



**Displacement and Dispossession :
Troubled Relationships in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge***



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Research Paper :

Caryl Phillips has produced wonderful creations like novels, plays, screenplays, travel books, anthologies, Radio and Television dramas and documentaries. Considering his literary works, specifically the nine successful novels and five nonfictional works, he has been rightly described as one of the talented and renowned writers of contemporary England.

Caryl Phillips' fiction include *The Final Passage* (1985), *A State of the Opened Once* (1986), *Higher Ground* (1989), *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Nature Of Blood* (1997), *A Distant Shore* (2003), *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), and *In the Falling Snow* (2009). Caryl Phillips's focus has always been the problems of immigrants, specifically their question of

belonging, homelessness and identity. The novel *Cambridge*, by Phillips, published in 1991 is aptly described by *Washington Post* as

“One of the subtlest, but most insistent statements ever about the troubled and urgent relationships between... Africa and Europe, justice and injustice, cruelty and compassion.”

The story of *Cambridge* gives the picture of the Nineteenth century West Indies and the plot revolves round the protagonist named ‘Cambridge’-an African slave who works on the sugar plantation of Emily Cartwright, a white English woman. Emily in this novel is also the main character who in the beginning of the story in the very first chapter acts as a narrator and witnesses the whole story of Cambridge. She tells us about the failure of justice in West Indies, due to society, which is driven with the domination of superior (white) race against the inferior (black) race. Apart from Cambridge as the main character, we find some black slaves representing the suppressed lives in West Indies.

The first chapter is Emily’s first person narration of her life at West Indies plantation which begins with her voyage from England to West Indies. The second chapter is first person narration by Cambridge who describes his own life journey as a slave from Guinea to West Indies and the third chapter is a brief account of Cambridge’s crime. Being the eldest and a motherless child in the family, Emily was allotted the task, which she thought best suited to a man, indirectly portrays the gender difference in Emily’s mind. Her ‘buried feelings’ at the age of thirty makes the reader realise her miserable condition as a woman in the Nineteenth century English culture.

Phillips as an external narrator through the voice of Emily takes us to the voyage from England to West Indies. Here, Emily who is accompanied by her loyal and close servant Isabella is seen in distress due to the pathetic condition on the ship. Their journey unfortunately becomes so stormy and rough as well as full of unpleasant climate that Isabella loses her life. Isabella was Emily’s close and caring intimate in her life, whose loss becomes a big subject of sorrow with the very beginning of this adventure. The culture of sea voyage which has been unpleasant experience from the beginning for Emily frustrates her from the beginning:

Phillips here prominently focuses on the picture of slavery through the technique of narration by Emily’s ‘journal’, which evidently had been a part of literary culture of writing the experience during Nineteenth century England. The historical reference, which Phillips gives through Emily’s journal, reflect the portrayal of slavery and the American and British colonialism of

Nineteenth century Caribbean places. Emily, a white woman who is also a non native of the Caribbean West Indies like other white people, is also one of the intruders who migrated in the name of traders to overpower the weak natives of Caribbean. Phillips validly puts forth the concept of history of white colonizers and the true natives of West Indies and clearly documents the sense of displacement and dispossession.

Through this ironical and satirical history of the Caribbean, the question of identity and belonging of the blacks is also discussed. Since during this period, the slave trade was prominent, the migration of African blacks to European places and then to the Caribbean places makes the blacks question their roots. And at the same time, the displacement of the true natives or 'Carib-Indians', also called as 'Red Indians' was indirectly cited. This probably centralised the colonial and cultural hybridity in the Nineteenth century West Indies. Along with the racial differences between the non-native Negroes is also an indicative aspect.

Later, when Emily is seen settled in the unnamed place of West Indies, where her father's sugar plantation, along with a well-looked house existed, she explored the life and world of the West Indian people. To her curiosity, she finds in this black race 'many shades of black, some of which signify a greater social acceptability than others¹.'

Phillips here portrays the attitude of the white people towards the blacks with psychological outlook that has an impact, socially and financially. This history of blacks and whites since ages has never changed and depending upon this, the question of civilised and uncivilised criteria had been always raised.

Further, Emily with the help of her new servant Stella, a black woman, learnt that the new manager Mr. Arnold Brown has been looking after her sugar plantation. Her curiosity of Mr. Wilson, the old Manager was fulfilled by Mr. Rogers' confession of Mr. Wilson shifting to neighbouring island leaving the present work. Mr. Rogers, the minister of Church, is a friend of Mr. McDonald, a physician, who is taking care of Emily being unwell after three weeks of long voyage. From Mr. McDonald, the Scotchman, she learns about the life of tropical people, since he was more close to those people on humanity ground and took interest in their welfare of health since years.

It is he, who introduced Emily to the real tropical life in West Indies. The observation of the races and their information by Mr. McDonald made her realise the uncivilised and unpleasant

situation and the ethnic culture of the negroes- specifically the mixed races and the hybrid cultures of the Negroes from the historical perspectives.

Thus, Phillips here portrays different races within the blacks, as of different origins, with varied culture, language and behaviour that have now in West Indies been formed with unique ethnicity. Prominently, through this historical outlook, one gets the idea of the mixed race existence with their hybrid culture of creoles as a blend of the “New World” people that have their heavy roots in the Caribbean area before nineteenth century. The concept of acquiring the Caribbean colonies by both whites and the blacks as non-native also illustrates the theory of colonialism from the period of slavery, as well as the slavery by the European whites for their profitable source of income. Even the working culture of the white colonisers upon the Negroes is described in detail showing the authoritative attitude upon the slaves. The displaced natives in this way do possess nothing and are the usual victims of financial loss.

“Each group of ten negroes is supervised by a driver, who walks behind, bearing both short and long whip. Above them all is the Head Driver, who carries with him the emblem of his rank and dignity, a polished staff upon which he can lean. He is the most important personage in the slave population of an estate, and it is he who takes daily charge of the *great gang*, which is comprised of the most powerful of the field Negroes.”

(P 41)

During this course of observation, Emily notices the character of the novel, namely Cambridge, a slave upon whom Mr. Brown is bestowing his cruelty. Emily uses the word “Hercules” for him, since she sees his strength as to bear with the whipping of pain without a grudge. Phillips, through Emily’s journal, provide very little information about Cambridge, in a mysterious way later who guards Emily at a night when Christiania (a dark magic) woman of witchcraft tortures Emily with her practices.

The first chapter in Emily’s journal is mostly about the life of slaves and the creoles in this anonymous place of West Indies. Phillips had historically interpreted the way colonialism had its contribution in creation of such a vast and hybrid yet unique culture of the slaves- natives and non-natives. Apart from the different coloured culture, Emily’s exploration through the lives of the black provides plenty of information of their living culture. Unlike their living status, eating habits, working culture, their relationship (men-women, family, individual) etc is noted

wonderfully. This is what the reason, where the cultural hybridity due to racial differences are linked with the issue of colonialism.

During this course, Emily's curiosity about Cambridge's identity, along with Mr. Wilson's disappearance and Mr. Brown's taking charge of the estate is disclosed, but to somewhat dissatisfaction. As Mr. Brown who initially seems to be very inert with Emily begins to spend time with her in the form of excursion for her learning of the West Indian culture. When they become close the curiosity of Emily is shattered with the appearance of Mr. Wilson, who reveals to her that it is Mr. Brown of whose fear made him banished for so many days. He explains further that 'His only crime, he told me, was over-zealous civic pride, and a care for the welfare of the slaves.'(124) The journal ends with the grief stricken Emily who feels loneliness and the guilt of her presence in this anxious and dark place.

Caryl Phillips in one of the interview stated that

'the special challenge of writing a novel set in the past, is to recover the mystery absent in most history, and to use the past to get at the heart of the mysteries in human behaviour.'²

Cambridge's narration begins with the addressing to the people of different countries and races, with whom he is conversing with his nineteenth century polite English usage which he feels his own yet not belonging to him completely. "Pardon the liberty...[in]extraordinary circumstances."(133). When Cambridge was in Guinea he was just a black person, but on the ship he was addressed by an abusive word '*nigger*' that demoralized his status as a human.

"Clearly it was a term lacking in affection ... of great abuse." (137)

This one word disturbs Cambridge's identity through the journey of slavery to the feeling of being rootless. The concept of identity crisis is not only pertaining to his roots in Africa ,but also his changing of names according to the migratory condition. In England with his name as Thomas or 'black Tom' (142) he with fortunate destiny educate himself with the help of his master.

'Part of what Phillips seems to be conveying through the voice of Cambridge is a pioneering black Briton's "sense of both belonging and not belonging" to the European world. Occupying the roles of both an insider and outsider, in telling his story Cambridge extricates himself from those features of his identity which doom him to an outside position, and foregrounds the features which qualify him as a Briton.'³

During this course of time, Cambridge marries an English woman Anna, a domestic servant at his master John Williams' house, with whom he tours England as a part of missionary. Further after the death of his master, they travel to Africa where to his dismay, the minister of the church is found blasphemous. He tried to preach the lessons of Christianity, but in vain. His purpose of mission was basically to eradicate the evil thoughts of the discrimination of the people from class and race. It became not only a failure for the hypocritical English people but also for the black races that mostly were under the influence of the white blasphemous missionaries.

This situation was a reversal one in his life. Once he had long back sold as slave, during slave trade, but was attained freedom and cultural assimilation in the society of English people. His freedom is taken away as he is forced into slavery and cultural oppression in one of his Caribbean island. This paradoxical situation not only focuses the cultural hegemony of nineteenth century, but also the racial differences by questioning

‘the very possibility of definitive historical construction’.⁴

Phillips not only here questions the moral belonging of colonial roots of the white and black, but also the limited self government of women that is also a part of the system parallel to the slaves. *Cambridge* in this way portrays victimised souls who suffer from the troubled relationships between blacks and whites, and blacks and blacks.

References :

1. Philips Caryl, *Cambridge*,----- p. 25
2. Phillips, *A New World Order*,-----p.11
3. Kuurola Mirja, *Caryl Philips's Cambridge: Discourse in the Past and Readers in the Present*, -----p.5
4. O'Callaghan, *Historical fiction*, -----p.39