

## **Captivity and Spirit of Manumission: A Study of Caryl Phillips**

### ***Higher Ground***

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#### **Abstract**

Roman councilors delineated captivity as an “unnatural condition” through which men suppressed others to their jurisdiction. On the other hand, manumission is a word which is taken from the Latin term ‘manumittere’ which gives sense of liberty. The concept of manumission inspires Blacks to never surrender before the slaveholders. By abdicated domination over to suppressed, slaveholders reestablished the freedom of those individuals whom they had taken in their clutches. Thus, manumission gives power to slavery by recognizing the temporary nature of it and charges blacks for obtaining liberty. Slavery will come to be easy when the heart of slave completely converges towards manumission. The spirit of manumission in Blacks has been a popular aspect in Postcolonial literature. This paper will investigate how the spirit of manumission helps in surviving of a Black slave and how he prepares his brothers for revolution against slavery in Caryl Phillips third novel *Higher Ground*.

**Keywords:** Manumission, Slave, Slaveholder, Captivity, Dominancy.

The trend of slavery is in continuation since ancient times and has taken many semblances in different societies. To become a slave means to loose one’s individual rights and to lead a dependent life. Generally, slavery is always fearful and hideous but it begins to be more horrible when it is taken in the terms of Blacks. Blacks always became victim to it due to which they experienced cruelties of hell in their lives.

In 1619, the arrival of 20 African slaves in a Dutch ship is regarded as the starting of captivity. After their arrival slavery stabled its feet in whole America. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, African slaves proved to be helpful in building of the new nation through the remunerative crops such as tobacco and cotton. Thus, Africans were always a source of income for Americans. Some scholars have assumed that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 6 to 7 millions captives were imported into the new world. Though, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the slaveholders, carried important steps towards controlling slavery in the independent country and many states had boycotted slavery but the trend of slavery was in continuation in North. A large minority of the population of Blacks was constructed in the south. In 1808, Government restricted the arrival of slaves in America but the slave population constantly grew up and gradually it tripled in the next 50 years. In 1807, Britain discarded slavery but it was not completely rejected until 1833. A new trend of eradication came to light in the North in the 19th century and it was the reaction against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 by the Congress. As a result, the banning of slavery was seriously taken under consideration.

Literature expresses all the merits and demerits of society in its political and social context. English Literature also includes each and every aspect of the Black literature. The agony of Blacks has been widely expressed through the literature. Black literature involves several themes such as issues of migration, cultural issues, spiritual issues, feministic issues and also the most prominent theme that is slavery. The readers come to know about the tortures of slavery and feelings of slaves. Slave literature has made its place in every genre- poetry, prose, fiction and novel. Through theses genres several writers have thrown light on the issues of slavery. This literature also tries to show the spirit of manumission of Blacks.

Slavery does not mean to serve someone but it gives some wider meaning. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have rightly described that-

Slavery existed in many periods and in many societies, they were not commercial slaves in this modern sense. Slavery was often associated with exogamous groups, captives or members of other groups outside the community, but the post-Renaissance development of an intense ideology of racism produced the peculiarity destructive modern form of commercial, chattel slavery in which all rights and all human values were aside and from which only a few could ever hope to achieve full manumission.(194)

At the very first, the white European wrote about the memories of slavery which was popular in England and British Isles. Sometimes, the captive literature includes account of the life of the author his/her self. The author shared his or her personal experiences about slavery to his/ her readers or to the world. In their writing, they expressed the critical condition of Blacks in which they had suffered during the colonization. This literature includes themes like captivity, freedom and nostalgia. Wole

Soyinka, William Styron, Ernest J. Gaines, Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips are some major writers who have profoundly analyzed about the problematic circumstances of slavery in their literary works.

Caryl Phillips has examined the condition of slaves and has also made an attempt to know about their spirit of achieving full freedom. The characters of Caryl Phillips are not internally weak. They have an urge for breaking shackles of slavery and they want to see this same urge in their brothers.

Caryl Phillips third novel *Higher Ground* is an expression of slavery in the African diaspora. The novel is fragmented into three parts- "Heartland", "The Cargo Rap" and "Higher Ground". The first part "Heartland" is narrated by an unnamed slave who helps in catching his own people in a compulsion. The anonymous narrator bears all the tortures during slavery. Even he starts to feel himself as inferior and claims that- "the rules that bind normal men have no place in this land"(Phillips 31). In the chains of slavery, slaves start to feel as they are commodity as the governor wants a girl only for his sexual satisfaction. The feelings of that girl don't matter anything for him. The governor behaves with the girl like a 'thing' and says that- "tell him I need a young girl. She will be well treated and eventually returned. She will not go with the others"(Phillips 22).

After the capturing of the girl, the governor treats her badly and this excites the unnamed slave for raise his voice against these cruelties but he feels himself fearful- "my soul is not at peace. I sometimes wonder why I do not go with the rest of our people but. I fear what you fear, and what we all fear that there may be awful misery beyond these shores (Phillips 45)". When the governor leaves the girl, the slave narrative feels bad for her and tries to snatch the girl from the jaw of slavery. He puts effort to escape from the prison with the girl but he doesn't achieve success in it. After this, he completely understands about the trap of slavery. If one has involved in slavery than it is impossible to see a sun of complete freedom. He explains about slavery- "We are all promising to one day return..... And the promise comes from deeps inside of our souls, it comes from a region where it is impossible to pretend, it comes from the heart."(Phillips 60) The anonymous slave doesn't succeed in achieving liberty but his inner urge for getting the freedom doesn't loose.

The second part of the novel, "The Cargo Rap" is written in an epistolary style. Through the letters, Caryl Phillips claims about the eagerness of a member of Black Panther Movement, Rudolph Leory Williams, for attaining freedom. Through a series of letters which are written to relatives of Rudy, Phillips tries to expose the critical circumstances of a prison in which a slave has to suffer during African American slavery. Through the mouth of Rudy, Phillips reveals the acceptance of slavery by Blacks or Africans. The slave traders fixes the inferiority complex in the mind of slaves as Rudy explains the reason of slavery to his mother- "First, because the slave owners have led you to believe that you have a 'natural' position;" (Phillips 63)

In the novel, Rudy again and again motivates his receivers to put their efforts against slavery. The readers find Rudy in the boundation only on the external level but internally Rudy's heart is completely filled up with an excitement for freedom. In spite of being a slave, Rudy wants to live a vigorous life with a positive attitude as he writes to his sister, Lavern- "To survive with the will to begin again and go on, this is the highest morality" (Phillips 97). Generally, after bearing the harshness of slavery, slaves loose their confidence and want to die but in the case of Phillips' character it is opposite. Phillips' characters always want to fight with the negative substances. Phillips expresses his dream to accomplish Africa as a powerful country as Rudy sees a dream for Africa- "If we want our children to visit a Disneyland then let it be our own African Disneyland" (Phillips 107).

Slavery can be compared to the birth of human beings. A slave's real birthday should be considered on the day on which a slave achieves full freedom. Rudy assumes that it is not the real birthday which is celebrated by the slaves according to their birth date because they are still in the womb of slavery as Rudy considered in one of his letters- "our true birthday will be celebrated on the day we step out of our American exile into a different and fuller form of freedom" (Phillips 112).

Despite of having such thoughts, Rudy is disappointed by his own people as he finds lake of will and action in them. Here, like Hamlet of Shakespeare, Rudy's friends and committee members don't do anything for his releasing and this is the agony of all slaves as Rudy describes- "For God's sake, Joe, can you not make these people understand that I am a man who demands action" (Phillips 114). For inspiring his people, Rudy recounts the characteristics of Blacks and claims that Blacks are not inferior. They have beauty, strength and they should feel proud on their noble past and ancestry.

There is a burning fire in the heart of Rudy for attaining the freedom but he finds himself in the shackles of slavery. His letters shows that these shackles can not bind up his spirit which has a flame for gaining emancipation. The only reason of his defeat is the poverty of eagerness and determination of his own people. Through his enthusiastic thoughts, he wants to wake-up the Africans- "can you not organize among your friends and acquaintances out there and help raise individual consciousness otherwise this tragic and seemingly inveterate cycle will never be broken" (Phillips 152).

In this part of the novel, Phillips has also given references of Malcolm X, Richard Wright and Phillis Wheatley who have either spent a major part of their life in slavery or given their work on slavery. The inspirational stories of these figures help Phillips to create an eagerness for freedom in the heart of Blacks.

By this novel, Phillips educates the Africans about the revolutionary politics of the newly developed Black movement and Rudy's negation to yield to the system can produce a new encouragement for acquiring freedom. Indeed, if the characters of Phillips are bounded in slavery, they have a spirit of manumission too.

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