

Caryl Phillips as a Black British Writer: the Experience of Caribbean Immigrants After World War II

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Abstract

This paper has focused upon the making of Caryl Phillips as a Black British novelist from two perspectives. My first perspective is the history of Africans in the British society and the way blacks were treated there. I gave a special attention to the 18th to the early 19th century where the slave trade prospered, then was abolished as a result of the abolitionist movement and then followed the abolition of slavery itself in the British colonies in the West Indies in 1838. My main concern here was to find out why, in spite of such a large scale movement against the slave trade and slavery, racial prejudices against blacks still continued to the 20th century and awaited the arrivals of black Caribbeans when they immigrated in a mass to Britain after World War II.

My second perspective is to explore how such racial prejudices affected the making of Caryl Phillips as a second-generation Black British writer. I also discussed the process in which Caryl Phillips came to know the existence of African-American writers in his first visit to the United States in 1978 and thought that he encountered literature which expressed the anger he felt about the prejudices against blacks in Britain during the 70s and early 80s. I then described how this literary impact was replaced by his discovery of the first generation Caribbean black writers such as Selvon and Lamming who, he found, could express something he found missing in the African-American literature, that is, the experiences of growing up as a black Caribbean in an urban British environment. This was the starting point of Caryl Phillips as a Black British writer. I also stated that, even though his novels mainly deals with historical black experiences from the perspective of black diaspora, his contemporary concern with his experience as a black Briton coming from Caribbean underlies his works.

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A new trend in black diaspora literature seems to be emerging for the last two decades. Whereas black-male authors predominated in African-American literature until the 60s, black literature after the 70s witnessed the emergence of powerful black-female writers representing the enhanced power of black women released by the Civil Rights Movement. While the latter is still vibrant in the 90s, a new wave of Caribbean men and women writers began to draw the attention of American scholars in black Studies as well as general readership. Another new trend is the emergence of the new black-British writers since the 80s. On the one hand, such scholars as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy in cultural studies have been having theoretical influences on black Studies in the US and, on the other hand, as fiction writers such as Caryl Phillips have been adding something new to black literature by exploring so far unknown historical black diaspora experience.

The emergence of the new Caribbean writers and the black-British writers is not a separate phenomenon but shares a common root: The flow of Caribbean immigrants to Britain after World War II opened a new space for the flowering of Caribbean rooted literary creativity.

Caryl Phillips was born in 1958 in St. Kitts, West Indies and went to England with his family when he was four month old to settle in Leeds.¹ At that time his father was 25 years old and his mother was 20 and they were part of a great migration of black Caribbean labor forces which began in 1948 and lasted until 1962. British government needed skilled workers to reconstruct Britain from the War devastation and decided to rely on the immigrant workers from the former colonies in Caribbean. The number is said to amount to 250,000.

To the immigrants, Britain was their mother country whose language, culture and religion were already quite familiar to them. They planned to begin their second lives in Britain with many dreams and expectation, especially for their children who would have far greater opportunities in life than they could have in their homelands.

But the lives of the immigrants in Britain were not easy due to discrimination. They had to suffer discrimination in housing and employment, and especially when black men had relationships with British women, which aroused antipathy among British white men and often caused race riots.

Faced with the loss of Empire after World War II, Britain felt the need to reconstruct the land and to redefine its national identity. They needed the Caribbean immigrants from the stand point of the national reconstruction, but

1. I owe all the biographical descriptions about Caryl Phillips to his new book, *A New World Order*. Vintage Books, 2001.

the Caribbean black presence in Britain was considered as contaminating its racial, and cultural 'homogeneity' and 'purity.' Even the Conservative administration which had decided to have Caribbean immigrants in Britain discussed the possibility of using the slogan 'Keep Britain White' in the 1955 election campaign.

The antipathy and hostility among British people toward the Caribbean immigrants rose to the extent that they had to often hear the rebuke 'Go back to the Jungle' or had to suffer 'unprovoked physical attacks'. Phillips defines such prejudice as 'a most primitive form of racism,' which is 'rooted in a physical distaste for black people.'

Concerning the racism of British people against blacks, Phillips picks up an episode in his childhood in Leeds. Phillips was a great fan of football and often went to matches to support 'Leeds United'. But he found that the same white supporters who would hag him when 'Leeds United' scored, would verbally harass any black player should the opposing team had the audacity to field a black one.

Phillips, explaining the nature of white British hostility toward blacks, says that white British, feeling 'uncomfortable' with Caribbean blacks because they were so like the British in their language, education and religion tried to differentiate blacks from them by skin color about which blacks couldn't do any thing. So 'even the hitherto unacceptable Jew, Irishman or Pole, ... would now be acceptable for the battle was to "Keep Britain White.' And 'a black man could never be a British man.'

Phillips says that that was exactly the message Enoch Powel, 'the paterfamilias of modern British racism,' wanted to deliver in 1968 when he made a series of lectures in which he asserted that blacks 'could never be admitted as full members to that closed, fixed, club called Britain.' And what he said captured the mind of ordinary people and gained support among them.

But from where did such prejudice come? The next section will explore this question and show that it was solidly rooted in British past.

Historical Sources of White British Prejudice Against Blacks

Paul Edwards and James Walvin in *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (1983)² gave an historical analysis on the relationship between blacks and the British society. The following is the essence of what they wrote.

2. Paul Edwards and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade*, the Mcmillan Press Ltd, 1983. Except for the part referring to Eric Williams, all the descriptions concerning blacks in Britain came from this book.

The encounter between the British and blacks in Africa dates from the period of Roman occupation of Britain. A black auxiliary soldier is recorded to have offended the Emperor Septimius Severus near Carlisle by making fun of his victory. In the Middle Ages, there is evidence to show that in the year 862 Vikings brought some North Africans in captivity to Ireland. With the beginning of the European slave trade with Africa, conducted in its early stage mainly by Portuguese, a number of Africans began to appear in Britain during the second half of the 15th century. And by around 1500 there were many Africans present in Britain, most of them women at the court of King James IV of Scotland. Far from being slaves, in fact, the black women of James's court were possibly those freed from slavery when taken by Scottish privateers from Portuguese ships. Their exact status in the court is ambiguous, but they appeared in the context of court entertainments.

For many years, there had been a widespread belief that black Africans were descended from Noah's son Ham or Cham, whose posterity was damned by God for wickedness and disobedience. As a result of their association with devilry, Africans were also often said to be the familiar of witches.

It is clear from both historical and literary sources that in the late sixteenth century, blackness was commonly equated with ugliness, lechery and wickedness in general.

By 1562, Africans were seen as commodities, when John Hawkins undertook the first effective trans-Atlantic English slaving mission, having been assured that 'Negroes were very good merchandise in Hispaniola, and that scores of Negroes might easily be had upon the coast of Guinea'.

But the profits of the early slave trade with the Spanish and Portuguese were minute compared with the wealth which later accrued to Britain from her own colonies. In parts of mainland America and the West Indies, the relative cheapness and abundance of the imported black slaves soon overcame what little hesitation Englishmen possessed about basing their fortunes on black slavery.

Eric Williams in his *Slavery & Capitalism* (1944)³ asserted that the wealth derived from the triangular slave trade and from the sugar production monopolized by British West Indies was one of the main sources of the capital needed for the Industrial Revolution. And the status of blacks as chattel slaves was legalized in the late 17th century in Navigation Law which gave the legal framework for the trade with Africa and blacks were also clearly defined as

3. Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

properties in the colonial administrations.

On the other hand, the expansion of the slave trade and slavery in the West Indies brought about the increase of the black population in Britain itself. Blacks accompanied their masters to Britain and lived mainly as the servants to their masters, which explains the presence of blacks not only in London but also in rural areas. Their presence in Britain was disliked even in the period of the Queen of the Elizabeth and she often tried to expel them from the land. But such efforts did not succeed due to the profitability of slave trade and slavery. According to a magazine, their number reached 20,000 in 1764 and worried voices and complaints about their presence began to be raised in London in the 1770s.

One of the characteristics of the black population in Britain was that they were predominantly males due to the fact that it was mainly male-slaves that were mainly demanded by the planters in West Indies. As a result, relationships between black-males and lower class white women began to develop and this soon aroused hostilities toward black males in Britain. The source of such hostilities was the white writers from the West Indies. In other words, the relationship between blacks and whites there was transferred to Britain and worked to stigmatize the miscegenation as contaminating the purity of the white race.

Although in Britain there was no need for black labor, their employment as servants were not uncommon. The blacks in Britain were likely to be regarded as slaves because blacks were slaves in the British colonies in the West Indies. In fact, advertisements for runaway slaves were as commonplace as notices for slave sales. It sometimes happened that a free black man in Britain was sold again as a slave to the West Indies. As a result, there were various law suits concerning the legal status of black people in Britain with conflicting court decisions. This confusion was derived from the conflicting legal opinions between the one based on Common Law which stated that it was illegal to make any human being a property and the opposing one based upon the fact blacks were slaves in the colonies.

From the 17th century up to the 1770s Britain accumulated wealth due to the profit gained from the slave trade and sugar plantations based on slavery without having any doubts about the morality of buying and selling blacks as commodities. But from the 1780s the movement against the slave trade became very active and slavery was abolished in 1807. Then in 1833 a bill was passed in the parliament which actually abolished slavery in the British colonies in the West Indies. And in 1838 slavery was totally abolished.

But why did such a big social change happen? This is the question the two

authors also raise in their book. The concern of this writer is why did the Caribbean immigrants after World War II find themselves faced with severe racism in Britain upon arrival if there had been such an agreement to abolish the slave trade and slavery in the 19th century Britain? In order to answer this question it is necessary to analyze the cause and nature of the movement and understand why the slave trade and slavery was abolished in Britain.

Concerning the abolition movement, there seems to be consensus among the scholars in the field on several points. Firstly, abolition movement was a national movement which find no match in British history. Secondly, abolition movement resorted to every means to appeal to people, especially to petitions to the parliament and moved it to the extent that it passed the bills to abolish the slave trade and slavery in 1807 and 1833, respectively. Thirdly, at the center of the movement were various denominations of Christians such as Quakers, Methodists and Baptists who believed that the it was God's will to condemn the slave trade. Fourthly, the radical political groups who were influenced by the French Revolution also joined the movement. Fifthly, with people gathering in big cities as a result of the Industrial Revolution, it was relatively easy to appeal to those people concerning the cruelties the slaves were suffering in the West Indies. Sixthly, those people in the cities, who had the experience of being cut off from their native places found it easy to feel sympathy with Africans who were cut off from their native lands.⁴

But these factors alone seem not enough to explain why the nation which had committed itself so profoundly to the slave trade and slavery and had complained about the presence of blacks in its own land, had changed their mind overnight. It is also necessary to notice the paradox that the anti-slavery movement was so successful abroad whilst the black presence in Britain was decreasing. Even the two authors raises a question concerning the real motives of the movement "Would the humane British response to blacks have been so striking-would it even have been possible-had the black community survived on the scale of the 1770s."

If the movement was supported only by humanitarians and radicals, it would never have achieved success. It could never have become a national movement without the support of the industrial capitalists who were gaining social prominence in British society. If we are to really understand the success of the movement, we need to put the matter in the larger context of the contention

4. Paul Michael Kielstra, *The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-48*, Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000, p. 5-6.

between free trade vs. protectionism in British trade. This is exactly the point Eric Williams made in his famous work, *Capitalism & Slavery*.

According to Eric Williams, until 1785 the sugar producers in Jamaica and Barbados had the monopoly of sugar production. But the monopoly was challenged by Saint Domingo with its more fertile, larger land and therefore higher productivity. France could export sugar from Saint Domingo to Europe and could balance the big trade deficit by the sugar alone. But because Britain at that time had the protectionist trade policy, Britain had to buy sugar from its colonies in the West Indies. As a result, instead of buying cheaper sugar from Saint Domingo, Britain had to buy more expensive sugar from English colonies. It meant the higher living cost for the laborers, thus higher wages for them, which ran against the interest of the industrial capitalists. Thus the industrial capitalists who wanted to import cheaper sugar from Saint Domingo were in opposition to protectionism which put a high tariff on sugar from Saint Domingo. From that stand point, the sugar production in the British West Indies had become a burden to the British economy and lost its justification. That was an objective background of why the industrial capitalist could object to the slave trade.

It was in such a context that the British Prime Minister Pitt came to judge that the slave trade to the West Indies was against the national interest. Although Pitt pretended that he agreed with the humanitarian abolitionists, he had other economic interests on his mind. So Pitt tried to import cheaper sugar from the East Indies, but his intention was frustrated by protectionism which would put high tariff on sugar from the East Indies. Then he moved to advocate the abolition of the international slave trade. He had calculated that even if he could not get the concerted actions from other European countries, at least Britain could deal a great blow to the sugar production in Saint Domingo which was dependent upon slaves imported by British traders which predominated the sea trade at that time. In other words, behind his humanitarian facade of the abolition of the slave trade was concealed such an economic expediency.

It was under such a situation that the French Revolution occurred. In 1791 the slave owners in Saint Domingo, fearing that slavery there was to be abolished under the French Revolution, appealed to Britain that they be allowed to become one of British colonies. Pitt accepted the offer, which meant the continuation of slavery in Saint Domingo and the postponement of the abolition of the slave trade in the British West Indies. This act shows that national interests was his primary concern and the abolition of the slave trade was a mere expedience.

Then the War between Britain and France began over Saint Domingo in 1793. Although Britain could not win the war, it succeeded in destroying the sugar plantations in Saint Domingo and thus could get rid of its opponent in sugar production.

But then British colonies were faced with a new powerful opponent, Cuba. In addition to that, Napoleon replaced cane sugar with sugar beet and let it compete with sugar. At the same time, Napoleon moved to blockade the continent to stop sugar export from Britain to Europe. As a result, British surplus sugar piled up in England. In order to restrict the production of sugar, it was necessary to stop the import of the slaves. The older colonies in the West Indies did not need further slaves, but newer ones did. The survival of the old ones made it imperative to abolish slave trade. "West Indian distress", Eric Williams says, "could not be imputed to abolition. Actually, abolition was the direct result of that distress."

Thus the slave trade was abolished, but slavery still continued. It was not the agenda of the abolitionists to abolish slavery itself, at least from the start. What made it necessary to abolish slavery itself were the appearance of the new, competitors such as Cuba, Brazil and Mauritius after Saint Domingo, which made unreasonable the protection of relatively expensive sugar from the British colonies in the West Indies. In addition to that, as the British market could not consume all the sugar from the British West Indies, it had to be sold in the European market. But to sell relatively expensive sugar from the British West Indies necessitated national subsidies to the planters. From the point of view of the industrial capitalists who advocated free trade, these developments were something unendurable. Thus the economic necessity to sustain the sugar production in the British West Indies disappeared. "Overproduction in 1807" says Eric Williams, "demanded abolition; overproduction in 1833 demanded emancipation."

Thus the basic contention of Eric Williams was that the rise of abolitionism could only be understood in terms of the historical context in which the sugar production in the British colonies had lost its monopoly of sugar production and had become a burden to the industrial capitalists because of its relatively high cost. In other words, if sugar production in the British West Indies had continued to be as competitive as before, the abolitionist movement could never have become a national movement, involving the industrial capitalists.

Some scholars criticize Eric Williams by pointing out that the sugar producers in the British West Indies had made profit or their production had increased. But these contentions lose sight of the points Eric Williams made: that

the sugar production in the British West Indies had lost its competitiveness in comparison with other newly developed islands and the protectionist policy to sustain it had become unreasonable from the industrial capitalists' point of view. In other words, he asserted that the real motive behind the humanitarian appearance of the industrial capitalists who joined the movement was economic expediency. And that, this paper's author believes, explains why Eric Williams has been a target of criticisms by many scholars; he attacked British nationalism. The abolitionist movement in Britain had become a source of national pride. But it seems natural that he felt no obligation to such a nationalist sentiment, considering that, even though he had graduated from Oxford University as a top student and published this book in 1944, he still could not get an university position anywhere in the world

Eric Williams further critically examines the nature of abolitionism by considering the words and actions of the leaders of abolitionism after the abolition of the slave trade. According to him, the slavery in Cuba and Brazil continued to exist for at least 25 years after 1833. If British abolitionist were really against slavery itself, they should have protested against it, but they didn't. Rather, they thought that it would disturb the economic development there and would hamper the British interests.

"The desire," he wrote with irony, "for cheap sugar after 1833 overcame all abhorrence of slavery."

Then what were their alternatives for the former slaves? To Buxton it was the instruction of Christianity. According to him, "It is the only compensation in our power" for the all the injustices, and suffering black people had experienced. This kind of thinking is based upon the assumption that the African's 'souls are in darkness' and it would be of greatest happiness for them to come to know about Christianity. It actually means that Buxton approved humanity in blacks only in an abstract sense and regarded them as barbaric and inferior to him.

The abolitionist movement was very active in the 1820s and 1830s when the black population in Britain was rapidly decreasing. In other words, the abolitionist movement in Britain was against slavery abroad, but not necessarily against the discrimination of blacks at home.

Caryl Phillips As a Second-Generation Black British Writer

These historical accounts let us know why the immigrants from the Caribbean faced discrimination in Britain after World War II. And, in spite of the hostile

reception by the British whites, those immigrants endured with it and gradually stepped up the social ladder of Britain.

Phillips is one of the second-generation Black British from the Caribbean who has been brought up in British. Phillips explains the difference of the first and second generation of immigrants as follows:

By the 1970s their children's generation, my generation, was still being subjected to the same prejudices which had blighted their arrival, but we were not our parents. You might say we lacked their good manners and their ability to turn the other cheek. Whereas they could sustain themselves with the dream of one day 'going home, we were already at home. We had nowhere else to go and we needed to tell British society this. The 1976 and 1977 Notting Hill riots were born out of this frustration.⁵

The militant black youths with Afro-hair appeared in this period. The movement of American black youths from the middle of the 60s until the end of it captured the mind of the urban black British youths in the late 70s and early 80s.

It was when Phillips visited the US in 1978 as a 20 year-old Oxford student that he could understand the racial situation in Britain with an adult's eye. And one day on Californian beach Phillips discovered *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Phillips recalls what and how he felt when he read the novel.

I felt as if an explosion had taken place inside my head. If I had to point to any one moment that seemed crucial in my desire to be a writer, it was then, as the Pacific surf began to wash up around the deck chair. The emotional anguish of the hero, Bigger Thomas, the uncompromising prosodic muscle of Wright, his deeply felt sense of social indignation, provided not so much a model but a possibility of how I might be able to express the conundrum of my own existence...I had decided that I wanted to try to become a writer.⁶

The next year Phillips spent his last year as an Oxford student studying the novels of Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralf Ellison. At that time, Phillips recalls, there seemed to be no British literature to express what he felt toward the British society. So it was American black writers who seemed to express the anger and frustration he felt toward Britain in the late 70s. What is quite interesting is that he says that the gloomy feeling and sense of isolation the

5. Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order*. p.242.

6. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, pp.18-19.

protagonist of Ralf Ellison's *Invisible Man* felt seemed to be more close to what the Caribbean second generation writers felt in Britain. It was particularly so because he was living isolated in the ivory tower when things were burning outside.⁷

When he visited the US for the second time in the early 80s, he avidly studied black American writers and musicians.

But then Phillips realizes that "in their rush to escape the bigotry and discrimination of their homeland, these writers seemed to be content to overlook the treatment of both the colonial and economic migrants in Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam and London. They also appeared to be indifferent to the disturbing and undeniable specter of the Holocaust."

What he thought was "What kind of a Europe did these writers imagine they were running to?"

He also felt that something was missing in their works. Phillips was born in Leeds which was an urban black neighborhood which had a lot of things in common with American inner cities, but born in the Caribbean and brought up in Britain, he felt himself somehow different from the American blacks in large cities. He says "Like the British writers such as Golding or Lessing, they were, at least to my eyes, from a different world."⁸

As for the Caribbean writers, there was V.S. Naipaul, but he could not 'digest his politics.' Neither could he feel comfortable with the rural scenes depicted by Caribbean writers published by Heineman.⁹

And then he came upon Samuel Selvon and George Lamming. Phillips not only recognized the urban landscape in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, but also recognized "the contradictory tension engendered by Selvon's attraction to and rejection by England." "The literature was shot through with the uncomfortable anxieties of belonging and not belonging and these same anxieties underscored my life."¹⁰

Then he happened upon the work of his fellow emigrant, George Lamming. He read Lamming's *The Natives of My Person*. What was appealing to him about Lamming's work was 'its dense textuality and Joycean formal ambition as well as 'deeply historical sensibility.' And the next work he read, *The Pleasure of Exile* made links between the Atlantic slave experience and the colonization of

7. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p.36.

8. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p.233.

9. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p. 234.

10. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p. 234.

language. It places the migration of Caribbean people to Britain into a global political and cultural context.”¹¹

Summing up the significance of these two writers for the second-generation black British writers from Caribbean, Phillips writes as follows:

Those of my generation who were going to write found in the work of these two authors recognizable subject-matter and a restlessness associated with formal invention, which meant there was no longer any necessity for us to keep looking to New Jersey or Chicago or Detroit for our literary fixes.¹²

After graduation from Oxford, Phillips began his career as a playwright creating works which deals with the experiences of the modern Caribbean immigrants in Britain. It is interesting to note that it is only in plays that he depict contemporary scenes. Concerning this point, he says in an interview that “Usually subject matters determine what format I choose. To be honest, if a story or idea feels particularly dramatic of contemporary, it tends to work its way into dialogue.”¹³

But it seems that what distinguishes him as a writer is the way he deals with historical materials relating to the slave trade and slavery. And with his historical novels, things past are not just past, but are sources from which the modern world came, thus having relevance to the understanding of the contemporary world.

What is unique about Phillips when he depicts history is that he rejects the ‘essentialist’ point of view of blacks, focusing on the diversity of the experiences of African diaspora. Neither do the concept of diaspora restrict him only to the black experience but drive him to the exploration of Jewish experiences such as the persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages, the sufferings of the Jewish people under Nazi regime, the subsequent Jewish experiences in concentration camps and the Zionist movement to establish a homeland in Palestine.

In the contemporary political context of black and Jewish conflicts, Phillips’s approach to seek common ground and humanity between them in the past stands out as an act of courage and sanity. And it is important to note that such a point of view, as I have mentioned before, came from his concrete experiences as an immigrant in Europe in contrast with the American black exiles in Europe. A new voice has emerged from a different background.

11. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p.236.

12. Caryl Phillips, *ibid.*, p.237.

13. Benedicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p.13.