Sun* resurfaces in *The Plains of Caroni*, but in the later novel it is channelled through two different characters, one young, the other old. Selvon creates two heroes, who, curiously, are at odds with each other. Balgobin, the father, represents a traditional Indo-Trinidadian peasant sensibility; Romesh, the son, embodies a progressive world-view, moving from cane-field to university to working for the management of the sugar company. Both Balgobin and Romesh are ignorant of their precise propinquity, a fact

known only to Seeta, Romesh's mother. Selvon uses this old literary device to allow each individual freedom to act independently. Balgobin is the exemplar of an obsolescent heroism, a heroism that recalls the conduct of the epic heroes of old. He also resembles at least one modern-day peasant hero - Santiago, the old fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Indeed a comparison between *The Plains of Caroni* and *The Old Man and the Sea* is instructive, because it reveals Selvon's intentions of writing an heroic novel. It will also, I trust, show how unfair and misguided Birbalsingh is when he assesses *The Plains of Caroni* as merely a 'collection of sketches and anecdotes jumbled together in flimsy frames of romantic intrigue'.<sup>6</sup>

Although *The Plains of Caroni* does not possess the parabolic intensity of *The Old Man and the Sea*, nevertheless it can be placed quite comfortably in the heroic tradition. Both Santiago and Balgobin are very old: chronologically they are the oldest men in their respective villages. They are also fortunately the oldest in experience, suffering and occupational expertise. Both are wrinkled, and exhibit the tell-tale signs of a life of hardship and industry. A juxtaposition of two descriptive passages indicates the striking similarity in experience, physical appearance, in impressive strength and in character.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings forth from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But, none of the scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

Everything about him was old, except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.<sup>7</sup>

While Hemingway's parabolic intentions seem clear from the penultimate sentence, Selvon, as it were, more firmly grounds his hero:

The fingers were long and the nails still pink and oval-shaped - an artistic hand, as they say, more suited to paint-brush or pen. The grey hairs on the back curved as if they had overlived and were curling back on their lives. But the skin stretched taut as if seeking more life, and this tautness was all over his body. Even the skin on his face had used wrinkles and creases in this quest; when he was sixty, they appeared for the first time, but gave up soon after that, and except for tiny crowsfeet and two parallel horizontal lines on his forehead - the feet from squinting in the sunlight, the lines from tension and worry - his skin was smooth. But it bore the marks of time in other ways. It was burnt a deep brown from years in the fields, and an abscess in his youth had left an ugly scar on his left forearm.<sup>8</sup>

Both peasant heroes, as it were, are made to represent their respective elements, the sea and the land. Santiago's destiny is on the sea: it is to catch 'the biggest fish that he had ever seen and bigger than he had ever heard of' (p45). He loves the sea in that peculiar quasi-sexual



relationship that characterizes so many male responses to nature in American literature. Santiago, we are told, 'always thought of her (the sea) as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favors, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them' (p.20-21). Santiago is sustained by the food of the sea: the fish, the shrimp, the turtle eggs which he ate all through May to be strong in September and October, and the cup of shark-liver oil which he drank every day 'against all colds and gripes', and which is 'good for the eyes' (p.26). Passive and often supine on land, Santiago becomes the epitome of technical virtuosity and industry on sea. Balgobin, on the other hand, is a land person, more specifically, a cane man. Selvon leaves no doubt of his intention of portraying his peasant hero as a sort of embodiment of the total cane experience and process:

His whole body oozed odour. Not the smell of sweat and dirt - these were overwhelmed by the sweet smell of molasses, and sugarcane, and rum. By smell alone, he was part of a sugar plantation. The rum had his eyes red and blood-shot, but his vision was still good. (p.10).

Both heroes fortify themselves against the ravages of time, and both are self-assured experts preparing themselves for the big fight. Both Santiago and Balgobin are men of destiny, although it is true that the sense of destiny is far more obtrusive and insistent in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago is always aware of what he is and what he was born for. Balgobin is not given utterances of destiny as Santiago is, but Selvon adds a dimension to his characterization that Hemingway omits. Like Oedipus and Mr Biswas, Balgobin's fate is decreed early in his life: 'as for Balgobin, it has been decreed by the stars that he would wander and come to a sad ending' (p.11). Balgobin's heroic struggle shows him battling against fate, and his ending, although sad, is triumphant. Time and circumstance conspire to fulfil at least part of his destiny.

One fateful night, the sweet smell of cane all round them, and the silver-grey sheen of the flowers against a sky of stars, Balgobin and Seeta, his younger brother's betrothed, make love in a cane-field. Driven by 'a love that transcended all ordinary understanding', they could only 'love for the first and last time, and try, in the union to defy their destinies and capture some unforgettable togetherness to last them the rest of their lives'. Haunted by feelings similar to those Tiger feels after his violent intercourse with Doreen Robinson, Balgobin, like Cain, becomes a vagabond, and wanders 'all over the island cutting cane, ageing and disillusioned' (p.101). Through his wandering 'over the island from sugar estate to sugar estate' (pp.10-11), Balgobin unwittingly prepares himself for the fight of his life, for the battle that will immortalize his name among the villagers of Wilderness.

Santiago and Balgobin are not only associated with two occupations, but also represent a way of life. Both heroes fight desperately to preserve

a way of life they believe is worth fighting for. In both novels, part of what they confront is represented by the presence of the machine. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago watches and comments on the young fishermen, 'who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motor boats', and 'on the rich with radios in their boats' (p.28). The presence of the machine is nicely adumbrated in the most ominous image of all: 'An aeroplane passed overhead on its course to Miami and he watched its shadow scaring up the schools of flying fish' (p.51). In *The Plains of Caroni*, the machine is a far more palpable and minatory presence. The mechanical harvester emerges early one morning, 'drew spangling silver across the fields', lumbering 'like some cumbersome juggernaut', with an emergency unit in attendance (p.67).

In the comparison between the mechanical harvester and 'some metal Trojan Horse' (p.68), Selvon reminds us of the most celebrated emblem of intruding treachery in classical heroic literature. The mechanical harvester represents, on the one hand, all that is inimical to the continuity of peasant life on the plains of Caroni, and on the other, the inevitable result of man's technological efforts to be more efficient and productive. Unlike Balgobin, his son Romesh, a mouthpiece for Selvon in this instance, senses the inherent ambivalence of the machine in the garden:

there were other and more important Trinidadians who felt that with any technological innovation, the Company was threatening the livelihood of the people. The bogey of the harvesting machine was the greatest threat of all. Many labourers looked forward to the reaping season after months of unemployment and hardships...But there could be no holding back or delay if the sugar industry was to prosper and benefit the island's economy as a whole (p.56).

Whereas Santiago, in a three-day ordeal, battles against a live fish of incredible strength and beauty, Balgobin fights a mechanical harvester, variously described as a 'lumbering cumbersome juggernaut', a 'metal Trojan Horse', a 'magic machine' (p.68) and a 'giant monster' (p.73). Such descriptive phrases serve to remind us of a literary heroic tradition, which dictates, among other things, that heroes have unique weapons, without which they cannot overcome their antagonists. Like the Red Cross Knight, Arthur and Achilles, to name a few, Balgobin, a modern epic hero, has his cutlass, affectionately called Poya, the most common Hindi term for cutlass. It is very old, sixty-years-old to be precise, with a balata handle and a steel blade whose 'fine edge was as bright as silver' (p.10). Selvon deliberately invokes the heroic tradition in his description of this venerable weapon:

The cutlass seemed to have a life of its own. For years it had been accustomed to certain patterns of movement, obedient to the call of particular muscles, to a fixed routine of action. From the moment the hand of its master touched it, the fingers meshing into worn grooves on the handle. Poya knew what it had to do. If a

stranger held it, it rebelled, and once, in La Gloria, as a labourer made fun of it, it dropped from his hand and split his big toe in two, through nail and bone. Poya had longed to test itself in a variety of ways. It had descended from a strain of buccaneers; its ancestors had tasted real blood. Poya knew that several of his friends and relatives kept the buccaneering spirit alive, particularly on the banks of the Caroni, and the Indian villages...(pp.76-77).

Armed with this special weapon, with a defiant pride bordering on *hubris*, with an unshakable confidence in the rightness of his attempting to preserve the only way of life he knows, and with a profound fear of change and of the future, Balgobin engages in 'battle'. Despite the fact that Poya, somewhat like Santiago's left hand, betrays him in the ordeal, Balgobin is successful. Angry because Poya receives a six-inch 'honourable wound', Balgobin, to destroy once and for all this antagonist sent by history and progress, sets fire to the harvester:

In the morning the combine harvester was still smouldering and smoking, but from a distance it was hardly possible to tell that anything was wrong with it. It was only on a closer look that it was discovered it had been destroyed beyond repair, still towering above the cane, but now a wreck of twisted metal (p.78).

A crucial aspect of Balgobin's heroism is his artistic potential. His right hand, we read, was 'an artistic hand...more suited to paint brush or pen' (p.10). His cutlass becomes in his expert hands a magical and artistic instrument. Its clean, clear strokes remind us of the artist's pen or brush. The artistic hand is but an external index of the inner creative spirit. Once the fateful battle is over, Balgobin, now a poet, experiences a yearning to re-enact the ordeal. In words, graphic and compelling, he recounts the battle for the moral uplift of his young nephew, Popo:

Balgobin badly wanted to tell the story. He had lived with it, going over each little detail of the battle. He had slept with it, and in his dreams the fight was long and exhausting and he got up in the morning so tired he could hardly move (p.99).

Balgobin, therefore, like so many of Selvon's protagonists, manifests a creative desire. Tiger, Moses, Foster (*An Island Is a World*), Harry Banjo, and even Garry Johnson (*Those Who Eat the Cascadura*) are all artists inchoate; men of imagination and dedication, each succeeding, in varying degrees, to use the words of *The Plains of Caroni*, to create his personal 'glorious episode of history' (p.100).

One of the most affecting aspects of *The Old Man and The Sea* and *The Plains of Caroni* is the relationship between the hero and what we might call his heir apparent. The relationship is one of mutual love and caring. Manolin, Santiago's disciple, longs to know everything that his master can teach: 'You must get well fast for there is much that I can learn and you can teach me everything' (p.91). Similarly, Popo wants to learn as much as he can about his uncle and about cane cutting, and to this end

he emulates his uncle: 'And when he got to be an old man, he was going to be like his Uncle Balgobin' (p.43). He is the young initiate, the only one allowed, as it were, in the magic circle, and 'the only one privileged to touch Poya' (p.45). Popo is taught to hold, respect and use this unique weapon:

'How much time I got to tell you, don't hold a cutlass with the edge turn to you?' Balgobin glowered at Popo. 'Sorry, Uncle.' The boy turned the blade.

'All right.' Balgobin got up. 'Now show me what you do when you face that patch of cane.'

'I do so, and so'. With the words the boy stepped forward and the blade was a blur as he cut the imaginary stalk of cane - two strokes at the top, one at the roots.

'You lie. That ain't what I teach you.' Balgobin took the cutlass. 'When you do so and so', he imitated the boy, 'you only get two cane plants. But when you do so, so, and so, and then so' - the cutlass flashed faster than the boy could follow - 'you get three cane plants, and you have your ripe cane cut, and you ready to tackle the next one' (p.45).

This, of course, is necessary training for the inevitable 'one day', when the heir apparent, turned hero, faces his true test. Both boys, as part of their complete education for their destiny, sustain the older men, spiritually and physically. Both are chosen to bring food to their mentors, who live in the humblest of abodes. Santiago lives in a shack made of the tough budshields of the royal palm, furnished with a bed, a table and a chair, and a place on the dirt floor to cook with charcoal. Balgobin's dwelling is even humbler: a hut made of the branches of the carat palm, 'with the bare necessities', no furniture, but a 'shaky table and sugar sacks' for a bed (p.104).

Unlike younger heroes, Santiago and Balgobin are old men, trying desperately to rationalize their lives, and to preserve intact a quintessential but obsolescent way of life. While the traditional epic hero is almost always forward-looking and future-oriented, these two men attempt to hold back the hands of time. But even in their retrograde struggle, they are allowed to act courageously, to stand out from the mass of mankind, and to establish a mode of conduct worthy of emulation. Santiago lives to fish another day, but his substantive role is now to teach Manolin as much as he can in his remaining years. Balgobin, however, dies after being comatose for two days, 'during which there was a great uproar throughout the length and breadth of the island'. Significantly, his death, like his life, affords him the opportunity to be heroic:

Unionists were about the only ones working overtime, rallying their party members to the cause of the downtrodden, oppressed sugar workers, calling for an end to the white imperialists and for local capital to take over, demanding that the Company withdraw all charges against the one ailing poor old man at death's door who had the courage to fight single-handed against the disaster of mechanization...Sugar workers from all over the island came to Wilderness and

formed a protecting force around the house, threatening blood and sand if any move was made to arrest their hero (p.136-37).

With Balgobin's ashes scattered into the Caroni River, he becomes an eternal part of the landscape and the river, so closely associated with the moods and feelings of the people who lived near to it (p.136). In time Balgobin's heroic life-story will no doubt become part of the 'Indian music [the Caroni River] would learn from the farmers and cane workers who live along its banks' (p.1). As Balgobin fought to ensure the continuity of peasant life on the plains of Caroni, so in turn the very peasants will ensure the perpetuity of Balgobin's indomitable struggle to give his people their own 'glorious episode of history' (p.100).

*The Plains of Caroni* ends with Romesh on the verge of leaving Trinidad for England on a Sugar Company scholarship. With Balgobin dead, the future of the sugar industry is in his hands, and so is the future of the Indo-Trinidadian peasantry who have tirelessly and successfully worked the sugar-cane fields since they first came to Trinidad. It is true that Romesh once cut cane, but nothing we know about him, except perhaps his name, indicates that he is distinctively peasant or Indian. His university education has forever taken him out of the cane-field, and evidently away from traditional Indian ways. His feelings at Balgobin's cremation seem far more removed from the expected ethnic response; and he does not have the abiding sense of family we have come to associate both in real life and in fiction with Indians. Furthermore, he chooses as lover, and possibly future wife, a pretty, university-educated local white girl, who seems as free from racial prejudice as Romesh is. Selvon does not give Romesh an option in love, because he does not present an Indo-Trinidadian alternative to Petra Wharton. To be fair to Romesh, although his feelings for Petra seem genuine, his involvement with her is at least partially to avoid any further entanglement in a suspiciously unnatural relationship with Seeta, his young, attractive and ambitious mother.

With his education, his dedication to research and his orientation to the future, Romesh comes to symbolize the process by which the Indo-Trinidadian peasant leaves the cane-field forever. Similarly, Balgobin represents the passing of the golden era when heroic individual effort was possible and necessary. History catches up with him, permitting him one last heroic gasp before the incipient demise of peasant labour. The ominous mechanical harvester, capable of doing the work of 'eighty-eight men' (p.68), will in time totally supplant the Indo-Trinidadian peasant, whose blood, sweat and tears have produced cane. The interests of Industry have devalued, if not destroyed, the interest in the worker. Although the mechanical harvester wins the war, Balgobin, in fighting the good fight, realizes his human potential. Created both unique and representative of his community, he becomes the apotheosis of the Indo-

Trinidadian peasant, forced by history and ethnicity to sacrifice everything to the creation of the sugar industry, which in turn sacrifices him to the 'cumbersome juggernaut' of technological innovation.

## NOTES

1. Peter Nazareth, 'Interview with Samuel Selvon', in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Washington : Three Continents Press, 1988), p.81, (hereafter cited as *Perspectives*).
2. Kenneth Ramchand, Introduction, *The Lonely Londoners* (London, 1986), p.18.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 'Turn Again Tiger', in *Perspectives*, p.123.
4. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Introduction, *Turn Again Tiger* (London : Heinemann, 1979). pxviii.
5. Andrew Salkey, 'Plains of Caroni', in *Perspectives*, p.128.
6. Frank Birbalsingh, 'Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance', in *Perspectives*, p.155-56.
7. Ernest Hemmingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (London, 1984).
8. *The Plains of Caroni* (Toronto : Williams-Wallace 1985), p.10.