Disrupting Forces of Multicultural Social Order: Racism and Xenophobia in Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*

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Abstract

Twenty-first century England has become one of the postcolonial centers of migrations. People from erstwhile colonies migrate to England looking for better prospects in their life. But for these migrants, crossing the boundaries from their familiar spaces to the new geographical and cultural spaces of England becomes hazardous as very often they are categorized into 'us' and 'them'. The power-structures and dominant ideologies of race, ethnicity, and nation in England in effect resist the possibility of attaining and exploring a multicultural existence for the migrants. Generally, such power components are accompanied by a fear of these 'foreign' elements as they are reckoned to threaten the assumed integrity and cohesiveness of society, culture and nation at large. Such negative elements of fear and hostility towards "foreigners" or "outsiders" thwart the designs of a multicultural society while racial distinctions and differences are prioritized. Caryl Phillips, one of the contemporary Black British writers discusses these issues of racism and xenophobia in his seventh novel, *A Distant Shore*. Written at the backdrop of twenty-first century migrations, *A Distant Shore* explores the traumatic existence of refugees and asylum seekers in a racist and xenophobic world of England.

Keywords: Racism, Xenophobia, Multiculturalism, Caryl Phillips, England, *A Distant Shore*, Postcolonial.

1. Introduction

Migration has been one of the significant aspects of humanity since the early days of history. Almost every country on the globe has been affected and continues to be affected by it. Today no nation can be categorically designated as a point of origin, transit and destination as almost all the nations in the world have been instrumental in creating migrations and receiving them. But as for the migrant, crossing the boundaries from a familiar space to a strange one renders anxieties and worries. The sense of estrangement is intensified when they are reckoned as "strangers", "foreigners" or "outsiders" in the host countries even after many years of life there. When analyzed, such feelings of suspicion and inhospitality that are directed against them arise from negative attitudes cultivated around national, ethnic and racial exclusivism. In the contemporary times such sentiments against the migrants are on alarming escalation in Europe as well as in almost all the migrating countries. Though migrations are made on varied reasons, historically they have strengthened economic developments as well as enriched the

cultures. Not only have the migrations enriched the nations, but they also have transformed their social, political and cultural landscapes into essentially heterogeneous and multicultural. But today nations forge new discourses and policies to keep the "foreign elements" out of these multicultural societies due to an increasing fear and skepticism of these groups. The present study examines Caryl Phillips's (1958) *A Distant Shore* that tells the tale of migrants in a multicultural England against the backdrop of persistent feelings of xenophobia and racial exclusion.

Caryl Phillips born in St. Kitts, one of the Caribbean islands was transported to Leeds in England by his parents when he was twelve weeks old. Having grown up in a society that excludes people on the basis of their colour and ethnicity, he has experienced excessive trauma of racial exclusion and ethnic prejudice. While postcolonial displacement has been one of the central features of his people, he himself has experienced the same ever since his transportation from Caribbean. After having lived in Britain for many years, Phillips wrote in *The European Tribe,* "I still felt like a transplanted tree that had failed to take root in foreign soil."[1] At present, unable to fix his loyalties to any permanent "home," he lives in America, England and Caribbean, characteristically partaking Paul Gilroy's (1993) concept of "Black Atlantic" which is "one single, complex unit of analysis" producing "an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective".[2] Teaching at the Yale University in America presently, he travels and writes as well fulfilling his role as a devoted explorer of the history that has been undermined and distorted by the dominant discourses. As a versatile genius, Phillips has authored a number of fictional and non-fictional works. He has written ten novels, a few short stories, screenplays for television and film, travelogues and essays. *A Distant Shore* occupies a significant place as his seventh novel and the 2004 Commonwealth Prize Winner. It also found its place being one of the finalists for PEN/Faulkner Award and National Book Critics Circle Award.

A Distant Shore is situated in the contemporary England. Gabriel, an African who escapes his civil war-torn country comes to England where he experiences dreadful attacks of xenophobia and racism. A few days after his arrival, he is accused of molesting a girl and is imprisoned. There he meets Said, an Iraqi who also has been accused of a theft and who suffers an animal-like death in the jail. Later on, having been acquitted and changing his name to Solomon for safety reasons, Gabriel travels to north and makes a brief friendship with Dorothy an English woman. Both Dorothy and Solomon reside as neighbours in Stoneleigh, a brand new development on the outskirts of Weston, a village in northern England. Solomon is detested by the community of whites for the reasons of his racial difference, and meets his tragic end due to racial prejudice when he is brutally murdered by young English hooligans. Apart from African Solomon, there are other migrants like Said an Iraqi, Mahmood an Indian, Bright an African and as many as other blacks in England. Their lives in England explicate the predicaments of being migrants as they are caught up in a racist and xenophobic world of England. Essentially, the novel astutely draws the twenty-first century migrations and the subsequent struggles of the refugee and asylum seekers in a racist and xenophobic world.

2. Migration and Multiculturalism

While describing various types of "world landscapes" Appadurai (1996) mentions about *ethnoscape* which is "the landscape of people who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree."[3] Appadurai does not deny possibilities for any relative stable communities or networks of kinships and friendships, but rather he invites the attention to the movement that people make or wanting to make by giving a twist to these stabilities. However, Europe's history of colonization and its imperialist ventures in the past have been some of the instrumental factors in destabilizing such kinships and

communities and creating its own geographical spaces the sites for rapidly increasing number of migrants and their long lasting presence. Various reasons have been discovered for the migrations of humankind. Avtar Brah (1996) observes, "Economic inequalities within and between regions, expanding mobility of capital, people's desire to pursue opportunities that might improve their life chances, political strife, wars, and famine are some of the factors that remain at the heart of the impetus behind these migrations." [4] But Gayatri C. Spivak (1997) in her essay, "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World", distinguishes two modes of historical dispersions of the humanity viz., the new diaspora and the old diaspora. The new diaspora or present model of migrations have been occurring due to the Eurocentric movement, labor export, border-crossings and seeking of political asylum. And the old diaspora model emerged as a result of slavery and indenturing, trade and conquest, and intra-European economic migrations. [5] However, these migrations have been viewed as a phenomenon that has generated a lifestyle infused with mobility, criss-crossing of the national borders and initiating new cultural reproductions. In effect, these migrations and cross-border movements have changed the concepts of nations, cultures, races and national belongingness while dismantling "homogenous" and "stable" concepts about them.

Postcolonial migrations also initiate multiple relationships and interactions between people or institutions in the new locations. They also productively alter the cultural atmosphere of these nations into multicultural hubs wherein diverse cultures coexist and participate concomitantly. With the transnational dispersions and diffusions, the essentialist and absolute assertions on the concepts of culture and identity are challenged and paused problematic. Originally, the anthropological concept of culture referred to the way of life of a bounded social group in a fixed and clearly defined geographical location or territory[6]. But today the foundations of this cultural homogeneity and stability are destabilized by multicultural and intercultural patterns. The centrality of the migratory pattern indicates a type of life style across national borders while bringing two dissimilar cultures into the formation of "hybrid cultures" as Gilroy (1993)[7], Bhabha(1998)[8] and Hall(1990)[9] conceive of it. Accordingly, multiculturalism signifies "the co-existence of multiple cultures"[10] and a multicultural state is composed of several ethnic groups, none of which is officially recognized as dominant. Instead, all are ideologically considered equal.[11] In fact, it consists of a challenge against the hegemonic moves of ethnocentric societies. Caryl Phillips observes that "A truly multicultural society is one which is composed of multicultural individuals; people who are able to synthesise different worlds in one body and live comfortably with these different worlds."[12] Central here is the idea that an all embracing attitude of forbearance and tolerance which accommodates and appreciates the essential differences of various cultures is a requisite and essential component of human existence today. The present study is concerned with the difficulties and the challenges that the present day migrant faces in countries like England. Essentially, in the present study, England is viewed as one of the postcolonial centers of migrations due to its role in displacing people through colonial ventures and operations. People from erstwhile colonies migrate to England looking for better prospects in their life. If the migrations of various kinds have modified the British social, cultural and political scenario, they also invite one's attention to the long-term presence of these groups and their diverse cultures within these territories. By such co-existence, it challenges the national, racial and ethnic absolutism and essentialism that England has been assuming to hold for a long time. However, while it acknowledges the presence of diverse racial and cultural groups within its geographical territory, it also is required to recognize the liberty of all members to maintain, develop and share their cultural heritage. It is a method by which a "new world order" emerges, where everybody participates without inhibition, as envisaged by Phillips. [13]

3. Instruments of Exclusion: Racism and Xenophobia

David Sibley (1995) argues that the human landscape can be read as a landscape of exclusion because power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker

groups in society to less desirable environments.[14] Historically, though migrations to England have strengthened economic development and nation-building, its power structures have tried to exclude and construct marginal spaces for the outsiders. These migrants have been looked upon with contempt and disgust significantly for the reason that they are not of the assumed ethnic, racial and national ring of England. In *The European Tribe*, Caryl Phillips observes: "Europe is blinded by her past, and does not understand the high price of her churches, art galleries, and architecture. My presence in Europe is part of that price."[15] The contributions of these migrant groups in England have been immense that the present-day England cannot ignore the existence of them in its social, cultural and political spaces. But today England evinces symptoms of ingratitude by turning its back to its contributors.

Racism, xenophobia and other discriminatory practices are present at the heart of multicultural England today as intimidating forces. Racism constructs a boundary between those who can and those who cannot belong to a particular group. Attempts to pin down the concept of racism to some kind of definiteness escape its boundaries due to a transhistorical and unsteady nature of its meanings. The concept of racism has been seen as moving from a phenotypical construction of earlier understanding to one of cultural production of the minority groups. However, according to Todorov, racism in its traditional sense "designates two very different things. On the one hand, it is a matter of behavior, usually a manifestation of hatred or contempt for individuals who have well-defined physical characteristics different from our own; on the other hand, it is a matter of ideology, a doctrine concerning human races."[16] In any case, the concept of racism and its practices construct a hierarchy of social organization that lends privilege to hegemonic views; it postulates a system of both inclusion and exclusion of individuals by categorizing them into those who can belong and those who cannot.

While racism can be the name for that aspect by which persons belonging to another group are categorized and marginalized due to the presumed racial inferiority, xenophobia and the resultant hatred and dislike originate from the fear of "foreigners" as they are considered to threaten the cultural integrity and homogeneity of the society. Etymologically xenophobia means "fear of the stranger" and it is derived from the Greek—'xenos' meaning stranger or foreigner and 'phobos' meaning fear.[17] Therefore, xenophobia is literally a fear of foreigners and outsiders and xenophobes are considered to be those people who hold negative attitudes to those "out-groups". Jonathan Crush and Sujata Ramachandran (2009) quote a rather comprehensive definition of xenophobia in their work as "attitudes, prejudices, and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity." [18] In England, xenophobic violence and atrocities have been increasing concern of the minority groups as they stand vulnerable to targets of political, social and economic dissatisfactions. Very often, the intensity of experience of xenophobia and its reactionary measures are closely related to the cultural, racial and ethnic background of the migrant group. The racial ranting of Enoch Powell in 1968 is indicative of a symptom of paranoia existing in England. In his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, he remarked about the black's immigration to Britain as follows: "It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre"[19]. Such views have often reduced the immigrants to the edges of society making their condition deplorable.

4. *A Distant Shore*: Receding Multiculturalism in England

"England has changed. These days it's difficult to tell who's from around here and who's not. Who belongs and who's a stranger."[20] The observation at the beginning of the novel *A Distant Shore* that England has changed and the resultant uncertainty surrounding the distinction between the stranger and resident implies the contemporary atmosphere of England as a multicultural. The arrival of these migrants to England focuses the attention upon the heterogeneous, diverse and polycultural character to which it has transformed their colonial

involvement around the world. According to Gilroy (2005), Europe cannot deny at least the logic behind the presence of immigrants in these locations today. "The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable."[21] But to the much disappointment of the immigrants the acclaimed heterogeneous and polycultural character of England seem to be vanished by the way the unsympathetic and hostile subjection of these individuals from erstwhile colonies are treated. Paul Gilroy argues, "Today, any open stance toward otherness appears old-fashioned, new-agey, and quaintly ethnocentric. We have been made acutely aware the limitations placed upon the twentieth century's cosmopolitan hopes by the inability to conceptualize multicultural and postcolonial relations as anything other than risk and jeopardy."[22] Gilroy's is an anxiety and concern of an age that finds itself caught in the exclusionary practices and ethnocentric structures of Europe.

Many of the characters in the novel who crisscross the landscape of England expect to make England their "home". Bright who travels along with Gabriel to England declares: "I am an Englishman. Only the white man respects us, for we do not respect ourselves. If you cut my heart open you will find it stamped with the word 'England'. I speak the language, therefore I am going to England to claim my house and my stipend."[23] For, Said and Mahmood, England stands as an epitome of freedom and culture. Said, an English teacher in his country leaves it and travels "in a small space under a truck….like an animal, but worse than animal"[24] to the multicultural space of England believing that "in England freedom is everything. They can change the law, but you cannot change the culture."[25] But amidst the spread of "Islamophobia," strangely he anticipates the freedom in England. He says, "Everybody wants to keep out the Muslims, but in England freedom is everything."[26] He enters to England simultaneously with fear and hope. He is not without being aware of the hostility directed against Muslims across the globe. In fact, what he fears is becoming a victim of "Islamophobia," a generalized fear of Islam and Muslims.[27] However, his situation remains doubly underprivileged as it is traumatized by a suspicion and skepticism directed against the Muslims in general and as a person suffering the consequences of colonial occupation of Iraq by America. "I have lost everything. My family, I have left my family behind. Despite my education I cannot feed my family. I am no longer a teacher. I am here to begin my life again and I have the appetite to do this." [28] But as Said enters England he falls under the suspicion of being a thief. When the couple who entrusts him with the bag returns from the restaurant after a while and frantically shouts that their money in the bag has been stolen, Said falls under suspicion and is handed over to the police custody. Ironically, in the place where he sought freedom, he is imprisoned even without having involved in any kind of criminal activity. "But why would I come all the way from my country to make a new life here and then take their money?"[29] In the prison he suffers both physically and psychologically as a foreigner. Eventually, not receiving a treatment for the ailments that he suffers, in the prison he dies. Though Said does not become a victim of Islamophobia in Europe or England, his predicament becomes clear as he is a foreigner. As a foreigner he is easily vulnerable to such suspicions and allegations. The prevalence of "institutionalized racism" in England is apparent in Said's case and his death proves intolerance, suspicion and discriminatory practices against the "outsider" or "foreigner" in the public and legal domains of England. Though Gabriel as the cellmate seeks the warder's help for Said, the man was not interested in leaving his television and coming to him in the beginning. But he comes when he realizes that Said dies. Leaving "his precious television set" he comes to Gabriel and says, "I'll call the doctor, but they do everything in their own sweet time."[30] For Said, it is too late to realize the hard realities in England. His anxiety is evident in what he asks. "But have you noticed? The light in England is very weak. It depresses me. They have taken the sun out of the sky."[31] Later on, after his death, the body of Said is left in the cell with Gabriel. Said's sad death in the cell is a case of sheer lack of concern for the human life. The optimism that Said expresses at the beginning that one can grab freedom in England remains paradoxical through his animal-like death in the cell.

Another immigrant in England is Mahmood, who in escaping from his Panjabi village imagines that "there would be no problem finding a well-paid job of some description in Mrs. Thatcher's country." [32] Having encountered conflicts with his marital life at the age of twelve with a fourteen years old girl in his village, he escapes to England realizing that "it would be impossible to jettison this woman and keep his honour intact."[33] In England, he hopes to earn some money and join the university to study law or medicine and finally return to his village in triumph as the most important man in the region. For some time, he manages 'The Khyber Pass', one of the restaurants of his brother, but soon leaves that job as he encounters racial abuse and offense from the English people. He "could no longer stomach the disrespectful confusion of running a restaurant"[34] under the racist bullying of the English people. He feels insulted at the misbehavior of the white customers in the restaurant.

> The sight of fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath, and bellowing for mini-cabs and food that they were too drunk to see had already arrived on the table in front of them, was causing Mahmood to turn prematurely grey.[35]

Mahmood's story in England illustrates the problem that a foreigner encounters in the normal work places. The disrespect and abuse that are directed to the outsiders reiterate a continuing legacy of stereotypes against the "Orientals" in England. They are reckoned to be objects of playfulness and mischief. Mahmood finally discards his business with the restaurant and moves to another small town and makes a living by running a shop for newspapers. But he is soon to discover that the situation is not any better here:

> I have been thinking that I should take my chance and drive a mini-cab rather than suffer all this newsagent business by myself. In fact, this England is crazy. I go in the streets and after all these years in this country they tell me, 'Your mother fucks dogs.' Why does my mother fuck dogs? They do not know my mother. In my home there is problems. Out on the street there is problems.[36]

Though Mahmood does not experience the physical oppression due to his ethnic belonging like Gabriel, the lack of respect and dignity that the whites pay to an outsider in England remains to be central issue with him.

The long and hazardous journey of Gabriel in *A Distant Shore* to England is intended to start anew his life. "…beyond this nightmare and to a new place and a new beginning." [37] If his life in his African country is mingled with traumatic episodes of disavowal and guilt, in England a break with the past is anticipated. "I was blessed to be in England."[38] Nevertheless, England does not offer a different prospect in his life. Coming to England with Bright he encounters suspicion and skepticism usually directed towards the foreigners especially with the black males in the white world. Initially Gabriel is suspected of raping the white girl who provides food to him in the desolate house and is taken to custody by the authorities. Gabriel is not only suspected of raping the girl, but he is seen through the residual colonial stereotype of the virile and sexually robust African male. While discussing Marvin Gaye in *A New World Order*, Phillips observes, "African-American males remain the only migrant group in the American world whose social standing upon arrival was deeply wedded to their ability to perform sexually."[39] The black male is conceived as an object of racial stereotype in which his power of sexuality is exaggerated. While it contains the white man's exaggeration, ostensibly it also reveals the subconscious fear and envy of the black male-power as it is assumed to be a threatening factor to the manliness of the white males.

> Usually named 'Smoke' or 'Molasses', the characters of these black men generally develop no further than grasping at white men's property and lusting after white

women. White American society placed so much emphasis upon black male sexuality that is created for itself an imaginary nightmare. A fear was engendered in white America's soul that somehow African-Americans were more highly sexed and therefore likely to be both a threat to white females and a source of comparative embarrassment to the white males…. His most potent 'weapon' was neither the gun nor brain, it was to be the penis.[40]

The suspicion that surrounds Gabriel at the beginning is centered on this racial stereotype. The father of the girl and the police are prompt enough to suspect Gabriel of the molestation of the girl, while he remains innocent. As a result of this suspicion on Gabriel, a black man, he is charged of sexual assault on the girl, treated inhumanly and incarcerated. Phillips notes how these stereotypes are usually associated with the black men in the popular theatrical performances.

The "institutionalized racist" practices in England are apparent in the beginning when Gabriel says "[t]he procedure at the police station was swift and disrespectful."[41] Gabriel receives extreme levels of discrimination in the prison. As a stranger or foreigner, he suffers from verbal abuse by both the warders and the man who is locked up in the cell next to his. The racially absorbed man next to his cell shouts at him, "fucking, noisy cannibal"[42] and asks the warden to make Gabriel eat Said's dead body. Later on, when the warden brings in Gabriel's meager amount of food, the same man shouts: "You fucking animal. I don't know why they bother to feed you"[43] and also later, when Gabriel asks the warder for water, the man in the next cell shouts: "Drink your own piss. Isn't that what your lot do in the jungle?" and then he "laughs at his own humour." [44]

Later on, what brings Solomon and Dorothy together is their collective experience of physical and psychological displacement and as such they develop a mutual friendship. Though both weave a short cover of friendship, Dorothy, the white lady entertains thoughts of racist attitudes against Solomon. "…what people would say about me if I were to be seen with a coloured, and particularly one as dark as this Solomon…." [45] More of racist attitudes of the society are clear in what Dorothy contemplates on her father's perspectives. "…coloureds as a challenge to our English identity….For him, being English was more important than being British, and being English meant no coloureds."[46] The strange reactions to xenophobia and racism are evident in placing the razor blades, threatening letters and the dog-mess in the letterbox at the door of Solomon. They are clear illustrations of how England counts the foreigner and the outsider. However, these entire inhuman treatments end up in the sad and brutal murder of Solomon in the hands of a group of young hooligans. According to Carla, the girlfriend of one of bullies, Solomon is kidnapped and driven to a solitary open place. "They just wanted to have some fun, but when they opened the back of the van to let him out…he'd undone the ropes and he started to attack them like a madman."[47] While playfully trying to frighten Solomon, they were shocked to see his uncontrolled reaction. "I could see that they were scared stiff. He kind of went mad." [48] The frightened gang grabs him and finally bricks him until he stops moving. Finally, pushing him down into the canal to give an idea that it was an accident, they escape the scene. Solomon's death at the hands of hooligans explains the position of being both subject and object in the English society. The dehumanizing and disindividualizing social structures of England collapse his diasporic identity, and the cycle of his displacement is complete with his brutal murder. Sarah Lawson Welsh argues,

> …black Britons have long suffered from invisibility on the map of Britishness despite their *presence* in Britain. The growing visibility of their own creative and experiential mappings of nation, of the complex state of (un)belonging in Britain, has been central to the problematizing and unsettling of received versions of Britishness as well as in undermining notions of a fixed, unchanging construction of nation.[49]

In the case of Solomon, visibility and invisibility mutually engage to destruct his life as an immigrant in England. England's pretensions of not seeing the migrant or the asylum seeker

renders him a "homeless" whereas the visibility is paradoxically threatening while it attempts to expel him out of its boundaries.

5. Conclusion

Thus *A Distant Shore* is a stark criticism on the emerging attitude of European intolerance and sense of insularity. The instances of cruel treatment of migrants in England exemplify the manner in which England treats its asylum seekers and refugees. As 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."[50] It is an indication of vanishing multicultural paradigm. The antipathy towards the migrants in general suggests a numbing malaise that the modern society of England has been affected with. Paul Gilroy while observing the imminent demise of a multicultural frame of Europe notes,

> Across Europe parties that express popular opposition to immigration have triumphed at the polls. Xenophobia and nationalism are thriving…. Of course, the briefest look around confirms that the multicultural society has not actually expired. The noisy announcement of its demise is itself a political gesture, an act of wishful thinking. It aimed at abolishing any ambition towards plurality…. In these circumstances, diversity becomes a dangerous feature of society.[51]

What Gilroy implies here is that while Europe attempts to refute the continuing effects of colonialism and imperialism on its contemporary political, social and cultural life, it also desires to suspend a multicultural social order. Under such an alarming move from the part of England and Europe on the issues of accepting and accommodating the twenty-first century migrant or asylum seeker, Caryl Phillips proposes a "new world order" in which everyone partakes and participates equally and tolerantly.

> The New World. A twenty-first century world. A world in which it is impossible to resist the claims of the migrant, the asylum seeker, or the refugee…. The old static order, in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. In this new world nobody will feel fully at home. […] In this new world order of the twenty-first century we are all being dealt an ambiguous hand, one which may eventually help us to accept the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant, the asylum seeker, or the refugee.[52]

Farrier commenting on Phillips observation notes that this "new world order" represents the opening up of formerly closed conversations about power and control that disposes of the old Eurocentric model in favour of a world ordered around movement which is productively in constant flux.[53]

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