



DIASPORIC ENGAGEMENT AND INFLUENCES ON CARYL PHILLIPS

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ABSTRACT:

Caryl Phillips (1958) is a prominent black British writer. He is known for his substantive picture of the tragic stories of Afro-Caribbean and Britain experience. Caryl Phillips' personal history determines his views on Diasporas. His past and present life is connecting with some 'dots' (events) which can renders a different angle and background to search influences and his diasporic engagement. In this article Phillips' diasporic engagement will be explored in the backdrop of his personal history.

Keywords: diaspora, migration, home, identity etc.

The Caribbean province has experienced constant demographic movement and migration since the centuries. There is the geographic displacement of individuals and groups generally occur for economic or social reasons. The migratory scenes in the Caribbean island were so common phenomenon and these movements are unquestionably extensive and varied. Rual Johnson, a Journalist in his articles *The Diaspora* gives the possible causes for decision to migrate.

When a migrant decides to move, there are two factors that weigh on the decision; uncertainty and pay. Considering and insecurity involved and the long-term outlook, it is important that the income in the destination country in higher than that of the country of origin (Johnson *The Diaspora* 1).

What motivates a person to move from his or her country of origin to another country? The answer is not so simple. It may a lack of jobs, slavery, attraction of modern world, poverty are some factors for migration. Historically, the mass migration of the Afro-Caribbean's between 1880 and 1920 to Latin America it's because of the high rate of unemployment. The migratory waves of poor states like Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and St Kitts to the United States in the 1920 to the 1950's are mainly cause of poverty, education and unemployment. In short the Caribbean is a zone of migration 'coming and going'. The writer like Caryl Phillips is also witness and part of a great historical migration. When he

was born in St. Kitts in 1958, at that time the Caribbean people were migrating to Britain in terrific numbers. His parents were very young in their early 20s they decided to go to England for better future and for all those opportunities like education, more money, and better economic prospects than St Kitts. Migration is deeply associated with Caribbean's so Phillips. He explores 'diaspora' which is scattered largely in the Caribbean history. His family is also a part of migration and that particular event leaves everlasting effect on his writing. So his script belongs to the 'diaspora' which is mainly refers to migratory experiences and splintered worlds.

The term *diaspora* is used in contrast to hyphenated identities, quest for self and cross cultural encounters. He belongs to the same tradition of immigration (*forced and otherwise*), cultural and social displacement and nostalgia for an elusive 'home'. Most of his titles and speeches are about dislocation and personal experience of migration and its consequences. Many of his literary crafts explored the migratory experience of blacks of the contemporary age. The seed of his writing on immigrants was influence of his personal and ancestors migration in the past and present. In his interview with John Johnston the Cincinnati Enquirer in 2004, admitted that he get the idea of story from his personal experience of migration and travelling tours. In his notification writing *A New World Order* (2001) Phillips have chosen the poem as an epigraph which encapsulates the dilemma faced by first generation Caribbean migrants. Migration is major theme of his writing which is result of his personal past and influence.

Phillips grew up in Britain and absorbed the British way of life. As a young black boy he was fascinated and influenced by white culture. The colour of his skin will always reminds him as migrant and outsider. The black identity and race often questioning him, 'Who I am'? It was so difficult to him to search out where he really belonged. These themes of "belonging" and "home" became a guideline to his life as well as in the lives of his characters. Phillips passion of journey and travelling is to answer the question of what "home" means to him, someone who lives in the African Diaspora. He used to say home is one of the 'problematic words' for Caribbean people. Caribbean people have always a multiple sense of home. Benedicte Ledent said that, "What is home is a question that echoes virtually through the writing of Caryl Phillips" (Ledent *Ambiguous Vision of Home* 1). His personal migration and 'unhomeliness' attempts to search: *Where he belongs and Who am I?* His writing reflects his home consciousness.

In the preface of *The European Tribe* (1987) he writes, "... a Europe I feel both of and not of" (Phillips, *ET* ix) and similar expression which concerned with the tensions between home and the unhomly; between migration and settlement; black and white. In the introduction to *A New World Order* (2002) "... Africa ... I fell at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of this place" (Phillips *NWO*

1). Many of his work are set in the past and discuss the themes already mentioned from varying views. His work, which is typically concerned with home was originally adopted and associated with his own past. In an essay in *The Atlantic Sound* (2002) he explores, "the complex notion of what constitutes home seen through the historical prism of Atlantic slave trade, he undertakes a personal quest to come to terms with the dislocation which is the history of an individual" (Phillips AS).

His most of books sheds insightful light on lives of Caribbean descent. Through the suffering of the blacks and Jews help learned to understand his own suffering. He correlates his own life and struggles with the story of Anne Frank. *The Diary of Anne Frank* made a permanent imprint on him and so it is visible that his literary work is strongly influenced by Anne Frank. His ancestors came from Africa, India and West Indies. He has a Jewish ancestry also, so there is a blood relation with Jewish community. In his first visit to sub-Saharan African in his collection of essays an belonging, *A New World Order*, it is clear that the migratory and hybrid qualities of identity are reflects in his work since the beginning which is because his personal influence of ancestry. He reveals that his grandfather was a Jew.

His travel quest started with his identity. He has travelled around Britain and Europe, to Africa and North America. On his journeys he gained knowledge about Diaspora, slave trade. In his travelling he especially concentrate Ghanaian diapora. He focuses on meanings of diaspora slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, Post colonialism, neocolonialism and identity crises of blacks. His fiction and nonfiction writings are explores the issue of the Atlantic slave trade and its consequences for African Diaspora his major works focuses on the personal and historical legacy of the blanks. He is an archetypical black writer and traveler yet he adamantly has refuses the label of black writer. In the preface to his play *The Shelter* (1983) He said, "... in Africa I was not black. In Africa I was writer. In Europe I am Black. In Europe I am a black writer if the Missionaries wish to play the game along these line then I do not wish to be an Honorary white (Phillips *The Shelter* i). Journey to home and host land tagged him with the label of diasporic writer which works are mainly concern with the issue of home and unhome concept.

The themes of his novels show great similarities with his own life, or with ancestors. The feeling of home and belonging plays a pivotal role in Phillips life. Being as a black migrant like there he did not get permanent home or fit in anywhere. This feeling of unhomeliness is translated in his work, which covers a lot of muted stories from past and personal experience. According to Bronwyn T Williams, "... for a generation of writers like Caryl Phillips, cultural identification is slippery and problematic concept. He adds a Phillips' statement about identification and home belonging, "I've always been quite envious of people who talked about going home. Even now people don't know quite what to

say to me... If I were to arrive in England, people always say to me "Good to be back home, isn't it?".... "Well, is this his home?" So Phillips talks open up a new perspective on identity and unhomeliness. In 2006 December Caryl Phillips gave a key note address, entitled *Colour Me English*, in his preamble speech he read log notes from his personal diary,

"Ghana, 1 December 2005

I will tell you that I belong but at the same time, I will resist you embrace".

The concept of identity and belonging is main perspective of his writing and personal history. As Ledent writes about Phillips, "I was not born in Europe. I was not born in Africa I was not born in United States. I was born on a small island, where I could breathe Europe, I could breathe America, and I could breathe Africa ...Geography, in fact, made me who I am, and history presented me with a blank canvas upon which I could begin to describe on identity that resists the vulgarities of loyalty to nation for race. The embrace of welcome can quickly tighten into a life threatening chokehold in which we breathlessly begin to accept other people's definitions of who we are" (Ledent CP 8).

Phillips personal experiences demonstrate his view of genocide and racism. His association with the Jews has determined his strong affiliation with Jewish suffering expresses his deep respect for discriminated and migrated from society. There are various causes for migration and discrimination but mainly it reasons of race, ethnic background or religion. Phillips strongly condemns any form of racism. In his novels he makes people aware of all the forms of racism that have affected people in the course of history. According to Ledent, "Phillips not only do his novels relentlessly alert their readers to the hidden history of West, that of the transatlantic slave trade, for example, but they also underline Britain's inherent, though long negated heterogeneity. Whereas slavery and the other presence in England were either in existent or, at best, figured as side issues in most English novels until the 1990s, they have become central issues in Phillips writing... Finally, *Dancing in the Dark*, though set in the United States, deals with identity issues that have become burning ones in contemporary Britain too" (Ledent *A Master of Ambiguity* 1).

The keynote address speech in December 2006 at Liege University that follows, *Colour Me English*, Phillips starts with the recounting of childhood memory which led the young Phillips to realize that not only race and class, but also culture and religion, serve as factors of exclusion in British society. Phillips says that "As a boy growing up in England, I knew that the main factor that was preventing my full participation in British life was the colour of my skin... notion of thinking that race by itself is a barometer of either human disaffection or social progress" (Ledent CP 18). According him equality and opportunity is determined by race and class and gender. Phillips faces so many racial situations in his real life experience. At the school Phillips brothers were the only black

children. Many time Phillips and his brothers called as a nigger instead of his name. At the white-dominated schools he attended in Leeds and Birmingham he did not learn anything about race, where he came from, or his history. A telling anecdote from his youth shows how he teased on the term of race:

About three years later one of the most painful episodes of my childhood took place. This time it was inside a classroom. Mr. Thompson, an English literature teacher, decided to demonstrate his knowledge of all things by explaining the origins of our surnames. So Greenberg was Jewish, Morely originally came from the small Yorkshire town of the same name and Mackenzie was a Scot, I felt a hot flush on embarrassment long before he turned to my desk. 'Phillips', he mused, you must be from Wales. The whole class laughed, while I stared back at him stony-faced, knowing full well that I was not from Wales. The truth was I had no idea where I was from as I had been told that I was born in the Caribbean but came from England. I could not participate in a joke which made my identity a source of humour (Phillips *E T 2*).

Phillips struggled with the dilemma of being both black and British, being both of and not of Europe. His 'pigmentation' and 'cultural difference' is the main problem in unite in British life. He sensed very different because he was a black boy growing up in a white society and did not really fit in British society. "The Phillips acquired a unique sensitivity to the plight of the outsider, which has remained to this day one of the hallmarks of his writing" (Ledent, *A Master of Ambiguity*).

As a writer his main interest in issues concerning belonging, identity and dislocation as they are manifested in multiple points of the African Diaspora. He uses both fiction and non-fiction to imagine the lives of people who mostly affected by historical circumstances. He feels confusion about his Caribbean heritage because his parents, who were anxious about root and they never talk about back home. As Phillips tells Pico Iyer, "...a very working class, extended family (...) I had my mother and my father and my brothers and that's it. So, the Primary displacement I felt was growing up in such a tight community without a sense of extended family" (Schatteman 38). He has a very deep desire of home and family. His childhood made even more elusive when his parents divorced. His early years are critical to his writing because it is during this period that he gained the experiential knowledge of themes that would later infuse in his fiction, and his experiences from past reflected in his writing.

Many of the issues tackled in Phillips fiction are present in his non-fiction, which can be regarded as a personal blueprint for the author of four book-length essays, often with an autobiographical slant: *The European Tribe* (1987), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), *A New World Order* (2001) and, *Colour Me English* (2011). History has always been influence the people. 'History' has a major concern in Caribbean literature, exerting in Mark Mcwatt's words, "at almost

obsessive influence upon the imagination of the West Indian writer” (Ledent 271). The reassessment of the past is a part or source of regeneration and identity for the rootless. These new voices very much influenced by the past and to understand the past they turned towards history. The various questions arise in their mind to understand where they come from, the better to comprehend who they are? And where they are going? They always search and organize their feeling about 'self'.

In the fiction he tries to undermine the imaginative limits of 'identity'. Phillips makes no distinctions between races, gender, age etc. he puts everyone in the same position of a plural identity. His characters, his narration and non-fictional work may be appearing to be even more powerful than contemporary society. As Ledent said that, "non-fictional work should be read as complementary, but while his essays may inspire you to rethink certain issues, his may be help you to truly understand and empathize with the complexity of thorough certain characters and a submersion in the story..."(Ledent *CP*). Phillips let his readers experience and sympathize with this nuanced multiplicity for them, in order to open up their minds to the reality of a cultural plurality surrounding them in their own society.

His characters have shown that he correctly sees individuals as person with a fluid identity. Phillips search of a 'home' constitute a larger part of his identity. Therefore Phillips is influenced by self discovery, identity, travelling and home which all reflects in his writings. He advocates his novels and an essay involves a lot of research: However, the starting point of his artistic creation is not an abstract idea but it is a human voice connected to his past. Many concepts and issues like immigration, crime, education and poverty is not viewed as a general concept, but as a phenomenon impact on individuals like Phillips. Most novels by Phillips influenced on such personal experience. His richness of multicultural background - including African, European and Asian reflects through writing. His several scripts, plays and non-fiction writing explore the influence of his ancestry, childhood and present life.

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