



Caryl Phillips, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*

(London, Vintage UK, Paperback, 2018, 324 pp.
ISBN 978-178-470-901-3)

by Alessia Polatti

[...] 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, too. I am so sorry. Truly I am [...]. (15)

Sense of disappointment and broken dreams, disillusion, and an impossible reconciliation with the past—and between distant worlds—are the main topics displayed by Caryl Phillips in his last novel *A View of the Empire at Sunset*. The text is a fictional account of the life of Jean Rhys, pen name of Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, best known as the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Although the publication of the celebrated prequel of *Jane Eyre* gave Rhys international celebrity, the first part of her life and her literary production have always been left hanging in the background. Born in the English colony of Dominica in 1890, Jean Rhys's career began in the 1920s and saw the creation of more than twenty works among novels and short stories collections. The true protagonist of her writings is her Caribbean background. Her childhood in the tropical environment had such an impact on her future perspectives that she recalled it also in her own autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979). Conflicts with her mother and the decline of English colonialism have been fundamental elements of growth as a young girl in Dominica at the very beginning of the twentieth century. The grim and depressing context of the personal and historical decay in which she lived caused her a persistent sense of alienation and a constant sadness, well exploited by Phillips in *A View of the Empire at Sunset*.



In his last novel, Caryl Phillips has chosen to re-write the immense and dense web of information and speculations which are at the heart of Rhys's experience in order to investigate her being a "migrant to Britain who simply never settled. Like many migrants she lost a sense of 'home,' but instead of capitulating to a certain grief with this loss she found a way to turn it into art," as Phillips pointed out in a recent interview (Gonzalez). That said, it is possible to "relocate our thinking of her into a Caribbean context" (Gonzalez). And this is exactly what Phillips does in his novel, where the author's life is narrated faithfully with some admission to Phillips's distinctive topics, such as the sense of loneliness and alienation of migrants in Britain, the centre/periphery dichotomy, the home's obsession, and the parental role in children's identity formation. Throughout the novel, it seems that Phillips's intention was to shed a new light on the connection between Gwendolen and Jean, by explaining how much the Dominican girl influenced the British writer. In other words, he has given a new voice and a different dignity to Rhys's personal story, without omitting the abuses, vices, and slip-ups of his heroine, also thanks to his transparent and straightforward literary style.

The novel is structured into ten chapters, set in three geographical areas: the homeland (Dominica), the hostlands (the UK and the Continent), and then back to the Caribbean where Rhys's second husband accompanies her in a sort of return journey.

The Dominican society described in the first part of the book is a typical colonial environment centred on the black/white stereotyped division. In this light, Phillips's narration recalls some passages of Naipaul's account of life in Trinidad given in his masterpiece *The Mimic Men* (1969), especially in the depiction of colonial relationships between black and white people on the Caribbean islands. In this context, little Gwen should play the role of the 'white' master, being the child of a Welsh doctor. However, she sooner identifies herself as the 'other,' as embodied in her friendship with a young black maid, Francine. When she is with her friend, Gwen plays "castaway and native, with Francine always assuming the role of the tragically helpless castaway" (Phillips 24) while Gwen actually prefers acting as the island's native. 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. She soon learns how to live in-between, caught "somewhere between coloured and white" (32). In this kind of environment, she is a "misfit" (50) who constantly tries to behave according to her mother's desires of mastery. A painful and endless conflict in-between Otherness and Englishness is expressed throughout the text; this situation, however, does not prevent her from constructing an apparent sense of happiness in Dominica, so that she "couldn't understand why anybody would want to board a ship and leave such a place" (30). Her strong attachment to home is actually stated since the beginning of the novel, but it is persistently accompanied by a sense of physical and psychological inferiority which refers not only to her colonial homeland, but also to the bad relationship with her mother. Her creole mum paradoxically embodies the attachment to what is English, ordered, and oppressive, while her father symbolises Dominica. The Welsh doctor openly speaks of this island as "his home" (57). This juxtaposition will haunt Gwendolen all along her life, as well as the silences and incomprehension with both her parents and husbands. In particular, the unsolved conflict with her beloved dad will push her to play the girl all her life: a passive, yearning-for-love little girl, powerless



but charming, pretty without being intimidatingly beautiful. The father's topic is a leitmotif for Caryl Phillips, and it is well expressed in many of his works, from *In the Falling Snow* (2009) to the most recent *The Lost Child* (2015). In *A View of the Empire at Sunset* the father's trope is strictly connected to the comfortable image of home: a sparkling mix of colours, scents, and shapes identifies the Dominican scenario which is always juxtaposed to the grimness of the British landscape, the "grey country" (58).

In England, Gwen experiences the typical condition of migrants who cannot get accustomed to the mother-country: English people do not understand her because of her Caribbean accent, and she has to fight against a plethora of prejudices and stereotypes. As a reaction to her frustration she becomes an actress, since "when she pretended to be somebody else there was nobody available for [...] any of the other girls, to mock" (81). Her artistic inclinations are here connected to the necessity of surviving into a hostile place where nobody accepts her, including her British aunt Clarice. Constantly criticised by her schoolmates, her teachers at the Academy of Dramatic Art, and her aunt, Gwen starts to look for love and approval in a series of lovers, thus transforming herself in a prototypical colonial and sexual object of possession for white men. A long sequence of partners tries to define (and confine) her into the colonial categories of the "savage" girl (140) or the "exotic" man-eater (184). Throughout the central part of the story, Phillips omits to specify Rhys's past as a prostitute, choosing to consider her intercourses as if they all had embodied her search for a paternal presence which could take care of her and, finally, reconduct her to home. Gwen's concept of home actually involves "her walking hand in hand with her increasingly distracted father through thick tropical forest" (153). As a result, her first marriage with the French Monsieur Lenglet is bound to fail, not only for their incomprehension, but also because it does not have the right environment in which to grow and prosper. They move to Paris, in an attempt to substitute her home (and her father) with a continental life, although the Parisian period is quite bypassed by Phillips, so that he also omits the account of Rhys's affair with Ford Madox Ford in the 1920s. What seems important to the Black British author is Gwen's unburied bond to her past, exemplified in her husband accusing her "of looking at him as though she has gone back to her childhood" (206). Phillips largely insists on Rhys's search for home, and he connects her constant sadness to this absence. The impossibility to come to terms with her pursuit and the consequent frustration are ultimately confirmed by Gwen herself when she declares, "A child can never run away from an unhappy childhood. She knows this" (215). The encounter with her second husband and literary agent Leslie Tilden Smith in 1928 is just an apparent turning point. Thanks to him, Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams will become Jean Rhys and start her career as a writer by publishing her first novel *Quartet* (1929); but her being a quite despotic, unstable, and alcoholic woman—as Phillips describes her—who had already had her part of sorrow in life will outdo her literary career. It is in this framework that Phillips deals with the return-journey to Dominica.

The novel shows a consistent lack of details about her return: the journey is just sketched and also the details about Gwen and Leslie's visit and feelings are just drafted, maybe because any concrete allusion to Rhys's homeland would have been incomplete or unsatisfactory. Her journey and her birthplace are incorporeal like the happy memories of her past and her glad aspirations. Indeed, Gwen has to accept the impossibility of solving her past troubles because, "People say that time heals, but it



doesn't. You just train yourself to forget the ugly incidents, but it only takes one thing to bring it all back again" (287). Moreover, it is quite interesting to note that Gwen describes her beloved home as an "empty world" (299), and this is due to the absence of her father. This is the real leitmotif of all the narration; all along her life, Phillip's Rhys has looked for her father's forgiveness, but her yearning for rescue is bound to be displeased. This situation is exemplified by a dream after which Rhys character wakes up and goes to the beach to watch the sun rise. This hearkens back to Antoinette's dream in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when she wakes from a troubled dream to find the world has changed. Gwen's world has changed too; it has collapsed, so that migrants—Phillips suggests—cannot find a real home even in their birthplaces, where disappointment and broken dreams are just around the corner, along with a sense of disillusion and an impossible understanding.

A View of the Empire at Sunset is, therefore, a seldom harsh fictional depiction of Jean Rhys's personal story, in which the writer's interior life is open to speculation. According to Caryl Phillips, the gossiped side of a life is precisely what allows a novelist to treat a historic character "very similarly to how one would treat a 'fictional' character" (Gonzalez). But *A View of the Empire at Sunset* is also the account of the disintegration of both a migrant life and the British empire, as well as of the impossible reconciliation between them. In this sense, Phillips's aim was to relocate our thinking of Jean Rhys—as well as his own sense of 'not belonging'—into a Caribbean context, in order to reconsider how the history of colonialism, and its ending, can shape a whole life.

WORKS CITED

Gonzalez, Susan. "In Conversation. In his new novel, English professor looks at the life of writer Jean Rhys." *YaleNews*, 10 Jan. 2019. news.yale.edu/2019/01/10/his-new-novel-english-professor-looks-life-writer-jean-rhys. Accessed 10 Sep. 2019.

Naipaul, Vidiadhar S. *The Mimic Men*. André Deutsch, 1969.

Phillips, Caryl, *In the Falling Snow*. Harvill Secker, 2009.

---. *The Lost Child*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Rhys, Jean. *Quartet*. Simon & Schuster, 1929.

---. *Smile Please. An Unfinished Autobiography*. André Deutsch, 1979.

---. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin, 1966.

Alessia Polatti

Università di Verona

alessia.polatti@univr.it