

Traumatic Experiences and Incessant Anxieties in Caryl Phillips' *Higher Ground*

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Abstract: *This article attempts to evaluate Caryl Phillips's **Higher Ground** from the perspective of Trauma Studies. Phillips' obsession for the legacy of slavery and anti-Semitism continues even in the novel **Higher Ground**. The systematic institution of slavery dehumanized and debased the blacks and exploited them in all aspects. The characters in the novel recount the tales of their experiences, sufferings, sense of nostalgia, feeling of uprootedness, torn self, Diaspora and traumatic memories. The different characters of three parts are unrelated, but they seem to be linked with regard to the traumatic experience and anxiety they share and narrate.*

Keywords: *Trauma, History, Slavery, Displacement, Atlantic Slave Trade,*

1. Introduction

The present article attempts to analyse a literary classic of the contemporary Black British writer Caryl Phillips. His majority of the fiction and non-fiction written over a period of time explore the legacies of slavery, racism and anti-Semitism. His significant novel *Higher Ground* is not an exception as it excavates the histories of both blacks and Jews. The protagonists in Phillips's novel struggle with traumatic memories of racist or anti-Semitic violence. *Higher Ground* is a novel in three parts that narrate the stories of three protagonists from different history and geographical locations. Despite its disjointedness, the stories in the book are not treated in isolation, but they address one another, as a result, his work resonates with Cathy Caruth's notion of history and trauma as inherently relational (Craps 191). According to Caruth, a leading name in trauma studies "History, like trauma, is never simply one's own...[H]istory is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma" (Caruth 24). The literary works written on the oppressed carry in it the subject of humiliation, pain and suffering. It is these subjects which have given rise to trauma studies, trauma studies as Craps opines "[are] cultural investigation(s) that came to prominence in the early-to-mid 1990's and predominately focus on real world issues such as history, politics and ethics". Phillips in *Higher Ground* relates the African racial and Jewish anti-Semitic discrimination to show how the traumatic experiences are interrelated and implicated in each other's trauma.

Phillips's *Higher Ground* is a novel in three parts, consisting of three stories namely "Heartland", "The Cargo Rap" and "Higher Ground". The first part of the novel "Heartland" is set on the African Coast, the unnamed narrator is a slave acting as a translator, he was useful for the officials to control the slaves and other cargo transactions. He was also equally brutally treated by his masters and rejected by his own people. The Governor of the fort regards him "the most unlikely creature" (*Higher Ground* 13). This trauma of being rejected by the master and his own people makes him so restless that he feels isolated in the crowded atmosphere. Phillips's characters struggle to achieve the self-respect and inner peace in such volatile circumstances. Sarvan rightly points out the struggle of such characters as "Beyond cruelty and degradation lie continuum and death or the attempt to recover some self-respect and inner peace" (Sarvan 518). At the end of the first section, the unnamed narrator himself is transported to the United States: his loss is not his profit.

The second part of the novel "Cargo Rap" narrates the painful existence of Rudy Williams, the whole of this part is written in an epistolary form. Wherein the narrative of this part is conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters. Rudy, the narrator of this section makes an attempt to liberate the Blacks and put an end to the persisting racism in the society. Rudy Williams recounts the pain in the letter as:

They assume black people to be the trouble makers... The Trouble makers are those who set dogs upon unarmed men and women, who shoot and bomb children in a church in our home town who turn fire hoses on the black people to prevent marching peaceably on the side walk (*Higher Ground* 64). sufferings of blacks due to the racism has been a vital concern for majority of writers in the Afro-American community. The ethos of the narrator are also of writers and sizeable black population lived in America and Britain. As Sarvan points out “The Story is remarkable for the power with which it depicts the psychological and physical damage sustained by bearing in mind its epistolary nature” (Sarvan 518).

The Third section “Higher Ground” narrates the traumatic experiences of a Jewish girl, who has been hustled out of Poland by her parents to escape the holocaust. As Sarvan opines “It recounts the trauma of her experiences and the cold incomprehension she encounters in England, drive her first inward to bleak loneliness, then to numb sexual experience and a loveless marriage and finally to a breakdown and attempted suicide” (Sarvan 518). As a whole, *Higher Ground* as a novel in three parts relates all the three protagonists in the traumatic experience in the backdrop of history. It is considered as the most fragmented novels of Caryl Phillips, despite the fact that the three stories contained in the *Higher Ground* have no connection to one another, various implicit parallels emerge among them. Stef Craps opines in “Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*” as “*Higher Ground*...a novel in three parts, encourages the reader to read the three sections together and to uncover parallels between the lives of the individual protagonists” (Craps 17). In the novel, Phillips by employing three different narrators from three racial and geographical background experiments with the polyphonic narrative technique to tell the history of racial and anti-Semitic violence from three different perspectives, as Cathy Caruth says to implicate history in each other’s trauma (Caruth 24).

Polyphonic narrative interweaves main plot and a multiplicity of subplots into an intricately interrelated structure. Phillips uses the polyphonic narration to explore the trauma and history of Blacks and Jews in the *Higher Ground*. The protagonists of three sections of the novel represent Black and Jewish diaspora respectively. While the unnamed narrator of the first section ‘Heartland’ takes the readers to African continent to explain the horrors and brutality of the African Slave Trade, the second section concentrates on racial segregation and discrimination of Blacks in America. The Third section ‘Higher Ground’ explores the anti-Semitic violence expressed by the woman character. Multiple subplots, though not connected, they have an intricate interrelatedness in exploring the pangs and pains of slavery, racism and anti-Semitism.

Firstly, the three sections of the novel are modelled upon the repressed side of a historical accounting like a slave narrative, a prison memoir and an account of a descent into madness. The unnamed narrator of the Part one is not a slave and however is not free, the convict of Part- Two is poised in between his criminal youth and his desire to be an adult who wishes to contribute to the development of the black community; Irena, a Jewish girl of Part- Three, is the only member who has survived the Second World War, she is not a child now but cannot function as an adult too. Finally, all these protagonists have involuntarily exiled in from their home communities, as a result of this, they suffer a staggering loneliness. They are as Jenny Sharpe observes “people who have been displaced and who lack a comforting or stabilizing history or tradition” (Sharpe 155). Therefore, they are all searching for some means of relief to get rid of these sufferings that intimidate to destroy, they search for the higher ground that saves them from drowning in despair or madness.

As the novel’s epigraph says in the traditional prayer “Lord set my feet on higher ground,” (Phillips, *Higher Ground*). In connection with the epigraph of the novel Sarvan says, “safe from the floodwaters of life; and the stories, though dealing with different centuries, continents, and characters, are unified by this theme of individual lives damaged, if not destroyed, by cruel, man-made waters. Images of being marooned, of shipwrecked lives, of the impossibility of escape across the sea to another land, recur” (Sarvan 518). The protagonists of the three sections undergo a traumatic experience related to the anxiety, loss and dislocation, in spite of it, they try to overcome such physical degradation as Fred D’Aguiar observes, “*The Higher Ground* is both literal in the move northwards of Irena, the Central Character of part three, a Polish Jewess escaping Nazi

persecution and metaphysical; characters from the first two parts achieve a degree of moral and ethical self-betterment through gigantic mental efforts in the midst of physical degradation, both in the setting of the late seventeenth century slave trade on the African West Coast in part one, and in prison in the American South of the 1960's in part two" (Aguiar 287).

In *Higher Ground*, Phillips continues to explore his formal interest in dealing with the same legacy of slavery, Jewish persecution and slave trade. A majority of his fiction and essays, he conjures up the historical past to redress the crime of slavery and anti-Semitism. As Clarence Major opines "He [Phillips] is passionately interested in probing the moral and ethical exchange and conflict between Africa, Europe and America over the issue of slavery" (Major 173). Caryl Phillips's main preoccupation lies with his projection of uprooted characters in these settings[Africa, America and Europe]. *Higher Ground* as a novel attempts to look at the characters from the repressed side of history and narrates the pangs of past, experienced by the characters in three parts. The past legacy of slavery and anti-Semitism links the characters to one another and relates itself with traumatic past which is implicated in each other's memory.

2. References

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