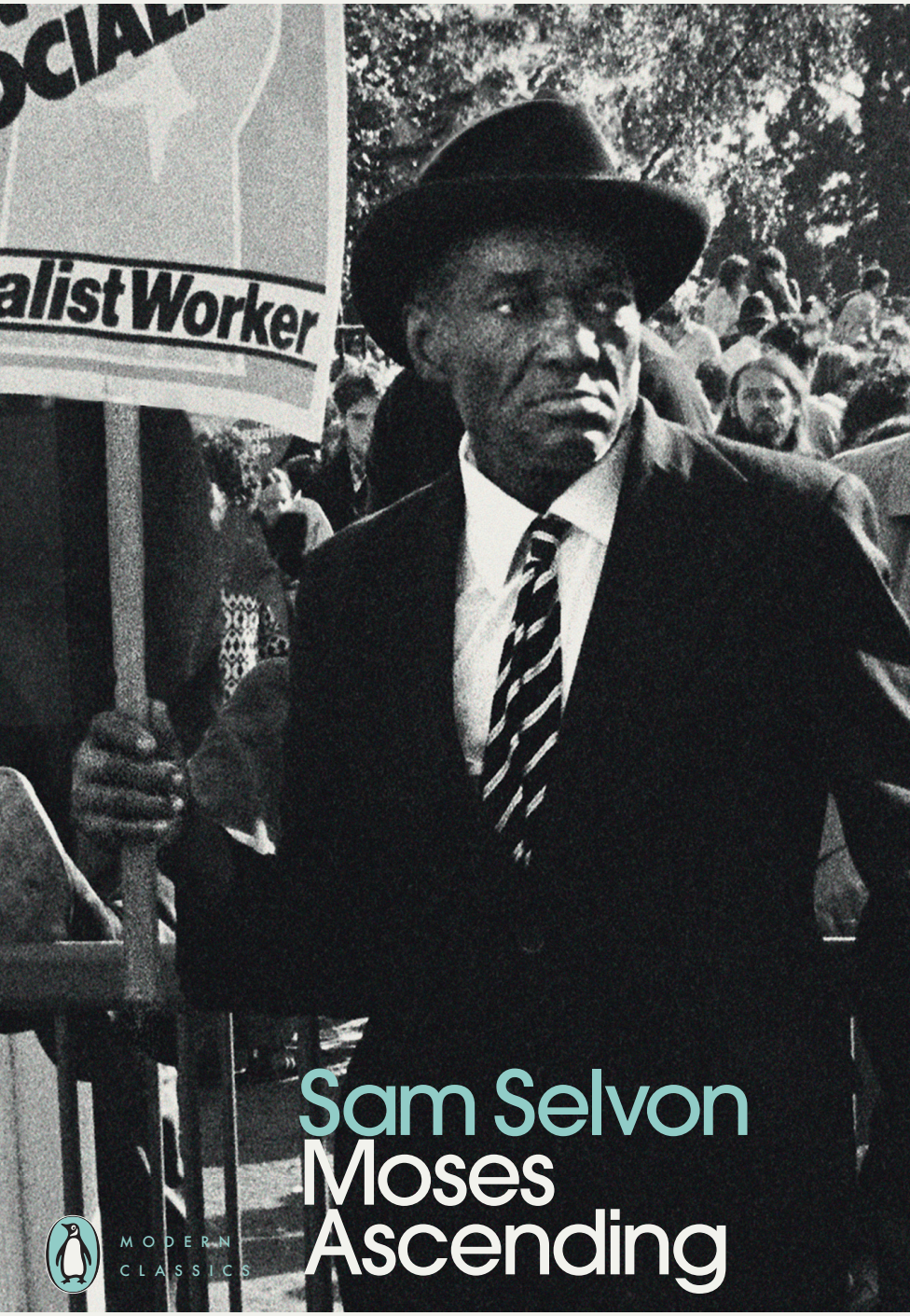

Sam Selvon

Moses Ascending

MODERN CLASSICS

Moses Ascending

Sam Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923. From 1945–50, he worked as a journalist for the *Trinidad Guardian* and was literary editor of the *Guardian Weekly*. During this period he published a number of short stories and poems under pseudonyms before departing for London in 1950. Soon after his arrival in the metropolis his first full-length novel, *A Brighter Sun* (1952) appeared; it received much international acclaim and established Selvon as a major voice in contemporary literature. It was followed by a number of other influential works set both in London and in Trinidad. These include the collection of short stories *Ways of Sunlight* (1957); his London fictions – *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *The Housing Lark* (1965), *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983) – as well as his Trinidadian novels – *An Island Is a World* (1955), *Turn Again Tiger* (1958), *I Hear Thunder* (1963), *The Plains of Caroni* (1970) and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972). Selvon remained in London until 1978 when he left the UK for Calgary in Canada. By the time of his departure from London he had earned the title of the 'father of Black writing' in Britain. Sam Selvon died in 1994 on a brief trip home to Trinidad.

Hari Kunzru is the author of the novels *The Impressionist* (2002), *Transmission* (2004), *My Revolutions* (2007), *Gods Without Men* (2011) and *White Tears* (2017).

SAM SELVON

Moses Ascending

With an Introduction by Hari Kunzru

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Davis-Poynter Limited 1975
Published in Penguin Classics 2008
Reissued in 2020
001

Set in 11.25/15 pt Monotype Dante by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–50439–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

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To my children,
and the rest of the world

Introduction

In a 1970 essay entitled 'Power?' (note the sceptical question mark), V. S. Naipaul draws connections between the origins of Trinidadian carnival and contemporary black nationalism in the Caribbean. Dressing up for their nineteenth-century celebrations, 'people who were slaves by day saw themselves . . . as kings, queens, dauphins, princesses.' This parody of the pomp and circumstance of a white-run world quickly became 'a vision of the black millennium, as much a vision of revenge as of a black world made whole again.' Naipaul sees carnivalesque chaos and violence at play in the Black Power movement of his own day, which he patronizingly characterizes as 'mystical, vague and threatening,' a politically incoherent blend of 'rage, drama and style.'[1]

Samuel Selvon was, like Naipaul, a Trinidadian of Indian descent, and evidently shared some of his misgivings about Black Power. In 1979, he presented a paper called 'Three Into One Can't Go: East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian' in which he described his unease about black nationalism and his feeling that as an Indian, 'we best hads don't talk too loud before we antagonise the Black people.'[2] So perhaps it's not surprising that *Moses Ascending*, published in 1975, has both a carnivalesque

atmosphere and an underlying tone of cynicism. It's a book full of mockery and dirty jokes, shot through with disappointment and undiluted anger. A generation later, it makes for fascinating but uncomfortable reading.

In the Notting Hill of the early seventies we rediscover Moses Aloetta, last seen twenty years before in Selvon's masterpiece, *The Lonely Londoners*. In the fifties, Moses was a reluctant 'welfare officer' for new arrivals from the islands, grumbling as he helped people find their feet in the Mother Country. Now he's installed as the tin-pot monarch of a tumble-down terraced house in Shepherd's Bush. He lives in the attic 'penthouse', served by a white factotum called Bob, who helps him run the place as a multi-racial hostel. The basement flat, at the very bottom of this microcosmic 'upstairs downstairs' arrangement, is used as a headquarters by a local black political group, but Moses wants nothing to do with 'black power, nor white power, nor any fucking power but my own'. 'I just want to live in peace,' he writes in the 'memoirs' which form the nominal substance of the novel, 'and reap the harvest of the years of slavery I put in in Brit'n.'

The house, bought from his Jamaican friend Tolroy, represents a tenuous security in the turbulent world of black London. After years of uncertainty, Moses relishes being a landlord: 'If you are a tenant, you catch your arse forever, but if you are a landlord, it is a horse of a different colour'. Like the slaves dressing up as kings and queens, Moses, with his drinks cupboard and his white butler, is acting out a charade of aristocratic power. 'I was Master of the house,' he exults. '[W]hen the tenants hear my heavy tread they cower and shrink in their rooms, in case I snap my fingers and say OUT to any

of them.' Now that he's a man of substance, he wants to put a distance between himself and 'the old brigade' of Caribbean ne'er-do-wells. The fellow-feeling he grudgingly displayed as a younger man seems to have been ground out of him, replaced by a toxic bitterness. 'It is,' he writes, 'always your own people who let you down in the end.' Instead of friends, he has possessions, and frets about 'the state of my Chippendale furniture, and Wedgwood crockery, albeit third hand, with which I had furnished the rooms . . . How was the warp and woof of my *Axeminster* carpets . . . ?'

There is something of the shipwrecked mariner about Moses, washed up on a cold and lonely shore, making do with what he can forage from the second-hand stalls of Portobello. His self-sufficiency and his carnival-king status as 'Master of the house' make him an echo of that paragon of Protestant thrift and virtuous accumulation, Robinson Crusoe. 'There was my majesty,' writes Defoe's sailor in his own 'memoir', 'the prince and lord of the whole island; I had the lives of all my subjects at my absolute command.'[3] Selvon makes the Crusoe connection explicit. In a pointed inversion, Bob the factotum ('a white immigrant . . . from somewhere in the Midlands') is described as 'my man Friday . . . a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man . . . I decided to teach him the Bible when I could make the time.'

Into Moses's strictly individualistic world steps 'the black community', in the form of his old friend Galahad, who has dived head-first into nationalist politics. Moses sneers at his 'Black Power glad rags' ('a pair of platforms, yellow socks, purple corduroy trousers . . .') and suspects that he has ulterior motives for coming to visit. In his experience, appeals to community spirit

are usually only made by people who want something. For his part Galahad approves of the Shepherd's Bush house:

> 'I am glad to see you in prosperous surroundings. It is good for Our People to make progress. But you must not forget the struggle.'
>
> 'I'm glad that you appreciate that I struggled to get where I am,' I say.
>
> 'Not that struggle,' he wave my words away. 'I mean *the* struggle. It is only right that you should contribute to the cause. We need financiers. Without the black gentry and nobility on our side, it is a losing battle.'
>
> 'I didn't know a battle was going on . . .'

Idealism gets a rough ride in *Moses Ascending*. Galahad's motives are as base as Moses fears, yet despite his misgivings Selvon's anti-hero does get sucked into 'the struggle'. He opens his wallet and his home to the revolutionaries, and even gets arrested (albeit by mistake) on a Black Power demonstration. Sadly, his flirtation with solidarity just serves to make him feel more alone: 'my brush with the law only make me realize that I had no friends in the world, that I had to peddle my own canoe for survival.' The substitution of *peddle* for *paddle* is crushing. Moses, *Homo economicus*, will always be a lonely Londoner, his occasional yearnings for community, even love, blocked by his suspicion of other black people.

If *Moses Ascending* is a novel about the tension between the black individual and a 'community' which appears to conspire to drag him down, it's also a novel about a first generation immigrant in a country he no longer fully understands. By 1975,

the Notting Hill of *The Lonely Londoners* had receded into the past. The 1958 riots, five nights of August Bank Holiday violence in which three-hundred strong mobs of Teddy Boys went 'nigger hunting' through W11, marked the beginning of a new era of tension, exemplified by Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, given at a Conservative party meeting in Birmingham in 1968. Quoting an unnamed constituent (a 'decent, ordinary fellow Englishman'), Powell warned that 'in this country, in fifteen or twenty years time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.' As well as the volume of immigration from Commonwealth countries, Powell objected to proposed anti-discrimination legislation, alluding in patrician style to the Sibylline prophecies described in Virgil's Aeneid.

> Here is the means of showing that the immigrator communities can organize to consolidate their members, to agitate and campaign against their fellow citizens, and to overawe and dominate the rest with the legal weapons which the ignorant and the ill-informed have provided. As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'.

The next day Edward Heath dismissed him from his shadow cabinet, prompting a deluge of supportive letters and telegrams and anti-immigrant marches by London dockers and Smithfield meat porters. The Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968, which Powell found so objectionable, were the first anti-discrimination legislation on the British statute books. The 1965 act made expression of racial prejudice illegal in 'places of public resort',

excluding shops and boarding houses from the definition of such places. The second, passed despite the furore caused by Powell's speech, extended these meagre provisions to a more general ban on refusing housing, employment or public services to someone because of their ethnic background.

Though minority rights were asserted they were not enforced. 'No blacks' notices were now illegal in Notting Hill hostels, but police harassment, deaths in custody, endemic institutional racism and the growth of the National Front all fed a sharp rise in black militancy. The W11 of *Moses Ascending* is no longer the district of Lord Kitchener (the Calypsonian whose famous song 'London is the Place for Me' became the unofficial anthem of the Windrush generation), but has become the backyard of the Black Panthers, the extortionist and self-styled revolutionary Michael X and the Mangrove Nine, activists associated with a restaurant on the All Saints Road, whose trial became a *cause célèbre* in 1971. A year after the publication of the novel, the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival riots broke out, inaugurating another new era in British 'community' politics. First-generation immigrants like Moses had been definitively succeeded by a second generation, represented in the novel by Brenda, the maxi-skirted siren of the local black revolutionaries. Moses is frankly amazed by her, and not just because of her mesmerizing backside:

> If I did shut my eyes, I would have thought it was a nordic talking, the accent was so high. She didn't sound like some of them women what try to put on English and it don't fit them properly. She sound like the real thing, and I know without asking that she was a Black Briton.

Brenda, with her 'Afro hair, Afro blouse, and Afro gleam in the eye', is soon installed in the basement, and Moses begins to consider the 'advantages of having a regular woman about the house'. 'I am not getting any younger,' he writes, 'and cannot hustle pussy and scout the streets of London as in days of yore.' Moses's unreconstructed sexism, expressed in extended ruminations on such topics as the 'more than a hundred white women' he has slept with, and the qualities of a certain 'proud and defiant part of the [black female] anatomy', no doubt contributed to Selvon's humiliation before an audience at the Commonwealth Institute in 1986, when his face was slapped by an activist, angry at the objectification of female characters in his work. In 1975, with feminism on the rise, Selvon's Moses must have already seemed like a dinosaur, and Brenda a two-dimensional cartoon whose willingness to jump into the sack with Moses and Bob can't have endeared her to the black feminists she was supposed to satirize.

Selvon's portrayal of the revolutionaries in Moses's basement is only slightly surer in its touch. The photos pinned on their walls are not of Huey Newton or Malcolm X (or even the newly minted 'third world superstar' Bob Marley), but of 'Lamming and Salkey and Baldwin', writers of Selvon's own generation, the generation of which George Jackson remarked (in a quote wryly repeated by James Baldwin himself in 'An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis') 'there are no healthy brothers – *none at all*'.[4] By 1975 Selvon's own critical reputation was in free-fall, and given the prevailing climate of intergenerational suspicion it's hard not to see his invocation of a familiar canon as a piece of wishful thinking, or a desperate attempt to reclaim lost cultural ground.

While working on *Moses Ascending*, Selvon co-wrote *Pressure*, generally regarded as the first 'black British' feature film. His partner was the director, photographer and fellow Trinidadian Horace Ové. The story of Tony, a second-generation black Briton trying to get by in Notting Hill, has many links to *Moses Ascending*, not least in its depiction of the Black Power movement which eventually offers Tony a home after he's been alienated by the 'white world'. Tony prefers fish and chips to patties, has white friends, and hopes to get work as a bookkeeper, but retreats into petty crime and political militancy after a series of bruising experiences with employers, neighbours and the police. Ové was far more engaged with Black Power than Selvon, and the depiction of the political milieu in *Pressure* is both more accurate and more sympathetic (if less funny) than that of *Moses Ascending*. By narrating the film from the point of view of Tony, rather than an 'old salt' like Moses, Ové and Selvon cross a line into a new realm of experience – not the world of the immigrant who can, as the Powellites put it, 'go home', but those who were 'born here'. As Ové remarked in an interview after the film's belated 1978 release, 'these young black British kids are trapped. They have broken with the older generation whose philosophy is ''hush your mouth, work hard, don't complain''. The young kids don't want to go on eating curried goat.'[5]

Moses is certainly not one to hush his mouth, but he's still every inch a member of that 'older generation'. He can often sound like a black version of Rigsby, the craven, scheming landlord in the ITV sitcom *Rising Damp*. Selvon's seventies are peppered with television references (*This is Your Life*, *Upstairs Downstairs*) and his depiction of race politics has a crude knockabout humour that owes much to TV series like *Till Death Do*

Us Part. When Moses gets involved with people-smuggling, the reader is treated to a confused and unpleasant depiction of South Asian immigrants, including a character just referred to as 'Paki', who seems to be a hybrid of Hindu and Muslim, pointing his prayer mat to the East, sitting in the lotus position and declaiming 'There is no god but *the* god, and Mohammed is his prophet.' Selvon, the Trinidadian Christian, clearly didn't bother to learn much more than Moses about the people staying in his fictional upstairs room.

Flaws like this contributed to Selvon's critical eclipse, and put *Moses Ascending* beyond the pale for a generation of critics whose work on 'postcolonial' literature was part of a wider anti-racist politics. In his introduction to a 1982 edition of *The Lonely Londoners*, Kenneth Ramchand warns against 'loose talk about a Moses trilogy', on the grounds that while the Moses of the earlier book is 'seeking answers to profound questions with an intensity that suggests a closeness to the author . . . the latter books . . . suggest a disengagement by the author from his protagonist which at times . . . feels like cynicism or evasion.'[6] Unfortunately for Ramchand, his attempt to preserve the purity of *The Lonely Londoners* was made difficult by Selvon himself, who peppers *Moses Ascending* with references to its predecessor. It's hard to escape the conclusion that what discomforted Ramchand wasn't so much 'disengagement' as the biliousness of an ageing writer who felt he'd been denied his critical and commercial due.

Twenty-five years later it seems less important to present Selvon as a heroic postcolonial saint than to place his work (and attitudes) in historical context. His pioneering use of Caribbean vernacular was acknowledged by peers such as V. S. Naipaul,

who said in a 1958 interview that 'because Sam has written so authentically he has made it easier for the rest of us who want to make people talk the way they do. Sam was the first man, and I think we ought to give him credit for this, who made it possible.'[7] There is much to admire in *Moses Ascending*, not least the extraordinary pages where Selvon describes, in lyrical satirical prose that's all the more intense for the cold anger that lies behind it, the 'good fortune' of black menial workers who have to wake up before the rest of the population:

> The alarms of all the black people in Brit'n are timed to ring before the rest of the population. It is their destiny to be up and about at the crack o'dawn. In these days of pollution and environment, he is very lucky, for he can breathe the freshest air of the new day before anybody else . . . The first flake of snow in the winter falls on a black man. The first ray of sunlight in summer falls on a black man. The first yellow leaf in the autumn falls on a black man. The first crocus in the spring is seen by a black man and he harks to the cuckoo long before all them other people what write to the newspapers to say they was the first . . . The population masses believe that racial violence going to erupt because he is being continuously and continually oppressed and kept down. Not so. It is true that racial violence is going to erupt, but not for that reason. What going to happen is one of these days the white man going to realize that the black man have it cushy . . .

Moses Ascending is a rough-and-tumble book, a carnival, and fittingly it ends with the high brought low and the low raised up high. It's also a depiction of a city and a country in transition,

a Britain making its way out of the post-imperial twilight towards a future lit by a brighter sun – a future Sam Selvon helped to imagine.

Hari Kunzru, 2007

Notes

1. V. S. Naipaul, 'Power?', in *The Writer and the World* (London: Picador, 2002).
2. Sam Selvon, 'Three Into One Can't Go: East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian' (*Wasafiri* #5, Autumn 1986).
3. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985).
4. James Baldwin, 'An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis' (*NYRB*, Volume 15, Number 12, 7 January 1971).
5. Horace Ové, 'Horace Ové in Black and White', interview with Stuart Hood (*Sunday Times*, 17 September 1978) (*Pressure/Baldwin's Nigger: Two Films by Horace Ové*, BFI, 2006).
6. Kenneth Ramchand, 'An introduction to this novel', *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Longman, 1982).
7. Radio broadcast, V. S. Naipaul with Stuart Hall, 'In Discussion on British Caribbean Writers' (21 April 1958), quoted in Sukhdev Sandhu *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

It was Sir Galahad who drew my attention to the property. He was reading *Dalton's Weekly*, as was his wont, looking for new jobs; roaming through bedsitter land; picking out secondhand miscellany he need and could afford; musing on the lonely hearts column to see if any desperate rich white woman seeks black companion with a view to matrimony; and speculating when he come to the properties-for-sale page, buying houses and renovating them to sell and make big profit.

Little did he dream that whilst he dreamt I was on the lookout for an investment in truth.

'Hello Moses!' he say, stretching the pages out and backing the one with the item he was reading. 'Tolroy's property is up for sale. Listen to this: ''Highly desirable mansion in exclusive part of Shepherd's Bush. Vacant possession. Owner migrating to Jamaica. Viewing strictly by appointment with agent.'' That's Tolroy's house. It got his address.'

'Does it say how much he's asking?' I ask.

'No. He'll be lucky if he could give it away. You never seen it?'

'No, you?'

'Yes. You ever build houses with playing cards when you was a little boy?'

'Yeah.'

'And you shift one card and the whole house collapse?'

'Yeah.'

'That's Tolroy's mansion.'

Nevertheless Galahad didn't know one arse about houses; it's true some of these terraces in London look like they might capsize any minute, but united we stand, divided we fall, and knowing Tolroy as I do, it stand to reason that he would not of bought no end-of-terrace house, but one plunk in the middle what would have support on both sides.

True enough it turned out when I went to see it and get some more details from Tolroy, such as it had a five-year lease, two of which was gone, and it was due for LCC demolition. It sounded like the sort of thing I could afford.

'That's why it's going so cheap, Moses,' Tolroy say. 'If you let out rooms you can make your money back in no time at all. Besides, you will be a landlord and not a tenant.'

It was this latter point which decided me in the end. After all these years paying rent, I had the ambition to own my own property in London, no matter how ruinous or dilapidated it was. If you are a tenant, you catch your arse forever, but if you are a landlord, it is a horse of a different colour. Take the HP, for instance:

'Er, Mr Moses, er, I'm sorry about this procedure, but we usually ask if our customers know anyone who will be prepared to act as a guarantor? Perhaps your landlord?'

'I beg your pardon, *I* am the landlord.'

'Oh . . . how silly of me . . . if you'll just sign the form here, SIR . . . sit down . . . use my chair.'