

Symbolism in Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*

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Abstract

“Symbolism” is derived from the word, “symbol”, which is anything that represents or signifies another; that is, something which is itself and yet stands for, or means something else. This could be an object, word, idea, image, event, action, season, place, colour, phrase, character, picture, weather etc. However, in a literary sense, a symbol is often a figure of speech which is used to express or suggest an idea or quality that is different from its literal sense; a trope that combines a literal and a sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect. And so, the term, “symbol”, when used in literature, is as a literary device in which a word, person, object, etc., stands for something else, in addition to its literal meaning, so that symbolism means the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, or the investing of things with a symbolic meaning or character. It is the objective of this paper to investigate how symbolism is used in Samuel Selvon's works. A look at his creative oeuvre reveals that certain symbols are recurrent in his works. Of his fourteen published works, the word, “sun” or “sunlight” appears in three of his titles – A Brighter “Sun”, Ways of “Sunlight” and Highway in the “Sun” and Other Plays. It is therefore the intention of this study to discuss how this symbol – “sun” – is employed in Selvon's fictive world. In its literal sense, the sun is one of the heavenly bodies and is responsible for giving warmth and light to the earth. However, as a literary device, the word “sun” could stand for something much more, that is, symbolize something else. This paper therefore investigates how this symbol “sun”, as reflected in the titles of three of Selvon's works is used. The particular focus is on A Brighter Sun.

Keyword: Symbolism, Brighter sun, literary device

INTRODUCTION

Symbolism is derived from the word, “symbol”, which itself comes from the Greek verb, “symballein”, which means “to put together”, and the related noun, “symbol” which is an object cut in half, constituting a sign of recognition when the carriers were able to reassemble the two halves. A symbol, in its broadest sense, therefore, is anything that represents or signifies something else; something which is itself and yet stands for, or means something else. As Catherine Hawkes puts it, a symbol is anything that has “a complex of associated meanings and perceived as having inherent value separable

from that which is symbolized, as being part of that which is symbolized, and as performing its normal function of standing for or representing that which is symbolized” (2016. 1). This could take the form of an object, word, image, event, action, seasons, place, word, colour, phrase, characters, picture, the weather, the elements, etc.

In a literary sense, however, a symbol is often a figure of speech which is used to express or suggest an idea or quality that is different from its literal sense; a trope which combines a literal and a sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect. So, the term, “symbol”, when used in literature is as a literary device in which a person, object, word, etc, stands for something else in addition to its literal meaning, so that

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symbolism becomes the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, or the investing of things with a symbolic meaning or character.

Perhaps, the sense evolution of the word in Greek which is from “throwing things together” (“*symballein*”), to “contrasting”, to “comparing”, to “token used in comparisons to determine if something is genuine”, and hence “something which stands for something else” makes it similar to metaphor (Harper, 2015, 4). However, whereas a metaphor evokes an object in order to illustrate an idea or demonstrate a quality, a symbol embodies the idea or the quality. Also, neither is a symbol a sign because whereas a sign stands for something known as a word stands for its referent, a symbol is used to stand for something that is unknown and that cannot be made clear or precise. In Paul Tillich’s words, a symbol always “points beyond itself to something that is unquantifiable and mysterious: the symbol’s “depth dimension” (1964. 54).

Symbolism enriches the narration by pulling its message down to the level of the unconscious. It advances the literal narrative since it adds extra layers of meanings to a work: a literal one that is self-evident and the symbolic one whose meaning is far more profound than the literal one, thereby giving the work an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Therefore, as Allison Protas points out, most symbols are “not code signals like traffic lights where red means stop and green means go, but part of a complex language in which green can mean jealousy or fertility or even both, depending on the context” (1997. 1).

As a movement, symbolism began as a literary concept that sought to represent ideas and emotions by indirect suggestions rather than direct expression. Begun in France in the later part of the 19th century, symbolism aimed to evoke rather than describe and its

matter was impressions, ignitions, and sensations. It sees the immediate, unique and personal emotional response as the proper subject of art and its full expression as the ultimate aim of art. Since the emotions experienced by a poet in a given moment are unique to that person and that moment and are finally both fleeting and incommunicable, the poet, it is argued, is reduced to the use of a complex and highly private kind of symbolization in an effort to give expression to his ineffable feeling” (Holman 1977, 52). The result is a kind of writing consisting of what Edmund Wilson calls “a medley of metaphor” in which symbols, lacking apparent logical relation are put together in a pattern, one of whose characteristics is an indefiniteness as great as the indefiniteness of the experience itself and another of whose characteristics is the conscious effort to use words for the musical effect without much attention to precise meaning (Holman 1977, 520).

And so, rejecting realism and naturalism and anti-idealistic styles which attempt to represent reality in its particularity, and to elevate the humble and the ordinary over the ideal and embracing romanticism, spirituality, the imagination and dreams, symbolists believed that arts should represent absolute truths that can only be described indirectly. In his manifesto (“*Le Symbolisme*”) in which the name “symbolist” was first used to distinguish the symbolists from the related decadents of literature and art, Jean Moreas announced that symbolism was hostile to “plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact descriptions” and that its goal instead was to “clothe the ideal in a perceptible form” whose “goal was not in itself but whose sole purpose was to express the ideal” (Wikipedia 2016, 3). The manifesto which named Charles Baudelaire, Stephen Mallarme and Paul

Verlaine as the three leading poets of the movement insisted on the validity of pure subjectivity and the expression of an ideal over a realistic description of the natural world. This philosophy was to incorporate Mallarmé's conviction that reality was best expressed through poetry because it paralleled nature rather than replicating it. It became a central tenet of the movement. In Mallarmé's words, "To name an object is to suppress the three-quarters of the enjoyment to be found in the poem... suggestion, that is the dream" (Myers 2016, 209).

Symbolists thus wrote in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. Though begun in France and as a literary concept, symbolism soon swept across Europe and North America and other parts of the world and became identified with other disciplines such as fine arts, medicine, psychology and mathematics. It emphasized the associative character of verbal, often private symbol and insisted on the subjective representation of an idea or emotion. As a literary concept, it involves the use of one thing to represent another, in addition to the literal meaning of that thing; a literary device used to represent something else in addition to its ordinary meaning. This practice of suggestion of one thing through another; nay, symbolism, is discussed in this paper using Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*.

The "Sun" Symbol in *A Brighter Sun*

A Brighter Sun is Samuel Selvon's first published novel. His other titles include: *An Island is a World*, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Ways of Sunlight*, *Turn Again Tiger*, *I Hear Thunder*, *The Housing Lark*, *The Plains of Caroni*, *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, *Moses Ascending*, *Moses Migrating*, *Foreday*

Morning, *Eldorado West One* and *Highway in the Sun and Other Plays*. From this list, it is obvious that the "sun" symbol plays a powerful role in Selvon's fictive world. This is as reflected in the titles of his works. Of the fourteen published works of the author, the word, "sun" or "sunlight" appears in at least three of the titles – *A Brighter Sun*, *Ways of Sunlight* and *Highway in the Sun and Other plays*. In its literal sense, the sun is one of the heavenly bodies and is responsible for giving warmth and light to the earth. However, as a literary device, the word "sun" could be used to represent something much more, that is symbolize something else. It is our intention in this paper to investigate how this symbol – "sun" – is used in *A Brighter Sun*. As seen in the titles, the word, "sun" or "sunlight" seems recurrent in Selvon's works. It is therefore the objective of this paper to discuss how this symbol – "sun" – is employed in Selvon's fictional world. The particular focus is on *A Brighter Sun*.

Set in the semi-cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic village of Barataria in Trinidad in the throes of the Second World War, *A Brighter Sun* charts Tiger's progress and painful ascent into manhood and pitiful yearnings towards education. Aged sixteen, Tiger, the protagonist of the novel, is an Indian boy who is placed in an arranged Hindu wedding with his equally young bride (sixteen-years as well) whom he had never seen before. So, leaving home with his young bride, Tiger sets out into the wilderness of adulthood and maturation. He struggles to come to terms with his newly acquired adult status and to get a proper education for himself and the opportunities offered by the multi-ethnic world of Barataria.

As observed by Frank Birbalsingh, *A Brighter Sun* opens with a catalogue of events, both local and international (and

repeats this technique throughout the novel). This suggests that the novel could be approached as a quasi-historical novel. However, this technique places the characters, their actions, and aspirations in social perspective while the main emphasis remains the concerns of the ordinary, struggling individual. Chapter two of the novel, for instance, opens thus:

There was change in the economic and social life and outlook of Trinidadians in 1941. United States personnel arrived, and the construction of bases provided work at high wages – higher than anyone had ever worked for before. Clerks quit their desks and papers and headed for the bases, farmers left the land untilled, labourers deserted the oil and sugar industries in the south, there was a rush to where the money flowed. From neighbouring islands, Grenada, St Vincent, Barbados, natives kissed their wives and relatives good-bye and came to Trinidad to make their fortunes. The city was crammed, as the Yankee dollar lured men away from home and family. Politically, a new constitution came into force, increasing the number of elected members to the legislative Council by two and reducing the strength of official representation from nine to three. At the end of March the Stars and Stripes waved over Trinidad territory.... Soon after the arrival of American troops fight began between civilians and servicemen.... The sum of \$1791, 228 was voted for slum clearance. Imports were controlled, a committee was appointed to settle displaced persons, another to assist the Rockefeller Institute of New York in conducting a malaria survey. A housing

settlement was opened in the southern district of San Fernando (17-18).

Tiger starts out as an immature Indian youth to the stage of adulthood, loss of innocence and quest and acquisition of knowledge. However, parallel to his search for manhood and personal identity and contributing to it is Trinidad's transition from a sleepy backwater colony into a society on the brinks of national independence. The war thrust Trinidad into the 20th century and a confrontation with the possibilities and problems that follow on modern nationhood. Initially naïve, timid and acquiescent, Tiger willingly accepts his wedding and new wife as part of the pattern of life imposed on him by forces and authorities upon which he has never reflected, let alone understand. As an Indian boy, one of his uncles sums up his destiny thus: "You gettam house which side Barataria, gettam land, cow well, you go live that side. Haveam plenty boy chile – girl chile no good, only bring trouble on your head. You live that side, plantam garden, live good (7).

However, away from the influence of his parents, Barataria, with its multi-ethnic composition and also undergoing transition from a rural settlement into a sub-urban town, together with Tiger's own curiosity and inchoate ambition to foster his search for manhood and personal identity not bound by old ways, Tiger begins to question earlier accepted facts of his life such as his marriage and his parents' ethnocentric racial attitudes. For instance, he reasons: "Aint a man is a man, don't mind if he skin not white, or if he hair curl? (49). Urmilla also wishes that Indians "could only be like white people?" (50) In fact, as a boy, Tiger remembers he never attended Indian feasts. And so, initially objecting to Boysie's calling of Indians "black people", Tiger now knows better and

questions why he should interact with only members of his race as admonished by his parents.

Tiger thus grows from a rural Indian boy with pre-conceived ethnic biases to a man with a mind towards the ideal of a more integrated society. In this process of development from a young Indian boy with racial prejudices to one of racial tolerance and gradual creolization, Joe and Rita Martin, the African-Creole couple, play a crucial role. Joe and Rita Martin, together with the attractions of the urban culture of Baratavia thus prove indispensable to the Tigers' gradual maturation. Joe and Rita Martin are the Tigers' negro neighbours who have managed to escape a slum in the city. To Tiger and Urmilla, the Martins are therefore models of modernity. In contrast to them who live in a mud hut with a thatched roof, the Martins live in a concrete brick house with electricity and running water. Self-assured, congenial and unpretentious, Rita proves herself the most wonderful of neighbours to the young and inexperienced Tiger and Urmilla. She does not only serve as midwife at the birth of Tiger's and Urmilla's first child, but also offers their only bed to them. On the proposed visit of Tiger's American bosses to his house, Rita also lends her cutlery, furniture and electrical cable to Urmilla, as well as allows Urmilla to tap light from across their fence into her home. To Rita, it is also a disappointment that Creoles "can't live like Indian quiet and nice" (72). In what is possibly her moment of crowning glory, Rita gives Tiger a savage telling-off when he expresses suspicion of Urmilla cheating on him:

Get out me blasted chair... get out de house, yuh worthless bitch! You have a nasty coolie mind! Dat poor girl does only be tinkin' bout you all de

time, how Tiger going to do dis for she, and dat for she. How Tiger working hard to save money to build house, and look at yuh, yuh nasty dog! You suspect she hornin' yuh! You ain't have no shame! Dat poor gul don't even look at any oder man but you, though she well have cause! And you know wat have yuh so? You know why yuh mind turning nasty? Because yuh reading all dem book because yuh finding out too much tings bout life. Dat's why. Learning to read! Learning to write! Why de hell yuh don't learn how to mind yuh wife? Ah wish it was true dat she hornin' yuh! Ah wish she had anoder man! Den yuh go stop reading dem book and going all bout in de night for experience! Yuh is a dam fool. Ah had ah mind once yuh wud turn out to be ah good husband, but wat yuh say here tonight really shame me. Get out de house, man. Haul yuh tail from here, don't stay here, go somewhere else (143).

Rita's husband also scolds Tiger for ignoring Urmilla in her time of illness shortly before her miscarriage: "What happen? You don't see your wife at home sick? You are carrying on like a little boy still. If I was your father, I beat you till you can't stand up" (174).

Boysie too is not left out in this process of Tiger's gradual maturation and creolization. In fact, as an Indian, Boysie dates only black girls and openly parades around with the girls, enjoying the stares he gets from old-fashioned Indians for it. He also makes a point of hailing couples who are similarly mixed-race whenever he passes them on the streets.

Tiger therefore develops from an illiterate peasant boy from a rural sugar estate to a young man with a heightened sense of himself and society. It is his belief that "All different kinds of people in Trinidad, you have to mix with all of them" (188). To change his life, Tiger also realizes that he must change his language. So, setting his sights high, Tiger learns to read and consciously changes and improves his use of language to prepare for the inevitable changes and opportunities he envisions, which perhaps, is why Harold Barratt opines that Tiger's progress in the search for manhood and personal identity parallel and "is reflected in the way he deals with language" (2).

In like manner, Ethan King observes that Selvon's strength in *A Brighter Sun*, in addition to his warmth and humanity lies in "the capturing of an authentic voice for his dialect-speaking Trinidadian characters and in the creation of a narrative voice which skillfully exploits the expressive possibilities of the wide range of language available to him" (2). The use of various forms of Trinidadian vernacular, King argues, "not only to create humor but also to express mental and emotional states and to reflect differences in class, race, education" is "so successful in the novel that the work in a sense can be said to be about language itself" (2). Also, Kenneth Ramchand notes that it is in *A Brighter Sun* "that dialect first becomes the language of consciousness in West Indian fiction" (1974-202).

However, Tiger finally settles into the use of urban Creole-English to communicate with his fellow people. Although his attempt to inject high-sounding dictionary English into his vocabulary is to much comic effect,

it reflects his ambition to move beyond the limitations of his peasant background. By the end of the novel, Tiger is able to employ Standard English when the situation calls for it and even heaps scorn on one, an Indian and one, a Negro doctor on their refusal to come and see Urmilla in her moment of illness and who seek to intimate him with the "pretty words of cultured British English" based on their assumptions of elitism or what Brighton Rock calls "fantastic racism" (2).

And so, curious, ambitious, diligent and determined, Tiger matures from a boy to a man. Although he develops a love for his pastoral surroundings, he seeks advancement and contact with a bigger world and therefore obtains employment with the American military constructing a highway in Barataria. He is fearful of becoming like Sookdeo, the village drunkard. Like Selvon himself who, though an Indian was brought up with exposure to Creole food and culture, it is Tiger's wish that the Trinidadian society would be one based on brotherhood, which perhaps is why Oscar Tiffany opines that Tiger seems to be "Selvon's point-man on the unification of a racially split Trinidad" (4). Tiger, at the end of the novel becomes something of a community leader, having learned how to read and write. He even ponders a political career because, "Is politics that build a country" (213). Tiger, therefore, emerges undefeated at the end of the novel which, perhaps, is why Adesh Seuraj remarks that Tiger's story is one of "indomitable triumph" (2). In the same vein, Mindy Barrios enthuses that at the end of the novel, he was "very proud of Tiger the protagonist and his attitude towards change and growing up" (3). Tiger yearns for something new and although he is somewhat apprehensive about change, he knows that it must come and that he must prepare for it.

Clearly then, it can be said that the word, "sun" is a positive symbol in Selvon's novel; a symbol of hope and change, hence, the title, *A Brighter "Sun"*. In fact, Edith Page argues that the symbol does not just suggest hope but a better future since the title – *A "Brighter" Sun* – implies a comparative. And since Tiger is a metonymic character, the word, sun, also signifies a better life and opportunities for the entire West Indians. As seen in the novel, Tiger's growth and quest are made to parallel those of the larger West Indian society since this was a time of critical change in the West Indies; change between colonial dependency and national independence and also when West Indians were adapting to the dictates of life in the metropolitan culture rather than the peripheral one. Also, the novel is set in the Second World War era as evident in the catalogue of events – both local and international – that are presented in the work. These show how the war affected the nation as a whole. As aptly put by Kristie Smith, "Tiger's personal war against the old order (and against being regarded as a child) coincides with World War II which cemented the super power status of the Soviet Union and United States while setting into motion a number of revolutions in colonial lands in Central and Latin America, Africa and Asia" (4). Again, the fact that Tiger is not given a family name but simply referred to as "Tiger" throughout the novel underscores his metonymic role. This suggests that he represents the entire West Indians.

Tiger therefore "changes from boy to man; the countryside changes from a collection of market gardens to a sub-urban satellite town; the muddy track becomes the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway; Tiger and Urmilla's mud shack becomes a furnished

brick house; the newly weds become parents; a backward colony is on the cusp of becoming an independent nation" (Page, 2016, 1). Whereas in the early chapters of the novel, Tiger and Urmilla are concerned with raising rice and other crops, towards the end, they are purchasing large fowls, rum, cigarettes, and household furnishings and borrowing knives, fucks, and other symbols of Westernization.

Without doubt then, the word, "sun", symbolizes better opportunities and a better future for Tiger and the entire West Indians. Other symbols, especially those common in the Caribbean and seen in the novel include rain, harmattan, mangoes, etc. For instance, it rains when things are not going well, such as when Urmilla is ill and when she is delivering her stillborn son and when Tiger is working in his garden immediately beforehand. Also, it is mango season when Urmilla discovers her pregnancies. Sookdeo also buries his money under the roots of a mango tree; a good omen, and when the tree is bulldozed, he dies. However, the sun, the dominant image and always bringing good things, brings Tiger out of his state of depression.

This optimistic outlook is sustained in *Ways of Sunlight*. Here, again, the word, "sunlight", symbolizing better hopes and opportunities is reflected in the title – *Ways of "Sunlight"* so that even though we see, especially in the Trinidad section of the work, gossip, rivalry, toiling cane-cutters, superstition, frustration, depression, etc, the Neapolitan attitude and exuberance of the people at the sheer fact of being alive come through. As William Wash remarks, the crackling life of the people, their nimbleness of wit, their great and disillusioned tolerance, their response to rhythm, their riddling uncertainties and the one splendid instrument

they developed for ordering a sad, comic, muddled universe, the language, all inform and shape" Selvon's fiction (1973, 56).

Similarly, in *Turn Again Tiger* which is a sequel to *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger, even though returns to the sugarcane estate despite his earlier rejection of that life, emerges victorious and with a better understanding of his Indian roots, so that despite his harrowing experience, disappointments and disillusionment, his final position is one of faith in the West Indian experience and hope in the future. In his words: "we finish one job, and we got to get ready to start another" (181).

Tiger thus lives up to his symbolic name – Tiger. One of his American bosses asks him: "How come you have such a funny name....? Why did they call you Tiger?" Tiger's response is: "I don't know..... All my other brothers and sisters have good Indian nominations, is only me they give a funny name". "I must be resemble Tiger" (133). So, humbled and chastened by experience, Tiger looks forward as does the country he represents to a brighter sun, shedding its lambent light of independence, racial harmony and increasing knowledge.

Conclusion

Selvon thus depicts the lives and struggles, the aspirations and failure of the large expatriate group of people found in the West Indies either by voluntary migration or otherwise as represented in the novel. He shows "the effects of voluntary as well as involuntary ghettoization based on race and ethnicity" (Wao, 2016, 1). However, he also shows their residual commitment to beauty and idealism in the face of tremendous odds. He does these through the use of the sun symbol and Tiger as a metonymic character whose experiences are necessarily representative of those of the entire West Indians. Just as Tiger triumphs over his problems, the West Indians are seen as overcoming their existential difficulties. Tiger has set his sights high and looks forward to the future with "a brighter sun" than that of the past. Undoubtedly then, the word, "sun", as reflected in the title of the novel – *A Brighter Sun* – is a symbol of hope; hope of a better future and life for Tiger and by implication, the entire West Indians; the new day.

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