

79. The Production of Space in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*: A Lefebvorean Reading

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Abstract

First published in 1956, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* explores the experiences of West Indian immigrants in London, following the end of World War II. Written by a migrant novelist, who came to London in 1950, the story fictionalises the immigrants' experiences and their struggles in the imperial centre of London. While the primary concern of the novel concentrates on the themes of identity, migration, and the politics of representation, it also deals with the production of space through the decisions made by the urban planners and designers, social movements and relations as well as the daily practices of the individual citizens. Sociologist Henri Lefebvre emphasises the significance of everyday life and the lived experiences of the individuals to analyse the process of how space is produced. Lefebvre's reading of space as a social product challenges any reading of space as neutral and static. In other words, according to Lefebvre, space is not just a mere geographical or territorial notion, rather a living organism which goes through a production process and changes over time. Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to analyse how space is conceived, perceived, and lived in, and as a result, how it is produced and reproduced in Sam Selvon's classic novel, *The Lonely Londoners*.

Keywords: Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, Lefebvre, the production of space

Sam Selvon'un *Yalnız Londralılar* Romanında Mekanın Üretimi: Lefebvre'ci Bir Okuma

Öz

İlk olarak 1956 yılında yayınlanan Sam Selvon'un *Yalnız Londralılar* romanı, 2. Dünya Savaşı sonrası Londra'ya göç eden Batı Hintli göçmenlerin deneyimlerini inceleyen bir eserdir. Kendisi de 1950 yılında Londra'ya göç eden bir yazar olan Sam Selvon, romanında, İngiliz imparatorluğunun merkezi haline gelen Londra'da yaşayan göçmenlerin tecrübelerini ve bu şehirde verdikleri mücadeleleri okurlarıyla paylaşır. Romanın ele aldığı konular arasında kimlik, göç ve temsil siyaseti bulunmakla birlikte roman, aynı zamanda, kent mimarları ve onların verdiği kararlar doğrultusunda, mekan üretiminin nasıl şekillendiğini ele alır ve mekanın üretimine katkı sağlayan toplumsal hareket ve ilişkilerle birlikte bireylerin gündelik yaşamlarını da anlatır. Sosyolog Henri Lefebvre mekanın üretimi aşamasını incelemek için bireylerin günlük deneyimlemelerine bakılması gerektiğini savunur ve bu bağlamda günlük hayatın önemine işaret eder. Lefebvre'nin mekanı toplumsal bir ürün olarak görmesi, mekanın değişmeyen ve tarafsız bir olgu olduğunu savunan tüm okumalara karşı çıkar. Lefebvre'ye göre mekan, yalnızca coğrafi ve sınırları belli olan bir olgu değil, aynı zamanda, üretim sürecinden geçen ve zaman içinde değişen canlı bir organizmadır. Bu nedenle bu makalenin amacı,

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Sam Selvon'un *Yalnız Londralılar* romanında mekanın nasıl tasarlandığını, algılandığını, yaşandığını ve bu sürecin sonunda nasıl üretildiğini ve tekrar üretildiğini incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sam Selvon, Yalnız Londralılar, Lefebvre, mekanın üretimi

1. Introduction

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellow who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. (Selvon, 2006, p. 1)

These are the opening words of Sam Selvon's novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, which was first published in 1956 and dramatizes the experiences of West Indian immigrants who arrived in Britain following World War II and were involved in constructing the country from the wounds of the war (Dawson, 2007, p. 2). Known as the Windrush generation, the name was given to these immigrants as a result of their travel from the colonies to London on the *SS Empire Windrush* in 1948. Their struggles in the imperial centre are fictionalised by a writer who himself came to Britain in 1950, especially as a result of the 1948 British Nationality Act which defined every citizen of the United Kingdom and colonies as British citizens. People who emigrated to Britain from the colonies "felt that they were coming to collect the reward for their faithfulness as British subjects" (Dawson, 2007, p. 2). A person who had this status was known as either a Commonwealth citizen or as a British subject and the early immigrants were mostly single males. The British Nationality Act was, partly, an attempt to further British imperial interests, which were wounded when they withdrew from India causing its division into separate states in 1948: India and Pakistan (Dawson, 2007, p. 10). It was for this purpose in Britain that immigrants, in the mid-twentieth century, were given legal status as citizens. Selvon narrates how the West Indian immigrants as Commonwealth citizens regarded Britain as their "mother country" and describes their struggles to find jobs, build friendships, and find places to live in the London metropolis.

The Lonely Londoners is a novel about people from the Caribbean, Britain's imperial past and their rather complicated relationship between the imperial centre, London, and the colonial margins, the islands in the Caribbean. It is also about searches for freedom, for belonging and for a voice. More significantly, however, it is a narration about the production of space. This paper examines how space is produced through the characters' movements, their experimentation with urban life and social engagement, resisting the limited surroundings of places and the pressures they carry while trying to build their lives in the new, strange metropole, London. Using Henry Lefebvre's theory of space as a framework, this paper aims to discuss how Selvon's characters create their own spaces and how the narration allows the experiences of each character to unfold in specific circumstances and at certain moments, while they attempt to find agency and overcome the burden of being strangers within the hidden corners of the global city. Through space, these characters move freely and actively experience this global city, which includes experimenting with strangeness and uncertainty. As will be discussed, Selvon's characters are uncertain of their surroundings because they are newcomers. The paper will examine whether some spaces prevent them from creating any sense of belonging. It will also explore whether these spaces are creating inertia whereas space should allow freedom of movement (Tuan, 2001, p. 6).

2. Lefebvre and His Theory of Space

Sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre published his major philosophical work, *The Production of Space*, in 1974 and within it, he defines space as a means of production, in other words, he sees space as a social product. Lefebvre offers a profound analysis of how space is constructed and experienced by the inhabitants and the book could be considered as a quest for a compromise between mental space and real space. According to Lefebvre's argument, space is a concept that is produced and this production process is connected with economic and political structures. The basic understanding of space is shaped through human activities which emphasises that space is actively produced through social relations and experiences. Lefebvre argues that "[t]his act of creation is, in fact, a *process*" (1991, p. 34).

Lefebvre identifies three dimensions of space as perceived, conceived, and lived. Perceived space stands for the representations and mental images of space while conceived space denotes the planned spaces which are created by urban designers. *Spatial Practice* is the concept that consists of the material and physical aspects of space. It includes specific daily activities which take place in parks, streets or within different physical structures and its main concern is with how space is produced and reproduced by individuals and groups. Spatial practices include the actual movements, interactions and performances within a specific space and it considers precisely how space is perceived and imagined. *Representation of Space* is the space of the architects, planners, and urban designers who determine what is lived and perceived, and it is directly associated with the conceived space. These spaces are constructed through different social, economic, political, and cultural processes and might include maps, posters or any other forms of communication that can shape how individuals perceive and interpret space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38)². *Representational Space* is the result of everyday experiences and practices of the inhabitants. This is the lived space that is actually felt by those who inhabit and actually use the space, and it might take into account concepts such as authority, regulations, power, and control (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39)³.

According to Lefebvre, these dimensions should not be regarded as separate, rather, they are mutually constructed, continually affecting and shaping each other. As they shape and affect each other, any analysis of space should include these three dimensions because space is socially produced and experienced and it is through these aspects that the complexity of spatial processes can be completely understood.

"(Social) Space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Within this context, space is considered as the result of social interactions and relations and cannot be defined as static, neutral or stable. Space is not just a mere physical or geographical notion but it is produced and reproduced through social interactions and forces. The city is produced and reproduced through social relations as well. Everyday life and experiences of individuals and their social relations is produced in the same way it produces space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 101). The production of space through social relations also means that individuals have the right to the city urban space as they are actively involved in shaping and producing it. The right to the city, in Lefebvre's view, is "like a cry and a demand" and it "cannot be conceived as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities; it can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158). The citizens have the right to transform the urban space according to their needs, use appropriate resources, and get involved in decision-making processes which can enable them to develop a sense of belonging as citizens. As Goheen expresses "Citizens" actually "create meaningful public spaces by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims

² Italics are in the original.

³ Italics are in the original.

and using it for their own purposes. It thereby becomes a meaningful public resource” for every single citizen living in the urban space (1998, p. 479).

3. *The Lonely Londoners* and the Production of Space

Set in the urban space of London, *The Lonely Londoners* is a novel which discusses themes such as migration, identity, the politics of representation, and empire (Usongo, 2018; Liu, 2016; Schwarz, 2014; Bentley, 2008). While primarily focusing on such themes, the novel also touches upon the ways in which space is produced, reproduced, shaped, and given meaning through the experiences of the West Indian London immigrants. Selvon opens the novel with the words quoted at the very beginning of “Introduction” to set the scene, where London is as a complex and challenging space for the Caribbean immigrants who arrive at Waterloo Station and enter a “strange” world which they primarily see as their mother country. In this context, Waterloo station functions as a bridge between the familiar and unfamiliar, the usual and unusual, and more significantly the known and unknown. This station welcomes the arrival of West Indian immigrants and is an example of conceived space which is linked to the representation of space by Lefebvre (1991, p. 38).

Moses, the main protagonist is also a veteran immigrant, he travels by bus through London to meet a newcomer named Galahad. The way Selvon introduces Galahad is of great importance in showing how Galahad perceives the station, where, “looking about the desolate station as if he in an exhibition hall on a pleasant summer evening,” which shows how in the newcomer ignores the cold winter evening and celebrates his presence in the global city (*The Lonely Londoners*, p. 12).⁴ In a way, through the space of Waterloo Station, the narration creates one of the first opportunities for social interaction and relationships and it is through this social relation that Waterloo, although a reminder of physical and emotional struggles faced by the passengers as they travel from the colony to London, as is experienced by Galahad, is perceived as a charming hall which exhibits works of art. Additionally, as Selvon describes, despite its cold weather, for Galahad, London feels “a little warm” (*LL*, p. 13). It is possible that Galahad perceives the global city and its challenging winter weather differently from Moses who has been living in this urban space for a long time, and, thus, that the social interaction and communication between the two characters pave the way for turning the representation of space into the representational space, which is produced by these experiences.

This production of a rather optimistic experience is challenged in the pages which follow where the novel shifts from Waterloo Station to Moses’ room. Inspecting the room meticulously, Galahad concludes that it is “rather a small room”, and this could suggest some kind of a foreshadowing for any future difficulties the immigrants might face in terms of housing conditions, of getting employment and income, the racial segregation in certain places, and the feelings of loneliness and alienation as a consequence. The small size of the room and the feeling of limitation felt by Galahad is more obviously reflected in the social and economic structures that develop from the immigrants’ experiences. This limitation and social and racial segregation affect spatial practices.

The characters in the narration mostly find themselves limited to some specific locations and social groups which restrict their free movement and their experiences of the urban space. One such neighbourhood, Edgware Road, is the space where the immigrants hand in their job applications at the employment exchange and Selvon suggests that through meeting “a lot of company there”, Galahad “shouldn’t feel lonely” (*LL*, p. 21). Although their mobility, and cultural and social opportunities offered

⁴ Future references to the novel will refer to *LL*.

by the urban space is limited to such places, like Notting Hill, the migrant neighbourhood where the Windrush generation lived in the 1950s, in order to await their rights to settle, accordingly affected spatial practices. The new citizens of the urban space explore and map their own spaces, create their own social circles, and develop a unique culture of their own. For the character, Galahad, Selvon narrates how, he feels "like a king living in London" (*LL*. p.73). This is how the urban space is felt and experienced by Galahad, Oxford Street means "prestige," and Charing Cross is a reminder of "romance" the same way Piccadilly Tube Station is developed as a space for romantic engagements (*LL*. pp. 71-72). As a new citizen of this city, Galahad is becoming accustomed to the environment and developing his social networks to gain his sense of belonging which will help him to overcome any fear of loneliness. Thus, through his social movements via the planned space, the representation of this space becomes a representational one.

Henri Lefebvre defines space as a social product (1991, p. 26) and in this context, he believes that social practices, relations and experiences produce space in various ways. In Selvon's narration, before reaching the Circus to meet his date, Galahad passes through gardens, where he observes the "sun shining, flowers growing, the fountains spouting water," sees the space, smells the space, and indeed he feels the space (*LL*. p. 78). From Selvon's description, it is clear Galahad experiences and feels the space and this process involves social relations between individuals and also between objects and people in space. In this context, it could be argued that spatial practices define space rather than the representation of space, planned, and organised by professionals. Overlaying physical and mental space, lived space makes use of everyday objects and structures and individuals attribute meaning to these spaces. One such lived space is produced when Galahad reacts to the liveliness of the Circus:

He start to walk a little faster, but was five past when he find himself in the Circus. Always, from the first time he went there to see Eros and the lights, that circus have a magnet for him, that circus represent life, that circus is the beginning and ending of the world... people sitting and standing and walking and talking and laughing and buses and cars and Galahad Esquire, in all this, standing there in the big city, in London. Oh Lord. (*LL*, p. 79)

Selvon's novel is well informed about the social and economic structures of the society, following the mass immigration from the West Indies to London. Harrow Road is associated with the working-class groups and where the Caribbean immigrants mostly live. The houses in the area are described as "old and grey and weatherbeaten" and without hot water and bathrooms. "All the houses" are

in a row in the street, on both sides, they build like one long house with walls separating them in parts, so your house jam-up between two neighbours: is so most of the houses is in London [...] London is place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to. (*LL*. pp. 59-60)

Here, Selvon admits that rich people living in Belgrave, Knightsbridge, and Hampstead would never understand what it feels like living in Harrow Road or Notting Hill (*LL*. p. 60). Lefebvre argues that "capitalism and neocapitalism" produces "abstract space" (p. 53) and within this production process, material forces and commercial interests produce mental space which overcomes the physical and social spaces. Abstract spaces are intertwined with poor neighbourhoods like Harrow Road and wealthy locations like Knightsbridge. The social and economic segregations affect people's daily activities and the way they perceive and use their spaces, influencing spatial practices. Selvon suggests that Notting Hill could never be perceived by everyone in the same way it is perceived by Galahad, different perceptions of the same place occur, as stimulated by the spatial practices. Selvon admits this in his observation: "People in this world don't know how other people does affect their lives" (*LL*. p. 62). Here, it could be argued that as space is a social product and spatial practices and representations of space all

contribute to the lived space, the perception of the urban space by immigrants or the poor is also affected by how the space is perceived and produced by wealthier people, turning the immigrant experience into a lonely, alienated one.

How Selvon's characters overcome their loneliness and create their own spaces is important. Selvon's characters go to parties and socialise, they sit by the fire in the evenings "knitting and talking about Jamaica" as if they were weaving together the text of their memories they left back at home into their experiences in this global city (*LL*. p. 68). Nottingham Hill is "Nottingham Gate" for Selvon's character, Big City, Gloucester Road is "Gloucestershire Road" and Kensington Palace is "Kensington Mansion" (*LL*. pp. 84-91). Saskia Sassen argues that global cities "bring to the fore the growing inequalities between highly provisioned and disadvantaged sectors and spaces of the city" (2005, p. 40). Kensington Palace is a prime location and Nottingham Hill as a disadvantaged one, both misspelled by Big City as if he was reducing both places to the same level, merging the provisioned with the disadvantaged and perceiving and imagining the urban space as well as overcoming the pressure of the organised and planned spaces. Furthermore, Selvon could show how Big City renames these spaces as another way of reclaiming the spaces.

Selvon introduces different opportunities where space can be produced and reproduced through social events. One such occasion is illustrated by a fete held at St Pancras Hall, organised by Harris, who, despite being a Caribbean immigrant in London, strives to mimic the English ways and customs and gain as much respectability as the English, so that he is "almost the same," with the coloniser "but not quite" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). Cities grow and develop according to the needs of their inhabitants and new social spaces are produced, as a result. These spaces also bring collective memories and shared experiences together, connecting the past to the present. The party at St Pancras Hall brings individuals from all walks of life and within this context becomes a common ground for the citizens living in the great London metropole. This common ground becomes a place of interaction, communication, a centre for differences and diversity as well as for memories and nostalgia.

The fete in St Pancras Hall the Saturday night was big times... So there Harris is, standing up by the door in black suit and bow tie, greeting all English people with pleasant good evening and how do you do [...] Like Marble Arch in the summer, any of Harris fete is a get-together of all the boys, wherever it happen to be, Big City, Galahad, Daniel, Cap, Bart, all of them leave the night work they have to hit this fete, and Moses as usual like a mirror master of ceremonies with the boys, giving them all the latest lowdown and ballad as they coast a drink [...] 'Oh lord, what is happening in this London! This fete like a real bacchanal in the Princess Building in Port of Spain! (*LL*, pp. 104-108)

The St Pancras Hall is an example of conceived space, which is defined by Lefebvre as a representation of space (1991, p. 38). The greatness of the hall and planning of the structure exemplifies the mental production of space. Selvon's characters are perceiving and imagining this space as a "bacchanal in the Princess Building in Port of Spain", leading to the intertwining of nostalgia and space through shared cultural references and experiences (*LL*. p. 108). The narration could be referring to a sentimental longing for the past, while an imagining of the cultural elements and memories is the result of the individual's perception of the space. Through social relations and social events like holding parties and dances, St Pancras Hall is transformed from representations of space into that of *representational space*.⁵ In other words, the production of representational space is based on the individuals who interact and relate socially within it.

⁵ Italics are mine.

4. Conclusion

Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* revolves around the idea of living "in the great city of London, centre of the world," and seeks to find an answer to the question of "What is that a city have, that any place in the world have, that you get so much to like it you wouldn't leave it for anywhere else?" (*LL*, p. 134).

Furthermore, Moses asks:

What it is that would keep men although by and large in truth and in fact, they catching their royal to make a living, staying in a cram-up room where you have to do everything -sleep, eat, dress, wash, cook, live. Why it is, that although they grumble about it all the time, curse the people; curse the government, say all kind of thing about this and that, why it is, that in the end, everyone cagey about saying outright that if the chance come they will go back them green islands in the sun? (*LL*, p. 134).

The Lonely Londoners deals with the theme of migration and migrant experiences and tries to answer the above-quoted question, but the novel also involves the process of how space is produced in the London urban landscape in the 1950s. It depicts complex relationships between the individual immigrant experiences and the global city, showing how economic, cultural, and social realities and relations shape the way space is produced. As an experienced immigrant in London, Moses is moving freely and actively in the urban space, yet, his movement is still informed by the economic and social limitations. For Galahad, rather than the organised and planned ones, spatial practices define space, leading to the production of a *representational space*. Lefebvre's reading of space as a social product emphasises the actively and socially constructed nature of space and stresses how economic and power relations, social practices and everyday individual experiences facilitate the way space is shaped and constructed. Lefebvre's description of space as a social product suggests that space can be produced and reproduced in various ways and this process is initiated by social relations, interactions, and events. The analysis of physical space in *The Lonely Londoners* illustrates how space is perceived by different characters, who migrated to Britain following World War II from the Caribbean. Through social movements and relations, perceived and conceived space is transformed into a *representational space*, turning the urban space into a more inclusive and sustainable one.⁶

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⁶ Italics are mine.

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