Conflicting Notions of Entangled Lives: Questions on Spatial Identity in Transcultural Borderlands

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Abstract
Born in the West Indies, raised in England, and now a veteran of American University teaching, Caryl Phillips started out in the mid-1980s as a second-generation chronicler of West Indian emigrant experience. The novel ‘In the Falling Snow’ is about Keith Gordon, a social worker in his late 40s, a British-born son of black West Indian immigrants, who was mostly raised by his white, working-class stepmother, Brenda, in a Leeds-like northern city. Within the problems of prejudice and racism lies the question of identity. The bigotry experienced by Keith has connection to his age, ethnicity, gender, identity, race, region and it is against this backdrop that the conditions of ethnic segregation deepen and intensifies. The paper also analyses if in London people from different backgrounds find it easier to integrate when ethnically mixed workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods are the rule, not the exception. The paper analyses themes that are coloured by postmodern traits of fragmentation and rootlessness, focusing on the themes of alienation, multiculturalism, belonging and the immigrant experience.

Introduction
Postcolonial critical approach, which has mushroomed into a viable episteme by itself, embodies cross cultural movement absorbing cultural specificities that includes third world cultures. Linda Hutcheon in her book, The Postmodern and the Postcolonial notes that postcolonial is “emblematic of the dynamics of cultural resistance and retention.” (10). Cultures are national while the term cross-cultural corresponds to that which is overlapping the transnational. When cultures interact over long period of time, changes in the traditional pattern will emerge. The British on seeing the ‘primitive and uncivilized ways of the Africans’ tried to change them according to their impression of culture. Historians have noted that the implantation of British standards in societies was undesirable as the native Africans did not share with the same geography, history, traditions, or religions and lead to uprooting of ethnic solidarities in Africa. Fanon reveals the methods of colonialism and how the Third World has to find itself and speaks through their own voice. Fanon further elaborates:

“We know that it is not a homogeneous world; we know too that enslaved peoples are still to be found there, together with some who have achieved a simulacrum of phony independence, others who are still fighting to attain sovereignty and others again who have obtained complete freedom but who live under the constant menace of imperialist aggression.” (Wretched of the Earth 10)

The present world has a number of third or fourth world countries who had suffered naked oppression under imperial forces. They are now emerging bold enough to bring about social, cultural and economic developments despite the colonial history that had pulled it back for long ages. The world at present has numerous divisions that are clutching at their progress, for instance racial prejudices, warring factions, conflicts and despondency owing to migrations or civil wars etc. Such a
situation seems to be unsettling the ideal balance required for a sustainable development and thus is seen pulling them backwards again. The lives become complicated with the establishment of colonies; and like Edward Said says, the non western population was divided into the ‘Us and Them’ binaries. The western world had intellectually divided the world into ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient’. Transculturization could be caused by voluntary migrations, exiles, adventurous voyages or colonial conquests. Yet the ensuing suppression resulted in turmoil as the people strove to get control of their histories and tried to regain their lost identities.

Karl Marx’s theory of alienation describes clearly as the estrangement which is an outcome of having existed in a drastically stratified class in society. Britain has a surplus of diversity through its immigration and innate multiethnic populations that had existed from the time of colonial rule like the African-Caribbean and South Asian ethnic minority population. Their countries of origin are the commonwealth countries or other former colonies. Just like other European countries Britain too faces a large number of immigrant populations which are creating ripples as they belong to people from multiple places of origin, from different socio-economic strata altogether, who arrive as legal immigrants but create numerous complexities in the host country.

Caryl Phillips is a true Diasporic writer as he was born in St. Kitts in the Caribbean and had later migrated to England with his family where he grew up. Later he immigrated to the United States which is aptly a nation state of immigrants. Phillips in each of his novels reconstructs the angst of a multiethnic society specially the individual’s trauma in venturing through acculturation. Caryl Phillip’s In the Falling Snow (2009) analyses a section of British life, spreading over race, class and migrant generations which have so many complications. Keith Gordon is a second generation black male protagonist who can be called a “native son” but without the destructive anger of a displaced native. The novel sets the tone of multiethnic characteristic feature of London. The ethnic and racial hierarchy doesn’t vaporize and conjure up the ideal democratic citizenship. Phillips begins the novel:

“He is walking in one of those leafy suburbs of London where the presence of a man like him still attracts curious half-glances. His jacket and tie encourage a few passersby to relax a little, but he can see that others are actively suppressing the urge to cross the road. It is painfully clear that as far as some people are concerned, he simply doesn’t belong to this part of the city.” (In the Falling Snow 1)

Keith had moved up the social ladder and in his job was doing steps to make the society more egalitarian for the entire British population. Yet despite his degree from university or being in charge of the local Race Equality unit, he was facing assimilation issues not because of his integration but due to racial separatism of others. This novel that was published in 2009 shows the changed state of England. The character of Keith shows the social up gradation that has taken place at the vocational front where there is more black male visibility especially in work related to fund allocation or policy making at the regional or local level. His job entailed a certain amount of authority over the community and he was instrumental in government department policy decisions.

Keith is an atypical second generation immigrant who is distinctly unlike the historical, ill fated male protagonists who grovel around with a colonial hang over and burden of a fractured identity. He had put aside all thoughts of a PhD and had decided on a job in social work. He even had a humorous version of his acceptance of that kind of a job as:

“… he now clearly understood why local authorities up and down the country had started advertising for race relations liaison officers, people who could help explain black anger to white people and white liberal do-gooding to disgruntled black people…” (In the Falling Snow 43)
His work involves Race and Gender issues which keep him occupied. He is aware of the inequalities around him like the “racial violence in Cardiff” or “the cultural insularity of South Wales” (In the Falling Snow 89) etc. His reaction is rather tamed and almost objective. He doesn’t rail about racial or class differences. His approach is that of enculturation where he has adopted the norms of the society he was raised in and he doesn’t go against the accepted norms and values of culture he is surrounded by. He is well aware of the stance a young person must adopt in this multiethnic society of London or Birmingham where he has lived. He is a modern man who works against political and social systems of oppression through his job; at his work place racism, sexism, minority issues were tackled by him with ease.

Keith’s wife Annabelle never says anything but he understands that his wife had to let go of her white upper class security when she married him. The couple seemed to exhibit structural assimilation as they get entrees to practically all that are open to whites. The birth of the son and their strained social or familial situation didn’t improve because Annabelle had lost her family but Keith because of his peculiar raising was unable to provide his family instead. Brenda his white foster mother acts as the agent of behaviour reception assimilation because her love is absolutely devoid of discrimination and lurking doubts of authenticity. She used to take him to a park, sit on a bench, watch children sailing boats on the pond and buy him ice cream. The little boy used to note that people stared at them because “they appeared strange together, but Brenda never seemed to mind…” (In the Falling Snow 170).

Annabelle’s father was a military official who often travelled to remote posts like Ireland, Germany or Gibraltar, leaving the young girl alone with her mother. These times were tough for Annabelle because she unknowingly develops the feel that two committed parents are a must when a child is in the growing up stage. According to Keith his ex-wife is unconsciously replicating with Laurie “the type of the unhealthy dependency that (she) has developed with her mother” (In the Falling Snow 217). Keith cannot understand her anxieties and thinks that she is over reacting. Annabelle on the other hand realizes that Keith doesn’t have a clear picture of Sylvia his birth mother and his elation with Brenda his step mother is not very strong though Brenda was devoted to him. This is the result of his apparent rootlessness and is a byproduct of all that has happened in his life.

Annabelle and Keith had a wonderful courtship and an even more amazing marriage. Keith would always permit Annabelle to go meet her mother and even allowed his son to visit them. He stayed away due to their displeasure. Briars had learnt to accept him later especially after the father dies and when they return Keith is curious as to how Laurie assimilated this peculiar juncture. Annabelle tells him: “He says its full of dry white people and he doesn’t want to come anymore, if that answers your question. He wants to see his grandmother, but not there” (In the Falling Snow 110). Laurie was slowly coming to terms with his native culture who considered his mulatto features as strange yet at the same time he was integrating with his mother’s white upper class background too. The third generation immigrant too faced the same kind of prejudices that his father or grandfather had faced. Thus the racial prejudices of Britain or the colonizer is slowly brought out.

His son Laurie however displays all the stereotypical features of contemporary urban black masculinities, such as gang life, crime or sexual violence. He is third generation migrant who seems to have identity crisis and a sense of displacement. In addition he is the progeny of a black West Indian father and white British mother. His parents love him and want to shield him but his coloured skin is a clear give away. He undergoes the same kind of unpredictability that Caryl Phillips had undergone while growing up in Leeds. Laurie had problems with some boys who bullied him calling him “halfie” (16). Keith felt he should be assertive but Annabelle opined that it was right to walk or even run away when they pelted him with stones. Annabelle is defensive whenever Laurie has issues
at school or outside. She says it’s the fault of the teachers who treat him like “some freak” while Keith instantly understands that Laurie is “one of the few black kids in his class” and hence feeling rejection and suspicious surveillance in all matters. He instead is filled with insecurities mainly because of his racial background. Keith’s father in law, a white man with a military background felt it was shameful for Laurie to back away when confronted by racial attackers; he says, ‘No feather-bedding’ for the grandson as he has to overcome such issues in life.

Earl, Kieth’s biological father was born in West Indies. He had immigrated to England at the age of twenty two. He could never acculturate or adapt to England. He always felt Britain would never be home. After a heart attack when he is bedridden he asks to go home where Earl is rejecting the dominant host culture of England as he feels his culture of origin is more precious than England.

Keith and his son Laurie differ in their approach to life. Laurie is involved with types of people who appear shady and hence this becomes a constant catalyst for fights between Keith and Annabelle. His teacher Mr. Hughes suspects he is in a “gang”. Gang stood for violent black street children who were doing drugs, binge drinking or sporting weapons. Keith does understand this classic stereotyping of black kids and is sure that he can talk Laurie out of it. Annabelle is more agitated because she feels the pressure of Laurie’s peer group and despairs that:

“...I feel as though I might be losing him around the black-white thing... Laurie only seems to want to be with black kids. He’s my son and I don’t want him to start disliking me.” (In the Falling Snow 112)

Keith wants to have a quality time with his son and suggests that they could go for a trip to the Caribbean but the unthinking immediate reaction of Laurie was why they are going to the Caribbean. Keith’s reaction is: “What do you mean ‘why there’? Your grandparents come from there” (120). Laurie is not polite when he replies “whatever.” Keith’s loyalty to his native roots is immediately ignited and he speaks with passion and a sense of belonging when he says, “You’re supposed to know something about where you come from. Or at least be curious. I’m not asking you to go and live there or anything, but at least just take a look. It’s the Caribbean, Laurie. How bad can it be?” (In the Falling Snow 120). Keith admits his desire to go see the real West Indian Island from where his father Earl had migrated. He hopes to bond with his son better while out on the trip to Caribbean. Laurie has other plans to go to Barcelona, Spain which according to Keith has no thrill as it is just around the corner while going all the way across the Atlantic to the Caribbean is far too adventurous and is the real journey.

Keith realizes for the first time that there is ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ at work in not just their lives but in the entire population. Annabelle means well but as Keith knows it’s because she is white and not black that she doesn’t totally comprehend. Keith says: “I know it’s not exactly straightforward for you out there on the streets. Who knows, maybe this is something that you may find easier to talk with me” (In the Falling Snow 157). In an attempt to redeem Laurie, Keith ends up with a cascade of his son’s grievances. He has dislike for the social and cultural practice of discrimination, xenophobia, dealing with disrespect and most of all retaining his mixed identity. Keith can’t tell him what he wants to say – “Laurie, act your age, not your colour” (In the Falling Snow 158). Colour of one’s skin is a giveaway for Laurie though he comes free of charges. The stabbing incident reiterated the fact that racial insularity and racial separatism is in full throttle even in cosmopolitan environment of London.

Laurie chooses to keep away yet he is constantly nagged about being coloured. Even Mr. Hughes his teacher taunts him that he can’t restrain himself from certain black lifestyles which are more attractive to shoplifting, brawling juveniles because he carries with him “… the cultural cachet of the ethnic way of life” (In the Falling Snow 221). He was merely implying in his vague sentence,
that he is black and consequently will behave like a black. The issue of being black, white or coloured is so complex that they view each other with evident distrust.

Laurie and his white girlfriend Chantelle though in their teens end up in a difficult state when Chantelle becomes pregnant. They break the news to her parents who throw her out. The cultural and ethnic variation is too much to be forgiven and assimilated. Keith and Annabelle at the end of the novel *In the Falling Snow* initiate enculturation of the young couple. They take them in and thus the novel completes the tale on a more forthcoming and positive bend of expectation.

**Conclusion**

Caryl Phillips brings out the subtle imperial hegemonic influences of colonialism practiced by the Western countries like the United States of America, Great Britain, and other European countries. The poor nations are tethered in the neocolonial manacles designed to arrest and pull backward feeble Caribbean nations like St. Kitts or Antigua. The works of Phillips are in keeping with the “heteroglossic” structure of the novel as said by Mikhail Bakhtin. The novel has numerous “socially diverse and competing discourses” which speak as the voice of the colonisers or newly formed states with their dynamic transcultural population. Transcultural borderlines portrayed by aryl Phillips is quite different from the traditional narrative employed in the novels emphasizing the heterogenous nature of their transverse representation of native population or incumbent immigrants who bring with them manners and mores of their native culture and their counter-memories of a turbulent or eventful past life in their island country.

**References:**