

The Politics of Whiteness in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*

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The race of white people shape the way they see as well as employ the world they live in. Whiteness is a socially constructed ideology through which they oppress and look down upon the people of color. Using this ideology into reality, they confer power and privilege on those identified as of whites. They imagine that they have inbuilt tendency of privileged in order to discriminate others. They are positioned in such a way that they are powered and privileged wherever they live in. Consciously or unconsciously, whites believe that they are racially superior and thus that it is okay to treat people of color as inferior. At the same time they proudly proclaim a racist identity proving white as complex and largely unconscious reality that has a far reaching impact. Black people are made to believe that racial as well as economic equality will never become a reality.

This paper probes to break the false notion of whites that blacks are not transparent and they are born devoid of natural bond of affection. It also focuses on how the blacks were forced into slavery and were treated as outcasts whereby they were treated as products which could be sold and purchased. It also shows the transformation of Emily's racial chauvinism that blacks are wild, violent, and emotionless and barbarians, turning into falsehood after her experience with plantation manger Mr. Brown, who is a white. Cambridge the black African slave embodies the qualities of goodness, virtue, civility and the white Mr. Brown is evil, violent and irrational is a simple example of the wrong postulation the white people have made.

Caryl Phillips is Kittitian born English novelist, playwright, essayist, travel writer, editor and screen writer. He is noted for writing variety of genres; Phillips has constantly explored themes of identity, belonging, displacement, cultural heritage, homelessness and slavery throughout his works. He was born in St. Kitts, in the Eastern Caribbean, he was only twelve weeks old when his parents settled in Leeds where he was brought up. Since his graduation from Oxford, he has led a brilliant writing and teaching career that has taken him worldwide. As a chronicler of the displaced, his restless life mirrors his writing:

"I couldn't sleep," he recalls. "I spent nights on deck, feeling the vastness and loneliness of the ocean, trying to relive not just my parents' voyage but Columbus's, the slave ships', and the Irish and Russian flotsam migrating to the New World. I realized the mid-Atlantic was

where I belonged spiritually, where you'd locate most of my life and work." (*Conversation with Caryl Phillips* 77)

Caryl Phillips happens to be an influential novelist who brings up human experiences in his works but most importantly he helps the reader understand the human essence that transcends space and time. He brings out in the most amazing detail the fact that there is more to a person than the depth of a skin colour. He embraces the common experiences and traits of the people individually and gives insight into the personalities and memories of people who were subjected to historical catastrophes.

Caryl Phillips is trying to fill-in the gaps and silences created by the white tradition of writing about slavery by writing about slavery. His novels expose the hidden history of West, i.e., the transatlantic slave-trade. Slavery has become central issues in Caryl Phillips' writing. As a writer, an intellectual and a teacher, Caryl Phillips has crucially contributed a lot to open Britain's eyes to her own heterogeneity, thereby promoting an empathetic understanding of complex identities and more generally raising awareness about multicultural societies.

The novel *Cambridge* tells two different stories that explore the two worlds of Emily and Cambridge which are connected by the insult of slavery. This institution of slavery though unlawful in Britain is still practiced in West Indies. A young upper class woman visits her father's West Indian plantation and tries to inform her father about his estate and to pour out her feelings about the social anarchy due to his absenteeism and Cambridge is a freed black in England, who is enslaved a new on his way to a Christian mission in Africa. The personal and social misunderstanding that prevails among the slaves and whites leads to this kind of shocking and unforgettable account of inhumanity which ultimately ends up in tragedy.

In socio-psychology, stereotypes have been defined as "standardized conceptions of people, primarily based on an individual's belonging to a category (usually race, nation, professional role, social class, or gender) or the possession of characteristic traits symbolizing one of these categories" (Schweinitz 4). Slave-holders' had assertions that Blacks were lazy and primitive by nature and they were incapable of anything other than servitude.

The more degrading images of slavery were also widespread; it was accepted "...that white overseers should inspect slave women like prize animals, or punish runaway slaves with casual forms of torture (like branding them or urinating in their mouths), and that fugitives should kneel to receive their punishment" (Hall 245). They made rigorous effort to normalize slavery and justify the inhumane treatment endured by slaves.

“...representations of daily life under slavery, ownership and servitude are shown as so ‘natural’ that they require no comment. It was part of the natural order of things that white men should sit and slaves should stand; that white women rode and slave men ran after them shading them from the Louisiana sun with an umbrella...”(Hall 336)

The peoples of West Africa had a rich and varied history and culture long before European slavers arrived. The transatlantic trade became dominant only when the plantation owners were in need of more slaves to satisfy their increasing demand for sugar in Europe. Millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homes, and the towns and the villages were depopulated. The Africans who were enslaved were named as slaves, stripped of their Identity. Ones identity is important aspect of self. They were dispersed across various parts of Europe to lead a life of degradation and brutality without thought of their personal life. Enslaved Africans were forced to engage in a variety of laborious activities, all of them back-breaking. The work in the fields was grueling, with long hours spent in the hot sun, supervised by overseers who were quick to use the whip.

The imported slaves like Cambridge faced tumultuous cycle of pain, suffering and discrimination after being introduced into Caribbean sugar plantation whereas the white plantation owners enjoyed abundance of wealth. . Cambridge, born olumide, was captured and taken to England and there renamed, reclothed, reeducated and eventually freed. Cambridge having lived in England and having been converted into Christianity acquires skills of literacy through his painful experience of slavery. He doesn’t know that he is going to be put into irrevocable betrayal back into slavery, he uttered these words “Truly I was now an English man, albeit a little smudgy of complexion” (147).

Cambridge is twice torn from home and family, one African and one English, where he could act as an individual. His naming at these points resembles that of a dog, which his masters intend to maintain leaving behind a position of inferiority. In England, Cambridge finds his true identity. As David Henderson, a name bestowed without cynicism, he embraces Christianity. With a dearly loved white wife at his side, he is accepted, if begrudgingly, into society, and on an evangelical tour of England he encounters a merchant who "was commonly very pleasant to both my wife and myself, directing us with witty turns and fanciful stories, but never to the prejudice of religion or good taste"(151) .The merchant, an African trader with a retinue of servants, is surely amusing himself. But there is a glimpse that in time, David Henderson might achieve a social integration that would affirm his own confidence in this identity. But a loving relationship which might grant security cannot last. David Henderson's wife dies in childbirth and with her

dies Henderson's tenuous credibility. Society will not allow him to perpetuate the myth of equality and, in trying to extend his mission to Africa; he is again taken captive to become the subjugated Cambridge.

There are very few accounts of what it was like to go through slavery as African people are denied access to reading and writing. This is because skills of reading and writing equal power. So they are always kept downtrodden in literacy and economically. Displacement endangers a great deal of suffering, a great deal of confusion and a great deal of soul searching. Transatlantic slave trade was responsible for the forced migration of Cambridge and his people from Africans to the western hemisphere.

It is very hard to describe the experience felt by an enslaved person on an auction block. The fear and anxiety that crop up in a slaves mind, when were they put on a display and made to face a prospect of being sold away from their family forever put them into a life of inscrutability. They were silenced by their pain and outrage. Their life got stifled with their grief and wrenching wail that ultimately remained the reason for their stillness. Whites felt hard to penetrate their consciousness, trigger their empathy and break their silence.

The white Europeans justify their slavery through beliefs that Africans were less human and biologically inferior. The whites oppressed them physically and psychologically. The idea that Africans and Africa are substandard to Europeans and Europe exists even today in the form of racial stereotypes and prejudice.

The prejudices predominant in Emily's insight are attributable not merely to ignorance but to a deliberately nurtured self serving system. It starts with a sea journey that is marked by extreme discomfort and a number of deaths including that of Isabella, Emily's companion and best friend. This is the first disappointment and discomfort that the privileged Emily faces through the unimaginable sea voyage. The author makes her as a superb witness for all that happens new in West Indies.

Though Emily makes a keen observation on her account about the white men in the estate -- Mr. McDonald, the doctor; Mr. Wilson, the failed former manager; and, above all, the brutal and enigmatic Mr. Brown, her presupposition on the blacks remained constant. Emily's racial prejudice that blacks are wild, violent, Emotionless and barbarians became stronger. She finds it difficult to disguise her revulsion at the appearance, dress, manners, and language of the black peoples of the island. She repeatedly associates them with the animal kingdom, mistaking slave children for monkeys, describing slave homes as "lair and nests" and the noises of the slave

village as a distant "braying." This is the testament to the strength and depth of European racial prejudices.

The slaves on the plantation are represented as a subhuman species of peoples, and she upholds the familiar stereotypes about their animal and childlike nature, their petty thieving, and their wanton sexual behavior. In describing the songs and festivities of the slave village, Emily remarks, "Such a vulgar, yet dexterous, set of antics never came into the brain, or out of the limbs, of anything but a son of Ham enjoying his jubilee" (87). Emily writes that "It is only to be expected that before long the pleasures of field gossip far outweigh the burdens of that weary duty known as motherhood. In short, these mothers soon prefer their pigs to their own children (68).

African people are not fit for the natural bondage of affection and relationship, say it marriage or parenting. The very worst thing is slave mothers and fathers are not permitted to parent their children as their children have become stock on the plantation owners account book. Some enslaved slaves did not reveal their pain even after experiencing the pain. They held their sentiments and emotions very closely. They did not express their true ideas. They regarded the white man as of completely different race from themselves. Distrust on the whites is the main reason for the blacks not expressing their real emotions and state of their conditions when they are asked. They always give vague replies when enquired and directly contradict their real sentiments.

The white people thought that the blacks would not be quieted unless emotions are walled off from the minds of the enslaved people. The erected boundary is so strong that even their wrenching wail sometimes cannot pierce through the wall. The shrieks and cry of these poor enslaved are enough to make any heart ache but the white people didn't have the will to care always. The notion that the blacks had lesser feelings and are intended for white exploitation led to the risk of ostracism and violence of enslaved under white supremacy.

She stays on the island, for a long time and she reveals and tales the racial prejudice that lies behind her mask of liberalism. Emily's initial discomfort on the island is due to her direct awareness of the injustices of plantation life. Her first dinner in the Great House shows that she is aware that the luxury of the feast laid before her is a direct result of the slave labor of the estate. She reacts defensively at her dinner table to the envious glances of the house servants, and complains that the surplus of the table flouts the rules of taste and domestic propriety.

"The story of sugar was not all sweetness. Sugar and slavery developed hand in hand in the English islands" (Dunn 189). There is no possibility to discuss about sugar plantation in West Indies without revealing about slavery. The sweetness of the sugar carries the blood, sweat and

tears of the slaves who toiled in the fields and the boiling houses supplying huge amount of labor that the sugar required. They were tormented and underwent harsh conditions of being burned and strangled just to terrorize them into obedience. They were put into work in appalling condition. They were often treated harshly as their masters tried to get the maximum work out of them. The whites had a mentality that they can abuse to slaves and treat them aggressively. White people felt that it was right to keep them as slaves and they were worth nothing more. They were treated as pigs. Life was not fair for the black people. White people had the right to do anything to the blacks.

The slave women were subordinate not only because of race but they also shared the trials of the oppression of female gender. The black woman remained innocent victims of male brutality and lust. They viewed African female as manipulating temptress. Enslaved women were often forced into prostitution than breeding.

Cambridge testimony provides relief from the ruthless narrowness of Emily's vision about blacks. He describes his capture and passage to England where he received an education and became a Christian, lobbying against slavery until he was betrayed into re-enslavement in the West Indies. Cambridge life is spoiled by institution of slavery. The decline of Cambridge is more steep and shocking. He is forced to live in extreme poverty and to lead life of beast. He is abused, tormented and victimized from all sides especially by Mr. Brown. This institution of slavery though unlawful in Britain is still practiced in West Indies. The novel explored the psychological nature of the society which upheld slavery and moral contradictions

During her stay at the plantation, Emily finds herself drawn to the mysterious Mr. Brown in spite of his obvious lower class status and the forbidden nature of any relationship with him. The drama of this relationship, which ends with Emily impregnated outside of wedlock. Cambridge the black African slave embodies the qualities of goodness, virtue, civility while the white Mr. Brown is evil, violent and irrational is a simple example of the assumption the white people have made.

Throughout the novel, be it a men or women, the white skinned people always stood for their racial stereotypes and prejudices. They never intend to deviate from their presumption and control over the blacks at any case. This has been evident from Emily, white woman censoring the violence of white male desire for the black women and erasing the traces of master slave violence though she pretends to be against slavery in outset. White male sexual violence is unspoken by Emily is articulated by in the rape of Christiana, wife of his slave Cambridge by Mr. Brown, plantation manager.

Negative depictions are believed to have come out very wide as a result of slavery. In their perspective, the blacks are always barbarians, emotionless who don't have love, heartless who never try to understand others, arrogant who behave wild, uncivilized who are uneducated and naïve, rogue who never respect others, violent who can do anything, always subservient to whites. Black men are portrayed as uneducated, pimps, criminals and abusers and black women are agreed as weak, prostitutes, dependent upon the black male, housewives and pregnant. Traditionally, black males have been stereo typed as men who do not achieve.

This shows that it is difficult to change stereotypes once they are imprinted in society's mind, even if they are proven to be wrong. The country having power and privilege gets tempted with the vision of wealth, luxury, pleasure uses the weaker country as a tool and instrument to make that vision realized.

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