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Polyphonic Voices of Survival: Diaspora in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*

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Caryl Phillips

Courtesy: <http://www.carylphillips.com/biography.html>

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Characters Disrupted in Space

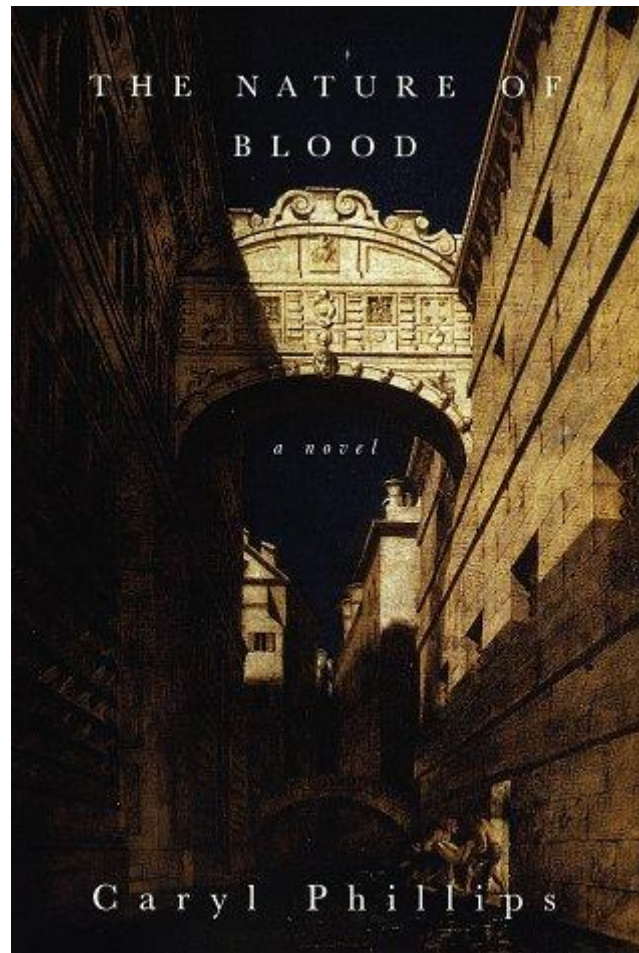
Caryl Phillips is one of the major contemporary black British writers. He was born in St. Kitts, in the Eastern Caribbean in 1958. Phillips explores the sufferings and the scattered life of the people in the diaspora through the characters disrupted in space, time, race, and gender. Phillips's novels offer the reader to sympathize with the intricacies of lives which deserve to be explored, even if they are fictional, they are emblematic of the broken dreams and the suffering that are part and parcel of the human condition all over the world.

***The Nature of Blood* (1997)**

Phillips's sixth novel, *The Nature of Blood* (1997) alternates between four narratives, two of which take place in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Venice and two in post-World War II Europe and Israel, while it also interjects opposing viewpoints on the two Venetian narratives.

Focus of This Paper

This paper analyses the diasporic issues of alienation, sense of belonging, racial discrimination and atrocities experienced by both the Jewish and black characters in the novel, *The Nature of Blood*.



Loosely Connected Narratives

The first narrative records the experience of Eva Stern, a European Jewish woman liberated from a concentration camp during the time of World War II. The second narrative presents Eva's uncle Stephan Stern, who leaves his family in 1930s to defend the Israeli settlement in Palestine. Another character is associated with Stephan's story is the young Ethiopian Jewess named Malka, who is one of the Falasha airlifted to Israel in 1984. Malka appears at the end of the novel and elderly Stern solicits her companionship. The third narrative depicts the plight of three Venetian Jews who in 1480 are wrongly accused of ritually sacrificing

a Christian boy, and the fourth narrative tells of Othello's experience of Venice in 1516. In the novel, narratives are loosely related by circumstances and are interwoven throughout.

Eva's Life

The novel starts with the story of Eva's uncle Stephan Stern, who left his family to establish a new state of Israel in the 1930s. The story of Eva Stern in the post war Europe appears immediately after Stephan's narrative. The first narrative of Eva commences on the day the English liberate the concentration camp in Germany. Her story is interwoven with flashbacks which detail her childhood, her displacement, and her traumatic experiences after the camp. Phillips depicts the sufferings of the Holocaust survivors through Eva's story.

Eva experiences abandonment throughout her life which leads to estrangement and mental deterioration. She comes out of the concentration camp in a disrupted state, both physically and mentally. Being parentless and unable to locate her sister, Eva cannot look to the future as the concentration camp surviving were encouraged to do, but rather succumbs to the "violence of memory" (33). Even though Eva tries to live in the present, she is haunted by her past. The novel gradually unravels her memories detailing number of scenes from the Holocaust, including the life before the war, the emerging tensions in the streets, the forced movement into the ghetto, the ride up on the trains and finally the concentration camp itself.

The Shift in Story

Paul Smethurst in his article notes the shift in Eva's story: "Eva is always drawn back into the past, as she attempts, in vain, to rediscover who she is, in what is for her, the vacuum of the present. . . .So the novel moves between the past's present, with its fragments of memory and story" (Smethurst 15). Eva's description of the camp, represented in a highly fragmented form

reflects her tenuous grip on her sanity. She describes the camp poignantly and chilling that the newly British soldiers who “drag bodies towards the mass grave, the leg and arms forming convenient handles” (15).

She is unable to make any personal relationship with other people in the camp, which results even more loneliness. She says: “Since mama left, I have grown accustomed to being solitary. But these days, even if I wished for company I would probably find myself alone. There is no companionship in despair” (29). Experiencing the alienation, she despairs that “now there seems to be just me and the night and the sky” (24). Continuous loneliness makes her hallucinating as she imagines her mother is still alive and living with her at the camp. She imagines:

Today, Mama arrived back in the camp. At first I was angry, for I thought the person lying in the cot next to me must have broken in during the night in order to steal something. Why not go to one of the other cots? Before I could say anything, the woman turned her face towards me and I saw it was Mama. I wasn't frightened. I was expecting her to return, for I never truly believed that she had gone. (35)

Holocaust Survivors

Phillips portrays the inability and impossibility of the Holocaust survivors to connect with the society they live in. Eva's estrangement from her community enfeebles the images of past, present, and the future in her mind. She remarks: “The sun rises, gloriously ignorant of the fact that a new day is not necessarily a good day. I want to survive. I remind myself that this sunrise has already happened in some other place. And later, our sunset will be somebody else's sunrise” (18).

Thinking about the Future

Eva really thinks about a future when she imagines her mother's return which gives her strength to leave the camp. Eva feels ease and security in the concentration camp. But once she left the camp, she feels the insecurity as she is haunted by the past memories. She imagines being followed by a girl with red lipstick. This other girl can be seen as her former self, a self she left behind in the camp, the girl she used to be. She says: "I decide to put Eva away in some place for safe-keeping until all of this is over. But already Eva refuses to be hidden. There is no new name in my throat. Eva refuses to disappear" (164). The solution Eva finds to escape from the "other girl" is death as she thinks only in death she can feel the rest that she deserves: "I know that somewhere, buried deep inside me, is a place where I will be able to lay down in peace. And this other girl will not be able to follow me. But until then? Can I ever be truly happy?" (198).

Worrisome Future

Eva finds difficult to continue in this world as she sees no future, particularly when Gerry abandons her. Gerry is the British soldier, who liberates Eva from the camp. She refuses his proposal thinking that nobody can ever understand her. Later she starts to London to live her future with Gerry. But her exile to London again puts her in a new world where no one recognizes her as she is overwhelmed with the haste of the people. "I stand in the middle of a great rush of human activity. It is difficult to know which way to turn. All around me there is purposeful haste. Faces are set, minds focused" (188). Eva is shocked again when she finds that Gerry was already married when he proposed her. Eva becomes mentally ill and admitted to a mental hospital. Eva wants to join her family in death rather than living in a solitary life. Ironically, Eva's uncle, Stephan Stern was working to resettle refugees in Israel at the time of her death and is desperate to recollect with family himself. If they had found each other, he would

have provided her with a reason and a means of remaining connected to life. Phillips presents Eva's tragic end like his other characters, who suffers the Holocaust and subsequent traumatic death. Through Eva's story, Phillips exposes the discrimination, oppression, and violence experienced by the Jewish diaspora.

Born Out of Sacrifice

Eva's uncle Stephan Stern sacrificed so much to establish Israel. He left his family behind to fulfill his home. Stephan considers Israel as the Promised Land. He says to Moshe: "And in Israel the fruit is on the trees. You may take the fruit straight from the branch" (4). Stephan joins the underground army in order to protect the Jewish settlements from the attack of the Arabs. Stephan hopes for a day, which brings a new beginning for the Jewish survivors. Stephan finally feels loneliness as Israel did not bring the joy he hoped for. Alied Fokkema in his article comments that: "Stephan is a symbolical character, one of the novel's samples of the displaced. In his new country, he does not belong, but his old country had become a dangerous place" (Fokkema 286). Phillips presents Stephan as a wandering person who does not know where to belong. Even though he considered Israel as his promised land, he does not feel at home.

Promised Land

Another Jewish survivor named Malka, an Ethiopian Jewess taken to Israel with her family. Like Stephan, Malka also sees Israel as her Promised Land. She says: "And when we arrived, and stepped down off the plane, we all kissed the ground. We thanked God for returning us to Zion" (201). Malka's transportation from Ethiopia to Israel bears some resemblances to Eva's transportation to the Lager. Once she reaches in Israel, Malka finds difficult to integrate with the society of Israel. She does not find any job because the norms and values are too

different in Israel. As a black Jew, Malka has double difficulties to be accepted in the society. The society never accepts Malka as a real Jew, because of her skin colour. Malka and her family seem to have big problems in adjusting to the new living conditions. Most of the black Jews are deliberately adapts themselves to the norms and values of the new world. Ethiopian Jews like Malka are limited to a dilapidated housing development and are kept away from participating in Israeli society. Malka's description of the living conditions reminds the Jewish ghettos of fifteenth century Venice.

Narratives of Venetian Jews

Phillips includes another narrative of three Venetian Jews accused of ritual murder in the fifteenth century in the novel and establishes a historical precedent for the twentieth century anti-Semitism responsible for the deterioration of Eva. The three Jews encounter severe tortures by the investigators during the inquiry of the murder of a Christian boy for which the Jews were falsely accused. The crazy torturing faced by the Jews is also comparable to the hunting down of the Jews in the concentration camp during the Holocaust. The Venetians justify their treatment towards the three Jews in a similar way as the Nazi's justified their extermination of the Jews. Without any proof the innocent Jews fall victim to the subdued racism that lives in Portobuffole: "But here on the earth, in the 'yes' of Christians, he [Servadio] knew it was easy for a Jew to sin. One could sin even without knowing it" (97). In the end, the three Jews are burned at the stake, an obvious precursor to the burning in the ovens of the concentration camps during the Holocaust.

Foregrounding the Roots of Racism

Phillips foregrounds the roots of racism against the blacks by comparing Othello's reception in sixteenth century Venice and Malka's treatment in the twentieth century Israel. In

his eighteen months stay in Venice before meeting Desdemona, no one befriends him except the city itself which “had remained ever faithful to her enchanted promise” (122). He realizes that it is only his well-established military reputation which “might lay to rest any hostility that my natural appearance might provoke” (118). When he repeatedly attempts to receive an audience with a Venetian Senate, he is pushed aside and reminded that as a revered leader of military men he “was to serve only in a time of crisis” (115). He feels humiliated and thinks that: “Some among these people, both high and low, were teaching me to think of myself as man less worthy than the person I knew myself to be” (118). Phillips connects the experiences of the Jews across time with the experience of people of African descent. He outlines the historical roots of intolerance and points out several commonalities in the experiences of these two diasporic people who have suffered so greatly. In Venice, both Othello and the Jews are tolerated only because of their usefulness to the city-state. Hanz Okazaki remarks: “Venice also serves as the catalyst for further reflection on the similarities and commonalities between Europe’s treatment of people of African descent and its treatment of Jews” (Okazaki 42).

Othello’s Suffering of Psychological Torment

Othello struggles with the psychological torment of a black man searching for an identity in a racist white world. Unlike the three Jews and Eva, Othello deliberately chooses to live his life in Venice. He arrives in Venice with an air of confidence, considering himself as a man of royal blood and a highly-accomplished soldier. He expresses disdain for those Venetians: “I was naturally suspicious of the motives behind the simplest actions on the part of those professed that they wished to help me, for I knew the world to be full of those who sought to increase their status by strutting beneath the outstretched wings of their superiors” (108).

Internalizing Discrimination

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Othello rapidly internalizes the discrimination that the Venetian shows towards him. He states: “I had moved from the edge of the world to the centre” (107) and thinking of himself as “a man less worthy than the person I know myself to be” (118). He spends a good share of his money on new costumes so that he might dress according to Venetian fashion to make him “look upon him with a kinder eye” (122) by the Venetians. He says: “It was this desire to be accepted that was knotting my stomach and depriving me of sleep” (122). Both Othello and Eva destroy themselves by committing suicide because of disconnection from their own people and their rejection by others. All the characters live in a confusing situation in which they have to try to survive.

Connection between the African and Jewish Diasporas

The connections Phillips establishes between the African diaspora and Jewish diaspora indicate that the discrimination and the nature of intolerance is not really about race or creed; rather it is the mechanism of power which a dominant group uses arbitrarily to confirm its own sense of identity. Phillips chooses a literary form of disconnection and abandonment to capture how unwieldy and scattered life can become for those who must live under the threat of anti-Semitism or racism. Benedicte Ledent comments on the structure of the novel that “If the structure of the novel is labyrinthine, so are the lives of its main characters. Each of them is trapped in a kind of existential maze and involved in a quest for its center” (Ledent 188).

Common Suffering and Common Quest

In spite of their different origins, the characters in *The Nature of Blood* have a lot in common, above all their humanity, as demonstrated by the structure of Phillips’s fiction which often puts their similar experience of suffering side by side. The characters jointly invoke polyphonic voices of their survival, even though they are separated by centuries. However, they

fail to get over the visible barriers that separate them, so that their friendship, or love, eventually aborts. The tension between loneliness and belonging, which is after all the common fate of the diaspora, is perhaps most dramatically played out in the context of the dysfunctional family.

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