

**An Interpretation on the Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Caryl Phillips' novel
*The Final Passage*****Author**

Lidiya. I
PhD Research Scholar
Department of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Trichy – 620002, Tamil Nadu, India.
Mobile: 9994811545
Email: aelydiagreat@gmail.com

Co-author

Dr. V. Francis
Assistant Professor
Research Department of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Trichy – 620002, Tamil Nadu, India.
Mobile: 9842404613
Email: joel.inian@gmail.com

Abstract

Caryl Phillips is a prodigious writer, whose writings reflect the cultural dynamics and its ramifications in a colonized context. He attempts to unravel the diasporic experiences of the black people in Africa, Caribbean islands and England. The author through his novel *The Final Passage* articulates the life experiences of a young girl, who was tossed up in a world of conflict of cultural infliction. The article attempts to narrate and offer exegesis on the bane that the young girl Leila encounters in Caribbean and England context. It exposes the myopic nature of the dominant white community and her own black family background. It offers a soulful rendition to the predicaments she faces due to ambivalent identity, racial disparity.

Keywords: Hybridity, Cultural conflict, Slavery, Racism, Displacement and Black British writing.

“England has changed. These days it's difficult to tell who's from around here and who is not. Who belongs and who is a stranger” (*A Distant shore*, p. 3).

In the literary scholarship of modern times, the study on ‘Culture’ has occupied the centre space. As the world at large is at the cross roads of divergent culture, lot of studies have been undertaken on ‘cultural study’ by phenomenal writers. Caryl Phillips as a prominent writer too undertakes such task to enumerate and explain the dynamics of culture and conflicts that a person encounters in a multicultural context. Before launching into the nuances and intricacies of cultural conflict, it is indispensable to define what culture is.

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary ‘Culture’ refers to the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of racial, religious, or social groups. In the words of Kim Ann Zimmermann, the word “culture” derives from a French term, which in turn

derives from the Latin word “colere,” which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture”(Zimmermann, p. 1). It is indeed true that despite being born in a particular culture an individual cannot live exclusively relying on one’s own culture without the influence of other cultures. All the more, it has become a common phenomenon that as the world is at the cross roads of multicultural context, the persuasion and impact of other cultures on an individual do play a pivotal role. Hence, obviously when a person encounters the principles and ideals of a different culture, a cross-cultural interaction takes place. On the process of such encounters, the cross cultural conflicts do occur. While elucidating the cultural conflict, Jonathan H. Turner in his book entitled *Sociology* states that a conflict is generally caused by “differences in cultural values and beliefs that place people at odds with one another” (Turner, p. 87)

Caryl Phillips as a postcolonial writer from Britain did encounter such dilemma of identity. Being born in West Indies and having undergone education in England, he did face such conflicting situation of cultural differences. Due to his mixed or hybrid identity, Caryl Phillips was thrown into an embarrassing situation, where neither he was able to identify himself with English nor with the West Indies nativity. Having been left in such a precarious situation, his sense of belonging was matter of controversy for himself and he felt perplexed. While referring to the interview of Caryl Phillips entitled “ I am What I am,” Rezzan Kocaoner Silku in his article “ Postcolonial routes and diasporic identities: Belonging and Displacement in Caryl Phillips *The Final Passage* and *A Distant Shore*” states that

As a writer of Caribbean origin with “a combination of different historical ancestries” and genealogies like African, European, Indian, and Jewish, however, Phillips, has at least a dual sense of belonging (“I am What I am” 4). As he himself says, “where [he] feels at home and where [he] speaks of as home [... is both] in England [... and] St. Kitts [a Caribbean island] too” (“I am What I am” 7). (Silku, p. 164)

As a black British writer, he delves into multiple themes based on the life experiences of the blacks in general and of the blacks of the Caribbean in particular. His writings are not mere fiction but the reflection of his personal experiences as a black man. His writings have won many meritorious awards and he is complemented for exposing the ordeals of the blacks. He possesses within himself a multifaceted dimension of being a

novelist, dramatist and screenplay writer. The hallmark of his writing is portraying the predicaments of the voiceless especially the black men and women. It also articulates the dimension of migration, displacement, cultural conflict and nostalgic experience that the blacks undergo.

Black British writers have additional responsibility of sensitizing the black who just arrived there as they have post imperial attitude within them. In which most black think that Englishness cannot be attained, and writers like Caryl Phillips redefine Englishness through art and writing. By which they claim their prop in British and European history. Thus Caryl Phillips in his book entitled *A New World Order* articulates the new vision of world in which we are living today as “An age in which migrations across boundaries are an increasingly familiar part of our individual lives as national borders collapse and are redrawn” (Phillips, p. 132).

The Final Passage (1985) was Caryl Phillips’ debut novel and it evolves around the story of protagonist Leila, who was a young woman and the daughter of an English man and black woman from Caribbean island. She migrates from the Caribbean island to London with her husband and her new born son in pursuit of better prospects. However, her efforts did not bear fruit that she had hoped for, but only dissatisfaction and conflict in London. It elucidates the pangs of pain, the crisis of an identity, the rejection and the anguish and longing that the protagonist undergoes.

The conflict that the protagonist along with her family undergoes is almost similar to the one that Homi Bhabha talks about especially with special reference as ‘in-between’ spaces’ in that they “are produced in the articulation of cultural differences”, which, Bhabha argues, “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [...] that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, p. 1–2).

The novelist offers a picturesque presentation of the dilemma of encountering multicultural factors and the struggle that a person undertakes to get absorbed into a dominant culture, and how resistance can bring disaster in a person life. The author while narrating the consequences of the transatlantic slave trade does not fail to record, the pathetic plight of the Africans who were exported into slavery to Caribbean Islands.

The blacks in the Caribbean Island encounter rich cultural diversity, which emboldens themselves and paves way for them to adapt and celebrate multiple cultural practices. However, one needs to be aware that while imbibing a new culture one may have to lose one's own indigenous cultural elements. Stuart Hall speaks in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" He views "'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common"(Hall, p. 223).

The author explicates the agony of the protagonist Leila, who celebrates the cultural diversity of belonging to a white father and a black mother and carries within herself a deep hurt for having lost the homogenous culture. She experiences in herself a rejection from the community for having been born as a white girl in black society. The ambiguity of her unknown father brings nightmare to her often. The fact of her birth outside wedlock was something horrible for Leila. Not having known the identity of her father and the unwilling attitude of her mother to disclose her father's identity further pierce her heart. The aversion and the non-acceptance that Leila experiences among the blacks alienate her from her own. The dichotomy of being a 'white girl' and having a black origin complicates her existence further.

Leila recalls the haunting experience of being called as a "Mulatto girl" (*Final Passage*, p. 65) by her companions at school. "The term 'mulatto' originates from the Spanish word for 'young mule' and it refers to the progeny of a European and a Negro" (Ashcroft, p. 147). Leila's identity of 'Mulatto' indicates the half white / European and half black / Caribbean identity which are dormant in her unconsciously.

Leila recalls of the cynical remarks made by her classmates and how she ran away from their sight to avoid shame. The bullying of her peer group caused psychological pain to her. The colonization of the British deprived the blacks, of their fundamental rights and erased their unique identity. Stuart Hall while investigating an individual's cultural identity defines cultural identity as:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.... The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subject-ed in

the dominant regimes of representations were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization...They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'other'. (Hall, p. 220)

The invasion of the European colonial power has drastically brought about changes in the cultural identity of the Caribbean Island and in particular Leila's life. Her yearning to defend her cultural identity amidst the encounter of dominant hegemonic British culture becomes a herculean task. Thus, she becomes victim to heterogeneous cultural identity. Stuart Hall echoes the anguish of Leila and affirms the cultural identity as an ongoing process, "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Hall, p. 225).

Leila longs to identify herself with blacks but her white complexion alienates her from her own people. Michael's grandmother addresses Leila as a "white girl" (*FP*, p. 45). The remark of Michael's grandmother was a proof of humiliation. It further aggravates the ambivalent situation in which the protagonist has been forced to live. She feels ostracized since neither she belongs to the white community nor to the blacks. The outpouring agony of the central character is realistically manifested by the author. It is an indication that every person who is faced with multicultural background invariably has to undergo the constant infliction regularly.

Leila's boyfriend Michael consents to her proposal of getting married. Michael was known for his immoral behaviours and he has fathered an illegitimate child in secret. His marriage with Leila does not begin well and the birth of their new born son Calvin brings burden to them. Leila was disappointed at the callous attitude of her husband. This episode of her sorrow becomes an unceasing as her mother departs from her to Britain without her knowledge.

Leila becomes a classical example for those who have been fettered an account of ambivalent identity. Having felt suffocated due to the familial and cultural conflicts, the protagonist wishes to breathe an air of freedom outside her community. Having decided to leave for a distant destination, she undertakes voyage to Great Britain in order to begin a brand new life. England appears to be the 'final passsage' for Leila, just like the others who board the ship travelling to "a point somewhere the other side of the world" (*FP*, p. 10).

Leila waits eagerly to meet her mother in Britain and find refuge in her. As she boards the ship and moves, her eyes are welled up with tears. She does not wish to disassociate herself from the place of her origin although circumstances force her to embark a journey. Leila wants to forget the painful experiences that she had undergone in the Caribbean Island. She believes that her life in England would be different as she had expected. As the ship moves away she gazes her attention on the breadfruit trees. Which signify the African identity, and the past slavery system that subjugated her ancestors. Thus, a move from her root is a mark of separation for Leila.

The reader can notice that Leila's story in *The Final Passage* can be traced back from the historical background offered by the arrival of the Empire Windrush in June 1948 "with 500 passengers from the Caribbean who had come to take up jobs in Britain. This ship [the *Windrush*] was the first of many ships to transport African-Caribbean migrants to Britain over the next two decades" (Weedon, p. 76).

The desire of meeting her mother in England gives hope to Leila but her hope turns out to be a despair as she witnesses her mother was bedridden at the hospital and who eventually succumbs to death. Leila and Michael search for house to stay in England but they become victims of racism in the white dominant country. Thus they are denied of shelter. It is obvious from the fact that when they search for residence the sign boards that hung on the walls of white people's home exhibited the discriminatory remarks of whites – "'No Coloureds', 'No vacancies', No Children" (*FP*, p. 155). The novel ends with the decision of Leila breaking her ties with Michael since he runs behind other women and involve in promiscuous activities.

The author through the protagonist Leila unravels the hypocrisy of Britain which seems to glory in diverse culture and celebrate multiplicity of identities. Yet deny respect for the others. Resonating the same thought pattern R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey state in their introduction to *Black British Writing*, "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" (Arana, p. 1). Thus, Caryl Phillips exposes the contradictions that prevail in the society and narrates the agony of the minority communities in Britain. The author also spells out in crystal clear terms that a colonized person who is forced to live in a multiple cultural and linguistic context would experience an identity crisis and feels ostracized to the periphery of the society. Henceforth he or she

would undergo cultural conflict and ambivalent situation of neither belonging here nor belonging there.

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