

HISTORICAL AND ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CARYL PHILLIPS'S THE ATLANTIC SOUND

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Abstract - Caryl Phillips is a postcolonial English writer of Caribbean descent. His works are seldom analyzed by eco-critical perspective because the main issues of his works are the racial and social injustice against black people in white dominated society. The present paper tries to illustrate his book *The Atlantic Sound* as a transatlantic eco-critical text. Transatlantic eco-criticism engages cultural production from the countries around the Atlantic Ocean. It deals with the study of environment and culture. In *The Atlantic Sound* Phillips traces the history triangular slave trade within the geographic space of the Atlantic Ocean. The book is divided into five sections entitled as "Atlantic Crossing", "Leaving Home", "Homeward Bound", "Home", and "Exodus". Within the course of this travelogue, Phillips traces the routes of the transatlantic slave trade's legacy by traveling Guadeloupe, Liverpool, Accra, Charleston, and Israel. He relates the story of three prominent figures related to the history of African slave trade and civil rights movement. The stories of John Ocansey, Phillip Quaque and Judge Waties Waring can be analyzed as 'eco-criticism of color'. The present paper attempts to analyze the text through historical and eco-critical perspective.

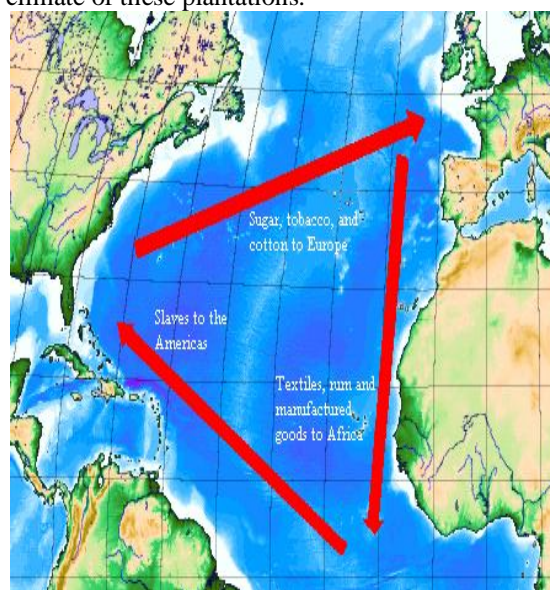
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Phillips's book *The Atlantic Sound* is related to the history of slavery and its impact on the contemporary socio-cultural environment. It is a travel book but it is not only confined to the nonfictional narrative of traveled places. The book is a mixture of geographical portraits and historical events. Phillips decides to visit the three points of triangular trade that linked America, Africa, and Europe. He juxtaposes the stories of past with his own present experiences. The book presents a personal insight into history and culture. The Atlantic Ocean is not only seen as a vast geographical structure that has separated the lands and people around it but is also presented as an entity in which history and culture are entwined. Phillips has primarily focused on the port cities of Liverpool, Elmina, and Charleston. These cities are physically connected with the Atlantic Ocean. Phillips's main concern is to show:

How the Atlantic facilitated the circulation and transformation of bodies, goods, capital, cultures, symbols, identities, and memories around those coastal locations. Phillips's experiences in Liverpool, Elmina, and Charleston reveal a plethora of concrete historical connections between and symbolic echoes among each of these. (Brian 9)

The transatlantic triangular trade was responsible for moving ideas, products, and people around the world. During this trade European empires filled their colonies with African slaves. At the first point of this triangle is Europe. From this point, the European products such as copper, clothes, guns etc. were transported to the African coast. In Africa, these European products were sold in exchange of slaves and these slaves were sailed to the America. Many African slaves died on the middle passage due to starvation and poor living conditions. In America, slaves were sold to work on large plantations. The

money was used to purchase agricultural products such as tobacco and sugar. These products were shipped to Europe completing the triangle. The reason of using African slaves on plantation was that they were strong enough to survive in the tropical climate of these plantations.



Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangular_trade#/media/File:Triangular_trade2.png

An interdisciplinary approach has become the inextricable part for investigation of all studies be it anthropology, philosophy, geography or literature or any other subject. The postcolonial anthropological studies cannot be fully understood without an eco-critical attention. Cartrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer support the study of eco-criticism in a different way. They take it as: "a methodology that re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically

motivated conceptualizations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments.”(10).

The Atlantic Sound presents a physical as well as a psychological journey to the main cities related to the triangular trade. Phillips directly addresses the colonialism and focuses on the history of slavery and black subjectivity. He has tried to narrate the history of slavery and its effects on the lives of the present generation. He recognizes that the history of the slave trade is at the root of identity struggle of blacks. Bennet remarks about it:

Phillips' title, *The Atlantic Sound*, does not explicitly state his project to travel to Africa and the outposts of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora. Rather, it calls forth an atmosphere or a scene, like the gray expanse of open water on the book's cover that evokes the mood of Phillips's enterprise. The open-endedness of the title invites the reader to sound the depths of the Atlantic's history and to listen for the resonance of the past in the present. (Bennett 10)

The sea plays an important role in shaping the text of *The Atlantic Sound*. Knepper calls the book as “embodying a poetic of seascapes” (qtd in Maufort 156). Phillips gives a more precise geographical orientation in his essay “The High Anxiety of Belonging”. When his lawyer asked a question about how his body should be disposed of, Phillips answered that “I wish my ashes to be scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at a point equidistant between Britain, Africa and North America” (Eckstein 63). Benedicte Ledent tries to find the reason behind the will of Caryl Phillips, “The choice of this watery grave is no doubt the expression of his being forever enmeshed in the complexities triggered off by the Middle Passage and the triangular trade. It also marks a development from a feeling of being homeless and existentially “adrift” to a sense of having finally found an anchorage in the ocean, albeit of an ambiguous kind since the sea implies constant movements and fluctuations” (Ledent 199). In an interview with Clingman Phillips also talks about his will:

Then there is a literal question of speaking to my lawyer about a will. Like most people, I felt I had to make a will, and sitting across the desk from my lawyer, my mind returned to the moment when I was on the banana boat – which I relate in the prologue to *The Atlantic Sound*, when I was retracing the journey my parents took when they came with me to Britain. Although that was a hellishly miserable journey, when I was on the ship I did try to calculate that mid point in the ocean. (116)

In order to explore his Atlantic home, Phillips begins his voyage by taking a banana boat from Guadeloupe to Dover. Phillips crossed the Atlantic as a child and now he crosses the Atlantic again as an adult. He

chooses to travel through banana boat repeating a journey he made to England as a child in the late nineteen-fifties. But he is a different kind of traveller if compared to his parents. The prologue of *The Atlantic Sound* is concerned with Phillips travel from Guadeloupe to Dover. It is entitled as ‘Atlantic Crossing’. This section of the book reveals the predicament of a person who is surrounded by sea atmosphere for a long time. Phillips travels through Guadeloupe by car. Guadeloupe is divided into two islands: Basse-Terre and Grand-Terre. Basse-Terre is full of hills and valleys and Grand-Terre is known for its beaches. On his visit to a beach, Phillips finds that “The people of Guadeloupe remain resolutely proud of the intimacy of their connection to Europe and Europeans” (1). Phillips and Gilbert come to the port from where Phillips has to begin his journey by the ship ‘M V Horncap’. It is a banana boat and the next port from where the bananas will be picked is Costa Rica. In the ship, Phillips gets a small cabin which he finds comfortable. In the cabin, there are two windows through which he can see outside scenes. Phillips realizes that he is, “witnessing the strangest of sights: a black sea that reflects moonlight” (7). During the first day on ship Phillips's enthusiasm about the journey vanishes as he discovers, “a day at sea on a freighter ship is a long day” (8). The reason behind the monotony of this journey is that there is nothing for the entertainment of the passengers. There is a tiny pool on the ship but it is not possible to use it due to the pitching of the ship. Phillips is again depressed to hear that the ship will stop in Guatemala to load extra bananas and they will reach Costa Rica later than their planning. He comes to his cabin and here again he finds it difficult to sleep because of constant vibration due to harsh sound of the engine. For Phillips, “It is like sleeping on top of a washing machine that is stuck on the spin cycle” (8).

The life in the cabin of the sea is like a prison life. There is no prospect of land for many days. Night time for Phillips is very difficult as he writes, “Night-time at sea is punishing. There is no room service, no television, and it is not possible to go for a walk or telephone somebody” (16). After two weeks Phillips develops the habit of sleeping during daytime. During the night he goes to fore-castle of the ship. It becomes easy for Phillips as he continues to sleep in the day and wander the ship at night. It provides a peace of mind upon him. On the second day of this secret wandering, Phillips sees a pair of migrating birds. It is the indication that land is not far off. He becomes familiar with sea and begins to like the rhythm of life on the sea. He expresses the strange feeling that arises in his mind on the prospect of leaving the sea, “I want to see land; I want to go home; I definitely want to leave this ‘banana boat’, but I have a feeling that I will miss the sea” (20). Phillips remembers his first journey through the Atlantic when he crossed the Atlantic in his mother's arm in 1958. He has asked his mother many times about her feelings while

crossing the Atlantic. Today he has got the answer as he notices a school of porpoises, "As I continue to stare at the porpoises playing in the strong light of dawn, I now know how she and all the other emigrants felt as they crossed the Atlantic; they felt lonely"(20). The ship arrives at the white cliff of Dover. Phillips happily says, "on this bleak late winter's morning, I am happy to be home"(21). Further Phillips travels three main cities basically related to triangular trade: Liverpool, Elmina, and Charleston. Liverpool is a very famous city of Britain and is known for its seaports. It is one of the major cities of Europe, which were involved in slave trade. The first chapter of the book 'Leaving Home' is related to Phillips's journey to Liverpool. Phillips here recalls the history of the place and writes, "The immense wealth of nineteenth-century Liverpool was based, almost entirely, upon the city's deep involvement in the Atlantic Slave Trade" (37). In the nineteenth century, Liverpool became the busiest port in the world. There are many gorgeous docks along the riverside. Sailors from all the corners of the world arrive here. Phillips is not attracted to see the grandeur of the place. He feels sad to see the pathetic condition of Africans. He writes that "Most visitors concluded that while the merchants of Liverpool lived like kings, the poor were encouraged to live like animals among their filth and excrement" (39). The displacement of blacks from Africa and their implantation in the America have left them in a state of rootlessness and alienation. Phillips's Liverpool journey is inspired by the story of a West African trader, John Ocansey, who sailed to Liverpool in 1881. John Ocansey's father William Narh Ocansey was a successful merchant of palm oil whose business was to export palm oil to England. This substance was used in Europe for manufacturing of soap and candles. It was also used as lubricants for machines and railway stock. The demand for palm oil was rapidly increasing in England. To improve his trade William thought of purchasing "a steam launch" but was cheated by a Liverpool merchant. Phillips here reminds us of the history of slave trading companies of Liverpool. Caryl Phillips arrives at Liverpool's Lime Street Station and hires a taxi to reach the hotel. Phillips expects to see black people but he is surprised to see that, "at Lime Street Station there was a distinct absence of black faces" (94). Phillips arrives at the hotel and meets the receptionist. He finds a noticeable melodious quality in the accent of the receptionist that is different from the accent used in the north of England. Phillips recalls the time when the football team of Leeds United played against the Liverpool based club, Everton. Then there was no black player in Liverpool team as he writes: In fact, when the occasional non-white player did have the temerity to run out onto an English football pitch, he would invariably be subjected to a volley of racist baying. Every time he touched the ball the crowd would erupt in anger, and it was extremely

common for bananas to be thrown at the black players. (96)

But now the scenario has been completely changed. When one day Phillips watches a Football match between Liverpool and Everton, he is surprised to see that "not only were there countless non-white faces on display, but the captain of Liverpool was a black man" (97). So Phillips decides to travel the city. He visits the most remarkable buildings of Liverpool such as the Town Hall, St. George Hall, Nelson's Fountain etc. he is surprised to see that, "history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people's consciousness" (117).

During his journey to Africa, Phillips comes to see a Panafest event held at the Cape Coast. Here a Ghanaian poet speaks about the history of blacks. "He speaks of 'people kneeling together in a sea of blood in the eye of the hurricane'. He implores us to 'come home'. He reminds us, 'we have pain, but we hold the world record for survival against the most unreasonable odds". After listening some songs Phillips realizes that "I am Panafested" (185). Phillips comes to the Culture Centre in Cape Coast. An African-American from the New York, Imakhus makes her point during her performance on the stage. "The water that divides us is not as strong as the blood that binds us. We know you're with us, God because no people on the face of the earth have ever gone through this. Give thanks to those who crossed the water during the middle passage and those whose bones are at the bottom of the Atlantic"(219). Imakhus calls a Jamaican poet on the stage. The poet says, "I man cannot bathe in the sea anymore for it be a graveyard for my own flesh and blood" (221-22).

The historical figure described in this section of the book is Phillip Quaque. Caryl Phillips first acquainted with the name of Cape Coast Castle through the letter of Phillips Quaque. He is related to African slave trade as Phillips writes that "This African man resided above the dungeons in which were held thousands of his fellow Africans awaiting transportation to the Americas" (176). He married an English woman Catherine Blunt. The twenty-four-year-old Quaque returned to his homeland "as a missionary to his own people" (177). His wife died after nine month of their arrival due to the tropical climate of the area. Phillips here remembers the history of the place:

Cape Coast Castle had originally been built to facilitate trade in goods in order that a European power might exploit the gold for which the region was famed. However, by the time the British took charge of the fort, black gold—human cargo—was rapidly replacing yellow gold as the principal material of export.(185)

Phillips arrives at Elmina Beach Hotel. He decides to attend the first of Panafest events that are performances at Elmina castle. There they watch an Austrian television crew. A Panafest guide tells them about the history of the place but he "omits to point

out two female dungeons, each of which could accommodate up to one hundred and fifty slaves, or the male dungeons which often held upwards of a thousand slaves" (169).

The third section of *The Atlantic Sound* entitled 'Home' begins with the quotation of Robert Frost. "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in"(223). This section is related to Phillips's travel to Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston was known as Charles Town. It was established by the British in 1670. Due to the development of plantation, the town became the fourth largest town in British North America. The labor used in these plantations was slave labor. "Almost one-third of all the Africans who entered the North American world in captivity passed through the gateway of Charleston, South Carolina"(232).

The historical person described in the American section of the book is Judge Julius Waties Waring. The importance of Judge Waring remains in the fact that he changed the system so that everybody could vote. But after this decision, he was considered as a traitor by the white society. Phillips metaphorically describes him as a lonely wolf, "He was a very lonely man after that decision. A lone wolf. I didn't know anybody in town who agreed with him on anything"(226). Judge's wife Mrs. Elizabeth Waring was also the southern champion of equal rights for Negroes. Caryl Phillips comes to Magnolia Cemetery. The area is populated by black people. Phillips goes to the office to know about Judge Waring. He finds the office closed. While returning he sees a tombstone on which the name Waring is inscribed. He gets out of the car and goes to the place. He realizes that "The Judge and his wife are positioned in Magnolia Cemetery as if to confirm the fact that they were outcasts" (262).

The concluding part of *The Atlantic Sound* is entitled as 'Exodus'. Phillips visits Israel, the site of the African Diaspora. Phillips talks about two thousand African Americans who were made free. They are assembled to celebrate thirty-second anniversary of their departure from the great captivity. Phillips arrives at the Dimona Palace of Culture to watch the evening performance. The singer, Tekiyan sings the

international anthem of the African Diaspora. Phillips concludes "It is futile to walk into the face of history. As futile as trying to keep the dust from one's eyes in the dust" (275)

Blacks in Europe are still denied equal opportunity in the society. Phillips himself feels like a "transplanted tree" in the white dominated society that is not capable of taking its roots in foreign soil. He suffers social alienation as Lydia Lindsey writes about Caryl Phillips in *Journal of Black Studies*:

Phillip's quest to resolve the conundrum of his rootlessness, in being both Black and British, is expressed in the sentiment that Europe offers no green pastures for black people who yearn to become firmly rooted. This is traceable in large measure to the residual effects of European colonialism, particularly insofar as people of color are concerned. (Lindsey 113)

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