



On the Exilic Woman in Caryl Phillips's Novels

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Abstract: *Caryl Phillips is one writer whose major themes have focused on issues of being Caribbean and being black in spaces that white people have for centuries claimed ownership. To do this, Phillips's aesthetics, and ideological trends have been dominantly experimental especially in his novel with fragmentation and memory being a major tool to re-historicised caribbeanness and blackness. A reading of Phillips's fiction and dramatics reveal his attachment and concern about the plight of the woman as she too constitutes part of the search for belonging in Phillips's world. It is therefore my focus in the paper to discuss the way Phillips represents women as victims of exile in *The final passage*, *Higher ground* and *Crossing the river*. While demonstrating that exilic life is characterised by sexual difference that defines identity, the paper argues that women suffer marginality in exile because of their gender and race.*

Keywords: *Gender, Sexuality, Difference, Race, Identity, Belonging*

The notion of “exilic consciousness” as Edward Said puts it rightly defines Caryl Phillips’s novels 1[p290]. Thomas Burkhalter develops the above Saidian concept to articulate on the idea of exilic fatherhood, a sparring discourse within the scope of feminist and/or gender ideology. This immediately gives us the idea that exilic consciousness is not only limited to psychic spaces, but reveals that psychic spaces inform and affect sexuality. In this sense, exilic consciousness “views lived experience and identity formation” 1[p292]. This position by Burkhalter is the starting point of this paper. How is the woman that Phillips represents treated and seen in exile and what is the situation of the woman in exile? To answer these questions, the paper demonstrates that sexual differences are cardinal in the identity construction of exiles in Phillips’s fiction. Therefore, it is the contention in this study that through narrative experimentation, Phillips represents the woman in his fiction as one who suffers triple exile in the European metropolis (being alienated by the black male, the white female and the white male).

Gayatri Spivak [2] sees sexuality as separating the masculine from the feminine. Spivak’s position shows that sexuality is a discourse of binaries that is sustained by gender difference. In this polarity, the woman is deprived of her right to existence. She then occupies the position of the subaltern or in other words, not being valued according to her worth. This subaltern position is greatly contested by many feminist scholars and campaigners. Eunice Fonyuy Fombele 3[p88] clearly articulates this view when she posits “this dominant attitude (placing women in peripheral places), as a matter of fact, has marginalised the central role women would have played in nation building, demonstrating some sort of internal colonisation of a people’s cognitive knowledge”. Fombele seems to postulate that woman’s second place, if care is not taken, appears like a solidified structure that it becomes forbidden to question. Simone de Beauvoir [7] argues that the woman’s problem in a male controlled society is her freedom and she is the one to look for her liberation, as no man is courageous enough to grant her this liberty. Beauvoir sees the woman as an object to the man-subject and the fact of being an object makes the woman to be dominated. The woman in exile in the novels here studied, who should enjoy the privileges of life like freedom, is been enslaved by the man-structured and governed world is England and the United States of America. Hélène Cixous [6] has presented the difference between the man and the woman arguing that this difference puts the woman in the constant site of the “other”. From Cixous, the woman operates and has adopted the place of the “othered” personality that has been imposed on her. It is this “otherness” that Michel Foucault [8] discusses as distorted representations by ideologies and stereotypes. Reading Foucault and Cixous reveal that sexual

binaries are constructed and not natural. Again, these constructs have been put in place to institute a gendering duality; build stereotypes that give the female gender or the woman an inferior status. Sexuality is, therefore, a structure of patriarchy and a call on the man not to look at the woman as different.

Mao Tse Tung had theorised four mountains that are resting on the back of the woman in China: Colonisation, feudalism, backwardness and the Chinese man. In the case of the postcolonial woman (especially the one in exile as we find in Phillips's novels), Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie 5[p228] has identified six obstacles for women, they include: "One, oppression from outside in the form of colonialism two, oppression from traditional structures; feudal communal, slave based etc; three, her own backwardness; four the African man; five her color and race and six, the woman herself because she has internalized all these oppressions". From what Ogundipe-Leslie writes, the obstacles that the woman faces in society can be summed up to be both external and internal; external in the sense that factors from outside like colonialism, her culture and the man being responsible for the injustice on her and also internal in that she can be seen as the cause of her subalternity. For purposes of study and within the context of the novels under scrutiny, this paper focuses on two of the mountains of oppression from outside in the form of colonialism and man.

The woman in exile in Phillips's narratives is a victim of man's brutality. Most often, the man uses this assault on the woman to prove his manhood by satisfying his bestial instincts. Even at a more serious level, the man physical and psychological attacks on the woman in exile very likely appears to be a revenge from a society that emasculates him. Leila, in Phillips's *The final passage* [9], is a product of rape (the white man who is fifty years older than her victim already explains that the man should be psychologically imbalanced) incident and it does not only affect mother/daughter relationship but causes some psychic pains on both mother and child. Leila and her mother have very little affection for one another. The peak of this is seen when Leila's mother goes to England without informing her daughter. She only discovers that "Her mother had left for England" 9[p69] through a letter addressed to her. The letter becomes the link between mother and daughter. This kind of scenario reveals that there is a kind of a loose bonding between mother and daughter. The narrator reveals how Leila's mother feels about Leila in these words: "That she loved her she did no doubt, but, as always, Leila wished there was something more, that would make her mother more like a friend" 9[p124]. The narrator 9[p125] narrates that:

And every week he managed to drag Leila's mother into his house on the pretext of some errand, and every week she would arrange her clothes and pick up her ten cents and skip past him out into the street as if nothing has happened, although she was as yet too young to know that the older eyes her and knew differently.

This white man, far older than his victim, represents all that is evil, corrupt and oppressive. In fact, the white man is a symbol of destruction. He ruins the life of a young woman whose result is the unaffectionate relationship between her and her daughter. In this excerpt, we can equally see that injustice done on women and young girls like the one in question does not mean any thing to the woman's exilic world because we learn shockingly that elder people are aware of what this old white man is doing to the young woman and yet there is no action to stop him and to stop the girl. Anastasiia Fediakova [10] describes this not just as silencing the woman in exile but also objectifying her. Though the narrative tends to make us see Leila's mother and later Leila as women who have some autonomy, Fediakova 10[p48] remarks "Leila's mother, although living alone, could only do so because of money provided by her ex-lover".

Interestingly, no one seems to object what this old white man does to this young woman. This is an indication that the society has no respect for women and therefore, do not care about their fate. Susan Griffin [11] recounts an experience she had with a police inspector and from there, draws the following conclusion: she says, "The inspector wondered why I wanted to write about rape. Like most men he did not understand the urgency of the topic, for, after all, men are not raped..." 11[p177]. This American experience is no different from what we have just seen in *The final passage*. Leila's mother, as a young woman, being harassed by an old white man and no one feels like protecting her reveals the vulnerability of the woman in the diaspora (exile) is and thus lives in constant insecurity. Griffin 11[p177] again attests that:

At the age of eight, my suspicions were confirmed. My grandmother took me to the back of the house where the men wouldn't hear, and told me that strange men wanted to do harm to little girls. I learned not to walk on dark streets, not to talk to strangers, or get into strangers cars, to lock doors, and to be modest.

From the testimony of the speaker, the woman does not really feel free where she lives. The grandmother's advice to her grand daughter already demonstrates that there is a rift that exists between the man and the woman. The man, represented as dangerous is a kind of image that has to stick in the child's mind. However, returning to *The Final Passage* Leila is not privilege to have this kind of grandmotherly advice and the out come is that men (much more Michael, her husband) ruin her life living in exile in England. The man is a brute and one whose duty is to harm women and young girls and therefore, the speaker cautioning the child at the age of eight seemingly is the effort of an elder trying to protect the girl child. Again, we see the bond between the grand mother and the grand daughter strong, which for Leila is lacking. Bonding or sisterhood as theme reveals some kind of a panacea for women's exilic pain.

While in exile, Leila hopes to reunite with her mother but seeing her mother. This meeting takes place in the hospital. Unfortunately, their reunion becomes a mere interlude of a conversation. Here the idea of mothering and motherhood are put to scrutiny, viewing the postcoloniality of Phillips's hostile "mother" image, it seems clear that British empire, though collapsing is also not living up to her responsibility – one which the colonial lie had made ex-colonised people to see Britain as the mother land. The discussion Leila and her is very casual with very little affection.

'You don't change at all, do you? Still the diplomat' she paused, this time to catch a breath. 'Who called the boy Calvin?' She felt her grandson's cheek with the back of her hand.

'I did', said Leila nervously.

It's a nice name. A nice name for the boy.' They both looked at Calvin, then Leila spoke. [...] As it was they just sat and stared at each other 9[p124]

In this passage, Leila's mother is seeing her grandson for the first time and does not or has never even been told about the name of the child. This surprising attitude in the relationship between mother and daughter is very disclosing as it has racial bearings. Fediakova 10 [p50] opines

Leila's consequent journey to England further unveils and sharpens the growing uneasiness between the family members in the text. The travelling itself – from the island that used to be a colony to its previous metropole – also places Britain in the role of a motherland, which could be regarded as yet another disillusioning and dislocated parent.

This is further justified by the fact that this woman and the daughter really do not have much to discuss. It makes Leila to feel lonely as her husband disregards her and the English skies remind her of her invisibility because of her race, her sex and her gender. She has no relative to confide to in England, no mother and no husband. Perhaps that is what leads to her desire to return to the Caribbean to meet Millie, her childhood friend back in the Caribbean.

Besides rape and other forms of brutality, the woman in exile is a victim of man's abandonment. Just as the white world abandons the Caribbean and makes them invisible, so too do they abandon their women. Michael abandons his wife Leila in London for two years and treats her like a stranger. At this stage, the eye and what it sees is very important. The eye, in this case, prescribes what identity allocates to the image. Michael's gaze on his wife in England is very negative. Homi Bhabha 12[p46] to this effect writes that:

What these repeated negations of identity dramatize in the elision of the seeing eye that must contemplate what is missing or invisible, is the impossibility claiming an origin for self (or other) within a tradition of representation that conceives identity as the satisfaction of totalizing plenitudinous object of vision.

Bhabha discusses the eye within the realm of a biased object that chooses to see what it wants. Thus, the eye is very central in determining what or who to be considered to be at the centre or in the periphery. In the case of the marriage between Leila and Michael, Michael considers his wife as other and that is why to him; she is invisible and does not exist. The narrator narrates: "Michael, a man

whose feeling for her had been like a knife at the throat for over two years” 9[p197]. The image of knife at the throat points to the hostile and instable marital life of Leila and Michael. It further shows that there is no love for her from Michael and thus, justifies his abandonment of her and their son. Michael represents the irresponsible man in exile. He does all to avoid the woman, as he has no emotional affection for her. “But now Michael no longer bothered to force himself upon her. It was as if she wore a tunnel he was tired of passing through. Leila’s fears as to why this might be, had recently been proven true” 9[p189]. The evident result of this is solitude, poverty and hunger and this pushes the pregnant Leila to steal from her husband. “that night Michael came home. As he slept Leila stole the 1s 6d from his jacket pocket” 9[p183]. It is this miserable situation, which she finds herself in, which will push her to return home. To her, the milk and honey of Europe is not for everybody.

Leila’s effort to relocate herself in England is received with resistance firstly because she is a woman and secondly because she is black. This resistance justifies the assertion that where there is representation, there is resistance. In this case, representation is dialectical and therefore breeds ambiguities in interpretation; while the man represents hegemony, the woman is the subaltern. Here, resistance is at both levels as the man does not want the woman to be like him. This reminds us of the same issue that Frantz Fanon [13] raises when it comes to the relationship between the natives and the colonisers. However, the woman is still struggling to make her voice heard. Bhabha again states that: “The migrant can subvert the perverse satisfaction of the racist, masculinist gaze that disavowed her presents by presenting her with an anxious absence, a counter-gaze that turns a discriminatory look which denies her cultural and sexual difference back on itself” 12[p47]. The exile woman as Bhabha postulates suffer doubly; that is from male domination and discrimination and also from racial barrier. Leila’s effort to look for a job in England shows prove of the fact that she attempts to fight the stereotypical image that has been imposed on the exiled woman. Her effort to look for a job is frustrated because it is argued that she is pregnant with some other flimsy excuses; “you are not well. You have not been eating properly [...] No life whatsoever and you haven’t been sleeping” 9[p186]. The speaker is a man and from his tone, one senses that he like mocks at this woman who is looking for a job. His mockery on this woman – telling her that she does not feed well – constitute the kind of psyche torture that exiled women go through especially in the metropolis. The woman becomes an object of male scorn in exile because of her gender. If Leila goes through all of these, it is because her husband, Michael has abandoned her and thus her exilic situation is precarious.

It is also worthy to note that even when women are given jobs to do in exile, they are discriminated upon. According to Patience Elabor-Idemudia 14[p239],

In advanced capitalist societies like Canada, racism and sexism are used to maximize profit in several ways: through the devaluation of educational qualification of foreign workers; through a segregated labor market where racial minorities and women, particularly black women, are concentrated in low-status and low-paying jobs, and through a split labor market where women are paid less than white workers and men for doing the same work.

From what Elabor-Idemudia says sexism or the marginalisation of women is a capitalist phenomenon based on production and consumption. At this point, the woman in exile is viewed as an agent of labour and one that is occupying the margins. In this case, the exile woman of black origin suffers a kind of double marginalisation. It is also noted as Elabor- Idemudia puts it that this segregation is seen even in the salaries given to these women irrespective of the fact that they may have the same qualification with the male and white counterparts. Leila finds it hard to get a job because she is a woman and is black. When she succeeds to get something to do the wages by week is £11 with overtime if she wanted 9[p187]. Leila’s private life in the novel is a replica of women’s life in exile. For this reason, Leila seeks refuge with other women who share her plight. An example is when we see her moving very close to Mary in England. Their relationship develops so strong that these women find themselves going for “shopping together not for anything in particular although Mary had talked of buying Calvin some gloves and scarf” 9[p187]. The fact that it is Mary planning to meet the needs of Calvin, who is Leila’s son, shows how intimate Leila and Mary are in London. In this connection, one finds the in Mary and Leila the bond that is absent because her and her mother. This new bond of sisterhood is tellingly Phillips’s ideology that the black exiled woman needs to bond in other the wade off racial and gender stress.

Higher ground on its part explores the formation of the gender space in the exile. Though the novel handles living in exile from both male and female perspectives, the female seems to be the greater victim in exile. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi 15[p66] stresses on the issue of the formation of the gender space in exile as she says that: “*Higher ground* is vitally important because it traces the development of the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere and puts that cultural formation in dialogue with the Jewish transnational formation that is generally acknowledged as one of the older diasporas”. Osinubi’s words hold true in that looking at *Higher ground*, Phillips [16] seems to have arranged the story logically to explain why black people live today in the western hemisphere. The reason why the novel is opened with “Heart land” that recounts the Africa during slave trade and the activity of the buying and selling of slaves being very active. This story explains the reason why black people live in the western hemisphere and their lives are expressed in “Cargo rap” that present the black man in the western hemisphere and precisely in America living in the most precarious state. “Higher ground” the next story seems to be in the logic of this structure but as Osinubi puts it, the narration of this Jewish lady might be Phillips’s effort to create a kind of exilic universalism. This universalism does not only portray Jewish exilic life, which to Robin Cohen [17] is first and oldest diaspora but also reveals the woman in “Higher ground” as one who symbolises the female as marginalised in exile. Thus, Irina/Irene’s situation in England in the 1940s as is not different from that of other women that Phillips represents in the novels”. Osinubi 15 [p74] again writes that:

If read as an enquiry into the “situated knowledge” marginality imparts, “Higher Ground” offers two critical submissions. Firstly, while the narrative presents imagined common grounds between two experiences of “complicity of rational and ethnocidal terror,” it suggests that this banner of commonality might be one that heeds the concrete needs of specific margins.

Osinubi brings out similarity that exists between Jewish exilic living and that of blacks coming from the Caribbean and Africa. He insists on the fact that these two diaspora faced ethnocidal terror, which has to do with a close elimination of the races. While the Jewish race is threatened with physical elimination by the Aryans, the African race since slavery faces a kind of cultural extinction. Phillips presents these two exilic people – Irina/Irene and Louis (He is a Caribbean living in exile in England). As these two exiles soon acquaint themselves as they both occupy the marginal space in the text, Louis decides to return to the Caribbean. “He [Louis] was going home, for he knew that it was better to return as the defeated traveller than be praised as the absent hero and live a life of spiritual poverty” 16[p197]. Louis’s decision to return shows that England is not a place of honey for the black man. This bold step is what we find Leila not able to undertake as a black woman and Irina/Irene as a Jewish woman without a homeland. Also in the passage one learns that there are two ways of reading the exile – either he is seen as a hero which means remaining in exile or returning to the land of origin. Louis in this passage through the narrator’s voice gives us a paradoxical interpretation to this heroic life by the exile, which according to him is characterised by spiritual poverty. This means that the exile especially the black man and the woman no matter her race, like is the case of Irina/Irene, are objects without value in exile. It is for this reason that “Louis is set to sail for his Caribbean home and Irene is scheduled to return to the psychiatric hospital. His imminent departure across “the water” evokes the narrator’s Middle Passage in “Heartland.” Her departure to the hospital alludes to the imprisonment in the fort” 15 [p74]. This further justifies the homelessness of the exiled woman. Comparatively, Louis is far better because as the narrative reveals, he has a home to return to. Irina/Irene, on her part, does not have a home; she has a confinement centre to turn to. Irina/Irene resorts to memory and this puts her in a very deplorable state as later in the story, we learn that she loses her sanity before spending some time to regain it. The narrator says that she wears “the thin bracelet of attempted suicide” 15 [p217]. Irina/Irene undergoes much pain and torture and this makes her to look at life as worthless.

Phillips’s anchor in “Higher Ground” is simply to put Louis and Irina/Irene from two exilic backgrounds together. Their relationship and brief sexual contact comes to an abrupt end when Louis decides to return to the sea. The juxtaposition of Black and Jew does not only expose Black and Jewish sufferings but further highlights the pain of the exilic woman into the complicity of rational and ethnocidal terror. This is seen in the fact that the narrator’s description of Louis is peripheral and he [the narrator] is detailed on his description of Irina/Irene. Her madness in the story and her being carried into an institution can be associated to the loneliness she undergoes in England and the harsh response that both the English society and Nazi occupied Poland gives her and impart, her intuition that refuses to conform to exilic patterns. Her madness in the story can be associated to the loneliness

she undergoes in England and the hostilities of the male folk. The narrator explains “When Irene first worked in England there was a man at the munitions factory who used to stare at her with violence. Mrs McKenzie said that ‘up here’ there were not many of Irina’s ‘people’, and Irina tried to smile and forget at the same time” 16 [p182]. The man that stares at Irene/Irina with violence clearly reveals that she is not welcomed. Seemingly Irene/Irina’s case is not different from that of Leila to justify that women’s silencing as exiles goes beyond race. It is much more an issue of gender, defined by their womanness. As mentioned earlier, this man even sees the woman as a threat to his position in the factory. His violent gaze at this woman is also suggestive of male violence on the woman folk and gives Irene/Irina no sense of security in the factory. This violent look is worsened by the fact that Irene/Irina happens to be lonely as Mrs. McKenzie suggests that it is because there are not many Jews in England. Irene/Irina is not very comfortable but relies on her memory to forget her marginalisation. This therapy is very difficult because the war keeps reminding her about her family, her home and her race that awaits extinction if Hitler’s Germany wins the war.

In Phillips’s [18] *Crossing the river*, the story “West” the story presents an slave woman, Martha, as an exile that has been stripped off every relation of hers. In an effort to regain her family, she joins “a group of colored pioneers” who journey westward to California “prospecting for a new life” 18[p73]. The exiled woman, from the narrator’s voice, is not passive, she is seen always making and effort and hoping to move to see if she can root herself somewhere. The new life that Martha hopes to meet in California is that of meeting with her family and a place of liberty “where your name [isn’t] ‘boy’ or ‘aunty’” 18[p74]. Though old and sick, the fact that Martha opts for this risky journey under scores the importance of freedom and belonging as vital components in human life.

The story is an exposure of the exilic woman in the permanent quest for belonging, which remains an illusion. Lying in her dying bed, the narrator, through flash back, reveals her past life and it is then that the reader understands that Martha is separated from her husband Lucas and daughter Elisabeth who are both sold to different owners during slavery. Martha’s narrative reveals the anguish of a woman in exile struggling to locate and redefine herself, almost destroyed and battered by the capitalist and masculine institution of slavery.

Martha knows what it means to be displaced. Her own father in Africa rudely displaces her from Africa by selling her into slavery in America where she starts living an exilic life. Maria Rice Bellamy 19 [p136] contents that “as a woman, Martha suffers in both African and Western patriarchal societies”. Later, she is displaced when her first master dies and her husband and child are auctioned. When her new buyers decide to sell her, Martha decides “never again will she stand on an auction block [...] Never again would be she renamed [...] never again would she belong to anybody” 18 [p80]. From Martha’s decisions, we learn that she is not free and does not belong. She is an object of use that can be tossed around everywhere. Her determination to stop this gaze on her is an effort to resist the oppression that she gets first as a slave and secondly as a woman living in exile.

To conclude, the objective in this paper was to analyse using the novels of Phillips the situation of the exiled woman. From what we see in the novels, one may affirm that the situation of the exiled woman is not the best as she suffers from marginalisation, racism and gender barriers. We have seen how people sleep outside and women being murdered and maltreated by their men. With this, exile definitely has an impact in the lives of these discussed above.

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