

Impossible Return: Demythologizing Homeland and Complex Identity in Caryl Philips's *A State of Independence*

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the notions of home and identity in Caryl Philips's A State of Independence. Specifically, I argue that the novel interrogates and challenges the fixed and the stable notions of the original homeland and identity. The protagonist's return is driven by ill-conceived notion of originary homeland and essentialist identity to finally discover the painful reality of changing homeland. The paper demonstrates that through the trope of return to the country of origin, the novelist engage in the task of demythologizing the homeland as the diasporic subject comes to discover and to confirm the elusiveness of home and thus negating the idealized vision he buries deep in his mind and imagination. It also attempts to show that the supposedly notion of physical return as a metaphor for return to origins, has left the protagonist suspended between two different countries and cultures.

Key Words: Return, home, and identity

Introduction

The notion of return, whether imaginary or realized, is always an integral part of diaspora studies. Though it is widely acknowledged the aspiration of return is not the shared by all diaspora and teleology of diaspora is necessarily linear, recent diasporic narratives reverse this teleology where their writings depict characters leading back home journeys. Return to the original home country after a passage of time generates intertwined sensations of recognition, alienation and estrangement. In other words, it is marked by ambivalence whose outcome is, both a reaffirmation of bonds and attachment with the native land or a break and estrangement from the home country. Diasporic narratives of return usually depict the tension and the conflict between a set of binaries. These binaries include: "the home of origin and its culture and the borrowed home and its culture; the received country or the locality of everyday experience (to borrow Brah's words) and "the country of origin that is at both familiar and strange; here and there; memory and reality; roots and routes" (Oliver-Rotger, 2015, p. 6).

Returning home often embodies a failure of memory because the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the fixed home has changed and does not live to the returnee's aspirations. It

arouses memories of the idyllic past but also generates feelings of estrangement as the places that are revisited are not the same. In fact, these memories are not always the accurate reflections of reality because they are “always flawed, always tainted by distortions of the exile’s imagination and desire” (Sophia A. McClennen 2004, p.59). Like many of expatriates, homeland has been held in a kind of fixed and stable entity with the hope that they could one day return to a native country that was in a similar condition to the country they had left years ago.

In *Alfred Schutz on the Phenomenology and Social Relations*, Alfred Schutz (1970) demonstrates that the homecomer usually encounters a homeland that does not live to his aspirations and expectations which consequently leads to his disappointment and frustration¹. To this end, he establishes a contrast between the perspectives of both the returnee and the stranger. He writes: “[While] the approaching stranger has to anticipate in a more or less empty way that he will find; the homecomer has just to recur to the memories of the past, so he feels, and because he feels, so he will suffer the typical shock described by Homer [in the *Odyssey*]” (p. 296). Owing to the contrast between the constructed and the imagined homeland on the one hand and the current one on the other hand, coming home can be more difficult and disappointing. Due to the diasporic subject’s expectations to return to a homeland and people frozen in time, the coming home usually turns into impossible and illusion.

Discussion:

Caryl Philips’s *A State of Independence* (1986) recounts the return of Francis Bertram to his home country after an absence of twenty years in England. It also depicts the psychological dilemma and turmoil of the returnee who comes with the expectation to reassert his belonging to his homeland and ends up frustrated and alienated. While in England, he has dreamt of “seizing the opportunity to help the nation²” (Philips, 1986, p.50) by establishing his own business as his coming coincides with the island’s celebration of independence from the British colonization. Unfortunately, Bertram’s aspirations, ambitions, and attempts to come to terms with his country go in vain. As such, he feels disappointed as the island he imagines and constructs in his mind does not coincide with the reality he finds. This encounter with unfamiliar homeland renders him unable to readapt and readjust in his changed homeland and he ends up as a stranger. Therefore,

¹ In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin (2008) argues that Odysseus’ return to Ithaca generates disappointment and disillusionment due to the contrast between his idealized memory of homeland and the reality he encounters (p. 66).

² . Tania Ghanem states that “Many return with the anticipation that the skills they have acquired abroad will give them the opportunity to contribute to the development or reconstruction of their country (Zarzosa 1998: p 193; Maletta et al. 1989: p 201). Instead, the returnee’s enthusiasm is received by the home population with cold indifference or rejection” (2003, p 45).

Bertram's ill-timed and badly motivated return leads him to realize that he does not fit in his island and he is a man of 'nowhere'.

Bènèdicte Ledent (2002) emphasizes that both leaving home and coming back generates the same feeling of estrangement and dissatisfaction writing:

Homecoming whether temporary or final, illusory or real, is always present in the mind of the migrant as the reverse side of the exilic coin. . . Exile and homecoming are indissociable because they proceed from a similar desire to begin [one's] life a new, and both unavoidably lead to the same kind of disenchantment aroused by the confrontation with the realities that has fed one's hope for long. Be it England for the migrant or the Caribbean in case of the returnee. (p. 42)

The above quote illustrates that the experience of return is somehow similar to the cultural shock and alienation one might encounter and undergo while in exile. Bertram thinks that his homecoming will be an opportunity to reunite with his family, friends, and the island and thus he will regain his sense belonging to the island, as he will not be a foreigner or a stranger anymore. Yet, he gradually realizes that the people he has left behind have changed during his long absence, and that he himself has changed. Similarly, Maletta et al (1989) argue that the main reason why the returnee views his homeland as different is due to his changed perspective because "Not only things continued to happen, but they have modified reality. Upon returning, the exile finds a different country to whose changes he or she is foreign" (p. 197). Consequently, return raises many ambivalences and contradictions whereby both the returnees and those who remain have changed and transformed given the passage of time.

Andres H. Stefansson (2004) argues that the returnee usually receives "a cool welcome, if not downright hostility, from the population that stayed behind in the homeland" (p.8). Likewise, Bertram finds that his mother and his presumed friend Jackson Clayton not supportive and welcoming of his return. Bertram's meeting with his mother was void of maternal love and affection as it only generates bitter disappointment and dismissal. She despises him and speaks with him in "contempt". In fact, his mother rebukes and blames him for not keeping in touch all this long period of time: "I don't really care how hard or how easy things is going to be for you, Bertram, for no matter how hard you might think they be, they cannot be no harder than you make it for Dominic and myself when you abandon us here and go about you own selfish matters in England" (Philips, 1986, p.84). In this same vein, Stefansson (2004) adds that "the stayees, including close kin, may envy and nurture exaggerated images of the living conditions and the easy life that the returnees are supposed to have enjoyed abroad" (p.8). She even makes him morally responsible for the death of his brother, Dominic. These facts make his mother resentful and surprisingly her first question is when he would leave the island. Her question indeed demonstrates her rejection and repudiation of her son.

As his mother bogs him down, he turns toward his friend, Jackson Clayton. While Bertram returns to the island empty-handed without obtaining his degree except the sum of cash he brought, Jackson is now a deputy prime minister in the government. Bertram hopes that Jackson who is now holding a good position in the government may be of a good help. On the contrary, Jackson is not supportive as he does not show any probability to help his “old friend”. In spite of their friendship, Jackson humiliates Bertram by showing off his achievements and success and instead of using his position to sustain his friend in establishing his plans, Jackson turns his back and he even looks down to him.

It is quietly common that the natives consider the returnees as strangers in their homeland and as threat to its safety and security. Tania Ghanem (2003) pinpoints that “[r]eturnees might cause a potential threat to the livelihoods of stayees if they come back to claim occupied land or property, thereby dispossessing the new occupants” (p.47). Jackson then as a representative of the nation considers Bertram as a threat to his island and therefore he has no claims on it whereby his intention to start a business is illegal. Moreover, he criticizes Bertram along with other West-Indian returnees and accuses them of laziness who by the end decide to come back home just to make profit in the island. For instance, when Bertram tells Jackson that he is coming back home for ‘good’, Jackson does not believe him for he knows well the ‘bad’ intentions of his old friend: “you’re clever, Bertram, but I’m not stupid” (Philips, 1986, p.135). Similarly, Ledent (2002) points out that Bertram’s intentions and plans to invest on the island are “not devoid of exploitative intentions, even if these only remain in the realm of the unconscious. Like the journey of his Austenian namesake in *Mansfield Park*, Thomas Bertram, Bertram Francis’ voyage to the Caribbean is, in effect, fuelled partly by his intention to derive financial profit from the island and its inhabitants” (p.49). In other words, he sees that Bertram’s return is ill-timed and badly motivated for now the island has changed and does not fit people like Bertram: “You barely come back here and you wanting to invest *in the place you remember, not the place that is*. Take a walk around, see what you think of the island as it is today, see if you could live here, then come back and talk to me. You see what I’ am saying” (p.112).

Bertram is disappointed by Jackson’s words; he does not expect such a bad treatment from his ‘presupposed’ friend. He has been fully confident that Jackson would do his best to support him in pursuing his plans. Accordingly, he understands that he chooses the wrong person to ask for help. Instead of assisting his friend, Jackson persuades Bertram to go back to England because it “is where he belongs now” (p.136). Bertram, however, protests against Jackson’s denial of his belonging to the island; he still believes the island as his homeland from which he derives his identity. He insists on reaffirming to Jackson his status in the island as a ‘native’:

you talking to me like I don’t have anything to do with this place. *I was born here, and I grew up here just like you*. . . I can see that the island has changed for I’ m not blind, you know [. . .] But this island *is my island too*, [. . .] I have a little cash and if I want to make

a business here, right here where I was born, then nobody can stop me. (p.113, *my emphasis*)

Being attacked and rejected once again, Bertram comes to realize the futility of his romanticized expectations that the independence will grant him a position in his native island. Therefore, his meeting with Jackson results a more bitter disappointment due to his hostile attitudes towards Bertram³.

As his mother and his presumed friend Jackson reject, Bertram feels lonely and frustrated. He turns towards Patsy hoping to find a sense of belonging and comfort he does not find in the island. For Bertram, Patsy symbolizes the island and her warm welcoming minimizes and contributes at least to lessen the bitter disappointment and hostility he receives. Patsy's warmth and unreserved welcome is a sign of hope for Bertram who after a series of rejections and exclusions has finally found someone to be associated and identified with so that he can feel at home. As she hugs him, Bertram is surprised by "the ease with which he fell back into her arms alarmed him, but at least someone had finally accepted him with unqualified joy" (Philips, 1986, p.91). More important, Bertram establishes himself as one of the islanders whereby the sexual relationship between him and Patsy can be read as a reunion between both and by extension it reaffirms Bertram's belonging to his island. Elena Machado Sáez (2005) pinpoints that Bertram "reconnects with his home, with the Caribbean, by reinitiating a heterosexual relationship with Patsy, who consequently forms the site for grounding his migrant male subjectivity" (p.32). It is Patsy's body the stage upon which he performs and reconfirms his identification with the island.

Despite his sense of temporary sense of belonging, Bertram still feels confusion and uncertainty towards his relationship to Patsy and to the island: "he was unsure about his relationship to her as he was about his relationship to this island he still insisted on calling his home" (p. 119). When Bertram prepares himself to leave, Patsy asks him where he will be going. Patsy's question intensifies Bertram's feelings of alienation and foreignness "wishing she had not asked him such a direct question for he had no place to go" (ibid). To his expectations and allusions, Bertram thinks that Patsy will be his savior and refuge from the agony and rejection he encounters, she too views him like others, and outsider and a foreigner, telling him "this place really got you acting strange" (ibid). The only hope that remains for Bertram to regain his belonging to the island has been shattered and faded away and thus Patsy's attitude only intensifies his estrangement and alienation.

Bertram's current rejections and disappointments bring to mind Anastasia Christou's understanding of the notion of belonging. Belonging is usually interwoven and associated with

³ This hostility and animosity is dated back to their adulthood when Bertram gets the scholarship and wins Patsy's love.

the notion of home whereby both bear “affective rather cognitive meaning” (2015, p.59). Home and belonging are neatly connected and are exclusive. In other words, members of the same community tend to exclude those “who are seen as “aliens” and “foreigners”. They consider them as a kind of threat to the safety, the homogeneity, and the purity of their common home. Bertram as well encounters these feelings of exclusion, alienation, and estrangement after his return as his own people perceive him as a foreigner. He is irritated and outraged by xenophobic views which believe in what Rushdie calls ‘the absolutism of the pure’ (1991, p.394). Indeed, Bertram encounters “discriminatory identities that secure the pure and original identity and authority” (Bhabha, 1994, p.160). Not having to accept those in-between thus helps maintain the picture of a nation that is pure and untouched. Therefore, the natives-those with a pure identity-consider Bertram as a threat to the security and safety of their national identity and thus he should not be let in.

The novel shows that Bertram is estranged from his island in various ways. For example, Bertram cannot adapt to the Caribbean climate as he is unable to endure the heat of the island as opposed to the cold climate of England. Bertram observes that “The claustrophobia of the heat surprised him” (Philips, 1986, p.11), and begins “to oppress him” (p.27). In fact, during his stay in England, Bertram forgets how the body reacts to the Caribbean tropical climate. Hence, Bertram’s recurrent sweating and perspiration indicate his inability to readjust to the climate of his native island and thus he becomes estranged from his home physically. Bertram’s heavy perspiration and the related smell, in the words of Ahmed, reflect “a failure which is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body which feels out of place, which feels uncomfortable in this place” (Ahmad, 1999, p.342). Likewise, Jopi Nyman (2009) pinpoints that perspiration is a recurrent trope in the novel through which Philips shows Bertram’s estrangement and how his island “has transformed into a space of Otherness⁴” (p.52). To overcome “this ordeal of pain,” he resorts to deodorant which proves futile in reducing the amount of sweat: “his deodorant was useless; it seemed to evaporate within minutes of application, and having pulled on his new shirt he decided to carry with him a small bottle of aftershave to kill off any bad odours” (p.88). Similarly, Petra Tournay (2003) comments on Bertram’s use of deodorant noting that “the imported devices of Western civilization fail him in his new surrounding and thus only serve as a further sign of his foreignness and powerlessness” (p. 230).

⁴Bertram’s relation with Patsy at the end of the novel which supposedly indicates his reunion with the island ends with image of “a thin film of sweat holding and dividing them” (p.152). This scene clearly reflects Bertram’s inability to reassert himself as a Caribbean and thus he becomes alien and outsider in his island of birth.

Staying in England for a long period of time affects Bertram's language as well. It is Lonnie, the man in the bar, who mimics and makes fun of Bertram's English accent. Bertram has been alerted since he does not pay attention to this fact. In his astonishment, Bertram tries to deny that his accent becomes anglicized and confirms that "they" (the English) not he who speaks in this way in order to reaffirm that he is still an islander. In his outstanding book, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) Frantz Fanon argues that "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture" (p.17-18). Since language is a key marker of identity, the transformation of Bertram's language signals his estrangement and seclusion from his island and thus hinders his reintegration into his community.

Bertram's disappointment does not only stem from the changing island but also from his own transformation. As stated by Maletta et al. "one returns to the familiar, the things that are known, but at the same time everything is different in a spatial environment that is not the same, just like the migrant who returns is not the same anymore" (1989, p. 200). Bertram's life in England for a long period of time renders him "English" who cannot in a way adapt to the pace of change of the island. His education and life in England affect the way he looks at his island; he looks at it in a different and critical eye or more appropriately with an English eye; one that embodies the Western's perception and racial prejudice against the people of the Third World. He has come with different accent, new habits and behavioral patterns. Tournay (2003) maintains that Bertram "comes equipped with *Imperial eyes*" in the sense that his actions and behaviours prove the extent to which he is much constructed by western civilization, its habits and values (p. 220). Bertram's attitudes towards his island embodies Bhabha's notion of mimicry which he explains in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man". Bhabha argues that the colonial authority uses certain strategies to implant its ideologies and control over its colonial subjects.

Bertram's observations are loaded with racist representations, prejudice and stereotypes. He usually associates the islanders with images of laziness, indolence, indifference and passivity. For instance, his description of the immigrant officer who "seemed uninteresting of anything [...] the young man's face was vacant and uncluttered with thought" as if he was "the victim of some of lethargy-inducing sickness" (12). Bertram's portrayals extend to encompass the landscape, the decayed and crumbling buildings etc. On his arrival in the airplane, Bertram draws a contrast between the capital's view from the plane, where it seems well ordered and clean, and the reality of dirtiness and wretchedness on the ground: "Below him lay the dense carpet of green forest . . . and in the distance, beyond the village, saw the capital. He knew full well that from this height what appeared to be a neat and tropical Versailles would seem little more than sprawling mess when on the ground" (10). In fact, Bertram's remarks show the contrast and the discrepancy between his island and England whereby the latter holds the position of supremacy and modernity. For example, he comments on the road: "the road was called Whitehall, but a thoroughfare less like London's Whitehall would be hard to imagine"

(23). These examples and others reflect the sense of superiority and prejudice that are inflicted on Bertram⁵.

Even when he leaves England, he retains a part of Britain through maintaining English habits and values. In fact, most of the people he encounters notice how much he has changed, and more specifically how English he becomes. For instance, his mother told him that “England had captured your soul”; Jackson Clayton as well is aware how his friend’s stay in England has transformed him, telling him “you let the English fuck your heads. . . You coming like father Daniels still got your head stuffed in your damn books. He make you blind, or maybe it’s something that happen in England that turn your mind so”(p.111); Mr Carter, the shopkeeper, looked up at him “as though he could see some dreadful change that England had wrought in him” (p.78). In this vein, Swift Dickinson (1993) argues that the returnee’s experience is complicated by the rejection of the natives where “[he] is displaced into a colonialist by the local, who recognizes in him the shadow of the oppressor” (p.121). Accordingly, Bertram is always mistaken as English and foreigner as most of people he interacts with refers to him in ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy or binary which indicates his status as a stranger and Other. By the same token, Tournay (2003) argues that “In an inversion of its use in imperial writing, the standard distinction between “us” and “them” is here used from the perspective of natives⁶” (p.227). She adds this distinction renders Bertram a stranger and more specifically a threat to the pure and essentialist identity of the island.

Since the notions of home and identity are inseparable, Bertram’s alienation from his home island reflects his identity construction. Bertram’s inability to negotiate to which culture he belongs affects his identity and results in an identity crisis. Maria Oliver (2015) in *Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature* demonstrates that “fictions about return testify not only to the multiple cultural affiliations of the ethnic subject but also to the psychological processes of alienation, deterritorialization, uprootedness, or exclusion” (p.6). Through the use of the trope of return, the writers are able to portray the experiences of the diasporic subjects and to delve deep into their psyche where they usually depict subjects straddling several cultures. Accordingly, amidst this insurmountable opposition and repulsion, Bertram feels like an outsider in the island which he cannot claim as his homeland. All these factors make identification with the island difficult and affect Bertram emotionally and psychologically as they tarnish the

⁵ Other examples that show Bertram’s changed perception of the island: “the idea of going around the house and washing under the standpipe, as he had done as a youngster, no longer appealed to him” (p.53). the voice of the insects embarrassed him. This made him aware that “how far he had travelled both in miles and time” (p. 9). He laughs at the Ford Corsair car saying that it is an old brand in England or “a joke car”, back home “the car seemed laughable to him” (p.15)

⁶ David Spurr points out that “the distinction between “us” and “them” is part of the rhetoric that affirms the distinction between “a collective subject united by a shared ideology and those who threaten the institutions of order and unity” (1993,p. 121).

romanticized image he had constructed while living abroad. Consequently, Bertram becomes doubly estranged, caught in a state of in-betweenness, and uncertain of his belongingness. He is somewhere between two opposing cultures and worlds, unable to position himself, he is neither here nor there, and never be able to identify fully with anyone. Even though Bertram is the product of British education, the English never consider him as one of them. Moreover, his attempts to regain his belonging to his island end in vain because he finds only rejection and disappointment. According to Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, this ambivalent hybrid is a migrant who is “dispossessed, schizophrenic, exilic, often profoundly unhappy” (2005, p.384). Being rejected and excluded from both cultures generates negative psychological effects and depression as Hodge and Mishra suggest. Not knowing where to go and not having a clear direction, Bertram keeps oscillating and questioning his affiliation and belonging.

The final scene in the novel depicts Bertram seating in the fence wondering to which world he belongs indicates his confusion and uncertainty. For instance, when Patsy asks him whether he is planning to return to England, Bertram confesses that he has “nothing to go back to,” and yet he doesn’t “feel at home back here either” (Philips, 1986, p.152). He never feels completely at home in any of these places whereby he feels alienated from both the English and Caribbean societies. Although he attempts to be one of the islanders, British culture becomes a part of his identity. He is trapped between two cultures, neither wholly Caribbean nor wholly English. Bertram feels isolated and excluded in both countries and cultures, unable to negotiate his belonging, being part of both cultures but belonging to any. His attempts to identify with both cultures are doomed to failure and rejection. Not belonging to any culture thus makes Bertram an outsider and stranger.

As such, Bertram ends up bewildered and puzzled as he is unable to decide to which world he belongs and to negotiate the two halves of his identity. He is alienated from his origins and does not fit in with the new setting either. Aschcroft et al emphasize that the place and the self are neatly interlinked and that any separation from the place one inhabits results an identity crisis and ambivalence. Therefore, Bertram ends up caught between two loyalties, oscillating two different worlds and cultures, each of which constitutes an important constituent in the construction of his identity. The accumulation of such conditions affects his identity and leads to identity crisis.

Conclusion

Philips’s novel de-romanticizes the stability and the fixity of homeland as a place of safety and belonging and redefines the concept of identity. Bertram believes that his return will allow him to regain the feeling of belonging to his island, yet it only results in disappointment and rejection. His return proves to be a failure as it crumbles down his aspirations and dreams to regain her sense of belonging and identification with island. His attempt to identify himself with island becomes complex and problematic because the homeland has been altered as he himself

has changed. Home proves to be “a place of no return” (Brah, 1996, p.188), and “a contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation” (Davies, 2002, p.84). Since both notions of home and identity are closely interlinked, Bertram’s status of in-betweenness renders him unable to locate and negotiate his belongingness. Therefore, his return appears ironic and instead of reaffirming his belongingness to his island, it intensifies and strengthens his estrangement and foreignness and leaves him suspended between two different cultures and worlds.

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