

What are the cultural assumptions around racial identity in Samuel Selvon's short piece 'Finding Piccadilly Circus'? Your answer should consider colonial discourse and the role of language and dialect in storytelling.

Homi K. Bhabha argues colonial narratives have "[construed] the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin"¹ and that positive representations of race are essential for a balanced approach to the reading of literature. Reading Samuel Selvon's *'Finding Piccadilly Circus'* through a post-colonial lens, the reader explores the character's journey of racial identity and cultural appropriation as he steps onto the land of a white, western country. Selvon uses language and dialect in ways which raise awareness of the "disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences"² in order to present his narrator as embracing his culture and not conforming to western society.

Selvon uses Caribbean dialect to reflect his narrator's cultural identity but also to explore the conflicts that exist in his own life. The unnamed narrator represents the wider immigrant populace and their experiences of their new life in England: "let me give all-yuh this lowdown about what happen to me when Ah land up in London straight from Trinidad"³

Selvon use of Caribbean dialect foregrounds the narrators' cultural identity and throughout the text, the reader can observe stereotypes being subverted as the narrator feels proud when "me chest swell, Ah only seeing wite man carrying grip and luggage all over the place."⁴ The narrator feels superior to the white male as he sees him carrying other people's luggage and the white male calls the narrator 'sir'. This is the only name that he is given throughout the text and for a black man to be called 'sir' bestows authority on the narrator who states that this "[makes] me feel as if I is a star or

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Visual Culture: A Reader* ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall. (London: Sage, 1999) p.371.

² Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', p.371.

³ Samuel Selvon, 'Finding Piccadilly Circus', *Writing Black Britain*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) p.27

⁴ Selvon 'Finding Piccadilly Circus' n 27

something."⁵ The white man carrying the luggage is a pivotal moment in the story as it exceeds the narrator's expectations of arriving in a western country; in this moment, the white man is the slave to the black man. Yet, we also see subtle racism from "them other wite people who ain't working looking at me cut-eye, like if they too vex that Ah come in they country and getting money for nothing."⁶ The white people who are also lining up to receive their benefits alongside the narrator still feel like they are superior to him even though they are in the same financial position as him. This is not a straightforward text: the narrator is presenting both a negative and positive impression of London and providing a conflicted approach. He sees London as strange and the people foreign to himself when they do not understand what he is saying, yet he also notices that London receives "free money, free doctor"⁷ and he thinks that he has "land up in paradise at last"⁸. For the narrator to think that this is paradise shows how different his life was in Africa and foregrounds the cultural and economic inequalities.

The story undermines the stereotypes of colonised cultures being inferior as it shows the narrator being offered money from the government so that he can live - like he sees other white people doing - and shows our narrator being called 'sir' and being treated like he is welcome in the western country. However, the story also perpetuates stereotypes as it portrays the narrator as uneducated when he thinks that Piccadilly Circus is a literal circus. He thinks that everyone else around him is stupid because "de policeman didn't know which part he send [him]"⁹ as "[he] can't see no lion, or no circus only [he] see ah people all over the place and car and bus."¹⁰

⁵ Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.28

⁶ 'Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.28

⁷ Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.28

⁸ Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.28

⁹ Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.29

¹⁰ Selvon, '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', p.29

Post-colonial theory repositions Black, Asian and Hispanic culture from its white hegemonic discourse as 'other'. Edward Said's notion of 'writing back'¹¹ is the notion of getting post-colonial writers to write about their experiences of racial differences. In '*Signs Taken for Wonders*' post-colonial writer Homi Bhabha states that "there is a scene in the cultural writings of English colonialism which repeats [...] wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean [in] the English book."¹² Therefore, in '*Finding Piccadilly Circus*', Selvon is 'writing back' to white, western cultures. The text does not ask the reader to sympathise with its narrator; instead Selvon re-writes the colonised people back into the narrative.

ENDS

814 words

¹¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978)

¹² Homi Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1985) p.144

Bibliography

Bhabha, K. Homi, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Visual Culture: A Reader* ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall. (London: Sage, 1999)

Bhabha, K. Homi, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1985)

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*. (London: Routledge, 1978)

Selvon, Samuel, 'Finding Piccadilly Circus', *Writing Black Britain*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000)