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CARYL PHILLIPS'S *FOREIGNERS* AS A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Born in 1958 in the West Indies, Caryl Phillips' life has revolved around issues of belonging and displacement. *Foreigners* (2007) engages eloquently with the idea of home. Phillips is certainly an authority on feeling like a foreigner, growing up as one among the few black faces in a working class English town who had travelled extensively with his writing. And it is important to note that such a point of view came from his concrete experiences as an immigrant in Europe in contrast with the American black exiles in Europe. My intention is to analyse the narrative techniques employed in Phillips' *Foreigners.* With his alluring pen, he illuminates the complexities of race relations through the lens of personal history and narrative. Phillips with a biographer's aim for facts, elucidates his readers with detailed portraits of the three men and their circumstances who were caught up in the African diaspora. He ponders the question of how one retains a sense of individuality under the annihilating onslaught of racism. In the contemporary political and social context of conflicts, Phillips's approach to seek common ground and humanity stands out as an act of courage and sanity.

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Caryl Phillips is perhaps the perfect candidate to address what has become one of his favourite themes - identity. And at a time in which the meaning of nationality and the composite nature of our identities are being explored once again, Phillips's works lands in the appropriate ground. Phillips' writing has been categorized by critics in various ways. Location and rootlessness or the ambiguity of identity and sense of belonging were its core themes. Phillips is a writer who has been devoted to the exploration of Immigrant stories and the destruction of historical myths. His essay collection *A New World Order* (2001) illustrates Phillips' relation to four places - Africa, New York, St. Kitts, Leeds - firmly: "I feel at home here, but I do not belong. I am of, and not of, this place" (Phillips 2002: 1-4).

Caryl Phillips' novels reflect deeper changes in the British society especially in terms of discrimination, survival quest and British identity. He skillfully combines fiction and history to convey the complex nature of national, personal and racial identities in modern day British life. This paper tries to find out the ways in which Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners* (2007) narrate black history in Britain and thereby becomes a factual representation of modern day misery in the contemporary political and social context of racial conflicts.

Foreigners is a work of fiction consisting of three unconnected stories of different men and is largely based on historical facts. The novel is as much a study of division along the lines of class as it is about race and culture. It is perhaps with this in mind that Phillips has chosen to narrate three lives which are supposed to be English: genial, self-effacing underdogs, ultimately doomed to fall short of the expectation placed upon them. It describes the lives of Francis Barber, who was the servant of Samuel Johnson; Randolph Turpin, who was Britain's first black world champion boxer; and David Oluwale, a Nigerian who came to Leeds in 1949 to become an engineer, yet who was brutally murdered by two police officers. Both Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale lived in England during the twentieth century and thus experienced what it means to be black in today's Britain.

Foreigners blends fiction, reportage and historical fact to produce a moving account of three black Britons. Each character bears 'the unmistakable imprint of a misfit.' Caryl Phillips with his inspiring blend of fact, fiction and citation enunciate the voices of three men who fail to compromise their own value system.Through them, Phillips explores the very concept of the foreigner existing as "other" amidst a majority culture which is determined to remain unaffected by the presence of difference.

Doctor Johnson's Watch

The first story titled 'Doctor Johnson's Watch' explicates the tale of Francis Barber, the Jamaican-born slave who had been brought to England and given to the literary giant Samuel Johnson in 1752. Through a series of flashbacks and historical depictions, the unnamed narrator, a minor member of Johnson's circle, sets out to interview Barber for a piece he is writing, for the Gentlemen's Magazine, after Johnson's death.

It is portrayed that the childless Johnson had raised Barber as his own son, granting him his freedom and giving him education. He also arranges Barber's marriage to an Englishwoman and award him a very generous pension and making him his heir. But after the death of Johnson, the wind blew against Barber and later, the narrator finds Barber dying in a rural hospital because of his own spendthrift ways. The reader learns that Barber may have fallen victim to the less obvious effects of racism, dislocation and rootlessness.

Made in Wales

'Made in Wales' is the chapter that discusses the story of Randolph Turpin. It begins by telling how Turpin will fight against the world champion boxer Sugar Ray Robinson and beat him to become the first black British world champion boxer. The narrator describes this match had an important effect in the mental recovery of the British nation:

> Britain in the early fifties was a desolate place […] the government lacked the resources to do anything about this bleak terrain […] Thousands of servicemen had returned after the war only to discover that there was no industrial machine for them to rejoin […] Britain was depressed and good times seemed a long way off […] The opportunity of seeing boxers in action, particularly champion boxers like young Randolph Turpin, brightened up everybody's lives.
>
> (Phillips, Foreigners 72-73)

Turpin realises that two years before his victory over Sugar Ray Robinson he would not even have had the opportunity to fight because he is a black man. Although he is now a hero for the British nation, he probably feels uncomfortable by all the cheers of those who despised him only shortly before. Turpin's mother makes a similar remark when she witnesses how her son is honoured by the masses; "The coloured baby that, much to some people's disgusts, she had given birth to twenty-three years ago in this very town was, on this day, the most famous man in England" (Phillips, Foreigners 88). It must be noted that Turpin is a "mixed-race-man" because his father was a black man from British Guiana who came to England and who fought for the British nation in the Great War whereas his mother was a white British woman. Although his father risked his life and fought alongside white men, for the British nation, the relation between a black man and a white woman was something very difficult to accept. The racism that poisoned the everyday lives of black people in Britain did so in the form of what was called "colour bar".

The personal problems of Turpin made him unhappy and the respect and admiration he received was short-spanned. Due to his violent behaviour and his constant infidelity, his wife Mary Stack, eventually leaves him. He also spends too much for the so-called 'friends' who are only there to exploit him. This tragically affected his boxing results, and he once again becomes only a black man who is being disgraced by the British community. He also realizes that his eyesight has been severely damaged by the rigorous fighting and that he will be a mere puppet in the boxing ring. Later the newspapers report on him in a story entitled "Turpin: A Story of Riches to Rags" (Phillips, Foreigners 144). Once more a black man feels the hypocrisy of the British society and literally Turpin lose everything that he possessed. In the end, he cannot bear this humiliation anymore and commits suicide. Fifty years after his victory over Sugar Ray Robinson, in 2001, a statue of Turpin in boxing pose was unveiled in Warwick. "On the bronze plaque below his feet are inscribed the words: In Palace, Pub, And Parlour the Whole of Britain Held Its Breath" (Phillips, Foreigners 156).

Before his death the state even claimed that he should pay huge taxes on all the prize money that he had earned. A really desperate act and one can wonder whether Turpin would have suffered that much if he had not been a black man. This question also occupies Phillips and Turpin's daughters:

> Do you think my dad would have got proper recognition if he wasn't black […] somebody told me that there are only two statues to black men in England. One is just along the river here, the one for Nelson Mandela, and the other is of our dad […] But there should be more recognition for black people, shouldn't there? (Phillips, *Foreigners.*159)

During his life Turpin was often despised, regarded as a man who for a short time could lift up the spirits of the British nation but who in the end still remained a black man. For the most part Phillips uses an omniscient third-person voice to tell the sad tale of how quickly Turpin descended into debt and despair, abandoned by his friends, ending his life by shooting his youngest child and committing suicide. Phillips's technique, unfortunately, distances the reader from the subject's consciousness until the last few pages, when Turpin is resurrected through the voices of Turpin's surviving mixed-race children. Foreigners clearly demonstrate the institutions, which were supposed to ensure justice but unfortunately ensured only one aim that was to keep immigrants void of power and segregated.

Northern Lights

The chapter entitled "Northern Lights" deals with the life of David Oluwale is rather remarkable because of its placement and narration: we never see David's thoughts or point of view, instead the description is always given through the eyes of others. This makes it often problematic at certain points, nevertheless it is intriguing to realise the character of David by putting all these depictions together.

The eighteen years old David reached Britain in 1949 dreaming of becoming an engineer but he experiences there the painful aspects of racism. Even if he wants to go to a pub, for example, he is often restricted by a big sign over the window which says: "No Coloureds, No Dogs, No Gypsies" (Phillips, Foreigners 184). It is astounding that black people, gypsies and animals were equally humiliated. These immigrants must have faced many contradictions: on the one hand they felt extremely unwelcome as a result of the colour bar, yet on the other hand they were extremely wanted by the British industry. In some industries the demand for labour was so great that members of the reserve army of black workers were actively recruited in their home countries. As a result, it was not very difficult to find a job, but the work given to these immigrants was very dangerous, as the local white people did not dare doing it. David's former personnel officer described his profession as follows:

> We attracted immigrants because the pay was competitive, but the conditions were terrible and safety was non-existent […] the day used to begin at 7:30 a.m. In fact, the hooter sounded three minutes before work was to start, and that's when the men would assemble in the streets and begin to

> clock in. They had an hour for lunch and worked right through until 5:30 p.m., but it wasn't easy. In fact, to many it was worse than being down the pit […] there were no safety shoes or anything.
> (Phillips, Foreigners 188-89)

The immigrants that worked there were strongly taken advantage from, and when someone dared to protest he was fired; these people had no rights whatsoever. This constant discrimination was difficult to accept for David: "he didn't understand the colour-bar situation and he would get very wound up." I'm from a British colony and I'm British," he would say. "So why do they call me 'nigger'?" This was the attitude David couldn't deal with. The reader understands the attitude of this immigrant and also how he became the white police's favourite target. They want him to keep unnoticed and accept what is happening around him rather than to be arrested or beaten.

As he did not hide himself, the two policemen who had already frequently beaten him without reason discovered David. But this time they were really merciless as they killed him. Tragically, something like this had to happen before Leeds realised that something had to be done; David's death was the starting point for condemning racist policemen:

> To me, David was a fighter for freedom. He was *not* another victim. You see, his life and death affected a whole generation. His life led to the full emergence of the Black Power movement in this city, and to black and white people finally saying "enough" (Phillips, Foreigners 226).

Caryl Phillips scrutinizes the pitfalls among the characters and the reader recognises the moral fluctuations of Francis Barber and his tender affection for alcohol and the downtrodden state in which the fictitious narrator finds his wife and children in Lichfield. Randolph Turpin's womanising attitude or his tendency to settle arguments with women by the use of his fists and David Oluwale's frustratingly stubborn insistence on remaining visible and accessible to his vicious tormentors, despite frequent offers of well wishers to protect him, are revealed in alluring words.

Throughout the entire novel, the disorientating narratives confuse the reader but it succeeds in reproducing the trauma for the reader, but once more, he or she is also prevented from fully identifying with the characters. As early as 1966, Barthes said in his "Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative":

> Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed among different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy […] stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation
> (Engl. transl.1977, 79).

Each of the three tales is woven with voices belonging to the precise context from the stiffly formal prose of Barber's 18th-century narrator to the multilayered police reports, interviews, flashbacks and talks that constitutes Oluwale's story. Phillips has an almost alarming capacity to humanise the ugly, brutal and sometimes outright wicked tendencies of his subjects. He makes a sensitive illustration of each character without romanticising or mythologising their painful stories. Through these three grim tales instead of arguing for blacks' inclusion in British society, Phillips seems to be elucidating that they will remain as aliens, forever. At one point, the white narrator of Barber's story reflects:

> Yes, the black should have left our country and journeyed back to Jamaica or to Africa ... In fact, all ebony personages should do so for I was now convinced that English air is clearly not suitable for Negro lungs and soon reduces these creatures to a state of childish helplessness
> (Phillips, Foreigners, 54).

The history makers always illustrate the level of biographical (re)creation in the foreground. Not the representation of past life, but the biographer in search for something, will be the focus of

metabiographic novels. It is noteworthy that the narrator's depiction reveals and disqualify some previous statements and happenings and it act as a real authority to interpret the events and gives out information. Phillips is a consistent believer that, a writer should feel empathy towards the society and illustrate things in an honest, insightful and compassionate manner, and according to him, the political is, unavoidable. He consciously tries to avoid giving any kind of judgement on the characters. Phillips states that he is not concerned with nationality since he finds race and class much more relevant to deal with and he does not believe in the assumption that he should be writing only about black experience. Human experience, after all, is largely universal.

Phillips also, is interested in the localization of identity which arises from his own personal experience as an immigrant child with its specific relation to England.These individual realities present a playful seriousness of his caught-between state in the post-war British history which he himself described as, "too late to be coloured, but too soon to be British." Phillips points out that the social and economic problems of the former British Empire must be studied in relation with colonization and such a connection is still prevalent in the present era of neocolonialism. Not surprisingly, Britain's humiliating attitude was not limited to people from the former British Empire only but also to the other members of 'European tribes' as well. Phillips compares the British in Spain to those in the Caribbean for they seem to have one thing in common - their lack of interest and respect for anything indigenous. The solution, Phillips has found to this problem is, the individual himself should come forward and join the resistance:

> I had learned that in a situation in which history is distorted, the literature of a people becomes its history, its writers the keepers of the past, present and future. In this situation, a writer can infuse a people with their own unique identity and kindle the fire of resistance.
> (Thomas, 2006, 36).

Phillips makes the theme of "belonging", one of the central pillars of his work. Hybridity or multiculturalism is conceptually very close to belonging and recent postmodernist theories embrace the concept as an inevitable pattern in writings. This clearly depicts that one's freedom revolve round the limitations of surrounding history and preconceived social positions. Caryl Phillips' fictions 'allegorically address the present' and reviewers have often criticised him for never talking directly to the British nation. This changes with the publication of the novel *Foreigners.* In this hybrid work, which sits between his novels and his more familiar non-fiction, Phillips skillfully demonstrates the black man's awareness of homelessness is based on the historical colonial premises of degradation, diversity and otherness. There is an important evolution in Phillips' fiction: he started writing about the past, and as a result he did not directly appeal to the British society. He then triggered on to the present what are the problematics of survival in Britain today. Moreover, countering and holding historical nuances, Phillips reminds the British of the painful mistakes that they had made and is still making with regard of the treatment of "foreigners" is concerned.

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