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The Quest for "Self" and the Question of "Othering": Re-reading Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage.*

Mirza Sariful Hassan

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Vidyasagar University. West Bengal, India

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Abstract: As a matter of fact, in diaspora studies, the dynamics of "migration" and "rootedness" has become increasingly an all-engrossing concept during the past decades. Therefore, their desire to entoute elsewhere away from the home land makes the subject of diaspora a site of much contention and contestation. Accordingly, the "Black Atlantic" experiences, which are largely shrouded by the historical reality of multiple migrations, in turn produces a prolific ground for the production of psychic idiosyncrasies honed by never-ending criss-cross of homeland and host land. As a result of such displacement, the expatriate figures often suffer alienation, racial subjugation and cultural segregation. The plot of the novel under discussion here is modelled after the Windrush-era mass migration of Caribbean islanders and the present paper explores it from the above vantage point to envision a universal predicament of displaced people.

Keywords: Diaspora, Home, Racism, Black Atlantic, Journey.

INTRODUCTION

Shortlisted for the 1993 Booker Prize, Caryl Phillips' debut novel *The Final Passage* (1984) has faithfully explored the experiences of the black diaspora in the global metropolis. Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips' novels are particularly interested in portraying the African diasporic experiences, and his debut novel *The Final Passage* is about the experience of Caribbean, particularly Kittitian Black people who migrated to England, the mother country, in search of brighter prospect. Best remembered for the representation of the "Black Atlantic" in his novels, Caryl Phillips, through the narrative oeuvre of this novel, yokes together the empirical facts of the history and decontextualises it to envision a universal predicament of displaced people. The "Black Atlantic" experiences, which are largely shrouded by the historical reality of multiple migrations, in turn produces a prolific ground for the production of psychic idiosyncrasies honed by never ending criss-cross of homeland and host land. The central character of this novel, Leila, is seen to undertake a trans-Atlantic journey to the mother country—England, which consequently unleashes a seamless interface of homesickness, racial segregation and the wretched plight of expatriate being.

The plot of this novel doesn't maintain a linear progression; rather, it disrupts the chronological sequence to make the incidents of the novel more evocative and succinct. At the very outset of the novel, Leila, along with her husband, left St. Patrick's Island for England on a ship named SS Winston Churchill in search of a better way of living. The fictional island of St. Patrick's is quintessential to St. Kitts Island, the homeland of the novelist. Furthermore, the name of the cruise *SS Winston Churchill* alludes to *HMT Empire Windrush,* which docked in Essex on June 22, 1948, as one of the first post-war waves of Caribbean migrants in England, which reminisces the Windrush-era mass migration of Caribbean islanders.

It is the chronotope of the ship that relentlessly signifies the trans-Atlantic migration of people from the very beginning. Paul Gilroy's observation in this regard is pertinent—"The image of ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons" (*Black Atlantic* 4). Accordingly, throughout the narrative oeuvre of different novels of Caryl Phillips, the ship has been the recurring motif which highlights the fragmentary historical psyche of the once-colonised people. Ships, therefore, exhibit the dualism of ruptures and reconstruction, acting as more of connectors of Space to History which Caryl Phillips has masterfully performed through character like Nash Williams (in Crossing the River) and Leila in this novel. Thus the ship which alienated Leila from his homeland and disrupted his existentialist essence of his historical Self is the same space which allows for the postcolonial disruption from a History which is not her. Therefore, "the ship remained perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-African communication before the appearance of long playing record" (Linebaugh 119).

The motif of never ending journey is one of the recurrent phenomena of this diasporic trajectory; the journey from the West Indies to global metropolis, to return to the island again—"the journey seemed endless"

***Corresponding Author:** Mirza Sariful Hassan

(*Final Passage*123). Though Leila thought "that her journey would soon be at an end" (129), all is in vain—"Leila prepared herself for the journey that only seemed to depress her" (173). The Black Atlantic people from the island like St. Kitts always thought of migration and Leila opines—"I think I'm going to England" (91). And "she was going to England to be with her mother", who is believed to be receiving better treatment there. Migration for them is not a pastime or vacation; rather, it is their obligation—"Maybe as a family it was what they needed? There was work there, wasn't there? And there was opportunity" (95). Such migration, in fact, provides them the escape route – a way for liberation from the constraints of life in de-colonized island—"her desire to escape the life she was trapped in" (95). Journey is here symbolically and metaphorically construed as life enterprise itself, that provides a vista for their "self" realization. The struggle of life is considered as a real journey—"they would begin the real journey" (160). And this journey motif is particularly "important in the history of the Black Atlantic, where movement, relocation, displacement, and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions" (Gilroy 133).

However, such migration inevitably accompanies the question of misplacement from home and homeland. For Leila, the homeland has ultimately remained as the home for hers—"This small proud island, overburdened with vegetation and complacency, this had been her home" (*Final Passage* 20). Even Michael considers his native island as a place of peace and security. He confesses "Leaving this place going make me feel old, you know like leaving the safety of your family to go live with strangers" (11). For both of them, the mother country – England, where they are planning to arrive- is still seen as a place of strangers. Thus, the diaspora journey is often, if not always, underpinned by the motifs like study opportunity, living standard and job prospects. In this novel, the expatriate characters are migrating for a brighter future—"the night before, Leila had decided that if England was going to be a new start after the pain of the last year, then she must take as little as possible with her to remind her of the island"(15). The "fortune motif" as a driving force of diasporic migration becomes conspicuous even in the confession of Bradeth, who says – "But you all going to be seeing me soon for I coming to seek me fortune" (19). This aspect of overseas migration for the bright future is traceable in the wish of Michael to go to America for prosperity—"It's only two years, two years and I'll be qualified, and you'll have saved up some money, and after we marry we can have a badly, it's incredible. It's so straight forward— right here now" (*Final Passage* 80).

The conflict honed in the spatial contingent proximity of the people of distinct socio- cultural lineage in the diasporic space is the catalectic factor for the culture war in diasporic space— and that is also found in the case of immigrants migrated from St. Kitts to England—"the distance as if unable to reconcile the conflict of where he had come from with where he was going to" (*Final Passage* 139). And this is the case of Leila and other migrants who undertook a transnational journey. Though the host land is always conceived as a place of ultimate prosperity and place of luxury, the Eurocentric racial prejudice is still undercurrent in the treatment meted out to them. Michael, while seeking a job in England, found their views regarding expatriate people from St. Kitts are largely loaded with misconceptions, like rampant polygamy, as he was asked by a European, Mr. Jeffries, "how many wives, one or two?" Such a question speaks volumes about their derogatory attitude towards Black Atlantic people. Jeffries exhorts his employees to put the sign which tells that the coloured quota is full—"you can put up 'COLOURED QUOTA FULL' sign now" (*Final Passage* 167) brings to the fore the issue of racism and cultural prejudices. Likewise, another coloured man from Brazilian background, Edwin, who stays in England, warns Michael about the exploitation of black people at the hands of white ones—"well all you need to remember is they treat us worse than their dogs. The women expect you to do tricks with your biceps and sign calypso, or to drop down on one knee and pretend you're Paul Robeson or somebody" (168). Michael retorts that their ways of extracting is no more than a rubbery—"just a way of robbing off a coloured man's money" (168). Description of Mr. Jeffries by Edwin to Michael is evocative of whiteman's brutality—"well you better know. He's a cunt, and he's going to call you names, man, and you going to behave like a kettle for without knowing it you going to boil. It's how the white man in this country kills off the coloured man. He makes you heat up and blow yourself away" (*Final Passage* 168).

The host land is always conceived as a place of plentiful opportunity, a utopian space for the expatriates. In the same vein, Leila thought her mother's treatment in England in positive way—"Leila had always imagined her mother just resting up in a nice house with a special doctor coming to visit her and nurse her back to health" (*Final Passage* 151). But after arriving in England, they became disillusioned. Because the society in England is largely underpinned by the racial attitude of the white people— "she noticed that coloured people did not drive big cars or wear suits or carry briefcases, that they seemed to look sad and cold"(*Final Passage* 121). Furthermore, the interface between diaspora and racism in the context of Trans-Atlantic migration is not an abrupt one; rather, as Gilroy theorises, it sustains a logical negotiation. He opines, "[t]he idea of diaspora might itself be understood as a response to these promting— a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being" (198). Racism becomes conspicuous in the sign knelled at the park which says— "no coloured", "No vaccancies", "No children". While she was searching for

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a rental house in England, the sign explicitly states that "No vacancies for coloureds'. 'No black'. 'No coloures'. Even the election campaign is highly informed by racial prejudice—"IF YOU WANT NIGGER NEIGHBOUR VOTE LABOUR" (*Final Passage* 122). Such precarious racism is not an exceptional matter, rather an inalienable trait of Western modernism—"[r]acial subordination is integral to the processes of development and social and technological progress known as modernisation" (Gilroy 163). Leila has come to London to meet her mother, who is now passing her life in hospital. When Leila encountered her, she reminds her that London, though a much coveted metropolis for the islanders, is not a home for them—"Leila, child, London is not my home" (124). This consequently compelled them to lead a wretched life—"A child, a coloured boy, who needed a good bath and a meal, stared at the bus and wiped his nose across the back of his sleeve" (122). Leila's disillusionment regarding England and its conflicting artefacts appears to her no sooner she landed in England—

Leila looked at England, but everything seemed bleak. She quickly realized she would have to learn a new word; overcast. There were no green mountains, there were no colourful women with baskets on their heads selling peanuts or bananas or mangoes, there were no trees, no white houses on the hills, no hills, no wooden houses by the shoreline, and the sea was not blue and there was beach, and there were no clouds, just one big cloud, and they have arrived. (142)

Disillusionment of Leila is palpable in the following words—

England, in whom she had placed so much of her hope, no longer held for her the attraction of her mother and new challenges. At least the small island she had left behind had safety and two friends, and if the price to be paid for this was a stern predictability from one day to the next then she was ready to pay it. (203)

Racial subjugation is not confined to merely derogatory outlook; rather leads to a wretched existential crisis that, in turn, evokes even the ontological crisis of black people. Leila has been brought up without a proper parental relationship. Her mother doesn't even know who her actual father is and therefore extracts money from three white persons—"Three white man eyed their daughter from afar and happily paid the money safe in the knowledge that they had a real relationship with the island that would live on after they left" (*Final Passage* 126). In the last chapter entitled "Winter", Leila's poverty is explicitly portrayed in the lines where she confesses—"I have no money" (184). The description of Leila continues as "[t]he man told her that she looked so bony he was putting her on the factory run Leila did not know whether she was expected to look grateful or feel insulted"(184). While serving as a bus conductor in the wretched surroundings, her unhygienic condition caused her to faint and fall—"'You are not well. You haven't been eating properly'…'No life whatsoever, and you have not been sleeping, have you?'"(186). Coloured people's wretched plight/poverty in terms of everyday amenities becomes conspicuous when Leila failed to offer proper sophistication to her neighbour Mary "ashamed that she had nothing better in which to give it to her" (170). Mary, her neighbour, sympathetically says, "I used to come home and say to him how I'd seen some of you, coloureds that is, shivering by the bus stops and I just wanted to go across and hug you and say "don't worry, love, you'll get used to it'"(170)

Such radicalised "othering" consequently propels to physical brutality, economic exploitation, and social segregation based on skin colour. Michael's grandfather reminded him- "Well, boy, it take me nearly forty years to realize that I done meet a prophet, for the economics of the world be soldered with my sweat and your sweat and his sweat and the sweat of every coloured man in the world, you understand?'"(41-42). Such exploitation is not an exceptional entity, rather a banal characteristic of race-prejudice, as Hegel substantiates it in the following words— "The only essential connection that has existed and continued between the Negroes and the Europeans is that of slavery" (Hegel 98).

Leila keeps herself with as less as possible just to get rid of any reminder of the bygone days in the island. But in such diasporic conjecture nobody can absolutely get rid himself off the reminiscence of life on the island. Memory, which is always an important aspect of diasporic studies, performs a recuperative performative of the past days. William Safran, while discussing the characteristics of diaspora in his acclaimed essay "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myth of Homeland and Return", states that diaspora subjects "retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements" (83). But contrary to the notion of Safran, here Leila is keen to forget her past days in the St. Kitts Island—"this reflected her own desire to erase from her mind all memory of the last year. Nothing was allowed to remain in focus; all was too distant or too close, unrecognisable, soon past and forgotten" (*Final Passage* 16). Leila, being a white coloured women, sometimes sustains a racial prejudice, therefore, she is not interested to remember Millie, a "small, black, radiant, a woman living in a little girl's body" (*Final Passage* 17). Though, the St. Kittitian Island is revered by them as a land of much affection and they frequently put up towards the island of birth during their journey –"she looked past his head and back towards the island of their birth" (19); they "did not want them remember each other as embraced by the other's presence" (17).

Despite their humiliation at the hand of racism, the black people in the host land tries their best to uphold their self dignity, Leila informs –"I just kept my head held high, girl, and I walked on till I heard somebody laugh and then a next person crack out and suddenly everybody is laughing at me and I start to feel the water

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in my eyes but I can't run away " (*Final Passage* 13). Leila, though brutally humiliated and physically tortured, she never gives in and maintains a sense of resistance, not crestfallen, but asserts resistance. Now she is confused whether her coming to England is itself a mistake—thus Leila is "unable to decide if the greater mistake was coming to England or agreeing to spend a third night by Earl" (162).

The dispersal of diasporic people all over the world is a predominant phenomenon in diasporic discourse. And this scattered condition of the people of St. Kitts is found in the following word—"On the cabinet top were photographs, old, grey, brown, new, bright, of her family. Now scattered all over the world, a family she never talked about for she had never seen them. She looked at Michael and forced a smile" (*Final Passage* 47). This statement speaks a volume in terms of the African diaspora who underwent multiple migrations to the multiple corners of the globe. And this ultimately paves the way for the multicultural buoyancy of St. Patrick's Island; the following words evoke this ethos:

At school her teachers had already done their best to confuse what little history of the island there was, and she had never really worked out for herself the relationship between the English, the Irish, the French, the Portuguese, the Africans and so on. The teachers had talked about each group as if it had made the most important contribution to the history of the island. (171)

The enmity between the people of the host land and homeland is palpable in Leila's attitude to Mary who, though they are friends, Leila considers her as a rival that ultimately evokes enmity between them—"Leila was, without even realising it, making an enemy in her mind of the only real friend she had in England" (*Final Passage* 186). Her sense of rivalry is underpinned by her belief that all white women are tendentious to love black men—"Leila had always found this a relief, especially as she has been led to believe that all white women in England love coloured men"(190). Contingent proximity always intensifies the contrast, so is the blackness of the black. Like cultural contrast in contingent proximity, Leila's staying in England in proximity to white people makes her uglier—

In England Leila had suddenly found herself, her light skin starved of the sun, growing paler by the day. But she was more coloured than she had ever been before, and not shame exactly, but feelings of inadequacy prevented her from looking back into the mirror. (194-195)

In similar vein, when Leila was on a Caribbean island and staying with the white people, she had an uncanny feeling towards them—"Leila had looked upon these white people as if they were an endangered species" (195). Even Leila asked one British lady, " 'Are you a witch?' she asked in that trilling accusative voice that only a child has the ability to muster.' Are you a witch?'" (196). This rhetoric of intensity, by contrast, is captured by Du Bois in the following words—"It is a peculiar sensation … this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"(3)

Such strangeness amid the people living in contingent proximity often times pushes the issue of identity to the centre. Not only that, the black people's abject condition, which is evoked here from a racial vantage point, frequently sustains an identity praxis. As Paul Gilroy opines, "[t]he best way to create the new metacultural identity which the new black citizenship demands was provided by the abject condition of slaves" (*Black Atlantic* 28). And literature from this domain, Gilroy continues, "provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory" (*Black Atlantic* 16). The conversation between Leila and Calvin questions the very normalcy of whiteness as banal. Calvin asks his mother, "' why is Santa Claus white?' 'He should be coloured. Why isn't Santa Claus coloured?'" (*Final Passage* 202-203). This questioning of Calvin itself questions the very process of identity formation on the basis of Eurocentric hegemony. But unlike other diasporic identity matrices, the black diaspora tends to stick to the ethno-centric propensity. Thus, "[m]arked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym route" (*Black Atlantic* 19).

England remains for her a place of impenetrable reality; a fathomless country indeed—"then Leila left England behind. Not understanding this country in which a smile could mean six things at once, a nudge on a bus from a stranger either an accident or a prologue to a series of events that might actually lead to your destruction"(198). Even after staying for four months, she could not comprehend her mother—"Don't she understand that she barely knew her mother, that everything up until now had been a preparation for knowing, not the knowing itself. Her mother was almost a stranger, and even after four months in England Leila had never given up hope that she might still get to know her "(132)

Like other diaspora narratives, the theme of "Home" recurs in this novel also. Right from the beginning of the narrative, when Leila is seen to migrate to the mother country, till the ending of the novel when Leila is found to live in close proximity with Mary; the home-thought remains a recurrent theme —"But Leila thought of home" (*Final Passage* 173). The novelist repeatedly claims St. Patrick's Island as the home—"The fishing boats come home" (10). After all, the host land, the land of adoption never becomes a "home" for her—

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"but she had to control herself for it no longer looked like a home, more like a cheap hotel room" (201), nonetheless, she tries to conceives home in England where she inconveniently lives—"she had grown attached to this coffin-like cabin, for it was a final reminder of home" (140). This dichotomy in relation to Home is well explicated by Avtar Brah in the following words:

> *On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as a place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. (Brah 188-189)*

After reaching to the temporary place of staying, Leila was asked to manage the place as her home—"Make yourself at home" (148). Thus the rental place in England becomes her home— "[t]he cabinet which had been her home for the last two weeks" (138). Leila's temporary place of residence is considered as "home." Is it really her home? This understanding of home in host land bears an interesting critical connotation in diasporic studies. Robin Cohen in the following words, puts forward a viable solution to such problems— "the harder notion of homeland has now yielded to softer notions of a "found home" in the diaspora" (*Global Diaspora* 12).

To conclude, Phillips' *The Final Passage* is a historical anecdote that dexterously portrays the wretched consequence of the Plantation Slavery that necessitates the forced displacement of their progeny. Ato Quayson, in his celebrated book *Postcolonialism* argues that "African aesthetic theories frequently aim to read literature and politics and political ideology simultaneously. At times this is done in a somewhat simplistic way, with literature being seen as an unmediated mirror of society, ideology and politics, and as an excuse for frenzied political analysis of one kind or another" (85). This observation of Quayson is aptly applicable to the narrative oeuvre of Phillips, who represents the archaic history in postcolonial temporality, for [p]ostcolonialism also regularly takes representation as the primary target of analysis" (Quayson 134). Therefore, in this novel, Phillips' presentation, as the title of the novel indicates, is heavily informed by rupture of the Middle Passage rather than the dream of revolutionary transformation.

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