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CARYL PHILLIPS'S *A STATE OF INDEPENDENCE* AS A NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE



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ABSTRACT

A State of Independence is the second novel of Caryl Phillips which enumerates a bitter ironic commentary on the 'Independence' of a small Caribbean Island which was expressed by a middle aged man to a returned native, who had a romanticized vision filled with great hope. But after returning, he had only opportunities gone by failed expectations, disappointment, love and loyalties of family and friends. The story revolves around the central character, Bertram Francis returning home to St.Kitts after

two decades in England. Phillips throughout the novel not only pointed out the problems faced by an immigrant in the foreign land but also he had concentrated on the problems on returning to the home after exile. As many writers and critics concluded that the migrants suffer a lot in the foreign land and most of them fail to return to their homeland. Phillips has tried to illuminate on the major aspect of Neo-colonialism that even the natives won't accept them after their return.

KEYWORDS

Neo-colonialism, Neo-slave narrative, Optimism, Hybridity, Reintegration

RESEARCH PAPER

Caryl Phillips has used non-linear narrative technique as the main storyline is interwoven with numerous flashbacks that portrays Bertram's childhood. Phillips also used the fragmented narrative which shows the impact of one's past on present. The facts are observed through the eyes of the protagonist, Bertram Francis. The plot follows the life story of this man, who had spent almost two decades in England and lost complete touch with everyone in the island including his own mother and brother. He always felt disappointed with his life in England and wanted to start a new life by initiating a business in the island. But the political condition of the island has been changed after it got its independence. Bertram started to meet the people whom he knows but after meeting them all he only encountered rejection, distrust and hostility. He felt that everyone, everything has changed. Bertram was initially very happy to travel to England, as he was sent at 19 as winner of an island's scholarship. But even his mother also turns from him in contempt and he came to know that his adorable younger brother, Dominic was dead. His childhood friend, Jackson Clayton has become Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Housing, Labour and Tourism and also a prosperous wheeler-dealer. Clayton advises him to go back to England because he feels that 'He is the wrong material for the new Caribbean'. Bertram was totally disappointed with the hybridity of the island which was the product of Neo-colonialism. Through all these encounters he felt sorry about his failure in England. Even after residing there for 20 years 'nothing happened'. Phillips has endured a quiet, sensitive explanation of a sad and maddening truth that – there are in a World of big fish and little fish, lovers and loved, no state of Independence.

As Bertram Francis gets down from the flight, he noticed several placards in the capital city like "Independence Forward never and Backward never". Other one read "Proud, Dignified and Black/ None can take my freedom back!" The immigrant office received him with reservation. The contrast thing was the officer in charge in the immigrant office asked him how long he would stay in the country, which made Bertram to wonder as he felt both home and exile. The car Ford CorSair came to receive him and the taxi driver asked him an atrocious fair – eleven pounds to which she explained about the corruption in the newly freed country. Then he moved to the island of his boyhood, Sand Bay. The houses of this village were made up of wooden shacks painted with all colours, as a rainbow had bent down and licked some life into this place. He found that the village St. Patricks was too backward and

Sand Bay was the only village on the island, apart from the capital city, Baytown is facilitated with another road besides Island road. There is an elaborate flashback of Bertram's boyhood and studies in Sandy Bay. That was his affectionate relationship with his mother, who used to prepare a little special food for him. Her only desire was that he would take care of her and his little brother, Dominic. She thought that Bertram would make some money in England and return back to St. Kitts and do some business as Leslie Carter did. When Bertram went out, he found the inauguration of the newly built hospital as the part of the Independence Day celebration. A queen's representative had arrived there. Yet he noticed, there was not much change in Sandy Bay. Once while passing through Buttler's village, the bus was able to accelerate down the long straight piece of road and the gentle bend of the bus gave them a view of the capital, Baytown which looked from the distance was beautiful. Still Bertram describe the town as a ghost town. Because Father Daniels had thought him that like most Caribbean towns, it was originally a part of slave-market and part harbour. The place was primarily designed in order to facilitate the import of Africans and the export of sugar. But over years it has developed in three directions. At first there were well-patrolled estates of the middle class people and a neat planned spectacular view of both the mountains and the sea. After breaking his relationship with his friend, Jackson Clayton, Bertram started to wander in the capital's major area, Baytown. And he found the following irony, the divide of urban-rural and neo-colonialism:

Of course the island had changed, he was not blind. There were bigger buildings, foreign vehicles, video shops, American news magazines on sale, a Pizza Hut, but all this was in the capital. Nothing much seemed to have changed in the country, but then he imagined that Jackson almost certainly lived in Baytown now and the differences that had always existed between country and town had simply become more marked. But for people like Jackson, a wealthier Baytown probably indicated a healthier island, despite the fact that the vast majority of the masses still lived in the country poverty, a poverty that as far as Bertram could discern would only increase as long as agricultural workers were patronized in soil-breaking ceremonies by politicians who were saving up their money to buy yachts and even larger Japanese cars. (*Independence*, 114-15)

This novel can be considered as the sequel of Phillips first novel *The Final Passage* as both novels have ambiguous endings. Here, Phillips had selected male protagonist unlike in

the first novel, there was a woman protagonist, Liela Perston, who travels to England and failed to come back. The protagonist in this novel returning to the island and meeting his family, friends, lover etc. gives a vivid picture of the island and the natives. And also he noticed the conflict between the optimism of the independence and also the signs of a village still struggling to acquire the means to meet the most basic of needs like running water and proper lightning. Meanwhile Bertram think about his younger brother Dominic, who thought that Bertram will take the position of his father and will look after his old mother. But Bertram who used to eat, play and study with his brother never stood at him when he was in trouble. The funny thing was they both lost their virginity together. Even Bertram's mother was totally disappointed on him for what he has done to his younger brother and expresses her agony through her words.

‘And now you’ve been to see him’. She paused. ‘I don’t want to talk about Dominic. The boy did his best to nurse whatever difficulties he had in his heart, but he was never the same once you did desert him. Eventually he just took up with a wrong set of people, but you could have helped prevent that.’

(Independence 83)

Further Bertram accidentally meets the Deputy Prime Minister, Jackson Clayton in a hotel. And he was shocked to see Bertram. When he met him for the second time Clayton accused him as if he is a foreigner and insisted him to go back, where he come from. Bertram still rested with lots of confusion ranging from bribery, his brother's grave, his meeting Jackson and his mother's disappointment. He then decides to meet Patsy, former lover, the only person to whom the arrival of Bertram made happier. She confesses that Bertram has fathered her son, which she had kept secret but he didn't respond to her in this regard. She says that she was his four months' lover and now nineteen years' mother. Then they both slept as if husband and wife. Bertram looked closely at Patsy's face. She still possessed strong graceful lines, and perfectly vaulted eyebrows. Her beauty and her strangeness of spirit were both still evident. But as Bertram has become older, he could see other virtues in her though diplomacy could never be counted among them.

Benedicte Ledent glances,

The only person that doesn't prove a disappointment is Patsy Archibald, Bertram's some-time lover, whom he ruthlessly left behind twenty years before. She

is the only person who does not feel contempt for him and who is even happy to see him again. Patsy's house becomes the only place where Bertram feels welcome. Patsy gives an impression of a very intelligent woman since she understands the futility of the independence, she realizes that people still live in the same poverty as they did under the British rule and she sees through Jackson, their one-time common friend. There is one thing that she does not say Bertram about – that they have a son together whose name is Livingstone. Bertram meets him at one point without knowing he might be his own son. Patsy also wonders if Bertram is going to settle on the island permanently. We might assume that to a certain extent he inclines to stay thanks to Patsy and the vision of their common future. (Ledent 11)

In the novel, Jackson Clayton's character is portrayed as a negative character because being school mate and a good friend instead of helping in Bertram's reintegration, as he was in a high position, turns back on him and openly shows his contempt. But Bertram stood quite when Clayton asked him for the reason for not writing a single letter, when he was in England. Meanwhile Clayton was also an aspirant for the scholarship, which Bertram got and left the island and he was initially jealous on Bertram as Patsy loved Bertram. While Bertram failed to finish his Law studies in England, ended up taking different kinds of jobs and the only thing he bring with him to the island was his failure. Jackson becomes a successful man by occupying the position of Deputy Prime Minister. Perceiving Bertram as his lifelong rival decides to take revenge on him by highlighting his own achievements and by humiliating him constantly and persuading him that he no more belongs to the island. A person who used to be a best friend some time ago appears to be a lethal enemy now. At first Bertram expected Jackson for the help to set up a new business in the island; however he almost immediately realizes that he has chosen the wrong person to ask any favour from him. When Bertram met Clayton for the second time in Jonnie's pub these are the words busted out by the Clayton:

'All I really want to know is if you're going to do anything to help me? I seem to remember you saying you would give me some advice.'

'I'll give you advice, but it might not be the same as helping you.'

'What advice?'

Jackson took a drink of beer, as though steadying himself. Bertram picked up his beer and did the same.

'The advice is I think you should go back to where you come from.'

(Independence135)

After all these encounters Bertram finally admitted that – he didn't find his home neither in England nor on the island. Since he failed to integrate either British Society or he got fit, back in the Caribbean. His intention for coming home was clear that to start a business. Though he didn't keep any touch with the island for 20 years, he was hopefully waiting for the support of his mother, Jackson Clayton for his business. This shows his self-centredness. In this way through all these instances, Caryl Phillips want to derive a conclusion that the impact of neo-colonialism has turned out the oppressed people into oppressors in their own country after independence. Just like Toni Morison, Alice Walker, Andrea Levy etc. Phillips narratives can be considered as Neo-slave narratives as they are depicted in the era, where slavery is legally banned but still the traces of it can be felt in different ways. In *A state of Independence*, the focus is on the protagonist's homecoming, on the other hand both migration to Britain and return are actually two sides of the same coin. Exile and homecoming are both proved to be dissociable as they proceed a kind of similar desire, a new life beginning and both lead to same kind of result, the utter disappointment with the harsh realities of the world that has shattered all the hopes of the migrants for so long, be it England or the Caribbean in the case of returnee. Homecoming is surprisingly more traumatizing experience when compared to exile which one can notice in Bertram's case. Phillips through his novels gives a contrast picture between his male and female protagonists. The female characters are portrayed as matured, responsible and down to earth, whereas the male characters as naïve, easy going, immature, self-centred and careless.

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