

SAM SELVON TALKING

A Conversation with Kenneth Ramchand

Samuel Selvon

K.R. Samuel Selvon, you are the first writer-in-residence that we have had at St. Augustine and this is an important breakthrough for us, but I'm sure that many people will wonder why you are here for one month only, and why you have come in June* when our students are preoccupied with examinations.

S.S. I had hoped to come for the full student term, from October to December 1982, but I'm working on a new book which I have started and I have found that some research that I'd hoped to put off till a later period has to be done right now. I can't really move with the book until the research is done.

K.R. Are you doing a non-fiction work?

S.S. No, but in a way it is a departure for me. I hope to do a work of fiction, but it will be based loosely — very loosely — on historical material. Although it will be in the main a fiction and invention, and will related more to human and social relationships than to events, I would like to adhere to the history of the period — roughly the 1920's and 1930's — as closely as possible. At the same time if I find that the fiction and the creativity are working to my satisfaction, I might forsake historical authenticity. In other words, if I feel the need to shift an historical event or circumstance out by a few years I might very well do so. I don't know if this sort of thing has been done by other writers, and maybe critics and historians would find fault with this unorthodox way of handling the material, but I am going to try it anyway.

K.R. You said earlier that you are locating the book in the South.

S.S. Yes. It is set in and around San Fernando, and deals with the movement of East Indians from the sugar cane areas into the town and, in a way exactly

* This conversation took place when Samuel Selvon visited the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies in June 1982. He was in Trinidad on a Canada Council grant to carry out research about life among Indians in and around San Fernando with special reference to the 1920's and 1930's, in preparation for writing a novel.

like what is happening now, forsaking the land, being attracted by the life of the town — going into business, working as tradesmen, etc. just like the Negroes are supposed to have done after Slavery was abolished. There are two elements I would hope to involve. (a) The Christianizing and educating of the Indians by the Canadian missionaries which to some extent influenced them to forsake the land and move into the town. (b) The slave (Black) and the indenture (Indian) have always fascinated me because in spite of what is happening in Trinidad today it is my belief — tinged as it is with more and more disillusionment as the years go by — that a very strong human bond existed between these two factions though it has become more and more fragmentary.

- K.R. I am reluctant to press for more details at this stage because I know your method as a novelist has never involved analyzing before writing the work itself. I can guess there might be something like the relationship between Tiger and Joe in *A Brighter Sun*, but I don't want to draw you out if you feel you would like to stop there.
- s.s. If I did that I would have to treat it as the earlier stages of that kind of relationship. The Tiger - Joe relationship had already been there in the period I was writing about in *A Brighter Sun*, but I can't have that approach with two races coming into contact for the first time. In the new book, I really don't know if I would do it, or how I would handle it.
- K.R. But it seems that you are not as optimistic about that kind of relationship now as you were when you wrote *A Brighter Sun*.
- s.s. I feel it is easy to keep the dream alive because I spend most or all of my time living abroad, but whenever I come back to Trinidad and I listen and hear about what is happening my disillusionment is fuelled. In other words, if I had remained in the island experiencing the realities of what I hear is happening the dream would turn nightmare. But whenever I come, and go to the market and see the races together, or whenever I go in a taxi and sit beside a Negro and an Indian I find that elements of human tolerance still exist and that the picture is not as black as it appears. I believe that this strikes at the very root of the controversy and argument that go on concerning the subject matter that our writers choose.
- K.R. Very few writers of African origin have had the courage to deal with this sort of issue. A notable exception is Earl Lovelace who writes about the attempt of an Indian to fit into a largely African community in *The Dragon Can't Dance*. But I agree the subject does attract controversy. Are there other difficulties for a writer dealing with this subject?

- s.s. Yes man, that is a great thing about that book. If I choose to keep the dream alive I would be tempted to write about aspects that enhance the dream. But while I am all for the ultimatest freedom for the writer, his work should encompass a broad unbiased picture.
- k.r. Did you feel any need to do research about African-Indian relations when you were writing *A Brighter Sun*?
- s.s. No. I was living in Trinidad at the time and I wrote about something I knew from first-hand experience. In fact I took the Negro-Indian relationship so much for granted that it still amazes me that when some people talk about that novel they mention the Tiger-Joe relationship as a racial statement. To me I was just portraying the relationship that existed between two human beings and that was all.
- k.r. Looking at the design of the novel, the structure, the choice of characters and even some of the conversations one can't help thinking that the impulse to write about African-Indian relationships was present although it was not the main thrust of the book.
- s.s. Yeh, but you are asking a question there to rip open the guts of a writer's creativity to find out what processes go on here. There is a saying that I like, "When the pot was cooking you wasn't in the kitchen." So now, Ken, you are suggesting that I contrived during my creative process to have Tiger and Urmilla living near Joe and Rita but that wasn't planned in my mind when I was writing the book. The fact that Joe happened to be a Black man is quite incidental. To many Trinidadians it would appear that I deliberately made this set-up. I do not work this way. I have never worked this way. I start a book and I allow this creativity/charisma that writers are supposed to have to do its thing. What would be truthful is to say that I selected Barataria as the setting because I was living there between 1945 and 1950, that was deliberate.
- k.r. Well, then, do you think that in the book you are now writing you are going against your usual method of composition?
- s.s. Yes, and it comes back to that first question, where I told you I made a start, and needed to do some research.
- k.r. When you first wrote to me about coming to do the research, I felt intuitively that you wanted to get the feel of the period, to immerse yourself, and this was more important than the facts you would nevertheless be wanting to check on. When you said on arrival that you were trying your best not to look around or to listen to what is happening now, I took it that you did not

want any interference with that process of getting the feel of the earlier period.

- s.s. Well I think the facts are important but the point is that I would select what I want to use, what I feel would be helpful to me. Also it is not so much to get the feel of the period for itself, as to get the feel of the people of the period, because I would be after human relationships, lifestyle, social behaviour and so on.
- K.R. Do you think that the research you are doing will help you to discover things that were not apparent to you about African-Indian relationships when you lived here in 1945-50?
- s.s. Quite so. Not only that. I can't say at this stage what I may create or what I may not. I would certainly hope though that in this novel set in the early period there would be a great deal that would cast light in what was likely to happen in the future.
- K.R. Sam, I feel I am making you talk too much about the new book which you are still writing.
- s.s. I didn't want to do this but I'm doing it for you — like a kind of thinking aloud, so you must take it like that. I am sounding a little more ambitious than I might accomplish. I realize now that covering a period of 20-30 years in this way is not easy. And I don't want to make a statement to make people say "That will be a great book," that in itself would create a hang-up in my approach. I know that I would only superficially and selfishly be taking out certain events to write a novel. I have no feeling at all that this book will turn out to be an epic or saga covering the movement from country to town. There is more than enough history and drama here for others to do more comprehensive and detailed studies, and I earnestly hope it is being done.
- K.R. I hope we are not using up too much time on the new book or on the issue it now looks as if you are going to deal with, even though it is the most important issue in the social and political life of Trinidad today. Besides, you are a novelist not a politician or social commentator, and I feel bad about pushing you to talk in this way.
- s.s. I would much prefer to have had the novel already written than to talk about it in this way in truth, because hitherto I have never discussed with anybody what I hope to accomplish in a future project, because a man could tell you a lot about what he's going to do tomorrow, but when the time come he ain't done one arse, and I would feel much happier if the book had already been written and we were talking about it in retrospect. Also I do

not feel that I express my thoughts and views as well as I would like to in interviews and public statements, and I prefer to be read than heard. If I have anything significant to say on any issue it is to be found inside my novels and stories. I would say that my interest would lie more in my characters' reactions to issues and situations than in the issues themselves.

K.R. What is coming out of this conversation, Sam, is how one writer takes possession of his material, or becomes possessed by it, so even if you never wrote the new novel what you are revealing now is of great value to those of us who feel a sense of awe about the creative process.

s.s. When a writer is writing, it should be approached with a certain amount of innocence and when a writer loses that innocence he ceases to be a writer as far as I am concerned. Therefore I deliberately cultivate a certain measure of ignorance about everything in order to allow the innocence to feel its way into a situation or issue.

K.R. Would you say that you cultivate this innocence in your use of language?

s.s. To the extent that it does not worry me if I invent a turn of phrase or word, and interpolate it into what is commonly accepted as Trinidad dialect. Some people accuse me of writing a kind of hybrid dialect which is not truly authentic. What they fail to see is that apart from Vic Reid's *New Day* I was the only other West Indian novelist to write a novel in which both narrative and dialogue were written in dialect, and that I had to consider being read by an audience outside of the Caribbean to whom a presentation of the pure dialect would have been obscure and difficult to understand.

K.R. This sounds very much as if you are saying that if you did not have to think of a non-Caribbean reading public you would have written differently. Do you mean that?

s.s. No, because I am a writer and language is a tool. I do not think I could have said what I wanted to say without modifying the dialect. And if I had not done this modification the dialect would have been Greek to a lot of people.

K.R. Yes. I go along with a view similar to this, held by the Martiniquan Edouard Glissant, that for our society to make a transition into full self-development and self-expression it is necessary for dialect to cease to be a secret language and become an open language. It must come to terms with writing and still retain its essence as the language of our community.

s.s. In spite of the modification I consider what I do to be dialect. Furthermore I saw potential in this modified dialect to the extent that in my last novel using this language form, *Moses Ascending*, I experimented even further

with it using both this and an archaic form of English which is not spoken anywhere today. The point I want to make is that that archaic form is a kind of dialect. So I am combining two kinds of dialect. Another thing that a lot of people forget is that Standard English or “proper English” is also used as part of our dialect in certain phrases or words. For instance if I rudely interrupt a creolized Trinidadian and he or she turns to me, looks me up and down and says in the Queen’s English “I beg your pardon,” I would consider that to be part of the Trinidad dialect.

K.R. The terms you are using are straightforward, but the ideas coincide with those of a number of modern theorists who speak about the literariness of the text.

s.s. My language is being taken in as written language off the page. I am not writing spoken dialect directly on to the page with phonetic spellings and apostrophes and half-spoken words because to me those are handicaps to the reader. People love to hear me read, but I am not very much concerned with that. My concern is that they read the book as a reader, and that they use the senses of a reader rather than those of a listener to interpret the language and once they can interpret it as readers that is the main thing to me.

K.R. How do you respond to the assertion by a number of critics that *A Brighter Sun* is a dialect novel?

s.s. To tell you the truth I did not even know the full meaning of the word dialect when I wrote that book. The dialogue and a few sections when Tiger is thinking out his thoughts aloud are in dialect, but a great deal of it is straight basic English. I consider *The Lonely Londoners* and some of my later books to be dialect novels.

K.R. I can’t agree with you about *A Brighter Sun*. What you call straight basic English is what I call Trinidadian Standard English. To the eye it doesn’t seem very different from English Standard English, but if either of us were to read it aloud it would declare itself to be closely related to the dialect — it has the same system of sounds as our dialect. If Trinidadian Standard English does not look different from English Standard English or American Standard English, that is only because writing is an unreliable guide to the phonology of a language, especially its tone and accent. This is not a difficulty for a native speaker of the language however. When you or I read aloud a narrative passage from *A Brighter Sun*, and pass from there into the character thinking aloud or speaking, nobody notices the changeover. There is continuity. I would say *A Brighter Sun* is written in the Trinidadian language or Trinidad Creole which includes both Trinidadian standard and Trinidadian dialect. *The Lonely Londoners* is written in Trinidadian Creole

too, but it prefers to locate itself for the most part in the dialect of our language.

- s.s. I have never really considered the language in that light before, and I find it very interesting. We must look at *A Brighter Sun* together before I leave. But I still maintain that there must be a distinction between the written and the oral.
- K.R. I don't want to abolish that distinction either. While we are on the question of language, have you thought about how you would approach the language of the characters in the new novel? Will some of your research be related to that problem?
- s.s. The answer to the last part is no. The answer to the first is that I am more concerned with the translation of the emotions, feelings and situations than with reproducing a historically accurate language. If I find a language form that works I will use it. If I could write French, and French suited my purpose, I would use it.
- K.R. Will that be your attitude to place as well?
- s.s. I can't afford to be too far wrong topographically so I want to look at Cross Crossing, to envisage the land as it was then. I want to talk to a few people who know what it was like. I have to get an idea of the physical layout. I want to know what roads were asphalt, which ones had gravel and which ones had mud, them kind of little things. I might write about a man coming in to San Fernando from Cross Crossing barefoot and gravel hurting his foot, and people would say "No, that road had pitch not gravel." That is the kind of research I want to do.
- K.R. The book you may end up writing will not be exactly like the one you are talking about now, I don't think. And yet, as you talk about how a writer approaches his task one feels glad that you are being so generous, giving from what is private and very personal. This is the sort of exchange that universities take on creative writers for.
- s.s. I would be much happier discussing this face to face with a group of student writers. I have had some experience teaching creative writing in Britain and in Canada, and many times I have wished I was talking with people from my own country. I feel that any contribution that I have to make as a writer should be directed towards our own culture, and most of the writers I know are disappointed at the fact that while our potential has been appreciated and used abroad, nothing has been done at home.

- κ.R. I know how you feel. We are only now making a start. Sometimes I am sure that this country has got so materialistic, its soul is so dry, that people are ready for what our artists, thinkers and creative people in every other field have to offer. But then one can lose heart so easily.
- s.s. In some countries the very fact that you are resident as a recognized writer is sufficient for that country to encourage and support you. I moved to Canada in 1978, and in a very short time, even though I was not well-known to the Canadian public, I was doing a paid-for writer's tour, visiting certain provinces that even published Canadian writers themselves had never had the opportunity to visit. If one were in Trinidad one would visit schools all over the island and talk to pupils and students about the art of writing, and encourage them if they were inclined to that art form. I am sure that in practically every school in Trinidad teachers would remember our late cultural officer, M. P. Alladin, who managed to direct his energies towards this kind of work as an artist, and was able as well to function at an international level. M.P. once approached me with the idea of having a literary officer who would do the same kind of thing that he was doing as an art officer. This was an original proposal of his but as far as I know nothing has been done about it.
- κ.R. Another possibility is that you might do paid-for reading tours to different parts of the country, and these would bring your work to a general public who might not otherwise have come into contact with it.
- s.s. I enjoy reading from my own work and a listener or an audience can catch some of the nuances more quickly but my concern is not with public rendition. I prefer to talk with people after they have read my work, after they catch this nuance from the written word. Mind you, I am not against reading in public. I don't do readings every day but I am reading at the Normandie next Sunday. I am here only for a month and while I am here I would like to reach as wide an audience of my own people as possible.
- κ.R. And a public reading can give the pleasure appropriate to a public reading. Now what about people who won't read but would come out to listen?
- s.s. I'm not all that interested, not really. I would be catering to a kind of laziness. I would read to them in the hope of showing them what they are missing, and encouraging them to read.
- κ.R. Would you read more whole-heartedly to people in our society who are not so educated and who can't read and in any case don't have access to books?
- s.s. Yes I would read to them. But I don't feel that the ability to read is one of the criteria human beings should be judged by.

- K.R. O.K. then. How about the problem of the higher illiteracy? Do you think that reading your works to intellectuals, academics, and others who usually read can help them to a better understanding?
- S.S. I would find this very difficult to understand because I consider myself to be one of the few writers who expresses himself in the simplest possible forms. Those readers who can't see what I mean need to be educated like the common masses who understand what I write about very well.
- K.R. I think you are not all that interested in reading your work partly because you have a great respect for writing as writing, and partly because you are not interested in power and do not feel that you have a message which has to be communicated to save people. It is good to know a writer who does not wish to conscript us and it is a relief to know that if we close the book he will not pursue us with his microphone. But still I must ask, would foreigners benefit as readers from hearing you or a Trinidadian read your work aloud?
- S.S. Yes, but I would like to be the one to read it. (*Laughter.*) I think that I am the best reader of my work and I have been told so very often.
- K.R. Isn't it generally true that a writer is usually the best reader of his own work? I have an idea that if this is so, it is because in some way what the writer writes is to a large extent determined by his own breathing patterns, by his vocal chords, by the shape of his mouth and lips. What he writes is his word and he can speak it best.
- S.S. I like that because I have always felt that I would like to be identified as an individual writer. I hate comparisons. My work has been compared to Steinbeck for example, and I have been called the Steinbeck of the West Indies, but that means nothing to me. When a reader says "I hear Selvon's voice," that satisfies me — whether they think Selvon is right or wrong. I can take adverse criticism as well as the praiseful. What I find in my writing is my identity and personality, and people's views that what I say is right or wrong becomes less important to me because in my writing I am being my own self.

