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The Cross Roads of Divergent Culture in Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage*

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Abstract

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less travelled by
And that has made all the difference.”

These words of Robert Frost shed light on the importance of taking decisions at crucial moments. Though the journey of life is undulating, it is also wavering. For immigrants, it is an expedition that puts down their culture, identity, and elevates the eminence of the host country. The choices to live a better life are few and harrowing. Caryl Phillips, being a Caribbean writer, explicates in his works the turmoil of being an expatriate, the struggles of the psyche and the cultural cringe. Culture to Raymond Williams was a collision of the way of life and signs that dominate society. He states in his books *Culture and Society* that culture exists in such collision and the determinants like art, class and others have been shaping it from time to time. As per his records, class prejudice, class legislation, class consciousness, class conflict and class war are much debated only after the nineteenth century. Richard Hoggart has stated that culture did not consist of free-floating ideas; it had to be understood as embedded in social practices. But it was something other than a reflection of some more determinate base in some dependent superstructure. Phillips's works are the looking glass through which the experiences of the immigrants, especially of the Caribbean settled in England, are examined. His novel, *The Final Passage*, echoes the cultural inflictions that wreck the life of a young girl, Leila. The insinuated narration brings out the distress caused by an insentient and dominant white community. Leila, who encounters the plight of ambivalent identity and racial incongruity, is denounced by both 'the home' and 'the host'. This paper purports to trace the swaying cultural conflicts in the novel and to show how hybridity affects and curbs the development of humans as an 'individual'.

Keywords: *Ambivalent identity, Anglo-Caribbean experience, Cultural conflict, Hybridity, Life of migrants.*

1. Introduction

'Home' has always been equated with warmth, solace and endearment. It is the emissary of the heritage of particular social groups. But, globalization has perturbed the consonance between home and culture. Migrants relocate to host countries intuiting desirable scope for a better life. However, what they confront are situations that are disparate from their intuitions. Thus, any culture is to be understood with its resilient bond with and its dependency on a system of economy and politics. The intricacies of the cultures are sensitive and are to be felt empathetically.

A diverse cultural shift is a remarkable phenomenon of the twentieth century and the acknowledgement of multiethnicity is crucial for the comprehension of the present world. Cultural Studies in literature, as a field of critical enquiry, scrutinize the evolution and cross-breeds of culture at a particular point in history. While articulating the nuances of Cultural Studies, Jennifer Daryl Slack, (1996) affirms in her essay entitled “The Theory and Methods of Articulation in Cultural Studies” that “works with the notion of theory as a ‘detour’ to help ground our engagement with what newly confront us and to let that engagement provide the ground for retheorizing.”(114) It is the portal to approach cultural contingencies based on different academic disciplines like sociology, psychology, history and others. Many writers have directed their attention to the elitism of the host country and the plights of the immigrants. The imaginative realms of the writers, with the twinge of reality, help in understanding the changing currents of culture. Thus, Cultural Studies acclaims Stuart Hall, (1996) “...was constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention. Theoretical work in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was more appropriately called theoretical noise. It was accompanied by a great deal of bad feeling, argument, unstable anxieties, and angry silences.” (262).

Caryl Phillips conceals in his writing the negotiations and consents obtruded upon the immigrants by the dominant hosts. As a writer of multiethnicity, he explains the swaying ethos and the dynamism in the lives of the immigrants. The characters in a multicultural context encounter bigoted situations that toss-up their emotions and lead them to displacements and conflicts and urge them to tolerate the predicaments of the hybrid life. This shows that the knowledge of indigenous culture alone is not sufficient for surviving in a heterogeneous society/world. *The Final Passage* explicates the fretful experiences of a hybrid culture (combination of the Caribbean and the British) by the protagonist, Leila. In a nutshell, it is a story in which, Phillips vividly depicts Leila’s romance with the child-man Michael, their empty marriage and joyless parenthood, and her decision to seek a new life in the white man’s world. After being separated from Michael, Leila drifts into isolation and hopelessness.

2. The Cross Roads of Divergent Culture

Invariably, it is indispensable to define comprehensively what culture is all about. In the words of Edward B. Taylor, (1871) culture is explained as something “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”(1). Culture, like words and actions, influence people and the impacts of cultures on the immigrants determine the life they lead. A person in a multicultural/cross-cultural ambience yearns for a sense of belonging. Though the immigrants try to comprehend the cultures by differentiation, the hybrid identity they acquire in such a plethora of context divides them into multiple ‘selves’. In the process of eluding the dominant culture, they accommodate themselves into it. They feel the need to adhere to both the highly impossible cultures. The intervention of the mainstream culture distances them from their home and they become alienated from both the cultures. Thus the lingering question ‘Who am I?’ becomes essential during the course of their survival and such complex situations are not new to the Caribbean.

The Final Passage is the vivid portrayal of the story of Leila, the protagonist, born to an English man and a Caribbean woman. Brought up with a blended culture, she allies herself with both cultures. Leila is rejected for being dichotomous and Caryl Phillips registers the detestation of her home community with the name they ascribe to her – ‘Mulatto’. According to Jack D. Forbes, (1993), the term has derived from the Arabic ‘Muwallad’ – a person of mixed ancestry (145). Whereas, David S. Goldstein and Audrey B. Thacker, (2011) define it as “constituting a third separate “species”” (77). She is not told anything about her father and she assumes this to be the contempt that her mother has for the deceiving Whites. The rejection due to her ambiguous origin leads her to double oppression. Her identity as the Caribbean becomes dormant unconsciously. She is bullied by her friends and also called a ‘White girl’ by Michael’s grandmother. The feeling of being ‘different in the home community’ creates culture shock.

Leila becomes restive and heeds not to her mother who says, “Arthur is a good man and the boy from Sandy Bay is no good. He loves himself too much and he’d use you” (Phillips, 2010, 34). Leila’s dubious nature let her choose Michael over Arthur. But, her life with the unscrupulous Michael becomes miserable. He is reckless and absconds now and then. Before Leila could regret her conjugal blunder, the newborn becomes an adjunct to the existing burden and she feels shattered. The unexpected departure of her mother to Britain is both a rupture and a sense of relief to her. She feels the need to move to a new place anticipating changes in Michael and their life. She heeds not to the words of Millie, her good friend, who advises her to stay on their island: “So just tell me how many people you see coming back from England with anything except the clothes they standing up in?” (Phillips, 2010, 106) Millie’s words explicate the pitiable stipulations that the migrants have with the host countries. Michael who becomes comfortable with the mundane and aimless life at his homeland gives a sharp remark: “Leaving this place going make me feel old, you know like leaving the safety of your family to live with strangers” (Phillips, 2010, 11).

Leila migrates to London, leaving Caribbean Island, anticipating a productive life. This redefines the ‘home’ as, what John McLeod, (2000) has stated in his book, *Beginning Postcolonialism* “...primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present.” (211) Leila’s pre-migration phase is full of aspirations and she is careful that “...she must take as little as possible with her to remind her of the island” (Phillips, 2010, 15). During migration, she feels numb and the uninviting weather during the voyage seems to signal the destruction of her desires. The culture shock gets intensified when Leila arrives at her ‘new home’ with her family. In no time she learns that it was her misconception about life in England that many had exaggerated. All through her journey in London, she is tormented by rejection, identity crisis and the disheartening vicissitude of home.

The period mentioned in the novel evinces the deep-rooted discrimination that was prevalent in society particularly based on race and colour. It is conspicuous that the streets especially – Quaxley and Florence – were filled with ‘coffin-like’ box-shaped houses. These were the sections of the ‘homeland’ that occupied the ‘guests’ - people from colonial places. Having witnessed such a horrendous reality, Leila starts feeling within herself as an ‘outsider’ and the sense of ‘non-belonging’ pervades when the discriminatory signboard on the walls of the white people’s home read: “‘No coloreds’, ‘No Vacancies’, ‘No Children’” (Phillips, 2010, 155). The prejudiced and the biased attitude of the whites towards the blacks bewilders her and all the good dreams and aspirations that she had nourished about London turns out to be an illusion and disappointment. While echoing her deep anguish and agony, and the duplicity and the hypocrisy of the white world, a reader could be reminded of the statement of Victoria Arana and Lawri Ramey, (2004) who in their introduction to *Black British Writing* state that: “Britain opened the door to the Empire, but certainly did not expect the colonials to come, to stay, and to expect the same life that the Anglo-Saxons themselves enjoyed.” (1). It is a testimony to affirm that the blacks and the colonized would be treated as second class citizens in London and they should not expect a better lifestyle inequity with the whites. Leila, the protagonist of the novel could not believe the harassment meted out to the blacks in London and finds it hard to come into terms with the gruesome reality and the novelist explicates it further through a slogan that Leila had read. It states: “If you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour” (Phillips, 2010, 122). As a newcomer into the city of London, She finds it hard to comprehend the exact meaning of the signs in the phrase. She finds it hard to elude the present. The dominant ideologies of British culture are far from Leila’s awareness and culture shock and cultural bereavement occur at the same time. Leila felt that “...everything seemed break” (Phillips, 2010, 142).

Ayse K. Uskul and Harriet Over, (2017) while enumerating the pitiable plight of the people who have interdependence on different cultures, acclaim that “culture groups differ in how they experience ostracism. Individuals from cultures that afford a high level of social interdependence will be more negatively affected when experiencing ostracism because social bonds are so important to them” (372). Leila’s speculations about the white people get reoriented with the proximity/proximity to them. “Leila had looked upon these white people as if they were an endangered species. She spied on them, but here in England, she saw them all the time, yet she did not understand them any better than she did when she was a young girl”. (Phillips, 2010, 195) ‘Home’ is marked accentuation in the novel. Michael

often utters “we’ve just arrived from home” (Phillips, 2010, 147). Leila’s mother has developed definite harmony with their island that she affirms to Leila “London is not my home Leila looked away but her mother continued to stare at her. And I don’t want you to forget that either” (Phillips, 2010, 124). It is disheartening to know that despite being married to a white man and bearing a child for him, Leila’s mother feels alienated in the land of the whites and all the more she exhorts her daughter Leila that London could never be her home.

Finding her bedridden mother at the hospital creates a deep cut in her heart. Her hope vanishes when her mother succumbs to death. Also, she is left alone by Michael, but she sets out her way for survival in a place that throws its despicable looks at the coloureds. Without Michael, she actualizes the reality and adapts to the acrid ‘habitat’. Though she celebrates the diversity of culture, she is ruined and is haunted by the wrecks of the lost homogenous culture. She remembers the cynical remarks of her classmates and the persecution of her group. She thinks it to be a deception that blacks were interested in hybrid inventiveness. They were forced to be a ‘hybrid’ and become deprived of rights and identity, due to colonization. Yearning for the lost culture and ravaging for the ‘host’ culture both breaches the affinity towards immigrant culture.

Eisenbruch, (2011) has defined cultural bereavement as:

“the experience of the uprooted person – or group – resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity: the person – or group – continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces from the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, feels pain if memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images) intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead, and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life”. (19).

Great Britain’s history and legacy explicate its adventurous colonization of very many countries in the past. Although its pomp and glory have been magnified in history and literature, it carried in its mindset an aversion and abhorrence towards the colonized. The ramifications of colonization destroyed the social and cultural identity of the natives and this has been disclosed in the novel concretely where Leila undergoes an agonizing experience of encountering divergent culture and how she finds herself in a world of dilemma and dichotomy. She having been brought up by a white father and black mother is faced with precarious situation – identity crisis, adaptation into a new culture, acceptance/rejection by the host country, etc., It is a reality that all those migrants who into the foreign land encounter and Leila to is not exempted as she found herself ostracized and rejected in Britain, the dream of her land. The authority, the dominion, the superiority complex that the British have in their mindset is unleashed in their attitude and treatment towards the blacks, who longed for survival. Two fundamental things are enforced upon the blacks by the whites in Britain. Firstly, activities are orchestrated systematically to ignore and suppress the culture that the blacks have carried along with them from their native land, which results in persuading them to believe and admire all that happens in Britain. Secondly, the onslaught perpetrated on the blacks made them become convinced that they are meant for unskilled labour and low-paid jobs rather than lucrative jobs. Obviously, opting for menial jobs would make their living conditions become miserable and would result in leading them to experience ordeals such as discrimination and harassment based on the colour of their skin. Thus, a reader can witness that Leila becomes a victim of racial prejudice. While witnessing the torments that the blacks face in London, Leila wonders “...what else her mother had left unsaid” (Phillips, 2010, 151) about England.

The novel ends with the decision of Leila breaking her ties with Michael who becomes a womanizer and invades in promiscuous relationships. When she questions the ruthless behaviour of Michael, he defends himself yelling at Calvin: “Because his mother is a selfish arewho thinks she does me a favour by marrying one” (Phillips, 2010, 178). The circumstances impel her not to regret but to get along with the currents in order to survive. Her journey from England to her Island becomes her ‘final Passage’. Leila can regret the choices she had made but, as Robert Frost states in his poem *The Road Not Taken* that she cannot recede. She remembers Millie’s words: “...home is where you feel a welcome”

(Phillips, 2010,115). She concedes to the off-target of her survival in England and dispels the displacement that she experiences. She destroys her humiliations by feeding “the fire with the objects and garments that reminded her of five months in England” (Phillips, 2010,200).

This way, Caryl Phillips articulates the pang of nostalgic experience, dimensions of migration, and the impenetrable psyche of migrants and the ineluctable conflicts of culture. He also highlights the divergence between ‘what home is’ and ‘what it feels to be at home’. *The Final Passage* can be probed in two ways – content analysis and the analysis of imagery and symbols. The novelist explicates further the stasis and vacuity that any immigrant, who is inclined towards dynamism, feels. Precisely, Leila tends to take ‘the road less travelled by’. Caryl Phillips attains Englishness in writing and claiming his due, he gains immunity and articulates the integrands that have vouch saved how history has been collapsed and redrawn and cultures have interested discursively. He sensitizes the impact and the post-imperial attitude of the blacks who have arrived in Britain. The civilized and posh appearance of Britain has drawn a veil over the dehumanized face of it. Discrimination, based on race, establishes the supremacy that Britain celebrates – what Rudyard Kipling called, ‘Whiteman’s Burden’.

The juxtaposing feelings leave her life bleak. Denude of possessions and bereaved of relationship, Leila stands crestfallen. The de trop grins abstained looks exacerbate Leila’s anxiety. The decisive reading will result in understanding the historical conjectures. The novel furnishes the particulars of English and Caribbean cultures the non-identical and semi-detached entities. To the British, the Caribbean island is a kind of sojourn, whereas to the Caribbean, British culture is unrivalled and unattainable. The anthropological definition of culture, as Stuart Hall, (2003) states in his book *culture, Media, language* is “the ‘whole process’ by means of which meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed, with literature and art as only one, especially privileged, kind of social communication. ‘Cold war’ persists between the white master and his ‘freed slave’”(222). She is bewildered by the restrained relationships in London. The opulence of London tantalizes her. It is the revulsion endured by the first generation immigrants that have sanctioned their descendants the sufficiency of living. They were deprecated, their efforts were belittled and they survived in – rat holes – cramped, squalid. The wrong decisions defenestrate the overarching credence of Leila.

Leaving behind familiar comforts, the migrants enter the realm of ‘unknown disquieting affairs.’ Leila brings a warm heart to England, hoping to embrace the energy and vigour of the country. But when she tries to fit in with British culture, she is doomed to fail. Michael, on the other hand, continues. Despite the fact that Leila has moved to England with her family, she feels throbbled with pain, as if she is devoid of any relationship. She manages to survive the situation with the little money she has, but she feels bereft when Michael abandons her completely. She envisioned a life that would assist her in constructing a superstructure, but reality has shattered even the foundation, and the loss she is deprived of feelings and responses as a result of how she feels.) She realises she can’t rebuild her friendship, family, and home among the whites. Her depression is the result of internalising her feelings as a result of denial and isolation. Whereas Michael, who externalises his feelings and finds a way to express himself by exploiting the needs of British women, liberates himself from isolation and becomes acculturated. Leila is a victim of pathological cultural bereavement, and Michael is a cultural diversity adventurer. “culture shock” is thus used in the novel to “examine aspects which include the stress of moving to a new culture, a sense of loss, confusion in role expectations and self-identity, a sense/ feeling of rejection by the new culture, and resulting anxiety and sense of impotence in not being accepted as part of the new culture” (Taft, 1977, 143).

Leila is a representative of those with ambivalent identities. To defend her home culture would double-cross the immigrant culture. The dogmas of cultural identity fail with the upswing amalgam of both cultures. This leads to ambiguity and the self-starts looking itself from a multifarious spectrum. Leila’s white complexion and her affinity towards black culture aggravate the ambivalence in which she is forced to live in. She feels a freeze-out from both cultures. She feels suffocated with the conflicts that she experiences within her community and is found in despair amidst the new culture which she thought would set out freedom and autonomy.

“It has been argued that cultures can be divided into socio-centric and egocentric, as with individuals (Hofstede, 1980/2001; 1984). In egocentric societies, ties between individuals are relatively loose and each individual is supposed to look after themselves or the immediate nuclear family. In collectivist societies, individuals from their birth integrate into kinship-based structures and have very strong in-groups. There is a clear difference between I-consciousness in egocentric societies (where the individual shows autonomy, independence, individual initiative pleasure-seeking and financial independence) in contrast to ‘we’ness seen in collectivist societies. In the latter, collective identity, emotional interdependence, group solidarity and obligations take precedence over the individual. Family interdependence and group identity are important components of sociocentric individuals.” (Bhugra, Wojeik and Gupta, 2005, 145).

3. Conclusion

The title of the novel conveys enough as done by Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*. *The Final Passage* neither can be eluded nor can be rescinded. It is unvarying. Verisimilitudes in real-life situations. The smear of whiteness in her blood antagonises her stay on her island and at the new home – England – when Michael indulges in a debauched lifestyle, she feels alienated as the Caribbean amidst the white women. This kind of binary non-compliance is discernible throughout the novel. “England, in when she placed so much of her hope, no longer held for her the attraction of her mother and new challenges” (Phillips, 203). –Disappointed narrative configuration demonstrates the broken histories in the lives of the characters. Leila’s decision to get back to her homeland is due to disillusionment. In his Book, *Culture Media And Language* Stuart Hall, (2003) stated that the ‘cultural revolution’ of the 1960s “has been exceedingly favourable to a renewed interest in the social and political dimensions of art and literature.” (220) looking into winnowing the historical details in a text influencing the remodelling of the concept of literature. Culture, in this sense, is expressed and carried not simply in literature and arts but in every level and activity which go to make up the social totality. It is a requisite to understand, what Raymond Williams affirms as, ‘structure of feeling’. Though it is a self-contradicting phrase, it layouts the social truth and the sentiments that an individual fetters to such truths.

Leila encapsulates the experiences of an Anglo-Caribbean in the hypocritical British environment. The author explains in clear terms that an individual, who is compelled to live in a multicultural setting, would encounter a personality emergency and feel alienated. From this time forward, he/she would experience a cultural clash and conflicted circumstance of belonging nowhere. He has uncovered the logical inconsistencies that win in the general public and portrays the anguish of the minority. As Josiane Ranguin, (2008) pins down in her essay, “Foreign Home Caryl Phillips *The Final Passage*” “London, in *The Final Passage*, is then more a London as felt and experienced by characters than a London graphically depicted in geographical details: it is more a London of the mind that allows Caryl Phillips to explore the ideas of home, estrangement and welcome.”(228) *The Final Passage* is thus from expectations to experiences, destruction of hope to the construction of life and death-in-life to survival.

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