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RE-VISIONING PAST IN THE NOVELS OF CARYL PHILLIPS

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand the literary works of Black British writer Caryl Phillips. Being a black British novelist hailing from the Caribbean background, Phillips's novels recount the tales of slaves, their experiences and sufferings, historical Atlantic journey, Middle passage, the sense of nostalgia, the feeling of uprootedness, the torn self, their Diaspora and traumatic memories. In this regard, we can put forward the view that, the writer has the responsibility of juggling with history in an authentic way as he becomes the voice of all those who have suffered the pangs of such an institution which has dehumanized and debased the dark skinned nations.

KEYWORDS: History, Slavery, Atlantic Slave Trade, Caribbean, Diaspora.



INTRODUCTION:

The present article attempts to investigate the literary works of the Black British writer, Caryl Phillips, a novelist, playwright and essayist. Most modern writers insist on the past which cannot be so readily ignored. Major historical events, beliefs and people reverberate through ages, and it is dangerous to deny the looming past. To understand the relation between action and consequence or cause and effect, it helps to establish what the past entails and how it affects the present. When modern writers embark on a journey to deal with historical era and people, their aim is often to show the ways in

which history impacts on the present. Many writers consider the central importance of the past to be being its ability to help us define or redefine who we are in the present. That is, our 'today' is rooted in our 'yesterday' whose effects are reflected in every sphere of our existence.

History has always been a major concern in Caribbean literature, exerting, in Mark McWatt's words, "an almost obsessive influence upon the creative imagination of the West Indian writer" (McWatt 12). The reassessment of the past is indeed a source of regeneration and identity for the rootless and dismembered

populace of former colonies, even though such (re) consideration becomes a process of "the backward glance" which inevitably involves sufferings deeply anchored in slavery, that some Caribbean writers of the younger generation, most of whom have settled outside the Caribbean space, should address in their fiction seems therefore to be in line with that tradition. Like their literary predecessors, these "New Voices" have turned to the past in an attempt to understand their roots, anchor points, to better comprehend their identity and where they are going. As a matter of fact, the past paves the way to open new vistas for the coming days. Major focus of West Indian fiction was on the social, psychological, and ontological aftermath of what has been called the peculiar institution or on the historical events

preceding it, such as the European conquest or the Middle Passage, rather than on the material condition of the plantation life or the slavery system.

This statement is substantiated by Hayden White who opines that there is a “fundamental similarity between the task of the novelist and that of the historian since both operate by organizing data’s through the structure of language though one does so over fictional and the other over real events” (White 1985). Being a black British novelist hailing from the Caribbean background, Phillips’s novels recount the tales of slaves, their experiences and sufferings, historical Atlantic journey, Middle passage, the sense of nostalgia, the feeling of uprootedness, the torn self, their Diaspora and traumatic memories. In this regard, we can put forward the view that, the writer has the responsibility of juggling with history in an authentic way as he becomes the voice of all those who have suffered the pangs of such an institution which has dehumanized and debased the dark skinned nations.

In his novels, Phillips excavates histories of both black and Jewish suffering: all of his protagonists struggle with and from the traumatic memories of racist or anti- Semitic violence and oppression. However, Phillips does not treat these individual histories in isolation but lets them address one another. That is, they are interwoven. As a result, his work resonates with Caruth’s understanding of history and trauma as inherently relational: “History, like trauma, is never simply one’s own... [H]istory is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996). Hence, the human race is bound across the global village due to similar disturbing traumas which gnaw each and every one of us. Writing in the *A Readers Guide to the Twentieth Century Novel in Britain*, Randall Stevenson puts Caryl Phillips as “a vivid historian of slave experiences” (Stevenson 1993). Phillips could even be called one of the chroniclers of the silenced past, since “behind all of [his fictions] looms the dark history of slavery and its consequences” (Coetzee 1997). Slavery has such a long dated history that it is inevitably palpable in such writers’ works and world. The institution of slavery has left scars on the people’s past psyche. Hence it has become the lifelong legacy of such people.

Several novels of Phillips are based on John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750-1754* and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative and other Writings* as Sofia Munoz Valdivieso opines, “The experiences of John Newton and Olaudah Equiano are rather profusely documented in writings of their own, while that of Francis Barber remains on the edges of written history as it was recorded in texts related to his very famous master Samuel Johnson” (Valdivieso). Since, some novels are necessarily relied on the historical documents and previous literary creations, Phillips’s novels are characteristically have pastiche and montage in his narratives to reconstruct the past in the context of diasporic present. Lars Eckstein provides a careful analysis of Phillips’s use of his sources in this novel that integrates passages, words or echoes from, at least, twenty prior texts. He comes to the conclusion that Cambridge could be described as “a palimpsest which assembles specific passages from older texts in an artistic montage” (Eckstein 2006), so that he argues that there is a parallelism between the novel’s literary technique of montage and the key idea of displacement and uprooting at its centre, since “Phillips’s narrative technique also consists of ‘uprooting’ and ‘displacing’ the material of older texts about slavery and the slave trade” (Eckstein 104).

His purpose of retelling the slave past is to inform the future generations about events of the past, the effect of the past on the present, and the central importance of the past as a whole. Hence, it can be put forth that our individuality is highly dependent on the bygone days and events. By juggling with the past Phillips acts as an eye opener for our present and future respectively. No one can escape from the past or disassociate oneself completely from what has taken place as the past-present-future thread epitomizes a cycle of events in its totality.

A work of art which exists in history by living its life from the past to the present and submits itself to one kind of understanding and perception in one epoch, and a different and another way of understanding and perception in another age, is capable of various disposition of power in each era as the mechanisms of power has a capillary form of existence; it reaches “...into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault 39).

Being a second generation Black British writer, “his novels mainly deal with historical black experiences from the perspective of black diaspora, his contemporary concern with experiences as a black Briton coming from Caribbean underlies his work” (Tsunehiko 2008) Informed by the fragmented histories of Africans in the Caribbean, Europe, the United States, and on the African continent, Caryl Phillips’s novels chart journeys in the

past and present across what he calls “the Atlantic Sound.” Those journeys produce complex linguistic and cultural negotiations: multiple voices speak through his texts; parents and children embrace conflicting traditions. Phillips’s novels take on innovative forms that approximate the ruptures and disjuncture’s inherent in the histories they reimagine.

This sense of polyphony or multiplicity of black and white perspectives in recreating slavery in the eighteenth-century British Empire is at the centre of Caryl Phillips’s conception of the history of the country and the interconnection between Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. Phillips fictional recreations of slavery and the slave trade involves as he has stated: “I suspect that the vast majority of what I have so far written has been an attempt to understand not just the actual details of the “institution” of slavery but, more importantly, the continued, corrosive, troubling and inescapable legacy of what happened on the coast of Africa, on the plantations in the Americas, and on the high and low streets of Europe” (“Our Modern World” 520). Novels such as *Crossing the River*, *Cambridge* and *Foreigners* play a crucial role in the recovery of voices of the African diaspora to narrate stories that have been hidden, and highlight the role of slavery in the history of Britain and the British Empire. They contribute to a richer understanding of the interconnected history of Africa, Europe and the Americas and the impact of slavery not only in the past lives of the British Empire but also in present day configurations of identity in people whose personal and collective history has been shaped by slavery and the African diaspora.

Born on the West Indian island of St. Kitts, Caryl Phillips was taken as an infant to Britain, where his parents settled in the city of Leeds. As a student at Oxford, Phillips became aware of the Caribbean culture and the African diaspora that spawned it. Phillips began to read African American literature as voraciously as he had been reading Russian writing. Among the influences he cites are Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Henrik Ibsen, William Faulkner, Kamau Brathwaite, and Derek Walcott. Phillips often emphasizes “his first trip to the USA, where, for the first time, he came across Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (ET 8). This discovery of an alternative, the black tradition of writing, eventually also led to his decision to “confront confusion and write” (ET 8).

Being influenced by the prominent writers provided him with a further insight into the duality of the society in which he was brought up, reinforced his resistance to all forms of exclusion, and above all aroused in him the need to come to terms with “the cultural confusions of being black and British” (ET 2). In the decade after his graduation Phillips made further journeys, notably one to the Caribbean in 1980 and another to Europe in 1984. These made him even more aware of the richness of his multicultural background -- including African but also European and Indian ancestry – and strengthened his determination to write, which resulted in the prolific and original fictions.

This includes several scripts, among which *Playing Away* (1987) which centers on a cricket game between an inner city West Indian team and their rural English opponents; three plays, *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There is Darkness* (1982) and *The Shelter* (1984) which address the West Indian experience in Britain as well as the relationship between the white woman and the black man; two novels, *The Final Passage* (1985) and *A State of Independence* (1986) which deal respectively with post-war Caribbean migration to Britain and with neo-colonialism in a Caribbean island on the verge of independence; and finally a travel essay, *The European Tribe* (1987), which Phillips describes in the preface as “a notebook in which I have jotted various thoughts about a Europe I feel both of and not of” (*The European Tribe*, p. xiii). Unlike his creative writing, where he always steers clear of anger, this book of non-fiction contains an incisive anatomy of European racism whose openly political message did not garner general approval.

Phillips entered another phase of his writing after staying in the Caribbean for two years at the end of the eighties and starting an academic career that took him to India, Sweden and, finally, Amherst in the United States. With *Higher Ground* (1989), *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), four novels which met with great critical claim and won him major awards, Phillips broadened the scope of his fiction. While his first two novels focus on the tense interaction between the Caribbean and Britain through the figures of migrants, these later novels tackle wide-ranging topics. *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River* are about the African slave-trade, and span the history of the African Diaspora, both in the New World and in Europe. *Cambridge* sets on a nineteenth century Caribbean plantation, addresses slavery and the complexity of the

master/slave relationship. And *The Nature of Blood* puts side by side the Jewish Holocaust, the persecution of Jews in the fifteenth century, the predicament of an Othello-like figure in sixteenth century Venice, and the rejection of Ethiopian refugees in contemporary Israel. In the nineties, Phillips also expanded the range of his writings to include criticism and editing, which resulted in two anthologies, *Extravagant Writers: A Literature of Belonging* (1997), a collection of texts by British writers born abroad, and *The Right Set* (1999), a volume on tennis; in the same period he also wrote an impressive number of essays that were to be collected together with earlier pieces in *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (2001).

Though he has recently devoted much time to non-fiction, publishing *The Atlantic Sound* in 2000 as well as regular review articles in the press, he has also continued to write fiction. His novel, *A Distant Shore* (2003), examines the state of contemporary Britain which is reluctantly coming to terms with the social and cultural changes taking place. To an extent, this new novel may represent a departure from the rest of Phillips's fiction which, with the exception of *A State of Independence*, is always set in a more or less distant past, even though it is of obvious relevance to the present. However, Phillips' interest in the past is again at the heart of his latest novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), which revisits the life of Bert Williams, a Caribbean-born entertainer, who became the best-paid black comedian in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. His fate was nonetheless tragic for Williams, who blacked up to go on stage, owed his success to his pandering to racial stereotypes. Phillips' sensitive and subtle narrative raises such crucial questions as the responsibility of the artist and the difficulty of being oneself in a society that pays exclusive attention to what you look like at the expense of who you are.

Thus, Phillips successfully subverts received historical documents in his novel to show the effect of past on the present and their present pitiable, pathetic predicament of despair and hopelessness.

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