Diasporic Subjectivity and Identity (Re)Construction: A Postcolonial Reading of Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*

Judith Penn Mantoh
University of Yaounde 1.

&
Prosper A. Ntambo Ntambo
PhD Student,
University of Maroua, Cameroon.

**Article History:** Submitted-09/05/2020, Revised-20/05/2020, Accepted-27/05/2020, Published-05/06/2020.

**Abstract:**

The frequent movement of people from erstwhile British colonies, especially from Africa and the eventual drowning of migrants off the coast of Europe has become one of the most disturbing issues in the 21st century. An epoch where Britain is detaching herself from the European regional block (Brexit) and millions of refugees are flooding her shores. The paper attempts to foreground the miserable conditions of the lives of subaltern people at their own inherited land as well as on the foreign lands. The power-structures and dominant ideologies of race, ethnicity and nation in England in effect resist the possibility of attaining and exploring a multicultural existence for the migrants. This is done through an engagement with postcolonial critique which conceptualizes the power relations between migrants and Britons as a direct continuum of the colonial encounter. Despite these discrepant experiences, the paper intends to highlight the affinity to belong in a space where there is always an inevitable 'Otherness'.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Subjectivity, identity, reconstruction, postcolonial.

**Introduction**

‘Postcolonial’ is a multifaceted and contentious term. To underpin it to a specific meaning becomes impossible because of the underlying ideologies associated to it. Postcolonial discourse according to Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* is mainly about “the interaction between imperial culture and indigenous cultural practices. It also refers to a process of disengagement from the colonial syndrome with the construction of the postcolonial subject within literary and theoretical discourse” (27). As Stuart Hall in *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference* puts it ‘an analysis of race, ethnicity and postcoloniality begins with the
recognition that the social meanings ascribed to categories or race and ethnicity have led to profound injustices’ (227). As Postcolonial is frequently used, it has become a very controversial and broad concept that covers a variety of issues. The ideas which are represented in the writings of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak provide a deeper understanding of immigration issues in relation to postcolonialism. John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, declares that:

So, the term ‘postcolonialism’ is not the same as ‘after colonialism’, as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with. It does not define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. Rather, ‘postcolonialism’ recognises both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved. (33)

While the term handles other issues of discrimination within the discourse of imperial culture and indigenous cultural practices, this paper employs postcolonial as a theoretical approach as the colonialists and anti-colonialists ideologies are still evident in the diaspora today. Although Phillips’ *A Distant Shore* is set both in Africa and England, the colonial view of binary opposition is still very much at play here.

British society feels uncomfortable being a multicultural society and aims to abolish any ambition towards plurality. Paul Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia* corroborates this view when he opines that: "The desire of British homogeneity is endangered. Alien cultures are seen to form a threat to the British nation as their arrival supposedly means national decline, weakness and diversity" (19). There is the growing sense in Britain that multiculturalism puts to question the superiority of the Western race. As a consequence of this desire, diversity becomes a dangerous feature of society. It brings only weakness, chaos and confusion. This reveals the incessant process of making Britain great again and restore an ethnic symmetry to a world distorted by imperial adventure and migration. It is evident that citizens of the British nation desire that immigrants leave the mother country and head back Home, then will Britain have the chance to become once more a great nation marked by homogeneity. The atrocious
history of the colonial encounter is not put on the British Empire; instead it is the immigrant that comes to represent all the discomforting ambiguities of the empires painful and shameful history. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* adds:

The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe was once out there. And yet its grudging recognition provides a stimulus for forms of hostility rooted in the associated realisation that today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of empire with them. The incomers are therefore unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past. (101)

Some members of British society thus do not want immigrants present in Britain because they remind them too much of their awful past; they do not want to feel guilty for the mistakes their forefathers have made.

On the other hand, Post-independent Africa is presented as a place of corruption, poverty, misery, war and bad leadership. These ills have made most of its citizens disappointed and are migrating in large numbers out of the continent in order to benefit from the boom experienced in Europe and Britain in particular. Some critics like Walter Rodney blames the Western world for the demise of Africa: "As is well known, Africa has had prolonged and extensive contact with Europe and one has to bear in mind that contact between different societies changes their rate of development" (Rodney,2005:36). Therefore, the underdevelopment of Africa is linked to the colonial contact which has promoted economic policies that benefit to a greater extent the West. The disillusionment of Africans thus leads them to lose confidence in their countries and begin to seek for greener pastures elsewhere.

In *A Distant Shore*, Philips presents Africa at the brink of war. Gabriel/Solomon’s country (that is not named in the whole story) is still a land of war and corruption. The savagery and brutality of the rebels is so heart breaking as seen in the way in which Gabriel’s father and sisters are murdered. This is evident as the narrator explains:

The boys are playing with his father, and then “Smokin Joe” puts his gun to the back of Gabriel’s fathers head. While the others continue to laugh and taunt his father, “Smokin Joe” casually pulls the trigger and the skull explodes. Small pieces of the brain fly in all direction and Gabriel’s mother and two sisters begin to scream. Brutus quietly steps forward and drags Gabriel’s mother and two sisters. Brutus unclips his pistol and pumps a single bullet into the back of both
sisters. He turns to his colleagues but nobody dares to offer a dissenting voice.

(75)

Gabriel is filled with fright and must leave in order to save his life. Even the weather condition reflects the gloomy situation in which Gabriel finds himself: “As Gabriel steps into the street he senses that dawn will soon break. The sky is still black and the noises of animals stirring and cocks crowing are a herald of what is to come” (79). Gabriel now has no choice but to leave for England as Joshua tells his uncle: “I did nothing wrong, but I know I have to leave this country. If I stay here, they will kill me” (78).

Violence that characterises this post-independent unnamed African country is at its peak. Joshua- Gabriel’s uncle keeps prisoners—of-war in deplorable conditions. Gabriel is so determined to raise money and give his uncle to arrange his escape to the extent that he robs his former employer -Felix. Freedom becomes the most important value that Gabriel needs:

Gabriel knows that he will have to act quickly and so in one swift movement he picks up the rusting metal clock that hangs behind the door and he brings down its full weight onto the head of Felix. His friend lets out a shunned cry. He tries not to look at his former employer as he quickly steps over and then through the door which leads to the stairs when Gabriel opens the box, he sees a thick pile of dollar bills and he grabs the bills and two gold rings that are inside, and he pushes them into his pocket. (82)

Thus, Gabriel is willing to steal and even kill in order to leave Africa which has become so dangerous for his existence. Gabriel’s only glimpse of hope for survival is to migrate to Europe at all cost.

At this stage, the only better option for Gabriel is to leave Africa and look for a homeland elsewhere. The society is plagued with people who take the law into their hands. Gabriel’s father again states that “power has not gone to the heads of these soldiers; it has gone to their bellies: They are fat and fleshy. They do not know how to fight, only to kill” (122). The inhumanity and exploitation in Africa has rendered the continent an uncomfortable place to live. Why is Africa in the current state in which it is? Is Africa’s past responsible for its current plight? There was no any absolute transfer of power from the colonial Powers to the new African elites- it was just a ‘flag independence’. This is evident as Gabriel says: “This is not my home anymore” (79). To him, it is clear that England is his new home. He is determined to
be there because Africa is hostile and is a place of war. Even Brown his friend is ready to save all his money and take the risky illegal journey to England because: “These feet were not made to suffer dirt. When I go to Europe, I will walk everywhere on soft material and they will worship my power and how handsome I am. I will stamp on their violins and piss on their classical music CDs’. I will bring them black Africa” (128). This shows the effects of a failed decolonization on Africans who dreamed of an egalitarian and humanitarian society after independence.

**Crossing Borderlands and Migratory Anguish**

Racism, Xenophobia and other discriminatory practices are present at the heart of multicultural England today as intimidating forces. Racism constructs a boundary between those who can, and those who cannot belong to a particular group. The concept of racism has been seen as moving from a phenotypical construction of earlier understanding to one of cultural production of the minority groups. However, according to Catherine Porter in *Theories of Race and Racism* that racism in its traditional sense “designates two very different things. On the one hand, it is the matter of behaviour, usually a manifestation of hatred or contempt for individuals who have well-defined physical characteristics different from our own. On the other hand, it is a matter of ideology, a doctrine concerning human races” (Porter, 2000:70). In any case, the concept of racism and its practices construct a hierarchy of social organization that lends privilege to hegemonic views; it postulates systems of both inclusion and exclusion of individuals by categorizing them into those who can belong and those who cannot.

Sibley David in *Geographies of Exclusion* argues that, “the human landscape can be read as landscapes of exclusion because power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments” (Sibley,1995:14). Migrations in England have strengthened economic development and nation building. Its power structures have tried to exclude and construct marginal spaces for the outsiders. The contributions of these migrant groups in England have been immense that the present day England cannot ignore their existence especially in its social, cultural and political spaces. The transatlantic slavery has been considered as one of the major colonial projects in which the dignity and rights of millions of Africans were violated unscrupulously for European developments. But today, England shows symptoms of ingratitude by turning its back to its contributors. While racism can be the name for that aspect by which persons belonging to another group are categorized and marginalized due to the presumed racial inferiority, Xenophobia and the resultant hatred and dislike originate from the cultural integrity and
homogeneity of the society. Etymologically, ‘Xenophobia’ means “fear of the stranger”, and it is derived from the Greek, ‘xenos’, meaning, stranger or foreigner, and ‘phobos’, meaning “fear”. Therefore, xenophobia literally means a fear of foreigners and outsiders, and xenophobes are considered to be those people who hold negative attitudes to those “out-groups”. Jonathan Crush and Sujata Ramancha in *Xenophobia: International Migration and Human Development* give a rather comprehensive definition of xenophobia as, “attitudes, prejudices and behavior that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity”(5). In England, xenophobic violence and atrocities have been increasing concern of the minority groups as they stand vulnerable to targets of political, social and economic dissatisfactions. Very often, the intensity of experience of xenophobia and its reactionary measures are closely related to the cultural, racial and ethnic background of the migrant group.

Philips’ *A Distant Shore*, the observation at the beginning of the novel states thus, “England has changed. These days, it’s difficult who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs, and who’s a stranger. It’s disturbing. It doesn’t feel right” (3). This shows that England has changed and the resultant uncertainty surrounding the distinction between the stranger and resident implies the contemporary atmosphere of England as a multicultural hub. The arrival of these migrants to England focuses the attention upon the heterogeneous and diverse character to wish it had transferred their involvement around the world. But to the much disappointment of the immigrants, the claim of multicultural character of England seemed to be vanished by the way the unsympathetic and hostile subjection of these ‘Othered’ populations from other continents are treated. According to Gilroy, in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Europe cannot deny the logic behind the presence of immigrants in these locations today as he evinces:

> The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable. Today; any open stance toward otherness appears old-fashioned, new-agey, and quaintly ethnocentric. We have been made accurately aware the limitations placed upon the twentieth century’s cosmopolitan hopes by the inability to conceptualize multicultural and postcolonial relations as anything other than risk and jeopardy. (100)

This shows Gilroy’s anguish and concern for the new age caught in the exclusionary practices and ethnocentric structures of Europe. This challenges the mutual co-existence of
different nationals, racial and ethnic groups that principles of globalization have been assuming to hold for a long time.

In Philip’s *A Distant Shore*, Solomon is a victim of racism and racially inspired vandalism. It is only shortly after setting foot on English soil that Solomon becomes acquainted with dynamic of “stranger danger” when he is accused of the rape of a young white English girl-Denise. Landing on shore with a hurt leg, Gabriel is dragged by his friend, Bright to an abandoned house where: “he looks around the room and can see now that the house looks as though nobody had lived in it for quite some time. Every object is coated in a thin layer of dust and the air feels heavy and stale” (134). Denise’s father accuses Gabriel/Solomon of rape just because he sees his daughter lying by him: ”They simply fell asleep, that’s all. They slept. In the morning, the girl’s father led the police on the house where they first attacked his daughter and then began to beat Gabriel with a metal pipe until the police pulled him off” (167). Denise’s father believes that Blacks are habitual to rape. His daughter sleeping with a black man must have been raped¹. Philips addresses the problematic issue of rape in *A Distant Shore* by not naming it as a way of deconstructing this mythic narrative. His symmetrical approach on the cultures of both sides of the “river” is especially explicative of the ways in which rape is encoded in the ‘manichean opposition’ (Davies, 1985:180). In Africa, Gabriel witnesses the rape of his two sisters before they are being shot down. In England, this traumatic past resurfaces as Gabriel is accused of raping Denise. The actual rape in Africa and the alleged ‘rape’-which the author chooses not to name in England. The author substitutes the word ‘rape’ to ‘intimate’ as Catherine the migration officer tells Gabriel: “Katherine ached her eyebrows. The girl is fifteen Gabriel. The father said you were intimate with her” (168). Philips is struggling to address the issue of racism, designating a Blackman as naturally oversexed.

In jail for the supposed ‘abuse’ of Denise, Gabriel/ Solomon is either ignored or treated as an animal by the guards. The night warder is much concentrated on his television set rather than seems to be the pleasure he derives watching his television. Worst still, Said- Gabriel’s cell mate who is unjustly accused of stealing a white couple’s body is dying from a severe illness, yet the warder refuses to take Solomon seriously when he begs for a doctor as the author reveals: "Gabriel has been holding on the bars of the cell and begging the night warder to call for a doctor. But the night warder continues to watch television with his boots up on the desk, his legs crossed casually at his ankles and the flickering glow of the screen illuminating his face" (64). Eventually a doctor arrives but it is too late as he dies and Solomon is left alone with the corpse in the cell. Together with a shocking event, Solomon also suffers from the
guard’s contempt in different ways, for example when he finally receives his dinner; he is told that he has two visitors. Solomon wants to take his plate with him, yet the warder tells him that this is not permitted and he should either abandon his food or see his visitors or he forgoes seeing the visitors to eat. “Tough, either you stay here and finish it or you see your visitors. You can’t do both” (95). Solomon chooses to eat his meal quickly as possible and

---

1. This is what Paul Gilroy calls “the myth of the Black rapist” and this is recurrent in white male discourse. Angela Davis gives a disturbing historical account of the manufacture of sex related crimes as she posits that, “the myth of the black rapist has been methodologically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against Black community have required convincing justifications” (Davis, 1985:173). Thus, she specifically decries the instrumentalization of rape in the production and maintenance of terror against people of colour.

then goes to his visitors, whom as it turns out have already been waiting there for a long time. The warder thus deliberately wanted to block Solomon’s consultation with his lawyers.

Xenophobic attitudes of fear held by the locals are envisioned by Solomon’s encounter with Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. The Anderson couple treats Solomon as kindly as their own son. Due to Mr. and Mrs. Anderson’s hospitality, Solomon decides to call them “Dad and Mum”. However, the apparent unconditional hospitality the Anderson Family shows Solomon is placed under strain when the house is vandalized by a group of xenophobic hooligans, an action which intimidates the other residents. Although ‘Dad’ and ‘Mum’ still accord Solomon the degree of hospitality, we observe a clear change in their attitude that signals the presence of fear. This fear is subtly conveyed when Mr. Anderson attempts to explain to Solomon why the vandals have targeted their house. Interestingly, the rationale Anderson evokes in doing this, is one that appeals to a notion of space:

Solomon, the first line of defense is prejudice. Once you get past that, there’ll always be a little corner where you can live and be who or what you want to be. But you’ve got to get past that first line, and things are not getting any easier. There’s an awful lot of you and the system’s already creaking to breaking point. I mean, things are particularly bad if you want to get into one of our hospitals. People are upset. You see Solomon, it’s just that this isn’t a very big island and we don’t have that much room.
People think that other countries should take you first because we’ve done our bit.
(256-257)

Such an exclusive conception of space is one: “with its primary motivation of fear and paranoid of the other presents a sharp contrast to the inclusive conviviality of the boundless space of a cosmopolitan world where a stranger is given the same dignity and pride or place and resident” (Lopez, 2005:66). Anderson’s disclosure also reveals the way in which, by explaining the xenophobic attitude of fear held by the locals, he partially adopts its logic by employing symbolically the derisive ‘us’ and ‘them’. Phillips therefore presents the reader with a compelling insight into the way in which xenophobic impulses can spread in a community even affects those who initially ascribe to it.

The method by which xenophobia can be observed and propagated is also illustrated in the sequence of arguments used by Mike-Solomon’s friend to explain the reason why some in the community resents immigrants. While insisting that “I’m not prejudiced” (258), Mike proceeds to play the devil’s advocate by iterating some of the reasons he thinks multiculturalism has failed in the region. In doing so, he applies a number of absurd stereotypes that reveal not only his own stance, but ironically the very attitude of suspicion of otherness that would make the failure of multiculturalism inevitable:

These Indians, they still make their women trail after them, and they have their mosque and temples; and their butcher shops where they kill animals in the basement and do whatever they do with the blood. I mean they’re peasants. It’s this kind of people that cause others to have bad attitudes and do things like they’ve done to Mum’s wall. Am not saying they’re right, because they are not. But I drive around a lot, and I see how people feel, more than the old folks do. It’s everywhere you see, you’re in a different situation, Solomon. You’re escaping oppression, and that’s different. I mean you’re working. You are no scrounger. But they don’t know what I’m saying, and so that’s what happens. (258)

Apparently from this citation, Mike who is Irish and not English is a racist himself. Instead of blaming the Whites for the mess of national consciousness in Britain, he accuses the Indians of being the cause of England’s misery as they are ‘peasants’. This paranoid and xenophobic utterance forms a stark contrast to the inclusive convivial concept of a ‘borderless’ metropole. Significantly, the words equally marks the point at which Solomon is compelled to
move away from the community and into the new settlements of Stoneleigh- the place where he eventually comes to make the acquaintance of Dorothy Jones, another resident and ‘exile’.

However, moving from the neighbourhood to Stoneleigh does not allow Solomon to escape the xenophobia that forced his flight from the Anderson residence. This time, dog mess is put inside his metal box, and some of his letters filled with razor blades so that Solomon would have his fingers sliced off in an attempt to open them. What is most striking about these letters is that most of them are signed as if the racial offenders want to make sure that Solomon knows who they are. Solomon is targeted and hated in his neighbourhood. He contemplates on the abnormality of British ethics and sense of morality: "These people are unwell, for decent people do not conduct themselves in this way. Writing to me with this filth is one thing, but this is savage. They regard me as their enemy, this much I understand, but their behaviour is unclean" (266). Solomon’s fury is an attempt to bring out the uncivilized attitudes and cowardice of xenophobes who find it difficult to integrate others in their society. Revisiting Joseph Conrad’s portrayal of Africa in his *Heart of Darkness*, Phillips has proven that England in the 21st century is ‘the heart of darkness’ where the bestiality of some whites have pushed them to savagery of animal-like instincts of behaving, thereby deconstructing the civilized discourse of the white race as opposed to the uncivilized others.

The ‘stranger’ or ‘other’ conception is constructed as a figure of danger, which transgresses perceived boundaries and engenders fear in the natives. As a result, the enforcement of violence becomes ‘justified’ to keep them as subalterns. This violence is mostly physical with psychological implications. In order for us to better understand violence and suspicion as a dividing force in a global world, our attention turns to Ashley Dawson in *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and Making of Post-colonial Britain* where he reveals that:

Racist violence in Britain, especially in Notting Hill riots was viewed by mainstream commentators and legislators as the logical outcome as aversion to the foreign cultural practices of colonial subjects. The deplorable racist attacks that took place during the riots, could only be prevented, it was argued through the diminution of Britain’s Black population. The Notting Hill riots as this week of violence meghem came to be known was a watershed for Britain. They shattered the long-standing metropolitan illusion that racial conflict was un-British. Moreover, the riots established some of the fundamental themes of racial antipathy that would characterize post imperial Britain. (20)
From the above passage, the British society is incessantly advocating for the lessening of Black population or they would resort to violence. Britain is thus constructed as a space from which other beings—that are marginalized, have to be expelled as they constitute a threat to British Identity.

Philips’ *A Distant Shore* portrays characters who suffer from violence and suspicion in their attempt to crisscross the landscape of England, expecting to make England their ‘home’. Said, an English teacher from Iraq, leaves his country and travels to the multicultural space of England, believing that in England, ‘freedom is everything’ (70). But to his great dismay, Islamophobia is evident, as he says, ‘everybody wants to keep out the Muslims’ (70). He is unaware of the hostility directed towards Muslims across the globe. In fact, what he fears is becoming a victim of Islamophobia, generalized fear of Islam and Muslims. In England, he falls under the suspicion of being a thief:

> And then an Englishman and his wife they ask me if I could watch their bag while they go to the restaurant car, and I say yes. And then they come back and look at their bags and the woman says that I have taken their money and she runs to get the man in the red jacket. But why would I come all the way from my country to make my own life here then take their money? I cannot go back. (70)

Said falls under suspicion and is handed down to the police custody. Ironically, in the place where he seeks freedom, he is imprisoned even without having been involved in any kind of criminal activity. In prison, he suffers both physically and psychologically as a foreigner. The prevalence of ‘institutionalized racism’ in England is apparent in Said’s case, and his death proves intolerance, violence, suspicion against the ‘outsider’ or ‘foreigner’ in the public and legal domains of England as he says, “But have you noticed? The light in England is very weak. It depresses me” (72).

In addition, Solomon’s neighbours show no true compassion for Solomon’s demise and are only eager to defend the purity of the village/nation and its inhabitants/citizens. Even though his landlord thus says in passing that he is sorry for Solomon, in the same sentence—he expresses his worry about the village’s reputation and is certain that it can only have been an accident and furthermore asserts that in the village only: “decent folk committed only to their families and their community. We don’t have murderers here” (49). In response, Dorothy only nods as she has “no desire to upset his sense of community” (49). The landlord’s concern for the village’s reputation, his alliance with the rest of the villages, together with the dual reference
to community takes precedence over the death of Solomon. This in fact strongly reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s concept of nation as “an imagined community characterized by a deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1991:77).

Gender shares a relationship with culture because culture refers to a way of life, and gender has to do with roles people ascribe to in particular societies. Mary Daly in *The Dialectic of Sex* opines that: “women always play a second role and are sometimes considered as the weaker sex” (70). Women suffer three facets of colonization which are, race, class and sexual orientation. If black men in the diaspora are discriminated because of their colour, women undergo extreme profiling because of their sex. Gender can therefore be termed as social construct as echoed by Julia Wood in *Gendered Lives: Communication and Gender Culture* that:

> The experiences during the early years of life profoundly influence individual identities. Although we continue to evolve through our lives, foundation of personality, values, attitudes and perspectives are tempered by hatred and social constructs that place sexes in various arenas. One’s experiences in life are a determining factor in shaping that person’s world view and ideology about life. This notwithstanding, the society also shapes one’s attitude and personality and values that are also determined by our sex. So, even though individuals are born either male or female, they acquire a kind of gender identity over the years and this largely depends on the roles society ascribes to them. (16)

From the above passage, sex is indicated as universal, but each and every society has its way in determining the way males and females should behave. Such gender arrangements largely depend on the culture of a given group of people. The female gender is associated with negative images of marginalization and depersonalization, while that of the male gender is power. A kind of imbalance of power between men and women, whereby the former exploits, manipulates and victimize the latter. The misuse of power by the men often results in different kinds of prejudices against women, reducing them to mere children. In *A Distant Shore*, Dorothy can be considered as an example of an exile in her home country. She undergoes what Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s in *Homecoming* calls "mental exile". This woman in her fifties is not only in exile, but remains a victim of male abandonment. The narrator describes her story as one that “contains a single word, abandonment” (180). Her marriage with Brian is a failure which leads to Brian’s abandonment of her with just one word. Her love affair with Geoff Waverley,
her colleague leads to a scandal as Waverley’s wife is introduced into the affair. Miss Mitchell, one of the administrators in the school where she teaches presents Geoff Waverley’s charges against her in these words:

The charges are that you repeatedly left Mr. Waverley’s notes in his box. That you called his wife, and on behalf of the teachers at this school, expressed concerned over the physical and mental health. That you visited his lodging and left him abusive mail. And that just last night while he was having dinner with his sister, you stood at the window and stared at them both. (211)

Though these charges look very unconvincing, they show the extent to which the woman is not being protected in this society that is dominated by men. Her relationship with Mahmood is no better, and she undergoes emotional stress. Men see her as an object of use for their pleasure and instinct.

According to Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second sex*, the woman will always remain in the subaltern space until she frees herself. Beauvoir further argues that the woman’s problem in a male dominated society is her freedom, and she is the one to look for this freedom as no man is courageous enough to grant her this freedom. In this connection, she holds that the woman who should enjoy the privileges like life has been enslaved by the man-structured and governed world. This is seen as Sheila, Dorothy’s sister suffers from persistent sexual abuse from their father. Whenever Sheila tells Dorothy about the constant abuse by the father, Dorothy resorts to shun Sheila to be ‘indifferent about it’, as if confirming Bill Ashcroft et al (1989) that ‘the silencing of the subaltern woman actually extends to the whole of the colonial world, and the silencing and muting of all natives, male and female’ (178). This abuse of Sheila affects her psyche to the extent that she abandons Roger, her boyfriend, to become a lesbian. The lack of feelings and attachments for a male whom she regards as a beast due to physical and psychological trauma of rape makes her believe that true love is in the same sex as the narrator explains:

However, never once Sheila mentions marriage, or move puzzling children when she got a letter from her sister announcing her split with Roger (who was by now winning awards for his documentary films), and informing him that Sheila was now setting up home with Maria Kingston ‘across the river’, she was shocked. After twenty five years with a man, her sister was only now discovering that she wanted to be a woman. Brian
smirked, and then began to laugh. He claimed that he had always had his suspicions.

(214)

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* states that: "The migrant can subvert the perverse satisfaction of the racist, masculinist gaze that disavowed her presence by presenting her with an anxious absence, a counter-gaze that turns a discriminatory look which drives her cultural and sexual difference back on itself" (47). Bhabha is reiterating the fact that while the man represents the hegemony and the woman the subaltern, the woman is able to make her voice heard. Besides rape and other forms of brutality, the woman in the diaspora is also a victim of man’s abandonment. Just as the white world abandon people of other races and makes them invisible, so too do men abandon women.

**Exilic Consciousness and Identity formation**

This section thus emphasises on the ability of Philips’ characters to negotiate space and identity in the Diaspora, especially at this moment when there is an increasing sense of lack of dignity given to migrants in their host societies. But the question one will ask is if at the end of the narrative, these characters achieve a sense of belonging? In order to better understand the dilemma that migrants go through in a bid to construct a space and identity for themselves, our focus will tend to Kobena Mercer in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*:

The development of ‘black’ political discourse in Britain’s post war economy, polity and culture has brought about the proliferation of antagonistic struggles around the signifier of ‘race’, which has entered the domain of hegemony as its effects involve ‘a recomposition of relations of power at all levels of society’. This space simultaneously circumscribes ‘the black community’ as that domain of the social in which the policing of black life is exerted with particular brutality and over the above the ability to resist and survive such forces which affects the landscape of the society as a whole, in what it is and what it could become. (9)

The colour of the skin then marks one perpetually foreign and therefore not British. While some black people in England choose to embrace British identity as a means of survival, yet, others instead embrace an anti-colonial or anti-British identity in the midst of the ‘mother country’. In this context, England no longer figures as motherland.
Resistance is one of the means through which the characters negotiate and assert their identities. Resistance against Western perception and domination serves as a useful tool to the individual because it demystifies feelings of inferiority complex and restores his self-respect. Frantz Fanon shares this view: “at the level of individuals, resistance is a cleaning force, it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from the despair and inaction: it makes him fearless and restores his self- respect” (Fanon,1978:74). Fanon’s view is justified where Dorothy kicks against the belief that English people are not supposed to mingle with foreigners or strangers. Dorothy even testifies to Solomon about her indoctrination by her father against other races. She tells Solomon:

With Mum and Dad, for starters, both of whom disliked coloureds. Dad told me that he regarded coloureds as a challenge to our English identity. He believed that the Welsh were full of sentimental stupidity that the Scots were helplessly mean and mopish and they should keep to their own side of Hadrian’s well and that the Irish were violent, catholic drunk. For him, being English was more important than being British, and being English meant no coloureds when people were around, they’d go on about them not really adapting well to our school system, but in private they were always “cheeky little niggers”. (37)

The above excerpt restricts Dorothy from interacting with ‘coloured’ and preserving English identity which is the most important part of her life. Even the Irish and Welsh are attributed negative connotations as “stupidity” and “drunk” to show the superiority of the English identity. Dorothy is convinced that, in order to come out from her myriad of abandonment and psychic fracture, she needs to strike a relationship with the ‘outcast’, Solomon. The loneliness they recognise in one another seems to draw them together and a friendship is soon forged when Solomon volunteers as a driver at the local medical centre and starts driving her to the doctor’s appointments in town. Although the people of Weston are unhappy with this ‘unholy’ relationship, Dorothy believes she can self-assert her identity by befriending a man whom she sees very much as herself: “without Solomon, Weston suddenly seems like a strange and empty village, and it feels as though a whole life time has passed since the day that Solomon came calling” (48). Dorothy negotiates her identity by identifying her existence with that of Solomon, which according to her is a sense of fulfilment. After the brutal murder of Solomon, Dorothy’s attachment to the stranger is seen as she alienates herself from the natives of Weston: “At the bottom of the hill I see a few of the villagers, but I ignore them. Especially now, after what they’ve done” (53).
Moreover, Solomon constructs a diasporic identity by resisting being biased and xenophobic like the English people; instead he constructs a positive identity. Solomon sheds his ‘murderous’ identity (when he was in the guerrilla group of Africa) and turns into the genteel Solomon. The razor-blades and hate-letters he receives and the dog-mess placed in the letter box do not make him feel significantly angry. The quiet job as a watchman at Stoneleigh and as a voluntary driver in Weston demonstrates the result of the process that built up his identity: an honest, respectful and caring citizen, a contrast to English people’s hostile attitude. The new diasporic identity of the African Solomon challenges and subverts the native “civilised” Englishman and his actions. His care for his cellmate in London subverts the selfish and no-caring attitude of the Warder; his respect for the ‘wild’ English Denise subverts the bias of the English police men who charged him with sexual assault. His respectful relationship with Dorothy is a challenge to his “savage” murderers. His gratitude to Mr and Mrs. Anderson, his benefactors, disrupts the ingratitude of the old man whom he drives to the hospital in his own car free of charge. The imaginary community, the “home”, however cannot be fulfilled. His tentative reach for recognition as a self, for equality, for relief from tragic treatments and loneliness has been his only weapon in a bid to have a sense of belonging.

Within the oeuvre of Philips, characters have attempted to negotiate their identity through what Gilroy terms ‘double consciousness’. While in the diaspora, migrants have had it difficult blending their culture with that of the host society. It is because of this difficulty that W.E.B Du Bois makes a clarion call to Africans in *The Souls of Black Folk* to blend their culture with American culture as he says: “one ever feels his twoness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (126). Du Bois therefore opines that, an African will only feel included if he blends his culture with that of the host culture. My analysis in this section will be guarded by Paul Gilroy’s notion of Double Consciousness in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy is in support of mixed identities and cultures as he writes:

> Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between two great cultural assemblages, both of which have
mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations.(1)

Gilroy in the above citation therefore rejects absolutism in favour of mixed personality especially in this age of globalisation where cultural flows are profoundly imbalanced. Gilroy affirms this view thus: “At present, they [diasporic] remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic- black and white” (1- 2). Gilroy sees the root cause of ‘home’ crisis in colour phobia and intolerance. He thus resorts to the ship image to demonstrate a global world where cultural diversity is celebrated: “... the image of the ship... a living, micro-cultural, micro political system in motion” (4). Gilroy’s double consciousness is thus in favour of cultural tolerance and not adhere to absolutism.

In Philips’ *A Distant Shore* Solomon, the African refugee, finds it difficult to be integrated in the English social system. He is equally disturbed by the fact that British people seem determined to make no contact with black people. They exhibit antisocial behaviours:

To Gabriel’s eyes, English people look unhappy, and he notices that they walk with their heads down as though determined to avoid another. It is strange, but nobody is looking at anybody else, and it would appear that not only are these people all strangers to one another, but they seem determined to make sure that this situation will remain unchanged. (144)

This shows that Solomon is not only isolated by society, he himself is to some extent responsible for his sense of loneliness, as he declines his first contact that he encounters in Britain- Denise. Due to this difficulty, Dorothy desires to tell Solomon how he should blend in with the community: “I want to tell him that in England you have to become a part of the neighbourhood. Say hello to people. Go to church. Introduce your kids to their new school. You can’t just turn up and start washing your car. People will consider you to be ignorant and stand offish” (14-15). Therefore, Solomon has to pay a higher price to belong just because of his colour and ethnic origin. That is why; in the latter part of the novel he adopts a sense of community service by driving people to the hospital free of charge. He has to greet his English neighbours even if they don’t treat him kindly. These attitudes of migrants are to enable them belong in a society that always view them as inferior beings.
Conclusion

From the forgone discussion, Philips artfully presents the plight of the migrants in their new locations that are continually surfacing in the wake of globalization and transnationalism. Globalization has been a calculated attempt by the Western world to place migrants of other cultures, races and ethnicities under white hegemony. The antipathy towards the migrants in general suggests a numbing malaise that a modern society of England has been affected with. Philips has made a remarkable contribution to the British literary canon by openly addressing migrant experiences and offers a dual perspective since he does not limit the setting of this work to Britain only. Under such an alarming move from the part of the Western world on the issues of accepting and accommodating the twenty-first century migrants, Philips proposes a ‘new world order’ in which everyone partakes and participates equally and tolerantly. This aim seems not to erase the boundaries between cultures, but rather where the dividing line between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ become blurred. Although Western states are now less able to protect vulnerable populations at home, these characters face with a common ethos; develop strategies to redefine and reposition their identity in a global cultural arena.

Works Cited


Diasporic Subjectivity and Identity (Re)Construction: A Postcolonial Reading of Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore*

