

Signposts of Alterity: Cary Phillips's *The Final Passage*.

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Human existence has unfortunately been constructed on the basis of contentious fundamental values that define societies from an externalised perspective. The exclusionist policy is one of the most sustained principles in human evolution. And the 'you' and 'we' syndrome has made human relationship most uncommon and evermore distant. This 'you' and 'we' phenomenon is the basis of historical, cultural, religious and geographical categorisation of humanity. Humanity has gradually progressed towards dominance from decade to decade and from century to century. This phenomenon is fostered by an extrinsic consciousness that makes alienation a social and cultural construct and value.

Alterity is a common but at the same time peculiar phenomenon in human history. It is however based on the idea of the other. Humanity deliberately creates otherness among them in order to maintain their supposedly superiority over the others and maintain the apparently inferiority of others. Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage* holds salient signposts that undoubtedly define the West Indian as the other. Phillips revisits the path that entangled the West Indian life with such magnified subtlety that uncovers the realities of the 1950s. The flustered consciousness of the West Indian personality, dignity and dependence is revealed in a perturbed sense of exile. The British constructed image of the West Indian inferiority is crystallised through the code of rejection, segregation and debasement in the various attempts that the West Indian makes to survive in London.

We shall be making two points in this paper. The first is the British overt manner of making the West Indian to realise or understand that he is the other. British thoughts, words and notices are very categorical and telling. The British or whites had continuously formulated moods to perpetually keep the West Indian under their feet, making him not only to suffer from British rejection but also from a sort of self rejection. But it is not only the British segregationist attitude against the West Indian that Phillips dwells on. Phillips is also concerned with the fragmentation of the West Indian that is occasioned by history – the history of slavery that has built and sustained the idea of alterity. Alterity does not only insinuate the idea of the other and of the apparently incapability of the captured to depend on themselves but also the idea of the nothingness of a people. It is this idea of nothingness that leaves the West Indian at peace-off with himself and with his society. Our second concern is based on the hypnotism of the West Indian by slavery which has fostered the idea of alterity by his internalised idea of himself. Slavery has made him enclosed in himself that he cannot will his own survival but must depend on the metropolitan setup. This has contributed in reinforcing and compelling the sense of otherness towards and from him.

When one reads *The Final Passage* what preoccupies his mind is the marriage relationship between Leila and Michael, a marriage characterised by failure from the beginning to the end and of which she says: “had probably only managed to breathe at all by drawing upon the artificial cylinder of blind hope” (197). Behind this relationship is the debate about going to England. But why is going to England such a big fuss among the West Indians? To this, a West Indian would explain with ignorance: “but we all the same flag, the same empire” (142). The British imperial agenda had included extending the British empire around the globe. With the end of colonialism her West Indian colonies had been left with the impression that they were British citizens. But they were to be proven wrong in many cases in their experiences in London. The hegemonious differences set against him draw the boundary and the idea of “the same flag” and “the same empire” becomes only a farce and a dream.

The position or the inferiority of the West Indian is well defined in the streets of London. He quickly understands that he is the other if not from the way people look at him or from what they say, then from the notices in the streets about him. Such notices are very derogatory and remind him always that he is the other and an inferior being. The Leilas come across such notices as “IF YOU WANT A NIGGER NEIGHBOUR VOTE LABOUR” (122), and “No vacancies for coloureds”. ‘No blacks’. ‘No coloureds’”. (156). Phillips mentions this so casually as if its palpability is indisputable and proceeds with his narration. The casual manner in which he mentions this relates the resignation of West Indians to their subjection, though the issue of the Nigger is a haunting reality to the black or coloured. As they come across another sign, Phillips tells us “nobody said anything and they walked on” (155). Their silence means everything; they understand the barriers that have been placed against them and they have learnt to live with them. In other words their reaction to the notices shows a people who understand the feeling of the other towards them. In another situation Earl would not hold it to himself but simply expresses his feelings by saying “well, some people just don’t like us and I guess we have to deal with it” (165). Though the West Indians resign to the white hatred against them, the consciousness triggers a reciprocal reaction and there is distrust on both sides. When Leila decides to have fun with white people at the beach by experiencing how it looks like lying with them, her mother gets her beaten and tells her: “Don’t’ never let me catch you lying down with white people again or as God’s my witness I’ll take a stick to you and beat you till the life leaves your body... You think you can trust them? You can’t “(129). Each thus creates a world for the other and subjects them to it. The whites’ complex over the Blacks orientates the Blacks’ stand over the White and this phenomenon between them introduces the racist dimension in the situation of alterity. Each of the societies succeeds in constructing a world for the other.

Inasmuch as the idea of designating humanity by colour may be for the differentiation of complexion or skin, the idea of blackness or coloured goes

beyond this perspective. It has excited a myriad of apparently irreconcilable manoeuvres to victimize the unfortunate and conquered race. It goes with every negative and derogatory connotation the white could imagine. The Black had been made to understand that his colour is a curse. In Phillips's *Cambridge* there is the attempt to give different representations to the black man, to make him see that the problem with him is first of all his colour. Emily who supports the abolitionists still ironically reads the black in different 'shades'. To her "There are many shades of black, some of which signify a greater acceptability than other. The lighter the shade of black, the nearer to salvation and acceptability was the negro" (25). In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz knows that Africa is a continent of darkness and he considers Africans as savages. The idea of bringing light to the black race in the 18th century in the name of Christianity was one of the tools employed to justify colonialism. The attributes of backwardness, primitivity, evil, destruction and darkness had been long standing references to the black man, a man fit only to be a slave. But the guilt and immorality of such representation did leave the British craving for justification especially for colonialism. Edward Ako and Blossom N Fondo note that the British presented colonialism as:

... a progressive scientific, commercial, or religious endeavour (thus labouring for the good of mankind), picturing African lands and peoples as dangerous (thus providing a proper field for English heroics), or conversely by picturing African lands and people as statically underdeveloped (and thus needing enlightened development). (3)

The battle for the recognition of black humanity may claim to be won and they may identify themselves as people of the same empire with the British, but to what extent when hegemony is still a dividing force! The issue of alterity in the West Indies is therefore not very peculiar in the region. In the Americas the practice of alterity contributed greatly in dehumanising the black man. It is this practice that led to the rise of Civil Rights Movements that fought for equal rights in the United States. The dilemma of blacks in the diaspora is a continuation of the derogatory and subjected context in which they had been placed for decades. They might just have crossed the first stage which only recognises their humanity but still holds the deep rooted segregationist and racist policy that places them undoubtedly as the other. The coloured or black had been defined by where he lives, by signs on streets, by names and by the type of job offered to him. In *The Final Passage* Michael's first job in London probably completes the number of coloureds needed in the sector that employs him and so the boss, Mr. Jeffries, tells his fellow white man to "put up the COLOURED QUATA FULL sign now" (167). But what is clear is that the job demands not a particular expertise that can only be done by a coloured, it is the inferiority of it. This is very significant in the whole idea of the other. It is a sensibility that has been implanted in the consciousness of the coloured man. Edwin cautions Michael about the position of the black man as he arrives in London. He emphasises to him the

sense of black man's inferiority in the presence of whites. He makes him understand that "all you need to remember is they treat us worse than their dogs" (168). He wants Michael to understand the bitter reality they go through as they work in London and as he, Michael, works with his boss in particular. Edwin thus tells Michael his impressions about Mr. Jeffries.

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. (168).

Such consciousness is what the West Indian has been made to live with. Edwin and Michael epitomize a people trapped in a system. They are like a sponge whose only importance is the water in it that has to be squeezed. They are no good if they are not serving the white man. They are there to ease life for the white man by doing what the white man would not bring himself low to do. Michael's grandfather reminds him long before he leaves for London that there certain jobs inferior that the white man will not bring himself low to do and that is what the coloured would do.

Next time you see a piece of sugar cane ask yourself when the last time you did see a white man cutting or weeding in the field. I want you to think hard when the last time you did see a white man doing any kind of coloured man work and I want you to remember good. (40)

In the face of all these, what is debasing, frustrating, and traumatizing is the West Indian hypnotism that makes alterity a continuous process. He has been so completely hypnotised that he despises his own capability and thinks his survival rests only in going out of his society. The larger belief is that England is a better place and that is why the move there is massive, and considered an achievement. But the mere desire and excitement to move to England is catastrophic to the West Indian. It revitalizes the white man's superiority complex that further downplays on the West Indian humanity. This no doubt is another form of slavery and the difference between the abolished form and what they face in London is only its subtlety. One reason why the West Indian subjects himself to slavery is that they have implanted in them the sense of the nothingness of their own society. Michael's father sarcastically plays over this idea of nothingness. He gives us the impression that if going out is a better option then why do those who go out come back with nothing. And so he puts it to Michael: "Ambition going teach you that you going has to flee from beauty and when you gone to wherever, remember me, boy, Remember me" (42). He makes the point that the West Indians do not see the beauty in their own society and that ambition drives them out of the place. He falls short of telling Michael the truth because to him that may break the boy because he is already too ambitious to leave like others. Like others, Arthur, one of Leila's suitors may agree of the nothingness of the place but he shares Michael's father's opinion that there could be something

in the place or that the place is not completely empty. Though he is equally ambitious in travelling out of the place, he does not dispel the capability of making life in the West Indies. He tells Leila “There’s a future here...A real future”(81). But though Michael’s father and Arthur’s opinion is very significant, it is only casually expressed given that it is only a microcosm of the larger opinion that rests so much in going to England or out of the West Indies. Because of the sense of the ‘nothingness’ of their own society they are forced to make England their dream and thus face the segregationist and racist attitude fixed against them. It is in the light of this massive movement to London that a British clerk in Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* becomes contemptuous to a Jamaican in London: “You people think the streets of London are paved with gold?” (24). The West Indian remains, sometimes, sarcastically convinced about the positivism of England as a fellow West Indian advises Michael as he plans to leave for England:

But I don’t care what anyone tell you, going to England be good for it going raise your mind. For a West Indian boy like you just being there is an education, for you going see what England do for sheself and what she did do for you and me here and everyone else on this island and all the other islands. It’s a college for the West Indian. (101)

This may sound cynical but it expresses one of the wisest thoughts about the West Indian consciousness of alterity. The West Indian would not know who he is until he goes to England. Being in England gives him a clearer vision of his relationship with the British and reawakens in him the traumatic search of home. His presence in England dispels two principal ideas, first that the West Indian and the British do not make up “the same flag” and the same empire”, and second, that England is no home for the West Indian. Going to England therefore enables him to discover who he is and where he belongs, though his sense of belonging would neither be clearly defined in London nor in the West Indies. In the words of Caryl Phillips “belonging is a contested state” (Laughlin, 1) especially to the West Indian. The movement to England, “thus, is a quest whose response is discerned in the treatment he receives there. The signal to the West Indian may be summarized in three words: ‘go back home’. This would reaffirm what Leila’s friend, Millie, tells her “... home is where you feel welcome” (115), and what her mother tells her later in London, “Leila, child, London is not my home” (124).

The failure of the West Indian in London to pull ends together bounces back to the thoughts and determination of Leila’s friend and mother. Leila ends her life in London with a backward glance to the island, not so much because Michael abandons her but because she is remotely connected to the society. Before she leaves for London she feels “sorry for those satisfied enough to stay” in what she would otherwise term a deserted place. She begins to read England as a new start and decides to take only a little of her belongings not to be reminded of the island. But hardly does she settle than

her dream paradise becomes a nightmare and she begins to fashion her movement back to the island. She is unequivocally the other and her frustrated end suggests a new beginning that would take its roots in the island. This again comes back to Derek Walcott's Adamic vision in "The Muse of History". That is, giving the West Indies its own name by the West Indians themselves. Leila's suitor, Arthur, whom she denies in favour of Michael, tells her, "the future of these islands, this island, is in our hands right here and now" (80). When Michael's father advises him as he prepares to leave for London he tells him "when you leave, boy, don't be like we. Bring back a piece of the place with you" (42). Michael's failure would be no surprise to the father. He knows if Michael were to come back he would never bring back anything because like all those who had gone before him, no one ever brought back anything to the island but their failure. Michael's father stands out as one character in the text, besides Leila's friend, Millie, who disapproves of the idea of emigration. Millie is even vehement and categorical in her stand against it as she tells Leila:

I love this island with every bone in my body. It's small and poor, and all the rest of the things that you and Michael probably think is wrong with it, but for all of that I still love it. It's my home and home is where you feel a welcome.' (115)

Going to England is a blindfolded achievement for the West Indian. England to them is a place of hope even though they are aware that "leaving the island is like leaving the safety of your family to go live with strangers" (11). England to them is like a world of freedom and arriving there is like coming out of a cage. One of the travellers with Leila upon arrival "knelt and kissed the ground" (143), falling short of articulating the words of Martin Luther King Jr: "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty we are free at last" (Straub 706) as King envisaged the freedom of black Americans in his famous speech "I have a dream". But like Lamming, Selvon, Kincaid, and many other West Indian writers, Phillips shows no successful West Indian in, *The Final Passage* or in exile. Like Leila's marriage that is based on "artificial cylinder of blind hope" all the characters blindly believe in a better life in London. Their only achievement in London is the education they receive that they are the other – they are inferior and different.

What Phillips does in *The Final Passage*, in the words of Patterson is "to remember, to construct, to fill in the past" (120). Constructing and filing in the past would mean extricating the West Indian from his stereotypical consciousness and imbuing him with an ontological commitment that redefines his purpose. It could also be constructing, as Laughlin discerns in his review of Caryl Phillips's essays "... a world in which the migrant's state - dislocated, never quite 'at home', always adjusting to a continuous stream of

unfamiliar cultural values – is the general condition, rather than the uneasy fate of an unusual few” (1).

Phillips’s ignition of alterity is a preponderantly excruciating confluence of the West Indian self and belonging. It reopens the West Indian thought and leaves him very distant from himself. He remains in the enigma of the ‘New World Order’ that does not only set him apart but also categorizes him with subjected references. London becomes a starting point for the West Indian. He has been identified by history and history continues to identify him, because as Phillips says in the epigraph of the novel, quoting from Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / of timeless moments...” (3)

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