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Abstract

The article examines the novel *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips, and how the novel explores the concepts of identity, exile, and belonging through the use of the complex narrative technique. The paper looks at the meeting of the lives of Dorothy (an English woman) and Solomon (an African immigrant) and how Phillips examines the creation, change, and destruction of identity in the process of cultural displacement. Phillips's disjointed narrative echoes the psychological impact of exile, with a focus on the unseen social divisions and racial lines that continue to exist in contemporary Britain. This study looks at theories of identity, belonging and trauma in postcolonial literary works and how they reflect on and challenge the boundaries of society through Phillips' characters. Racial prejudice, alienation and cultural dislocation are themes that Solomon has experienced, something that represents wider themes of exclusion in postcolonial Britain, whilst Dorothy's internalised isolation and mental health problems indicate that alienation is not specific to just one culture or race. This study highlights the complexity of Phillips's depiction of the psychological effects of exile, trauma and displacement on the self, placing *A Distant Shore* in the broader literary debate on the legacy of colonialism, race and national identity in postcolonial situations. Phillips brings the reader into his world and reveals some of the unseen boundaries that shape the sense of belonging, pushing the reader to recognize how society creates and confines notions of home and identity for the marginalized.

Keywords: Identity Formation, Memory, Trauma, Hybridity, Migration, Exile

Introduction

As one of the most prominent writers of this era, exploring themes of migration, identity and the consequences of colonialism, Caryl Phillips is widely recognized. Growing up in the Caribbean and spending his childhood in the United Kingdom, Phillips' life and work has always dealt with a complex awareness of cultural displacement and the desire to belong. His novels are frequently about people who reside on the fringes of society, who live at the edges of race, country and personal story. Phillips's stories explore themes of identity, displacement and social exclusion, and

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are both deeply personal and representative of the experiences of postcolonial people. In 2003, Phillips released *A Distant Shore*, a work in his body of work that is rich in layers and explores the complexities of identity in a globalized and post-colonial world. It is the parallel story of Dorothy, a retired English woman struggling with loneliness and mental health and Solomon, an African immigrant, who has to flee from violence and turmoil. The characters are both alienated in their environments, despite their different backgrounds. In the weaving of their lives, Phillips brings to light the complex nature of identity formed in a historical, cultural, and racial context. Through their various character voices, Phillips is able to show the reader the characters' disjointed realities, highlighting the emotional and psychological impacts of uproar. *A Distant Shore* is a work that will be explored in this paper as a meditation on identity, belonging and the psychological impact of cultural dislocation. It suggests that Phillips's narrative form and his alternate viewpoints are intentional means of depicting the internal confusion of his characters. Moreover, the novel illustrates many subtle and hidden constraints that impede integration and belonging, even in a multicultural society—constraints of race, class, and cultural difference. This study aims to highlight *A Distant Shore* as a critical examination of the modern British society, by examining the narrative techniques, character development, and thematic concerns of the novel. This study will use Phillips' novel to challenge readers to rethink their ideas of identity, home, and social inclusion and to examine the novel in terms of its narrative techniques, character development, and thematic concerns. The research can be part of the discussion on postcolonial literature which already discusses the psychological and social effects of exile and displacement, and puts Phillips' work as a key criticism of modern identity in the world of historical and racial divisions.

Caryl Phillips is a literary cartographer of exile, and charts the dynamic, fluid spaces of identity and migration in his writing. *A Distant Shore* is an unsettlingly evocative novel about two strangers, Dorothy, a disillusioned English woman, and Solomon (Gabriel), an estranged African immigrant, and their search for self in an alien place. Phillips' fractured narrative links the concepts of identity to a process of change that is historical, traumatic, and socio-political, all of which are interwoven throughout the narrative. The paper examines how Phillips's experimental narrative breaks down the binary realm of belonging/alienation and creates a more nuanced discourse on identity.

The use of a multi-perspective and fragmented narrative structure is key to reflecting the fragmented realities of migration and exile, as Phillips employs them in this work. The novel's time-travelling structure, which jumps from past to present, forces the reader to make his own sense out of the characters' identities, just as the characters struggle with their own confused identities. The story of Solomon, recounted in disjointed memories, highlights his dislocated life, and Dorothy's, in similarly fractured recollections, her exile in her own land. In the eyes of the narrative theorist Mieke Bal, fragmented story-telling represents characters' psychological torment, and the discontinuities of memory (Bal 14). In *A Distant Shore*, it is a potent means of

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representing the fragility of identity in the post-colonial and migratory. The characters' disjointed memories provide metaphorical images of their fragmented lives, further emphasizing the themes of alienation in the novel. Phillips's subtle treatment of racial identity places his characters at the crossroads of past and present marginalization. The conversion of Gabriel, an African soldier, to a nameless refugee, represents the suppression of his identity by his survival. His quest is one of the arduous experiences of the postcolonial individuals who exist in a state of liminality between the past of the colonial past and the restrictions of their new countries. By the same token, Dorothy's unease in this country is a metaphor of an exile within her own homeland and can help illuminate the gap between identity and nation.

This idea of the 'third space' is very important to comprehend Solomon's liminality (Bhabha 37). Solomon is caught between past and present, home and exile, between a dialogue of identity being negotiated at all times. The past is gradually revealed within the narrative, while the present challenges the reader through the problems that Solomon faces, creating a feeling of in-betweenness and causing the reader to doubt any notions of selfhood or belonging. In *A Distant Shore*, memory and identity, as in the epigraph, are a kind of sanctuary and frontier, both defining and challenging identity. Solomon's memories of his life in Africa are hazy, leaving him with only a few glimpses that are fragmented by trauma and displacement. Dorothy too lives with a sense of nostalgia and is locked into memories that don't correspond with her current life. Phillips makes the reader think about the act of remembering and the subjectivity and fluidity of identity. According to Paul Ricoeur, human beings are self-created by means of their narratives, and they constantly modify their stories as they have new experiences (Ricoeur 55). However, in *A Distant Shore* that is not the case. The novel does not offer easy answers to resolve, emphasising the ongoing process of negotiating identity, formed historically, through migration and exclusion. The non-linear, fragmented narrative is a representation of the displacement and trauma of Dorothy and Solomon; their identities are formed by what has made them different. The disjointed, fragmented nature of the narration reflects the psychological effect of the trauma, whereby memory and identity may become fragmented as in Dorothy's attempt to remember and in Solomon's repression of his traumatic history as a refugee. Literary critic Mark Stein observes that "Phillips's fragmented narrative form is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate reflection of the ruptured lives and identities of characters who straddle multiple cultural and temporal planes" (Stein 235). For example, Solomon's narrative is revealed in fragments, mirroring his hesitant assimilation into a hostile society and his attempt to reconcile his painful past with his present circumstances. By juxtaposing the perspectives of Solomon, an African refugee, and Dorothy, a retired British schoolteacher, Phillips demonstrates how alienation transcends cultural and racial boundaries.

Dorothy, despite being a native of England, feels estranged from her community due to personal losses and societal changes, while Solomon experiences overt racism and cultural displacement as a Black immigrant in a predominantly white society. Scholar John McLeod argues

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that this dual narrative approach “forces readers to confront the interconnectedness of isolation, suggesting that exclusion operates across both racial and cultural lines” (McLeod 57). The parallel exploration of their inner lives reveals the shared human need for belonging, even in a society that categorically others them. Another significant aspect of *A Distant Shore* is its dual perspective, which juxtaposes the experiences of Solomon, an African refugee, and Dorothy, a retired white Englishwoman. Scholars like John McLeod highlight how this narrative strategy reveals the parallels between the two characters’ alienation, despite their disparate cultural and racial backgrounds. McLeod notes that Phillips “invites readers to see exclusion as a universal experience, one that transcends boundaries of race and class” (McLeod 61). By presenting both perspectives, the novel critiques the rigid societal divisions that perpetuate isolation and dehumanization. Jill Brown further explores this duality, arguing that the novel resists the binary framework of insider versus outsider. Instead, Phillips presents identity as fluid and relational, showing how both Dorothy and Solomon grapple with feelings of displacement and disconnection within the same social milieu. Brown writes that “Phillips’s dual narrative framework destabilizes fixed notions of belonging, emphasizing the shared vulnerabilities of marginalized individuals across cultural divides” (Brown 89).

The function of the story in terms of constructing identity for both Dorothy and Solomon, the narration of their pasts is an act of self-preservation in an attempt to reconstruct the broken identities. Dorothy’s disorganized recollections of her dysfunctional family and troubled marriage demonstrate the ways in which “personal history” contributes to one’s sense of self, while Solomon’s unwillingness to discuss his past underscores the gaps in history imposed on marginalized people in oppressive settings. Phillips shows that storytelling is not only a way of knowing identity, it is also a way of claiming agency. The characters’ stories enable them to work through their traumas and find a sense of self despite the erasure of society. As Phillips himself states, “Identity is not a fixed point but a journey, one that is often dictated by the stories we tell ourselves and the ones imposed upon us” (Phillips, *Interview with The Guardian*). The role of storytelling in constructing and reclaiming identity is another recurring theme in scholarly interpretations of *A Distant Shore*. Solomon’s reluctance to share his traumatic past and Dorothy’s fragmented recollections of her personal failures illustrate the tension between silence and articulation in identity formation. According to Michael Perfect, Phillips uses storytelling as a means of empowerment, suggesting that narrative is central to both processing trauma and asserting agency. Perfect contends that “Phillips’s characters find partial solace in reconstructing their stories, even as they struggle against the societal silences imposed upon them” (Perfect 184).

The novel places personal identity in broader socio-political frames, and it examines the multiple ways in which migration contributes to the redefinition of personal and collective ideas about what it means to belong. The tension between his personal experience as a survivor of war and his imposed identity as “other” in England is especially emphasized in Solomon’s story.

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Phillips examines the dehumanizing impact of racism and xenophobia, how it affects the way people think about people such as Solomon, and how it affects them and their sense of self. The novel is set in a small, rural English village, where the traditional fabric of the community is disrupted and those who are part of the community feel isolated and alone. For Dorothy, her loneliness is due to a lack of connection to neighbours, for Solomon, it is due to systemic racism and culture barriers. The disconnection of the community reflects a larger theme of disconnection in a world of migration and multiculturalism that both the native and the migrant are unable to find common ground. The characters' alienation is further set up by the declining village of England portrayed by Phillips. For critics such as Stein, the village is a reflection of a wider societal breakdown, and the loss of the community adds to the sense of isolation among its residents and newcomers alike. Dorothy's alienation from her neighbours and Solomon's rejection by the very same community serves to highlight the novel's overall message of the need for belonging in a world that is fragmented. Overall, these scholarly positions underscore the use of narrative form and thematic investigation to complicate issues of identity in a globalized and polarized world in Phillips's *A Distant Shore*. The disjointed narrative is indicative of psychological dislocation as is the multiple points of view that questions binary thinking of belonging/exclusion. Furthermore, the novel highlights the power of storytelling in the healing process of trauma and the creation of identity – and the critique of the societal forces that marginalize people and communities.

Phillips's characterisation of identity as an evolving, multi-layered concept provides a larger picture of the issues raised by multiculturalism and integration in today's societies. His characters' conflicts are a commentary on the conflict between individuality and collective identity, and how empathy and the understanding of common humanity can help to bridge the divide. Stitched together around issues of migration, memory, and alienation, *A Distant Shore* is a criticism of the inability of modern societies to accommodate difference and a testament to the resilience of human identity in the face of adversity. Phillips' disjointed narrative structure is important for examining the dislocations of his characters. The story switches between Dorothy's and Solomon's points of view to show the world to them after they have lived separate lives is quite disorientating and they don't know who they are. The making of Phillips creates a sense of fractured narrative and psychological fragmentation, echoing the characters' psychological experiences, as well as the lived experiences of people caught between cultural identities. Scholars, such as Sarah Phillips Casteel, have argued that this fragmented form serves as a metaphor for the immigrant's fractured self, where "Phillips's use of fragmented narrative serves to mirror the fractured identity of his characters, who are displaced not only geographically but also socially" (Casteel 42). Phillips thus crafts a narrative landscape that immerses the reader in the characters' disjointed reality, intensifying the emotional weight of their search for belonging.

Phillips' novel explores the fluid nature of identity and its influence from individual experience as well as the cultural expectations of one's surroundings. Solomon's refugee

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experience is typical of the negotiations between culture and assimilation pressures in a hostile foreign society. His struggles with his adaptation are a reflection of the inner and outer struggles that accompany the process of identity formation. But Dorothy's character also demonstrates that isolation and the search for identity is not exclusive to immigrants; it can be a feeling within one's own society as well. Through this insight, Phillips is able to take on the ideas of belonging and home although they are simple and offers the hypothesis that alienation is the universal experience for anyone who is not in accordance with the norms of the society. Drawing on Stuart Hall's identity theory, which positions identity as "a process of becoming," Phillips portrays identity in *A Distant Shore* as a continually evolving concept, particularly for individuals affected by migration and displacement (Hall 54).

Race plays a central role in Phillips's exploration of belonging and exclusion. Solomon's character experiences intense racial discrimination in Britain, which compounds his sense of displacement and challenges his hope for acceptance. Phillips critiques the societal limitations imposed by racial difference, portraying Solomon's life as a microcosm of racial exclusion within Britain's postcolonial context. Literary critic Graham Huggan notes that Phillips's work critiques the ideal of cultural assimilation by illustrating how immigrants remain "othered" and marginalized despite their efforts to adapt. "Phillips presents Solomon as a symbol of racialized exclusion in postcolonial Britain, using his story to critique the limitations of cultural assimilation" (Huggan 89). Through Solomon's story, Phillips reveals the subtle, enduring boundaries that marginalize individuals based on race, complicating any straightforward notion of belonging. His portrayal of the psychological toll of exile and trauma underscores the complex impact of displacement on individual identity. Solomon's character is haunted by traumatic experiences from his past, which deeply affects his relationships and ability to trust. Dorothy, too, embodies the psychological strain of isolation within her society, as her deteriorating mental health echoes themes of alienation and despair. Trauma scholars, such as Cathy Caruth, suggest that traumatic experiences disrupt one's sense of self and place, an idea reflected in Phillips's portrayal of Solomon's psyche. "Phillips's portrayal of Solomon's trauma resonates with Caruth's argument that trauma disrupts an individual's sense of self and place in the world" (Caruth 102). Phillips shows how internalised oppression and alienation of Dorothy and Solomon's lives are intensified by their physical exile, emphasizing that exile is a psychological wound as well as an external one, and that it affects identity. His depiction of Dorothy and Solomon's lives is not just a story of personal struggle, but one that offers a wider critique of British society, and its attitude to race, immigration and cultural identity. Phillips' characters interact with one another and experience social dynamics that expose the omnipresent boundaries that limit the experience of belonging and self-definition. His story challenges the possibility of cultural assimilation and highlights the barriers to societal acceptance for marginalised people. Reflecting on the ways in which identity is not only personal, but imbued with cultural and racial bias, *A Distant Shore* is also a commentary

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on the legacy of colonialism and racial stratification in contemporary Britain. Paul Gilroy, among others, has commented on Phillips's criticism of national identity, his interrogation of the inclusiveness of British society, and his uncovering of the racially charged barriers that are still in place in the postcolonial world.

In *A Distant Shore*, memory, trauma, and identity serve both as a safe haven and a conflict zone, becoming as much a shaping and distorting force as they are a haven. The memories of his former life in Africa are not complete, and they are not always easy to find. As for Dorothy, she too lives in a nostalgic manner; she lives in a life that is separated from her current one. Phillips makes the reader think about the act of remembering, and the subjectivity and fluidity of identity. According to Paul Ricoeur, the self is a "narrative identity" and people continually modify their identities through the creation and development of their stories (Ricoeur 55). But, in *A Distant Shore*, coherence is elusive. The novel is unsolvable, is a reminder of the ongoing and ongoing negotiation of identity formed by history, migration and exclusion. This discussion is enriched by the work Marianne Hirsch does on postmemory, for it is through Solomon's and Dorothy's inherited traumas, and the ghosts of their pasts, that their identities are mediated (Hirsch 106). Phillips also references Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology, which sees the past constantly "haunting" the present, thus making it impossible to close or give a self-contained identity (Derrida 10). Solomon's figure is ghostly, somewhere and not somewhere, embodying the plight of the migrant population uprooted from its homeland, whose narrative is continually erased and retold by the dominant story.

A Distant Shore is a unique, introspective look at identity and displacement when compared with other migration stories. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), two other novels, also deal with migration and selfhood, but with a focus on mobility and adaption. In Adichie's story, Ifemelu, a black woman from Nigeria, has an experience of racial and belonging issues in the United States, but in Phillips's story, Solomon is more likely to suffer from a sense of total forgetting of identity. Similarly, while *Exit West* is a magical realist work authored by Hamid, Phillips is a "straight" one that highlights the psychological consequences of migration, but both novels rely on the psychological toll of migration. Placing *A Distant Shore* in this larger literary conversation enriches the book's exploration of the inextricable split in the self that is characteristic of a time of forced migration and racial marginalization.

Thus, in *A Distant Shore*, Phillips weaves an intricate narrative that illustrates the complex interplay between identity, belonging, and exclusion. Phillips examines the treatment of migration, race, and identity in today's society through Dorothy and Solomon's travels and the fragmented narrative structure is meant to mirror the fragmented nature of those who experience dislocation. This study also reveals the use of narrative style by Phillips to emphasize the fluidity of identity in relation to cultural and racial boundaries, thereby encouraging the reader to contemplate and reflect

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on what it means to belong and be accepted in a culture. Comparing *A Distant Shore* to other postcolonial texts dealing with identity and displacement could yield insights for future studies that could further the conversation about the effects of migration, trauma, and racial othering on society. Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* is a testament to the way identity can be fluid and continuous, even as it is negotiated and influenced by the conflicts between individual story and collective forces. The disjointed narrative and dual voices in the novel are the novel's central point that storytelling is essential to the journey of establishing identity in the world of displacement and alienation. *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips is an in-depth examination of the nature of identity as a complex and dynamic phenomenon, created by individual experiences, wider social circumstances and the long-lasting effects of displacement and alienation. The novel's disjointed form and its multiple viewpoints expose the fissures in society and in people's individual lives that result from trauma and exclusion. Through the pairing of Solomon and Dorothy, Phillips reinforces the commonality of humans seeking belonging and the strength it takes to live on the outskirts of a world that seeks to disenfranchise and dismiss them. Phillips challenges the notion of identity as fixed and singular and suggests that it is a dynamic process that is built through storytelling, an important means of regaining agency and of making sense of fractured realities. *A Distant Shore* is a comment on the dehumanizing forces of racism, xenophobia and societal dysfunction and is a reminder to be empathetic and connected in a polarized world. Finally, Phillips asks readers to look at the common fragilities and hopes that bind us together as human beings and asks how communities can be reimagined to embrace diversity and heal the scars of alienation. In *A Distant Shore*, Phillips undermines the notion of a fixed and unambiguous self, creating a story of selfhood as a constantly unfolding narrative that is affected by historical memory, displacement, and racialization. In the fragmented, non-linear narrative, Phillips forces readers to confront the ambiguities and dilemmas of identity formation. The novel's postcolonial challenge to notions of belonging, and its psychoanalytical and narrative treatment of identity as an unfinished negotiation between past and present, self and society, are highlighted through the lens of postcolonial, psychoanalytical, and narrative theory. By doing so, *A Distant Shore* not only gives voice to the dispossessed, but also changes the definition of storytelling as a way to gain understanding of oneself in a world that increasingly looks like a borderland, both literally and metaphorically. The illusion of a stable identity is broken in Phillips's *A Distant Shore*, which instead suggests that selfhood is a story in evolution, a story that is told in the context of historical memory, displacement, and racial positioning. The book is multifaceted, non-linear, and forces the reader to confront the ambiguities and complexities of identity. This study foregrounds this novel's interrogation of the concept of belonging from a postcolonial, psychoanalytical and narrative perspective revealing the novel's idea of identity as an ongoing conversation between past and present, self and society. *A Distant Shore*, in doing so, not only gives a voice to the voiceless, but

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also challenges the very concept of storytelling as an expression of understanding in a world where borders are growing more and more real, both physical and psychological.

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