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On Caryl Phillips' *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018)

齊　藤　みどり

SAITO Midori

Abstract

Caryl Phillips' *A View of the Empire at Sunset* narrates the story of Jean Rhys, from her childhood in Dominica, her migration to England, and her long-waited journey back to the Caribbean. In this essay, I shall examine how Phillips construct *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) and explain why his attempt to understand her life is important in understanding the Caribbean identity. Phillips's take on Jean Rhys as a Caribbean writer is interesting in a way since whether to include Jean Rhys in the tradition of Caribbean literature has been contested by several literal critics and writers for decades. Phillips re-tells the life of Jean Rhys and makes her return to the Caribbean imaginatively possible.

1 Introduction

The word "diaspora" originates from the Greek verb διασπείρω (diaspeirō), which means "scatter". This term is often used to refer to the diaspora of Jews exiled from Israel during the 8th to 6th centuries BCE. A similar term, "African diaspora," is often used to connect Jewish tribes' state of exile with the descendants of black enslaved people who have lost their homeland due to their capture and enslavement. The historian George Frederickson's landmark study on the connections between the history of Jews and that of the African diaspora is the only significant research on the topic. Similarly, the shared link through the sufferings between these two groups in the past has not been well discussed upon either in the literary field. With the rise of the Black Power movement, the collaboration between the black people and the Jewish people did not last for long, and celebrated black writers such as James Baldwin and others were reluctant to acknowledge the similarities in their sufferings to those of Jewish people in their writings.

In 1991, the Nation of Islam published *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, which argued that Jewish people played a major role in the Atlantic slave trade and profited considerably from slavery. The book was criticized for its bias by scholars such

as Henry Louis Gates Jr., and it encouraged scholarship on the involvement of Jewish people in the slave trade. Historians such as David Brion Davis and Seymor Drescher revealed that Jewish people were indeed involved in the slave trade, but in significantly in lesser degree than their Christian counterparts. Perhaps, it is not possible to compare these two distinct events, however, understanding the origins and racial oppressions at the given time may "contribute to our grasp of how systems of racial oppression function" (Taylor 186).

With this in mind, Caryl Phillips' writings demonstrate that racial and gender oppression is not limited to certain groups of people. In his writing, through connecting experiences of different group of people at different times in history, he reveals that many people have confronted systematic dehumanization. I argue that his *A View of the Empire at Sunset* is also an attempt to understand the oppression of 'the other' .

2　Caryl Phillips' *Higher Ground* (1989)

Caryl Phillips, a writer of Caribbean origin, has been making the connection between these two groups of Diasporas through their experience of displacements. In his third book, *Higher Ground* (1989), Phillips explicitly links three people's lives from different times and places:

Higher Grounds portrays three protagonists through their shared experiences of literal or figurative confinement. The first story is set in the late eighteenth-century African coast where slaves were traded. The narrator works for white colonists as an interpreter and agent. In this story, Phillips examines the plight of a woman who was sexually abused by the white colonists and then ostracized by her native village for being damaged by the whites. The narrator falls in love with the woman; yet he also has to endure his destiny of becoming a slave.

The second story, "The Cargo Rap", consists of letters written by Rudi Williams between 1967 and 1968 when the Black Power Movement seized the headlines in the media. The narrator, Rudi Williams, is a young black American who has been imprisoned for armed robbery. In his letters, he convinces his family to share his vision of race but in vain.

The third story centers around Irina, a Jewish woman who emigrated from Poland to the UK before the World War II. Due to the separation from her family, estrangement in a foreign country, and a failed marriage, Irina slowly loses mental stability.

Higher Ground is unique as it connects three different displacements experienced by different people of "race" at different periods in history, emphasizing the universal experience of exile in the narrative. Phillips' attempt to link three people across time, place, and race, suggests his commitment to undo the politics of racial identity and resist easy classification. What has enabled Phillips to examine the danger of easy classification

of race is connected to his experience of being born in the Caribbean and emigrating to Britain at young portable age of 5. Growing up in Yorkshire, in the north of England, as a black working-class boy, and entering to a prestigious university from a comprehensive school taught him the meaning of displacement in a deeply racist society. He left Britain in the 1980s to "construct his own identity":

> I too was convinced that to be free to explore and construct my own independent identity, and therefore write with some degree of freedom and compassion, I would have to leave; and so, in 1984, I left Britain for Europe to look at other places and people and encourage them to gaze upon me. There was no way that I was handing over responsibility for defining me to a country that was under the leadership of Mrs. Thatcher, a woman who clearly had little respect for people such as myself. After all, it was her own daughter, Carol Thatcher, who in her book, Below the Parapet, revealed that her mother and father used to joke that the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting should be more properly known as "Coons Holidaying on Government Money"("Necessary Journeys").

This experience of voluntary journeys and displacement seems to have enabled Philips to consider the meaning of identity that is not fixed, which is reminiscent of another Caribbean intellectual, Stuart Hall's "strategic and positional" notion of identity, in which Hall considers the concept of "identity" be replaced with "positional identification" (Hall 16).

3 Jean Rhys and *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018)

Phillips has displayed a keen interest in the lives of individuals in his writings such as *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) and *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018). The former portrays the life of Bert Williams, a Broadway artist while the latter portrays the life of Jean Rhys, the writer of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

In this essay, I shall examine how Phillips constructs *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) and explain why his attempt to understand Rhys' life is important in understanding the Caribbean identity. Phillips seems to consider Jean Rhys as a Caribbean person as he mentions her name in his article for *the Guardians* in 2004. In the 1980s, when the racial tension was high in Britain, he frequently went back to the eastern Caribbean in an attempt to understand the journeys made by the people of the Caribbean origin, and he mentions that similar accounts had already been written by "CLR James, Jean Rhys, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, in fact by the greater number of my Caribbean literary antecedents"("Necessary Journeys").

Phillips' take on Jean Rhys as a Caribbean writer is interesting in a way since her inclusion in the tradition of Caribbean literature has been contested by several literal critics and writers for decades. The debate on whether Rhys is a Caribbean writer started after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. In this debate, the most influential research was that of Kenneth Ramchand in his published doctoral thesis, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (1970). Ramchand applied Fanon's term "terrified consciousness" to Rhys' work in which a fear and a feeling of guilt on the part of the white Creole is revealed. Ramchand further related Rhys' works to those of other white West Indians such as John Hearne, a Jamaican novelist, who also considered Rhys as a West Indian in his article "*Wide Sargasso Sea*: A West Indian Reflection" (1974).

Critics who studied Rhys either followed or argued against Ramchand's position. For instance, fellow West Indian, V.S. Naipaul, identified himself with Rhys as a West Indian writer in the *New York Review of Books* (1972), stating that Rhys had identified the themes that engaged West Indian writers later on: isolation, an absence of society or community, the sense of things falling apart, dependence, and loss.

However, not all West Indians critics agreed with this view. For example, Kamau Brathwaite claims in his *Contradictory Omens* (1974) that Rhys' contribution to West Indian literature is relatively small and her texts can only be read as representative of those of the white minority. In 1994, Hulme problematized Braithwaite's view expressed in *Contradictory Omens* (1974), attacking his argument that West Indian spiritual culture belongs to the black majority and claiming that the relationship of Antoinette and Tia in the novel is historically fraught. Brathwaite responded to Hulme in "A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars". He claimed that Rhys' work cannot be discussed without paying attention to an historical understanding of the West Indies, and refuted Hulme's suggestion that the oppression of women and black women can be discussed in parallel. Rather, he considers these two issues as separate and that gender and race cannot be naively meddled with.

After this long debate about whether to consider Rhys as a Caribbean writer, Phillips' *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) seems to offer a new statement to this issue. He sees the shortcomings of the views by critics of Jean Rhys who had focused on her days in Europe or in England, thinking her life and literary career started outside of her native island, Dominica. Instead, Phillips considers her literary life had already started when Rhys was in Dominica. He expresses his realization in an interview when he visited Dominica and saw a local library:

> But it was actually seeing the library in Dominica, a very modest little place, that made me think, "Oh, this is who she is". Not the drunk, staggering around London and Paris and getting into all sorts of mischief with various men and dancing on the stage... No, she's a girl who loved to read, that's who she is. That's just a fact that changed my thinking about her, from framing her within the Edwardian music hall

> tradition or bohemian Paris, which is the common vision that people have of Jean Rhys. They think her life began when she got off the ship in England. They don't realize that, actually, she had 16 and a half years living in this tropical paradise where she learnt to read. So I began to reconfigure her and rethink her once I saw that library. ("A Growth to Understanding" 9)

4 Reading *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018)

A View of the Empire at Sunset is divided into ten chapters, in three different geographical areas: Dominica, the UK, and the Continent. The novel opens up with a scene where Gwendolen Rees Williams and her husband plan to travel to her native island of Dominica. This scene serves as the framework of the entire book and the book ends with Gwen and her husband leaving Dominica. Apart from foregrounding the significance of Rhys' return journey to Dominica, the book considers Rhys as a West Indian since it underlines her love for the island in the Caribbean as well as her childhood in Dominica with intricate details, and therefore, makes it possible to "relocate our thinking of her into a Caribbean context"(Gonzalez).

In the opening section of the book, Phillips gives the reason for Gwen's return to go back to Dominica: she has to go back there to repair the damage her brother had caused in his youth (11). The nature of the damage is not explicitly explained in the novel, but a reader can assume that her brother had left children out of wedlock. Phillips, as the narrator, depicts Gwen as an outsider in England and struggles to share the same opinion about English and English countryside with her English husband:

> Mt dear Leslie, you have now purchased the tickets for transatlantic voyage, so let us just go to the West Indies. I will show you the public gardens by the library where I used to sit as a girl and stare out at the sea and try to imagine the world beyond my island. But of course, I had no real conception of what lay beyond the horizon. I will show you rays of sunlight filtering through clouds and ribbons of water falling from palm fronds and grooving trenches into the earth, We two can lie in a hollow and witness the shimmer of later afternoon heat making corrugated iron of the air, and listen to a nearby stream trickling noisily over smooth stones...... I will show you the rivers and the mountains, and come evening, as the New World day convulses towards dusk, I will share with you a spectacular elevated view of the empire at sunset. Perhaps, my husband, if I show you the West Indies, then you will finally come to understand that I am not of your world, and maybe then you will appreciate the indignity I feel at not only having to live among you people but possibly die among you. I am so sorry. (14)

In this Gwendolen's monologue, Phillips clearly considers Gwen (Jean Rhys) as a West Indian who has immigrated to England but having both failed to settle in her "mother country" and to identify herself with her English husband.

Furthermore, to illustrate how Gwen is rooted in the Caribbean, Phillips portrays the friendship between Gwen and Francine, a daughter of Gwen's mother's servant. The novel depicts how Francine would come running away from her father to Gwen's house, and call out her name (23). Gwen and Francine would "amuse themselves by crawling around the empty marketplace on all flours playing the zoo" or would sing with her "the words of which she seldom fully understood"(24). Sometimes, they would play "castaway and native, with Francine always assuming the role of the tragically helpless castaway"(24). Significantly, Gwen does not play the role of castaway, but plays the island's native. According to Alessia Poletti, "This reference to Crusoe/Friday dichotomy — with Gwen's personification of Friday — is a first evidence of Gwen's predisposition to play as a subaltern object, as she will do all along her adult life, both as a writer and a woman" (309).

Gwen is described as a misfit, caught between the black and white even by a servant: "It look to me like Miss Gwendolen catch somewhere between coloured and white"(32). She does not understand her mother's insistence on valuing Englishness or laments for the death of the Queen. Therefore, in fear of not growing up like an English girl, her mother separates Gwendolen from Francine, lying that Gwen was resting in a "sugar-coated voice"(24). Phillips makes it clear that Francine, or 'the Negro girl' thought Gwendolen as "her friend" and it was her mother who tore the friendship growing between them. Moreover, it was her mother who decided that Gwen should be sent to England to be educated, to which Gwendolen objects because she does not "understand why anybody would want to board a ship and leave such a place"(30). She does not want to go but she cannot protest against her mother's request, and instead she tries to burn the landscape of her beloved island into her memory before she leaves to England. Phillips emphasises Gwen's profound affection for the island and her sorrow in leaving the place. The following passage depicts Gwendolen's wish to capture and remember her island:

> She knew that in days that remained, her task was to secure the island in her mind so that whatever transpired on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean, she would always be able to immediately conjure a picture of home. She closed her eyes and attempted to fix a sequence of images that might appeal to all of her senses: the distinctive sharp smell of dark velvet nights, the musical beat of rain on tin roofs, pipe water thundering into metal pails, the sun flaming against the sea before it disappears, the excessive, burdensome fertility of the island's fruit trees, the vast electrical bravura of a sudden thunderstorm, the irritating flailing of a dead frond against the trunk of a palm when visiting her mother's family estate and attempting to find sleep. (56)

Her Welsh father also shares the love for the island in the Caribbean and also the contempt for the English with her daughter. Her father tells her daughter that "the English to think of themselves as all-conquering heroes" is questionable as he thinks there is no glory in "defending a horde of barefoot primitives with spears for weapons and no experience of rifles and cannons"(65). Her father warns his daughter against the English men: "In the small country of England it is not uncommon for a man to look you in the eye and say one thing while meaning another thing altogether"(65). Through the portrayal of the values imposed by her mother who cherishes Englishness and her Welsh father who is critical of the English, Phillips seems to complicate the simple categorisation of "white colonists" and to offer instead an empathetic understanding of Jean Rhys.

Phillips' understanding of Rhys and his attempt to connect her sufferings with the black people on the island can be revealed in the episode with Mr. Morrison, the new English family that arrived on the island. Her father disapproved of Mr. Morrison because he has developed 'a particular loathing for the Negros' and he called them as 'niggers'. Furthermore, Mr. Morrison was rumoured to have punished an elderly servant in the privacy of his backyard with an unnecessary brutal beating with a stick (108). When Gwen is invited to his party, she has to keep a hideous secret from her mother: "Mr. Morrison had scratched her"(108). The passage subtly hints that Gwen might have been molested by Mr. Morrison, but the confused girl could not tell her mother what had happened. It is not too farfetched to say that Phillips may have attempted to link the experience of the elderly black servant with Gwendolen through their suffering at the hands of Mr. Morrison, and thereby offered more information on her life, resisting a simple categorisation of Rhys as a white colonist.

5 Lost in the 'Mother Country'

Furthermore, Phillips underlines Gwen's isolation and uneasiness even after she travels to England. Aunt Clarice does not approve of her brother of living in the colony and worries that he does not "maintain the correct standards of decency that might serve as an example for his children"(85). She warns Gwen to comb her hair: "If you wish to wear your hair like a golliwog, then I can't stop you, but in England, it is customary for a young lady to spend some time preparing herself before she enters the world each morning"(86). Aunt Clarice refers to her hair like "a golliwog", a pejorative name for the black people. This is another instance that Phillips demonstrates his understanding of how a 'white creole' from the Caribbean might have been perceived at that time. Phillips also illustrates how Gwen was bullied in the girl's school in Cambridge:

> During the course of the next few weeks this Myrtle would one day pretend to be her friend and the following day openly conspire against her with the other girls. "We

> don't understand what you are saying." "Do you speak English?" "Why do you wear such old-fashioned clothes?" "Have you no other shoes, you heathen?" "What do you mean you have never ridden a bicycle?" "Snow is white, stupid, and it falls from the sky. Like rain." "Do you have monkeys in your family? I mean as relatives, not pets?"(78)

Depicting Gwen in this way, Phillips invites the reader to imagine Rhys' isolation and loneliness being away from the West Indies. Questions such as 'Do you have monkeys in your family?' hint at the English children's derogatory attitude for the children from the colonies who were considered lower than their status.

Phillips elaborates that this sort of 'bullying' against poor Gwen continued even in her relationship with men, especially with Lancy, a son of a wealthy aristocrat family. When she is invited for an afternoon tea to meet Lancy's mother, she feels "there was something terribly illicit about her own waiflike presence in the world" (162) while his mother is asking her about her people and from where her origin is (162). In "the interview" with Lancy's mother, Gwen is unable to satisfy his mother's standard, and her relationship with Lancy would soon fall apart because she is not considered good enough for his family (162).

On writing about Gwendolen's failed relationship with Lancy, Phillips explains how he perceived the entire incident in his interview:

> I wouldn't have understood how damaged and distraught she felt at being patronized by this man's mother, unless I imagined it. You know, she fell in love with a man who after a year and a bit basically dumped her because he was just messing around with her. She was a mongrel, she was never going to fit into his family; his father was the governor of the Bank of England, for God's sake; he was a government adviser, he lived in this townhouse in Mayfair. ("A Growth to Understanding" 12)

The word "mongrel" is important here: 'mongrel' refers to something of inferior or dubious origin, "feared and despised because they straddle and destabilize racial boundaries" (Ferber 54). In Rhys' time, white colonials were considered inferior to the white British, often defined as defective or degenerate. Similarly, in the United States where Phillips was writing the novel, white supremacists thought of mixed-race people as a threat to civilization, incapable of surviving on their own or of contributing to a society. Referring to Rhys as "mongrel", Phillips does not consider Rhys (or Gwen) to be either English or a white colonist. Instead, he portrays Rhys as a half-caste, or a misfit who does not fit either in colonial society or the English society.

Towards the end of the novel, Phillips enables Gwen, or Rhys to make an effort in reconciling with her beloved island and with her family's past. When Gwen revisits the island, she welcomes her brother's illegitimate children and offers them money and gift in

compensation. Although her husband Leslie argues that she has been too generous and she might have been taken advantage of, Gwen replies to him that she and her brother "do owe them something"(311). This sort of reconciliation may not have happened in real life, yet Phillips further depicts a scene where Gwendolen encounters with a black person on the island while visiting her father's tomb. She encounters a black man who knew who she was "the Williams girl from Cork street". The man continues to grin but shows no harm to her (321).

Returning the island makes Gwen realize that "never before had the void between her world and his felt so vast" (319), but feeling sorry for her husband, she returns to England, possibly knowing she may not be able to return to her island again. The last scene of the novel is painstakingly beautiful as Phillips shows the readers how Gwen was rooted in her beloved island in the Caribbean: "She took his hand and held it in one of her own, and then she turned back to her island and looked again at her mountains and rivers and quietly, without Leslie noticing, she broke off a piece of her heart and gently dropped it into the blue water" (324).

6 Conclusion

Through underlining the importance of Gwen's, or Rhys', revisiting her island, Phillips seems to forgive Rhys and welcome her back to the Caribbean. Despite the fact that she was, after all, a white creole who did not fully understand the sufferings of the slave or the struggles of the black Caribbean in the post-war Britain, his sympathy for Rhys and his insights into her childhood spent in the Caribbean is crucial. It would have never occurred had he not been from the Caribbean himself. In this sense, he obviously goes against the grain of some of the academics' reading of Rhys. For instance, Robert Young in *Colonial Desire* (1995) includes Rhys as one of the English colonial writers concerned with incorporating the culture of the "Other". Young considers Rhys' work to be complicit with colonialism (3). It may be suggested, however, that Young's quick categorisation overlooks subtle differences among 'English' writers, and places Rhys as an English writer along with Charlotte Brontë, whom she was writing against. In opposition to Young's position, Phillips seem to attest to Rhys's ambiguity in her national identity, as expressed in her writings such as *Voyage in the Dark*, or *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or her posthumously published autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979).

Once, Stuart Hall once stated that Caribbean identity "is not an essence but a positioning" which is concerned with "the creative and imaginative 're-telling' of the past". (Hall 1990, 224) In this sense, Phillips re-tells the life of Jean Rhys and makes her return to the Caribbean imaginatively possible. Despite Phillip's awareness that Rhys might have had a colonial attitude towards Afro-Caribbean people, Phillips allows Gwen to return to her beloved island in the Caribbean.

In this time of pandemic, we still come across racial hatred or hate speech; this make us aware that racial thinking still exists in the present day. Racial thoughts or racist practices were at the core of the civilization since the time of Christopher Columbus, and still divides human according to skin colour. Phillips' re-telling of Rhys in his novel can be considered a demonstration of his sympathy towards Jean Rhys as well as his political stand against this ideology of racial separation of people. Reading *A View of the Empire at the Sunset* is an invigorating experience for readers still living in times persistent racial thinking as the author offers a hope to extend our understanding to the people with seemingly different experiences.

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