

## **Routes / Roots, Space and Migrants in Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child***

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**Abstract:** Reading Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child*, one discovers that there is a clear indication that the novels focus on travel and the desire to fit in a place. Thus, in this research, we set out to examine the identity ambivalences that go with traveling and the desire to belong in the different locales that Phillips represents in the novels. How movement from one place to another affects and builds the identity of an individual in time and space is the crux of analyses in this paper. The paper argues that the different locales in *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* play a great role in the identity construction of migrant characters. Thus, with theoretical methods from Cultural Studies, the paper reveals that in Phillips's narratives here studied, black migrants in Britain are grappling with challenges of belonging to a Britain that literally rejects them because of their "stranger" status.

**Keywords:** Routes, Roots, Belonging, Place, Identity, Stranger.

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### **I. Introduction**

The focus of this research is to discuss the plight of migrant characters from Africa and the Caribbean Islands to Britain and their search for identity, a reality that is far from the "myth of Britain" that George Lamming discusses in *The Pleasures of Exile*. Lamming submits that the colonial ideology continues to be lodged into their psyches of the ex-colonised that he/she continues to find his/herself inferior in front of the former colonialist. Thus, the paper demonstrates that in Phillips's narratives here studies, traveling, place and belonging, especially among people referred to as ex-colonised people, are complex and complicated issues that migrants, in the novels, who dream of Britain as a home, struggle to grapple with in a Britain that is, in herself, caught up in a cultural and racial mutating state. We are, therefore, of the opinion that *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* are narratives of encounter and identity construction. Also that encounter and identity construction are very complex and complicated for migrants in Britain because of the historicity of colonialism that makes Britain to continue to feel and to be defined with superiority.

### **II. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

Heather Sparling, Kati Szego and Frances Wilkins in "Atlantic Roots and Routes: Introduction" state that "routes" and "roots" allow us to imagine and tell the stories of human emplacement, and relocation; of severing and linking; of visiting, staying and returning. From Sparling, Szego and Wilkins, it is seen that the concept of routes and roots is very wide and deep for it involves both displacements and the effect of displacement on individuals, cultures and communities.

Routes means a way or road between things, which is the path from one place to the other while root is the underground base of a plant or the action of uprooting an individual from his/her place of origin to a new environment. Gayatri Spivak in *In Other Worlds: Essays in the Cultural Politics*, supports this view when she holds that routes are pathways between here and there, two points of rootedness. According to her, one cannot speak of route without identity, for routes often require some form of displacement- literally or figuratively. As such, leaving the native land makes the concept of home dialectical, with no clear definition of what home is. Rootedness to Spivak is the state of being tied to a single location. Moreover, routes imply travel, physical and psychical displacements in space, which in turn incorporates the crossing of borders and contact with difference. In order to understand the relationship between routes and roots, it is important to look at the vessels that carry travellers from one geographic location to the other for it is here that travellers encounter different people and cultures.

## *Routes / Roots, Space and Migrants in Caryl Phillips's A Distant Shore and The Lost Child*

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Transportation is a means of conveyance or travel from one place to another. Transportation, therefore, refers to any type of vessel that one can travel in or carry goods. Transporting goods and people with foreign trading partners can be accomplished by road, water, rail or air. This implies that vehicles, planes, moto bikes, feet, boats, ships, trains and cars can be used to travel. In *The History of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Forgotten Crime against Humanity*, Patricia M. Muhammad traces the history of Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the African Trans-Sahara slave trade. Muhammad submits that one cannot speak of transatlantic slave trade without associating it with the Trans-Sahara slave trade for African enslavement originated with the Trans-Sahara slave trade and expanded into the Trans- Atlantic slave trade.

However, in both cases, slave traders arbitrarily captured their victims and treated them as commodities to be sold for manual domestic, or field labour, as if they were another tool necessary for the cultivation of the New World. Slaves were marketed along routes of the Sahara in exchange for items varying from gold to clothing. Traders, emerged from many areas, and included members of the Songhai and Mali empires, the people of Ghana, and the Berbers of West Africa. Transportation at this stage was done by feet; trekking from one geographic location to the other and later on across the Sahara on camel's back to reach sub Saharan Africa from North African coast, Europe, to the Levant. This journey was very difficult because migrants went through the desert where water was scarce and hard to come by and the sun was very harsh. Most of them died from thirst and hunger and attacks from wild animals. During this period few people travelled by sea because they did not have good ships to face the dangerous sea tides.

Nevertheless, from the sixteenth to eighteenth century travel was mostly carried out through the sea because there was increase in the construction of slave ships, which transported millions of enslaved Africa to the Americas and Europe. The maritime web connected the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Atlantic: Western Europe, western and central Africa, and the Americas that made up the Atlantic world. Ships, boats, and Sailors tied the Atlantic world together. Native people depended on boats for fishing, communication, and trade with the wider world. Warships, merchant ships and thousands of Sailors who sailed them allowed European nations to manage their empires and profit from the far-flung lands they controlled.

In as much as ships served as means of transportation, they had a much bigger role to play as opined by Gilroy. Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* avers that:

It should be emphasized that ships were the living means by which the point within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly, they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more – means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production. The ship provides a chance to explore the articulation between the discontinuous of histories of England's ports, it interfaces with the wider world. Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialization and modernization. (17)

Gilroy brings to light that ships were not just vessels for transporting people from one place to the other but stand for shifting spaces in between the fixed places. That is, ships were used for the transportation of different people and different cultures from one place to the other and therefore resulted in the uprooting, enslavement and violence lived by many people. To him the “shifting spaces in-between” means hybridity, which signifies, like ships, border crossing and disparity. It is obvious that the spatial nature of “spaces in-between” or the middle passage and the image of sailing ships are mingled with each other into a space of mobile and temporal elements. Itala Vivian argues has sustained the view that ships are “the original in-between in a by now long history of (post) colonial in-between and that ships represent not only the Atlantic Slave Trade but “the traveling worlds” of European imperial power (220).

In order to cross over problems such as ethnicity, poverty, joblessness and integrity of modern nation, Gilroy settles on the image of ships in motion across the space between Europe, America, Africa, and in the Caribbean. Ships function now as that space that transports migrants from one space to the other and therefore brings two or more cultures together with their resulting effects of hybridity and diversity. The image of the ship is “a living micro cultural, micro-political system in motion”. To him “ships” immediately focuses attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts:” (4). He uses the image of the ship “to critique a nationalistic focus of what he calls, English and African-American cultural studies”(4). We are told that thousands of ships carried explorers, merchants, and migrants from Europe to the Americas.

The tenets of Cultural criticism are relevant to the analysis and interpretation of *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* especially as our focus is on cultural constructions and issues of travel and identity in multicultural Britain. We find the theory relevant because as Susan J Smith and Rachel Pain put it in *Fear*:

*Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*, Cultural Studies questions cultural hegemonies and enforces the idea of cultural pluralism. This makes that it becomes a politically leftist trend in reading and interpreting texts and cultural practices that look at sites and minute details of people's very existence in the confluence of cultures. Thereby there is the blurring of the binary of high and low culture (Bakhtin 4). Therefore, our reading of Phillips's narratives is guided by Jeff Lewis's views that textual readings from a Cultural Studies perspective engages both keen interpretative skills and an understanding of the politics in context.

### III. Ships and Travel: The Question of Encounter

Every crossing brought new encounters between people, customs, and ways of life, ultimately creating entirely new cultures in the Americas. This explains why Gilroy says "slave ships" were "vessels of transit and means of knowledge." In *A Distant Shore*, Gabriel/Solomon encounters Amma on the train while leaving his country (an unknown African country that is at war) to England. It is also on this journey that Amma told him why she is leaving her country in Africa to England. She says wicked men had killed her husband, raped her and got her pregnant and her husband people have also rejected her. The hostility she faces in her native land is the push factor that leads her to look elsewhere for a place of recognition and belonging. Similarly, Gabriel encounters the Chinese man and Said, the Iraqi, while crossing over the sea to England and during this crossing he begins to realise that life in England is not what he had dreamt of. It is on the various journeys that Gabriel learns of the importance of travelling. It was in the lorry with his uncle that he learns about the importance of moving out of the country. While in the camp and on the train, Gabriel is informed about all the wonderful things that England can and will provide for him. His uncle informs him that everybody is leaving so he should not be worried, for he is going to find home in England. Thus, journeys have a lot to play on the psychology of travellers.

Similarly, in Phillips's *The Lost Child*, he exposes the character of Monica's father while on the road in his car to visit the daughter at Oxford University. It is on this journey that his egoistic character is shown. He is presented as a self-centred man who cares about himself and nobody else. *The Lost Child* recounts a journey of a slave lady who has been sold into slavery and how the journey has been turbulent and cumbersome and the effects of that journey on the woman's life. The old woman recounts how she has been transported thrice in her life as a slave in a ship across the Atlantic Ocean. She submits that her first journey was from an African country to the Caribbean. The old woman recalls how she was later sold to a new owner and how her first journey to the Caribbean was difficult because of the presents of rats, which fed on human passengers. "Also they were chained and manacle in the holds, "where they rolled to the left and then back to the right, their rotation determined by the undulating waves" (5). The journey narrated in *The Lost Child*, is a replica of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade where Africans were captured or kidnapped, maltreated and loaded into ships to the Caribbean, South America, Latin America, or North America to work on the plantations.

This journey comprised of shiploads of Africans engrossed with fear, who involuntarily embarked on this horrific journey. This journey exposes the heartless nature of Europeans who treated human beings with cruelty and scorn. The lack of space often compelled slaves to lie in their own or other's bodily excrements without the opportunity to cleanse themselves. This overcrowding forced the Africans to endure unbearable heat due to poor ventilation. These conditions led to excessive perspiration and consequently dehydration. Furthermore, Africans who were not accustomed to sailing suffered from sea sickness and vomiting which increased their water loss. As a result of these unsanitary conditions, Africans became susceptible to disease. Many slaves died from fever, measles and scurvy while aboard the slave ship before they even reached the shores of the west.

In addition to the physical constraints that overcrowding imposed, iron shackles restrained the slave's ankle and wrist while aboard the slave ship and also upon arrival in the New World. The psychological impact was so great for many Africans died of depression. Africans further suffered from physical and psychological harm from the European sailors who rape African female slaves aboard the ship. Journeys were extremely difficult for the slaves for slaves were killed aboard the ships and their corpse were thrown overboard to instil fear and discourage other slaves from insurrection. At other times, the European crew would force slave captives to eat the flesh of rebellious slave (78). Such action was not only physical punishment for the actual victim, but also psychological torture for those forced to witness the barbaric treatment.

The initial transportation of slaves through what is known as the Middle Passage disrupted family and cultural ties and caused irreparable emotional and psychological damage. The slave vessels themselves were unequipped to safely transport the multitude of slaves as passengers on most ships, and shortages of headroom forced slaves into huddled position for a journey that lasted several weeks.

Another case in point is that of Gabriel/ Solomon who leaves Africa to Europe in search for a home. The journey is not an easy one, taking into consideration the huddles he and other migrants have to pass through before arriving England. Phillips represents the Atlantic slave voyage in *A Distant Shore* when he captures the journey made by Gabriel, Bright, Amma and many other Africans from an unknown African country to England. The journey is made through different modes of transportation. The journey begins in a lorry, followed

### *Routes / Roots, Space and Migrants in Caryl Phillips's A Distant Shore and The Lost Child*

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by a train and ends with a ship voyage. The train is packed full with people running away from war, everywhere is dark with little or no space to stretch their legs. Their first stop is Paris and at this point Gabriel separates from his uncle, Joshua. Joshua says for those who want to continue to England they have to take a bus that will take them as far as the tunnel. This separation is painful, for this is the only family that Gabriel has, but he has no choice. The journey is full with uncertainty for Joshua who made travel documents to help these people leave home says he does not know what will happen next at this point. He says, "they keep telling me that it is possible to go to England" (106). Is it not ironical that someone is making documents for people to travel without being sure that the journey will be possible? Joshua represents all those individuals who collect money from people with empty promises to help them leave their native land for Europe. They exploit people and send them into unknown and unfruitful journeys.

The first stop of this journey is when the travellers are dropped off and those going to France continue to France while those heading to England have to look for a way forward with a new guide. Here we are introduced to the problem of illegal immigration, for it is very risky and dangerous. Nothing is sure about your life. They board a bus and move on to the next phase of the journey where Gabriel spends his time thinking about his future. He cannot sleep and wishes to help Amma and the child but has no water to offer them. This phase of the journey comes to an end with the travellers being shown where to go after they alight from the bus in a French countryside. They passed through hedges and get to a space where some tents have been placed. It is from here that their journey to England begins. The journey is very tedious because they have to pay money for their cross-over and this crossing is very risky for the path they trek on is constantly watched by police officers. Amma pays \$200 for herself and her baby to jump on a fast-moving train to leave Africa but will not succeed. However, the two other immigrants succeed in jumping and therefore leave for England. The guide refuses to refund the money for he claims that he has already paid the guards three places in the train. The travellers rest in a camp, which symbolizes the warehouses in which slaves were held in while awaiting the arrival of ships or slave traders.

Added to this risk, is the cold weather. Other men use this opportunity to extort money from those struggling to leave their native land. This issue is current because today in our societies we find many Africans (Cameroonian, Nigerians) passing through Libya, Mexico, Egypt and many other countries to smuggle themselves into Europe and America. Most of them die in the cause of this displacement or end up in prisons or repatriated. Gabriel and Bright wish to continue on the journey but have no money. A Chinese man who is also running to England informs Bright that there is another way out for people who have no money. Bright submits, "The Chinese man told me that for those with no money, the only way into England is the boat" (119). In *A Distant Shore*, the readers are exposed to some of the risk involved in traveling unlawfully. The narrator says that:

Gabriel smells the sea, but he says nothing. The three of them continue to edge their way down the dark road, until they are greeted with a bank of floodlights which reveal a bustling scene of trucks and people, all of whom are bathed in the dazzling pool of bright fluorescent light. The Chinese man points to the bulk of a huge ship and then he speaks to bright in a whisper, all the while glancing towards the vessel. Bright listens and then turns to Gabriel. He says that we are to move quickly through the trucks till we close to the ship. Then we run to the ropes that secure the ship to the harbour take them in our hands and drop over the side. There is a ledge on the side of the ship that we put our feet on, and we must hold on to the ship. (119-120)

This is what it entails going abroad illegally, for people risk their lives. The Chinese man will die in his attempt to go to Europe, Gabriel will break the leg though he finally gets to Europe. But what does he find in Europe? Bright had told him that English people are the only people who respect Africans. What an irony! For immediately Gabriel enters England he ends up in jail. Even after being release he is asked to go somewhere far and to keep away from London, for people will not welcome him due to the popularity of his case. To travel to Europe or America or anywhere in the world people need documents to protect themselves. Just look at what these three men go through because they have no documents to travel with. The Chinese man is described as:

Chinese man is not listening. He looks intently all about himself, and then suddenly his red hat is moving quickly through the trucks. Bright notices that they have been abandoned and he is quick to follow. Gabriel chases after his younger friend, and the two men scamper quickly in an effort not to lose sight of the Chinese man. They hide behind the truck that is closest to the ship, and all three of them wait until they have caught their breath. Then the Chinese man points first to himself, then to Bright, and then to Gabriel so that it is clear that they are to move off in this order. Without waiting to see if his instructions have registered, the man dashes to the side of the ship and swings himself off the quayside and down into narrow gap between the sea wall and the vessel. Gabriel and Bright look at each other, but neither says anything. Bright glances all around



and then scurries off. Gabriel watches as Bright grabs a rope and then disappears over the quayside. And now Gabriel runs out, his heart pounding, and he too grabs the rope and lower himself until he can feel the ledge beneath his feet. (121)

These migrants are afraid of crossing over borders because they do not have legal papers but they desperately want to cross. They search around them to check if there are any police officers patrolling the area. This is the risk involved in traveling out of one's native land illegally but people are seen every day struggling to move out of their country in search for home and better opportunities. Home, as scholars like Benedict Anderson puts it, is in the imagination and until one gets to this position where he or she feels comfortable, the idea of home is not attained.

From the foregoing discussion on routes and roots travelled by the immigrant, one realises that journeys from the Caribbean to Europe were carried out mostly in ships and these journeys were cumbersome and stressful both physically and psychologically on the travellers and it took only the strong hearted to arrive their final destination in one piece. The maritime world was truly multiracial and multilingual due to the trade, which made blacks to develop a resistance to an onshore system, which denied them their fundamental of rights. Blacks could fight for themselves because of the training received on the ship. In *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child*, one observes that journeys enable travellers to train themselves, obtain jobs and learn new cultures and ideas. Phillips's characters like Said, Gabriel and the old unnamed woman and other immigrants on slave ships discover who the colonisers were; they realised that whites had no values for blacks in spite of the fact that they were taking the blacks to go and develop their countries. Blacks further learn more about the heartlessness of their masters and later started looking for means to defend and protect themselves. The old woman and Gabriel will learn a lot while moving from Africa to the Caribbean and America during the journey

Again, the sea provided the slaves with an escape route from plantation slavery. Even though ships have been looked upon as means of exploitation and suppression of cultures it has played a positive role in the minds of Africans. Ships were important in the eighteenth century due to the politics and poetry of the Black Atlantic world for most of British army were made up of Africans for whom the experience of slavery was a powerful orientation to the ideologies of liberty and justice. Gilroy notes in his book "ships remained perhaps the most important conduct of Pan-African communication before the appearance of the long-playing record" (13).

Nevertheless, going to the sea was not an easy task, for it had its own difficulties like being captured in the sea by pirates, being sold back into slavery in the South or imprisoned. As concerned the routes and roots travelled by immigrants it was observed that people left their homelands in search for a place called home but they met with a lot of hardship and resistance in the migratory spaces. Solomon and Dorothy are not welcome in Stoneledge nor the Jewish Doctor and family. The Doctor, Solomon and Dorothy are treated as outcast. The villages were unwelcoming and the youth's hostile to Solomon. The story is the same in *The Lost Child*, for strangers are treated as people with no cultures and barbarians.

#### IV. Conclusion

In this study, the focus was to establish the fact that movements in Phillips's *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* reveals a situation where native land seems to diminish the individual's sense of belonging, thereby, forcing the individual (now a victim in some kind of exile) to seek for a sense of selfhood elsewhere. In this sense, traveling for identity recognition as Phillips demonstrate through character construction is ambiguous giving that most of his characters in the novels here studied end up more homeless in the dream world of Britain. Therefore, routes become and agency to define and interpret a displaced people's identity. Since the novels here studied are dominantly set in Britain and so representing Black people in Britain, Gilroy's concept of double consciousness was used and conceptual and theoretical framework. Double consciousness was effectively applied to justify the thesis of this study that migrating people from the former British colonies has made Britain a culturally and racially polarised world. However, it is still hard for these formerly colonised people travelling to settle in Britain to comfortably call Britain their home.

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*Routes / Roots, Space and Migrants in Caryl Phillips's A Distant Shore and The Lost Child*

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