

Gender and Exile: Immigrant Women in Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* and "Higher Ground" in *Higher Ground*

By

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Abstract

Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* and "Higher Ground" in *Higher Ground* are centred on women moving to England. The move is both physical and psychological as these women, Leila from the Caribbean in *The Final Passage* and Irina/Irene, a Jew from Poland, in "Higher Ground" go to London to negotiate new spaces. However, the issue I handle in this paper is whether London can be a veritable refuge for the immigrant woman to express herself. Can the woman create an identity for herself out of home? What are the factors in the metropolis that lead to her marginalization? These are some of the questions that I shall answer in this paper. The paper aims to demonstrate that immigrant women in the metropolis, no matter their race, equally face the unjust oppression of patriarchy as we find in the treatment given to Leila and Irina/Irene as they attempt to build new identities out of home. In this connection, my paper defends the contention that women who migrate to the Metropolis, as seen in Phillips, suffer double oppression; firstly, as people of inferior races (Black and Jewish) and secondly, as women in the eyes of men. My arguments will be guided by feminist views especially those of postcolonial feminists whose work attempts a link between colonialism and the marginalization of women.

Keywords: *Phillips, gender, exile, migration, metropolis*

Introduction

Gender and Exile are broad concepts which vary in interpretation in time, space, and cultures. However, for argumentation purposes here I agree with scholars who hold that gender is a societal construct that sets roles to differentiate between what is masculine and feminine (Oyewumi 2011: 1); this differentiation privileges the masculine at a vantage central space authority while in Simone de Beauvoir's words the woman "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other" (qtd in Pearsall 1986: xii). Beauvoir sees the woman as an object to the man-subject and the objectification of the woman translates into her being dominated. The woman who should enjoy the privileges of life, like freedom, is enslaved by the man-structured and

governed world. Taking another tack Hélène Cixous argues in “Sorties” that this difference puts the woman in the constant place of the other when she refers to “femininity as keeping alive the other that is confided to her, that visits her that she can love as other” (1992: 149). This is because the woman not only operates from but has adopted the place of other imposed on her. It is this otherness that Michel Foucault designates as a representation that is “more or less distorted by ideology or of a misunderstanding caused by taboos” (1992: 92). Sexual binaries according to Foucault and Cixous are thus constructed by the difference which is not necessarily a biological but a societal construct. Sexual difference is therefore a construction of patriarchy and a call on the man not to look at the woman from the man’s position or perspective.

Mao Tse Tung theorised that in China four mountains rest on the back of the woman: Colonisation, feudalism, backwardness, and the Chinese man. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has expanded this number and identified six obstacles in the case of the postcolonial woman: “One, oppression from outside in the form of colonialism; two, oppression from traditional structures, feudal communal, slave based etc; three, her own backwardness; four, the African man; five, her color and race and six, the woman herself because she has internalized all these oppressions” (1994: 228). From Ogundipe-Leslie’s perspective, one can say that the obstacles the woman faces in society are both external and internal; external because factors like colonialism, her culture and the man perpetrate injustice on her and internal in that she can also be seen as the cause of her subalternity.

Caryl Phillips’s narratives are remarkable in that women play central roles. *The Final Passage* and the novella “Higher Ground” in the triptych *Higher Ground* are no exceptions as Phillips “excavates histories of both black and Jewish [women] sufferings” (Craps par 1) in London where they have been lured to escape the deprivations of their homeland hope to change their different fates. Emina Catic and I. Murat Oner rightfully aver that “the fractured and nonlinearity Phillips incorporates in his writings [especially in the narratives here studied] reflects the broken lives of those who are torn away from their homes and families” (2019: 32). My argument in this paper is that exilic women like Leila in *The Final Passage* and Irene/Irina in “Higher Ground” suffer double oppression in exile because of sex and race difference. Exile has to do with one’s inability to belong in a space and this is what engenders movement. I look at exile in this paper not simply as voluntary but as a desperate move from one’s homeland to a new space; this movement is both physical and mental. With this, I will answer the following questions in this paper: What is the situation of the woman in exile? Can the woman, as presented in both narratives create a belonging for herself out of “Home” and what are the factors that lead to her marginalisation in the metropolis, otherwise dreamed of as a place of peace, milk and honey? My study is guided by tenets of postcolonial theory that do not only question colonial paradigms but respond to some of the assumptions set forth by colonial discourse and criticism on the “other.” Thus,

how the woman suffers a kind of double exile in this supposed land of hope and promise is crucial here.

Phillips's Woman and the Male Governed World

The woman in exile is a victim of man's brutality. Most often, the man uses this assault on the woman to prove his manhood by satisfying his bestial instincts. Leila in Phillips's *The Final Passage* (and Phillips' deliberate play on the title recalls *The Middle Passage*) is a product of rape and it does not only affect mother/daughter relationship but also causes some psychic pain. Leila and her mother have and display very little affection for one another. That is why her mother goes to England without telling her. She only discovers that "Her mother had left for England" (1985: 69) through a letter addressed to her. It is true that letters are written to friends and relations. But the fact that the mother here takes an important decision to leave her homeland without telling her only child and leaves her to make this discovery in a letter shows that mother/daughter relationship is problematic. The narrator reveals to us how Leila's mother feels about Leila in these words: "That she loved her she did not doubt, but, as always, Leila wished there was something more, that would make her mother more like a friend" (1985: 124). This testifies to the dysfunctionality in this mother/daughter relationship and explains why the daughter keeps expecting more but gets nothing. This lacuna engenders Leila's loneliness as she lacks someone she can discuss intimate questions on life with. This coldness in attitude between mother and daughter comes simply because Leila is a product of rape.

And every week he managed to drag Leila's mother into his house on the pretext of some errand, and every week she would arrange her clothes and pick up her ten cents and skip past him out into the street as if nothing has happened, although she was as yet too young to know that the older eyes followed her and knew differently. (1985:125)

This white man not only assaults the young woman [Leila's mother] but also corrupts her with a meagre amount of money. That he drags the girl into his house also intimates that their intercourse is forced and therefore is rape. This image of white rape is very conspicuous and stereotypical in postcolonial discourse as the white man, the "civilised", is now read as a rapist who continues in character to rape the African he had enslaved. Slavery continues.

In this excerpt, we can equally see that injustice done on women and young girls like the one in question mean nothing to society. Shockingly, elderly people who are aware of what this old white man is doing to the young woman take no action to stop him or the girl. That no one seems to object to what this old white man does to this young woman shows that society has no respect for women and therefore does not care about their fate. In Susan Griffin's "Rape: The All-American Crime," she recounts her experience with a police inspector from which she draws the following conclusion: "the inspector wondered why I wanted to write about rape. Like most men he did not understand the urgency of the topic, for, after all, men are not raped..." (1986:177). This American

experience is no different from what obtains in Phillips's *The Final Passage*. Leila's mother as a young woman subjected to sexual harassment by an old white man with no one coming forth to protect her illustrates the vulnerability of the woman in the diaspora and how she lives in constant insecurity. Susan Griffin again attests that:

At the age of eight, my suspicions were confirmed. My grandmother took me to the back of the house where the men wouldn't hear and told me that strange men wanted to do harm to little girls. I learned not to walk on dark streets, not to talk to strangers, or get into strangers' cars, to lock doors, and to be modest. (1986: 177)

The speaker testifies to the woman's unfreedom. Imagined as a brute, the man's primary duty is to harm the woman and young girls; thus the woman does not feel free. This shows that the woman in the diaspora and exile lives a very precarious and insecure condition. While in exile, Leila hopes to reunite with her mother but seeing her mother in hospital their reunion is reduced to a mere interlude of conversation. Their discussion is casual with very little affection unlike what one would expect to see between a mother and her daughter.

'You don't change at all, do you? Still the diplomat' she paused, this time to catch a breath. 'Who called the boy Calvin?' She felt her grandson's cheek with the back of her hand.

'I did', said Leila nervously.

It's a nice name. A nice name for the boy.' They both looked at Calvin, then Leila spoke. [...] As it was, they just sat and stared at each other. (1985: 124)

This is Leila's mother's first meeting with her grandson and the first time she is told the name of the child. The coldness in their relationship illustrates that dislocation has changed nothing; between this woman and the daughter "there has only ever been silence" (1985: 33). Loneliness becomes more acute with no one to confide in in England; no mother, no friend, and no husband, thus further accentuating her isolation as Renee Larrier would put it. Perhaps this explains or is what sparks Leila's desire to return to the Caribbean to Millie her friend and confidante, in other words to familiar territory since like most people she "long[s] for community and that yearning is a place of possibility, the place [to build] a beloved community" (1985: 85). Clearly, "the experience of exile has changed her mind and transformed her perception of home" (hooks 2009: 13) for as Freire in *Pedagogy of the Heart* postulates, "suffering exile implies recognizing that one has left his or her context of origin; it means experiencing bitterness, the clarity of a cloudy place [...] Exile cannot be suffered when it is all pain when it is all reason. One suffers exile when his or her conscious body, reason, and feeling – one's whole body – is touched." (2000:14, 73)

Besides rape and other forms of brutality, the woman in exile is a victim of man's abandonment. Just as the white world abandons the African and Caribbean and makes them invisible, so too do the men abandon their women. Michael abandons his wife Leila in London for two years and treats her like a

stranger. At this stage, the eye and what it sees is very important. The eye in this case prescribes what identity allocates to the image. Michael's gaze on his wife in England is very negative. Homi Bhabha to this effect writes that: "What these repeated negations of identity dramatize in the elision of the seeing eye that must contemplate what is missing or invisible, is the impossibility of claiming an origin for self (or other) within a tradition of representation that conceives identity as the satisfaction of totalizing plenitudinous object of vision" (1994: 46). Bhabha therefore sees the eye within the realm of a biased object that selectively chooses to see what it wants to see. Thus, the eye is very central in determining what or who can be at the centre or in the periphery. In the case of the marriage between Leila and Michael, Michael considers his wife as other; to him, she is invisible and does not exist. The narrator states: "Michael, a man whose feeling for her had been like a knife at the throat for over two years" (1985: 197). The image of the knife at the throat illustrates the hostility and instability that characterizes Leila's marital home and picks up on previous references made to Michael's violence as she rides his bike (1985: 30 - 31), as he throws flowers at Leila (1985: 34) or at Michael who rebuffs any advances of intimacy made by Leila who "threw out her arms, but [...] was [...] hugging a statue" (1985: 34). It shows Michael's lack of love for her and foregrounds his abandonment of her and their son. Michael at this point represents the irresponsible man in exile. He does all to avoid the woman he has no emotional affection for. "But now Michael no longer bothered to force himself upon her. It was as if she were a tunnel he was tired of passing through. Leila's fears as to why this might be, had recently been proven true" (1985: 189). This results in solitude, poverty and hunger and pushes the pregnant Leila to steal from her husband. "That night Michael came home. As he slept Leila stole the 1s 6d from his jacket pocket" (1985: 183). This misery pushes her to return home. To her, the milk and honey that have been the promise and salvation of Europe is not for everybody. Leila's effort to relocate in England is received with resistance firstly because she is a woman and secondly because she is black. This resistance justifies the assertion that where there is a representation, there is resistance. In this case, representation is dialectical and therefore breeds ambiguities in interpretation; while the man represents hegemony, the woman is the subaltern. Here resistance is at both levels as the man does not want the woman to be like him and recalls what Fanon raises in *The Wretched of the Earth* when it comes to the relationship between the natives and the colonisers. Nevertheless, the woman is still struggling to make her voice heard. The exiled woman from this perspective seems to suffer doubly; that is from male domination and discrimination and from racial barrier (Bhabha 1994). Leila's effort to look for a job in England is proof of her attempts to fight the stereotypical image imposed on the exile like herself. Her effort is frustrated and even justified when it is argued she is pregnant and other flimsy excuses like "you are not well. You have not been eating properly ... No life whatsoever and you haven't been sleeping" (1985: 186). The speaker here is a man and from his tone, one senses that he mocks at this woman seeking employment. Seeing that Leila is pregnant automatically should tell this man-employer what

condition she is in. That he goes as far as telling the lady she does not feed well heaps further ridicule on the woman and her private life. The woman is thus an object of male scorn. Yet, if Leila goes through this, it is because the man (her husband, Michael) has abandoned her.

It is also worth noting that even when women in exile are employed, they are still discriminated upon. According to Patience Elabor-Idemudia,

In advanced capitalist societies like Canada, racism and sexism are used to maximize profit in several ways: through the devaluation of educational qualification of foreign workers; through a segregated labor market where racial minorities and women, particularly black women, are concentrated in low-status and low-paying jobs, and through a split labor market where women are paid less than white workers and men for doing the same work. (2001: 239)

From Elabor-Idemudia perspective sexism or the marginalisation of women is a capitalist phenomenon based on production and consumption. At this point, the woman and most especially the woman in exile is viewed as an agent of labour and one that occupies the margins. In this case, the exilic woman of black origin suffers a kind of double marginalisation. It is also noted as Elabor-Idemudia alludes that this segregation is seen even in the salaries paid these women irrespective of the fact that they may have the same qualification as the male and/or white counterparts. Leila, in *The Final Passage*, finds it hard to get a job because she is a woman and is black. When she succeeds to get work the wages by week is £11 with overtime if she wanted (1985: 187). Leila's private life in the novel is a replica of women's life in exile. For this reason, Leila seeks refuge with other women who share her plight as exemplified by her attempt to get close to Mary in England. Their relationship becomes so close that these women go "shopping together not for anything in particular although Mary had talked of buying Calvin some gloves and scarf" (1985: 187). It is Mary who plans to meet the needs of Calvin, Leila's son. That they are always together, even for things that seem unimportant, re-enforces the theme of the sisterhood built as a form of resistance to the male-dominated world. Interestingly, Maria is perceived as the other once Michael deserts Leila.

Higher Ground on its part explores the formation of the gender space in the exile as an interpretation of history. Svetlana Stefanova Radoulska argues that "Phillips historical writing with its presumable realistic discourse is unable to represent extreme historical events, such as slavery or the Holocaust that can only be reached through personal accounts" (2012: 328). Though the novel handles living in exile from both male and female perspectives, the female seems to be the greater victim in exile. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi stresses on the issue of the formation of the gender space in exile that: "Higher Ground is vitally important because it traces the development of the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere and puts that cultural formation in dialogue with the Jewish transnational formation that is generally acknowledged as one of the older diasporas" (qtd in Ledent 2004: 66). Osinubi's words hold true in that looking at *Higher Ground*, Caryl Phillips seems to have arranged the stories

logically to explain why black people live today in the western hemisphere. This is the reason the novel opens with "Heartland" which recounts the story of Africa during the slave trade and the active buying and selling of slaves. This story explains why black people live in the western hemisphere; their lives as expressed in "Cargo Rap" presents the black man in the western hemisphere (to be more precise, in America) living in a most precarious state. "Higher Ground," the next story, seems to be in the logic of this structure but as Osinubi puts it, the narration of this Jewish lady might be Phillips's effort to create a kind of exilic universalism. Thus, Irina/Irene's situation in England in the 1940s as presented in "Higher Ground" is not different from that of Rudy in "Cargo Rap." Osinubi again writes that: "If read as an enquiry into the 'situated knowledge' marginality imparts, 'Higher Ground' offers two critical submissions. Firstly, while the narrative presents imagined common grounds between two experiences of 'complicity of rational and ethnocidal terror,' it suggests that this banner of commonality might be one that heeds the concrete needs of specific margins" (qtd Ledent 2004:74). Osinubi's words thus stress on another similarity that exists between Jewish exilic living and that of blacks. He insists on the fact that these two Diasporas faced ethnocidal terror which has to do with a close elimination of the races.

While the Jewish race is threatened with physical elimination by the Aryans, the African race since slavery faces a kind of cultural extinction. In "Higher Ground," Phillips presents these two exilic people – Irina/Irene and Louis, a Caribbean living in exile in England. As these two exiles eventually get acquainted, they both occupy the marginal space in the text, Louis decides to return to the Caribbean. "He [Louis] was going home, for he knew that it was better to return as the defeated traveller than be praised as the absent hero and live a life of spiritual poverty" (1989: 197). Louis' decision to return shows that England is not a place of honey for the black man. Also, in the passage, one learns that there are two ways of reading the exile – either he is seen as a hero which means remaining in exile or returning to the land of origin. This means that the exiled especially the black man and the woman, as is the case of Irina/Irene, are objects without value in exile. It is for this reason that: "Louis is set to sail for his Caribbean home and Irene is scheduled to return to the psychiatric hospital. His imminent departure across 'the water' evokes the narrator's Middle Passage in 'Heartland.' Her departure to the hospital alludes to the imprisonment in the fort" (qtd in Ledent 2004: 74). Irina/Irene in "Higher Ground" of *Higher Ground* resorts to memory and this puts her in a very deplorable mental state. Only later in the story do we learn that she loses her sanity before spending some time to regain it. The narrator says she wears "the thin bracelet of attempted suicide" (1989: 217). This shows that what Irina/Irene undergoes makes her look at life as worthless (Catic & Oner 2019), because the thinness here amplifies a life ready to snap.

Phillips's anchor in the story "Higher Ground" is simply to bring Louis and Irina/Irene from two exilic backgrounds together. Their relationship and brief sexual contact ends abruptly when Louis decides to return to the sea. The

juxtaposition of Black and Jew does not only expose Black and Jewish sufferings but further highlights the pain of the diasporic woman in the complicity of rational and ethnocidal terror. This is seen in the fact that the narrator's description of Louis is peripheral, and he (the narrator) is detailed in his description of Irina/Irene. Her madness in the story and her conveyance into an institution can be associated to the loneliness she undergoes in England and the harsh responses that both the English society and Nazi-occupied Poland give her and impact her intuition that refuses to conform to exilic patterns. Her madness can clearly also be associated with the loneliness she undergoes in England and the hostilities of the male folk:

'When Irene first worked in England there was a man at the munition factory who used to stare at her with violence. Mrs McKenzie said that 'up here' there were not many of Irina's 'people' and Irina tried to smile and forget at the same time.' (Phillips 1989: 182)

The fact that the man stared at Irene/Irina with violence illustrates that the exiled woman is not welcome which depicts how vulnerable she is, not just physically but also sexually. As mentioned earlier, this man even sees the woman as a threat to his position in the factory. His violent gaze at this woman is also suggestive of male violence on the woman and gives Irene/Irina no sense of security in the factory. This violent look is reinforced by Irene/Irina's loneliness for as Mrs McKenzie states there are not many Jews in England and her journey into exile has only further emphasized her isolation and aloneness. Irene/Irina is not very comfortable but relies on her memory to forget her marginalisation. This therapy is very difficult because the war reminds her of her family, her home and her race that face extinction if Adolf Hitler's Germany wins the war.

Conclusion

To conclude, the returning gaze of Phillips from the woman's perspective shows the exilic victim in a precarious situation as she attempts to root herself in the host land and fits into what Larrier states is "the pattern of displacement, separation, isolation, and exile [...] mirrored in real life struggles of contemporary migrant workers everywhere." This effort is blurred by the very man she goes to the metropolis with as in the case of Leila, or the supposed receptive host, who ironically treats them as the other. Guided by the maxim of the postcolonial theory, it seems evident that this paper reveals that home is not necessarily elsewhere and that people of the Third World can start constructing their spaces rather than move to find solace elsewhere; a mindset which requires individual and collective re-constructing of the people of the Third World mindset to understand that the metropolis is not necessarily a haven.

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