

The Double Subjugation of the Jew: A Post-Colonial Reading of Caryl Phillip's *The Nature of Blood*

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Abstract:

Caryl Phillip's novel *The Nature of Blood* begins with an imaginative reconstruction of the pangs of the Holocaust survivor, Eva, but in the middle of it, her narrative becomes interspersed by the voices of a Moorish general, who had been brought to Venice to wage war against the Turks and by the tale of Malka, an Ethiopian Jew a victim of racism at the hands of her fellow white Jews.

This paper primarily wishes to employ the theories about trauma and social exclusion as developed by Giorgio Agamben and Zygmunt Bauman respectively, to read the different strands of narrative, in order to argue how the Jewish population has been systematically marginalised within the entire European community, ages after ages. In tandem the paper also analyses the despicable suffering of the Jews owing to their lack of a Jewish homeland, despite the emphatic promises of the international community, by employing the theories of refugee-hood as put forward by Zygmunt Bauman to read into the narrative of Stephen Stern.

In addition to this, the paper also wishes to employ the post-colonial theory of the subaltern to study the double victimization of the black Jew. To expatiate vividly, the paper pays special attention to the narrative of the Moorish general (a suggested retelling of Shakespeare's *Othello*) and that of Malka to argue how the dark skinned Jew finds himself ostracised both outside and also within his own community. Thus, the paper using the theory of the subaltern argues in favour of establishing the black Jew as the Neo-Subaltern of the international community, whose voice has been systematically silenced by the major narratives of European culture.

Thus, Caryl Phillip's *The Nature of Blood* is not just another take on the much discussed topic of the Holocaust of the Jews during Nazi rule in Germany, but rather presents a significantly new picture on the sufferings of the Jews, especially that of the black Jew, which may rightly establish them as the international Dalit.

Keywords: black, Jew, post-colonial, international Dalit, double victimization

That Antisemitic leanings had been ever present in Europe can be easily testified to, if one simply takes a cursory look at the Jewish religious calendar “where several holidays memorialize the hostility of various groups in the Ancient world towards Jews: Passover (Egyptians); Purim (Persians), Chanukah (Greeks); Tisha b’Av (Babylonians and Romans).” (Beller 11) Read in this light the monstrosity of the Holocaust that was unleashed upon the Jews during 20th Century Germany can only be argued as natural. In this regard, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the Holocaust was only the most logical outcome of the rugged individualism as promoted by modernism, as he states:

“the Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything (or so we like to think) it stands for. We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire. And that the two faces are perfectly comfortably attached to the same body. What we perhaps fear most, is that each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin.” (Bauman 7)

Bauman, goes further to argue that it was the efficient functioning of the modern bureaucratic system that made the perpetration of this genocide quite different from all else. Bauman states, that the entire bureaucracy of the Nazi regime had successfully turned itself into an “organised society in one of special roles”, that of finding a means for Hitler’s “Final Solution”, and thereby it had adapted from the army “the military precision, discipline and callousness” of destruction, the profit-making and “penny-saving” emphasis from the modern industries in tandem with the “factory-like efficiency of the killing centres”, while the “party contributed to the entire apparatus an ‘idealism’, a sense of ‘mission’, and a notion of history-making...”. (Bauman 14) Bauman thus rightly compares the herding of the Jews into the boxcars and being transported to the concentration camps spread across the whole of Germany as similar to the transportation of coals to factories, only in this case it were live human being who were ruthlessly fed into the gas chambers and later burned in the mass ovens. According to Bauman, this “technical-administrative success of the Holocaust was due in part to the skilful utilization of ‘moral sleeping pills’ made available by modern bureaucracy and technology” (Bauman 26), wherein the victims being located far away from the actual sight of the administrative officials, came to bear no direct moral responsibility on the bureaucrats; since all they needed to do was to press a few buttons, relay orders and/or talk on telephones to make it all happen. This modern “moral sleeping pill” of invisibility is what made the holocaust, ironically the greatest success of the Nazi party.

However, what is brought to light by Bauman’s intriguing enquiry into the Holocaust is the systematic method by which the Jews were consistently alienated and dehumanised. Helen Fein had used the term “universe of obligation” and had defined it as “the circle of people with reciprocal obligations to protect each other whose bonds arise from their relation to a deity or sacred source of authority”. (Bauman 27) Bauman borrows this term

from Fein and states that early in 1933, when a civil servant had first written down the definition of “non-Aryans” excluding the Jews, it was then that the “fate of the European Jewry was sealed”. (Bauman 27) Thus, for Bauman the construction of the idea of a pure “Germanhood” that reserved the right to exclude the Jews was only a short step. Bauman explains that this construction of the “Germanhood” had successfully excluded the Jews from the “universe of obligation”, and thus in turn justified any kind of extreme levels of torture that was perpetrated on the Jews. In this context Bauman mentions Frank’s conjugation of “Jews and lice” that effectively transformed the “Jewish question” from “the context of racial self-defence into the linguistic universe of ‘self-cleansing’ and ‘political-hygiene’”. (Bauman 27)

The experience of the African slaves being transported from the European colonies of Africa to work in the American plantations can be argued to be somewhat similar to the experience of the European Jewry during the Nazi regime. In this regard one only needs to closely observe the arguments of Paul Gilroy in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy begins by first depicting the middle passage, the longest stretch of the sea journey, carrying the African slaves from the African colonies to the site of the American plantation farms. Although Gilroy argues in regarding the ship as a chronotope for the Black Atlantic, as the “image of the ship [acts like] a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (Gilroy 4) Be as it may, it would not be a misplaced comparison if one finds similarities between the extreme disciplining, poor living conditions, severe dearth of food and the innumerable deaths caused by over-work or various diseases that plagued both the victims of the concentration camps and the poor black slaves being transported by ships during the middle passage. To take this comparison a bit further, it may be stated that just as the trauma of the Holocaust forms an integral part of the experience of Jewish modernity, similarly the terrible inhumanity of the black slave trade forms a part of the experience of modernity of the members of the African Diaspora; and just as the experiences of the Holocaust keeps recurring back in the writings of the Jewish authors, the black writer emphasises in remembering slavery as a critique of modernity in general.

Read in this light the marriage of these two different yet allied experiences of the modernity is not very far-fetched as Mantel claims in her review of Caryl Phillip’s novel, *The Nature of Blood*. Mantel had charged Phillips with the allegation of trying to “lay claim to other people’s suffering” and deemed this to be “indecent” and “colonial” (Kremer 936) However, most readers seemed to have ignored this criticism and have sided with Paul Gilroy’s argument, that, “there is something useful to be gained from setting these two histories closer to each other” (Kremer 936).

In the novel Phillips uses four different narratives to equate the pain and agony of the Jews with the torturous experiences of the black slaves. The first narrative describes the experiences of a white female European female Jew, Eva Stren and her futile attempts to come to terms with a world that has drastically changed post-World War II. The second narrative, that strangely intersperses Eva’s narrative without any proper preface or section, depicts the alleged murder of a Christian child, Sebastian New, as a part of the

Jewish ritual of the blood libel in the medieval town of Portobuffole, near Venice, but this unproven claim leads to the handing out of capital punishment for three Jews, Servadio, Giacobbe and Moses. The third narrative is again interjected within the second narrative, and this first person account depicts the tale of a Moorish General who had been brought over to Venice to lead the Venetian army into war against the infidel Turks. The fourth narrative, which somewhat stands apart, describes the struggles of Stephan Stern who has left his wife and child in order to make the Jewish dreams of an exclusive Jewish homeland in Palestine become a reality and his brief interaction with Malka, an Ethiopian Jew who is ostracised against by the fellow members of her own community owing to her dark skin colour. Thus what Phillips wishes to accomplish in this novel is to establish a correlation between the traumatic memories of the victims of antisemitism and those of racism, and this is perfectly in keeping with Cathy Caruth's claim that, "trauma itself may provide the very links between cultures". (Craps 1)

II

What this essay proposes to do is instead of finding the traumatic similarities in each of the four narratives delineated in the novel *The Nature of Blood* begins, the essay wishes to read each of the narratives in manner that justifies its culmination in the tale of Malka, the Ethiopian Jew, facing the brunt of racism even within her own Jewish community. The essay wishes to do this in order to bring to light that how the black Jew could be interpreted as the international Dalit.

As stated above, the first narrative of the novel belongs to the chaotic and unreliable narrator Eva Stern, one among many holocaust survivors of an unnamed concentration camp. Eva is rescued by the liberating army of the Allied forces, and it is here that one of the soldiers of the liberating army, named Gerry starts to make friendly advances towards her. Eva however fails to respond immediately to these advances as the prolonged maltreatment at the hands of the Nazis has made her somewhat inert to even basic human qualities of affection and friendship. However, as the narrative progresses and Phillips presents to us a psychological cross-section of the many conflicting emotions that merge upon Eva's brain we are able to grasp the extent to which she has been affected by the proceedings at the concentration camp and the reason for her inertness to Gerry's romantic advancements.

Eva informs her of her past life. She tells us, she had been the intelligent and hardworking younger sister of a diametrically opposite — fun-loving and adventurous sister — Margot. She had been born into a well affluent family, where the father was a doctor and the mother hailed from a rich aristocratic background. However, with the beginning of the state sponsored discrimination against the Jews by the Nazi government, the entire family of the Sterns is completely uprooted and ultimately meets the tragic end of perishing in the concentration camps. While Margot is sent to hide in one of the houses of a German, in exchange for a hefty sum of money from her father, Eva and her parents are not so lucky, as they are soon found out and herded with other Jews in boxcars and transported after a long and arduous journey to one of the concentration camps. In the course of the

novel we learn, that Margot was repeatedly raped by her keeper and the third time she yelled out in her agony, which eventually led to her being found out by the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo and she was killed as well alongwith her keepers. Eva on the other hand, on account of being relegated the duty of the Muzzleman (Jews given the job of burning off the dead bodies of those killed in the gas chambers of the concentration camps) was the lone survivor, as both her parents perished due to lack of food. It is only natural for a person who having witnessed the very death of her mother in front of her eyes to have become a little withdrawn. Nevertheless, even after Eva breaks out of her shell, and journeys to London to meet Gerry, she is thwarted even in this final chance to reclaim her life, as she finds out that despite his promises, Gerry had married and settled down. Eva seeing no other options tries to commit suicide, but fails and eventually lands up in a hospital. This is where her narrative ends.

A very close approximation of this kind of antisemitic ostracism that Eva and her family had faced during the Nazi regime in Germany can be found in the chronicle that depicts the execution of three Jews — Servadio, Moses and Giacobbe — in the fifteenth century town of Portobuffole, located near Venice, owing to an allegation by the townspeople that they had committed a blood libel, by murdering an innocent Christian boy, Sebastian as part of commemorating their Jewish festivities.

A botched up investigation committee is soon set up by Andrea Dolfino, a Venetian aristocrat chosen by the Signoria of Venice to look into the administration of the town of Portobuffole. The committee in keeping with the antisemitic leanings of the townspeople accordingly declares to have found all three Jews, Servadio, Giacobbe and Moses, along with Fays the tutor and Donato the servant to be guilty of not only the heinous crime of murdering an innocent Christian boy and using his blood to make and consume unleavened bread as a part of their ritual; but also, being involved in such other numerous blasphemous activities, as that of calling the Virgin a whore and Lord Jesus as “the dead one born out of a wedlock”. (Phillips 102) Such allegations are said, by the committee, to have been derived from the very confession of the three prime perpetrators of the crime, although they are tactful to leave out the part of exacting this confession under severe torture. The women of the household are nevertheless left out, as it is argued, that women have very little role to play in all Jewish religious rituals. The committee finally decides to burn the three heretics at the stake.

However, all the three Jews alleged of the blood libel mount up their own method of resistance against this state sponsored violence by deciding to fast, and not let a single drop of water pass their lips, all the while they have been confined. Even when they are being led to the stake, Giacobbe and Moses, led by Servadio continue to utter prayers to their deity, which in a way closely approximates the ethereal sacrifice of Christ.

In both of these narratives Phillips brilliantly compares and contrasts the inhuman treatment meted out to Jews by the state itself, across time and space, when it is governed by prejudices. In other words, just as the Nazi administration was occupied by the idea of building a Germany that was cleansed of all “non-Aryan” races, similarly, even in a

medieval town of Portobuffole, the administration cannot dare to go against the popular antisemitic feelings and thus, both of these governments ends up massacring the lives of their own citizen Jews. Such xenophobia is alarming and Bauman rightly calls forth a serious need to revise our sociological theories.

Be as it may, the final narrative of the novel, delineated from the point of view of Stephan Stern, the uncle of Eva and Margot. Stephan was a doctor in training when he had decided to leave behind the Nazi Germany, neglecting his duties towards his wife and his child, in order to fight for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Although none of the Sterns are able to grasp the need for this initiative, it is only in hindsight that the entire Jewish community realises the how important the contribution of such men were.

It is here, in Palestine that Stephan has a brief encounter with Malka. In the 1980s this young Ethiopian woman with Jewish roots still has to face prejudice and suspicion from the members of her own community. Hence, by introducing this character at the end of the book, Phillips tends to imply that African and Jews will probably always have to deal with racial discrimination.

Although Mantel had severely criticised Phillips for trying to appropriate the voice of the Holocaust survivors and equating their experiences of inhumanity with those of the blacks, the inclusion of this narrative of Malka and her experiences of segregation ideally help to counter not only Mantel's criticism, but also clearly establish beyond any doubt, how the black Jew is subjected to racism both without and within his community, making their experiences likened to that of the Dalits, who are continuously subjected to inhumanity within the Hindu community and also by the larger community of Indians. It would thus not be an excess to call the black Jew an international Dalit.

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