

## Family and Identity in Caryl Phillips's Fiction, in particular *A Distant Shore*

Family relationships are central to the way Caribbean writers define their identities. This is particularly the case of Caryl Phillips. Most of his fiction presents the family as a site of disruption, but also includes examples of surrogate parenthood, which reflect the complexity of the writer's identity conundrum. The discussion focuses on Phillips's 2003 novel *A Distant Shore*.

Family relationships have always been central to the way Caribbean writers define their identities. This is particularly the case for the contemporary novelists of the diaspora who use the family as a metaphor that sheds light on their own displaced condition. Several examples spring to mind. Perhaps the most obvious is that of Jamaica Kincaid, the author of several books with a strong autobiographical content. She first devoted several coming-of-age novels to the love/hate relationship with her mother, which seems to have shaped her as a woman and as a writer, very much in the same way as colonialism did. Later on she focused on the disappearance or absence of family members: she wrote a book entitled *My Brother* (1997) on her brother, who died of AIDS, then another one, entitled *Mr Potter* (2002), on an absent father figure that had already featured in *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1996), a novel in which Kincaid's heroine, tough, childless Xuela, sums up her life thus: "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; ... between me and the black room of the world" (3). Parental absence, obviously a metaphor for the Caribbean homeland left behind, also features prominently in other texts like *The Intended* (1991) and *The Unbelonging* (1985), two London novels respectively by David Dabydeen and Joan Riley whose protagonists arrive in Britain from the West Indies and end up in the care of social services. In both cases, the disruption of the family unit is associated with the trauma of displacement and the emotional void that exile can entail, especially in its first stages.

Many more examples could certainly be provided. It seems to me, however, that one of the contemporary Caribbean writers who most clearly testifies to the pervasiveness of the family trope is St. Kitts-born Caryl Phillips, who uses it in his fictional exploration of the human condition admittedly less obtrusively than Jamaica Kincaid but, as we will see, with wider-ranging effects. In what follows I would like to argue that Phillips's take on the family, especially on the parent-child relationship, crystallizes the complexities of diasporic identity, shaped as it is by initial losses but also by undeniable gains, however ambivalent these might

sometimes prove to be. My paper is organized around three sections: after analyzing how Phillips's novels present the family as a site of disruption, marked by absence, separation or even abuse, I will attempt to show that his fiction counterbalances this chronic dysfunctionality with an almost obsessive focus, on the part of his characters, on their absent or estranged kinship or with recurrent instances of surrogate parenthood which can suggest hope, of course, but in many cases also convey a more dubious sense of attachment. My conclusion will briefly examine how this representation of the family ties in with Phillips's world-vision, in particular his rejection of racial and ethnic essentialism, a view which he develops in a more straightforward manner in his essays, notably in *A New World Order* (2001).

Caryl Phillips has often been 'accused' of being a pessimist. His depiction of the family might be case in point to those who think of him as a nihilist, since most of the protagonists of his eight novels to date experience a collapse of what is considered to be the traditional family structure, and this crisis is almost always at the heart of their tragedy. With the relative exception of *The Final Passage* (1985), the author's first novel, where the intimacy between Leila and her baby son Calvin compensates ever so slightly for the hardships of exile and, to some extent, of his second *A State of Independence* (1986), the characters in Phillips's fiction are either childless or parentless, or both. And if they have children or parents, then they are either physically separated, or kept apart by an often unbridgeable communication gap, which is again the case in Phillips's latest novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), in which Bert Williams, the novel's childless protagonist who calls his wife 'mother', entertains with his father a "perplexing, but loving, peace" (89) marked by silence. It would be tedious to list here all the occurrences of family alienation in Phillips's fiction. What is more to the point is to try and understand, from a selection of examples, the meaning of this breakup of the family unit as well as its existential implications for the individuals, keeping in mind that Phillips is not a sociologist, but, an artist, and as such is first and foremost interested in sounding the human soul and its meanders.

The family situation of the two protagonists of *A Distant Shore* (2003) might be an interesting starting point here as it presents the main types of family estrangement that recur throughout Phillips's fiction. On the one hand, there is Solomon Bartholomew, a young man from an undisclosed West African country, whose parents and sisters are massacred in front of his eyes in the context of an ethnic war. Caused by forces that are beyond the powers of the individual to control, his loss, added to the guilt of surviving, is similar to the bereavement that affects several other Phillips characters, namely the survivors of the Holocaust, like Eva in *The Nature of Blood* (1997)<sup>1</sup> and the African slaves torn away from their relatives, like Martha in *Crossing the River* (1993) whose daughter is auctioned away from her. The other main character of *A Distant Shore* is Dorothy

<sup>1</sup> As Barbara L. Estrin eloquently demonstrates, *The Nature of Blood* can be read as a revision of the traditional myth of the founding.

Jones, an English woman and retired teacher in her fifties, whose parents die a natural death but with whom she entertains, even beyond the grave, a strained relationship full of silences and secrets, where much remains unspoken. Nothing is openly mentioned, for example, about Dorothy's imagined betrayal of her working-class roots nor about her father's abusive behaviour towards her sister Sheila, nor even about the latter's homosexuality. A similar ambiguity pervades the parent-child relationship in *Cambridge* (1991), where Emily, whose voice also "unspooled in silence" (4), is promised to an older man in exchange for her father's material comfort, and in *Crossing the River*, where an African father sells his three children into slavery.

While the disruption of Solomon's and Dorothy's families is apparently triggered off by very different causes — on the one hand man's propensity for evil and segregation that leads to war, genocide, or enslavement, and on the other an incapacity to communicate properly — it seems that it derives in both cases from a common impulse to dominate the other and an inability to view people simply as humans. So, while the brutal soldiers who kill Solomon's family "shot [them] like animals" (297), Dorothy's father "tried to treat [her] like the son he'd never had" (10). Be it as it may, the collapse of the family structure results in both cases in utter loneliness,<sup>2</sup> and an obligation to fend for oneself without the support of close ones, which is compounded by the fact that neither Dorothy nor Solomon has set up a family of their own. No doubt the disruption of Solomon's and Dorothy's families point to man's essential loneliness and to his/her inability to fully and permanently belong to a single community. It also reflects negatively on Solomon's and Dorothy's countries of origin, both belonging to a world where cold individualism has become the norm. Solomon's country is presented as a nation in disarray where people are ready to deny their family for money, power or a chance to escape to Europe. For example, the young men under Solomon's leadership in the liberation army "were fighting because somebody had given their family a bag of rice or promised them a car. For over a year they had simply eaten what they were given, and they had lost all friends" (146). England too is a morally corrupt society made up, from Solomon's point of view, of "shipwrecked people" (176), who are "all strangers to one another, but ... seemed determined to make sure that this situation will remain unchanged" (163). For all its affluence, England is also shown as a place with a significant number of homeless people reduced to begging. To that extent, then, *A Distant Shore* may be said to be a bleak novel. However, its acknowledgement of total dislocation, on individual and communal level alike — to some extent also rendered through the novel's fragmented and non-linear structure — is transcended even as it is made. This seems to suggest that in spite of its vulnerability and its faults the family is a structure that you cannot do without, whatever happens to you.

<sup>2</sup> The novel contains many more characters whose family life is disrupted, for example Denise, a teenager left to her own devices, who says "Me, I don't like families. Especially my dad" (186) and Mahmood, who is at some point trapped into an arranged marriage, "traded [by his family] as though he were a mule" (200).

Significantly, therefore, in *A Distant Shore*, as in his other novels, Phillips uses his characters' dreams and memories as well as several examples of surrogate parenthood to compensate for the apparent dismantlement of the family, to produce a message that is moderately optimistic because it takes into account man's irrepressible gregarious impulses and his benevolence as well as his proclivity for paternalism and selfishness.

Thus, after the death of their parents and siblings, Dorothy and Solomon cannot resist the urge of the unconscious to remember the dismembered family. Their dreams and memories are constantly peopled with their parents or siblings, which leads, in Dorothy's case at least, to some form of madness since she pretends that her sister Sheila is still alive. This mental condition is reminiscent of Eva in *The Nature of Blood* who refuses to acknowledge the death of her mother and behaves as if she was still at her side. While Dorothy's and Solomon's obsession with their kindred is to some extent the expression of their guilt for being survivors, it also indirectly expresses the impossibility of jettisoning one's origins and of starting anew, an idea which nonetheless underlies Dorothy's decision to go and settle in the village of Stoneleigh (259 & 268) and, even more importantly, that of the refugees who, like Solomon, dream of going "to a new place and a new beginning" (94).

However, the pull of the past and of the family is irresistible. As Solomon puts it "I could escape neither myself, nor my country, nor my family" (297). This paradox of wanting to start a new life and yet being unable to leave one's family behind is poignantly evoked in one of his dreams where his mother appears to him as faceless, "as if somebody [had] taken a piece of cloth and rubbed out her features" (132). Dorothy, too, becomes aware of how strong family bonds are when she reconnects with her sister Sheila after six years of separation. Afraid at first that "all that bound them together was blood and the increasingly distant memories of a past that they shared" (243), she gradually realizes that "her sister's pain is connected to her own guilt with a bond that neither of them can untie" (262). One could say of the two sisters that "[they] are separated by silences, yet bonded by love," (McLeod 144) a formulation used by John McLeod in his discussion of Phillips's *Crossing the River*, in particular of the relationship between the English woman Joyce and her black son, Greer, whom she has given up for adoption and who comes back to see her eighteen years later.

The resurgence of the family in Dorothy's and Solomon's life is not limited to the realm of the unconscious. It also takes a more concrete turn, most obviously in their growing platonic intimacy which somehow compensates for the void left by the death of their relatives. Family surrogacy affects them individually too, especially Solomon, who is taken in by an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Anderson, who regard him and another lodger, Mike, as the sons that they never had. Mr and Mrs Anderson are very kind to Solomon, especially Mrs Anderson, whom he calls 'Mum'. The couple manage to get him legal status, find him a job and a place to stay. For all this genuine generosity, however, one senses a certain ambiguity in their relationship, not only because the couple might be deriving some sort of

"personal triumph" (291) from their benevolence to the young African, but also because it looks as though Solomon needs to be a child all over again in order to be accepted into England. For all their warmth and hospitality, then, this surrogate family only imperfectly compensate for Solomon's orphaned state: "I was blessed to be in England, but this life bore no relationship to the one I had known in my own country, and as a consequence I felt as though my new family knew only one small part of me. In truth, only one half of me was alive and functioning" (291). The ambivalence at the heart of this adoptive relationship<sup>3</sup> is further conveyed by the fact that Solomon's first-person narrative of his arrival in the Andersons' home bears oblique linguistic resemblance to Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, notably this sentence "I was much caressed by this family" (271)<sup>4</sup>. While this echo may suggest that, in spite of his benefactors, Solomon's experience is not really different from that of the famous eighteenth-century figure who arrived a slave in Britain, it may also be an expression of the author's literary affiliation, as a way of compensating for what has been called "the cultural orphanage engendered by slavery and colonialism" (Phillips, "George Lamming talks to Caryl Phillips" 14).<sup>5</sup>

Incidentally, there are many other examples of (often interracial) surrogate kinship in Phillips's fiction, the most striking of which is to be found in *Crossing the River* where the African father who has sold his three children into slavery, and has thereby triggered off the African Diaspora, eventually regards Joyce, a white English woman who has married his son Travis, as one of his own children. Yet, it is interesting to note that these alternative bonds are usually presented as problematic, as if to suggest that any return towards an original state of togetherness is impossible and that there is no easy way out of family fracture. It is either difficult for the characters to transcend race barriers, as is the case for Emily in *Cambridge* who finds it hard to accept her black servant Stella as a substitute mother figure and at one point refuses to call her 'Aunt' because, as she puts it, "my aunts Mabel and Victoria bore no relation, physical or otherwise, to this ebony matriarch, so how could I bind them together with the same word?" (36). Or, in some cases, these alternative relationships contain an exploitative streak that annihilates all the philanthropy they might entail, which happens, for example, in the case of Edwards Williams, in *Crossing the River*, whose paternal generosity to his ex-slaves is coupled with sexual concupiscence.

<sup>3</sup> A similar ambivalence in surrogate family relationships is suggested when Solomon (or rather Gabriel, at this stage of the narrative) wanders in the streets of London shortly after his arrival in England. He first encounters one of his countrymen who looks at him as if "he had suddenly recognized a long-lost relative" (173) and calls him "my brother" (175), but nonetheless steals his money from him. Then later he meets a man who suggests to him easy ways of making money, telling him "Let me know if you need somebody to be your daddy" (177, my emphasis), a term clearly evocative here of sexual, not familial, partnership.

<sup>4</sup> "I was so much caressed by this family," (Equiano 68).

<sup>5</sup> David Dabydeen's novel *Disappearance* (1993) could provide another possible literary relation for *A Distant Shore*. Both novels indeed focus on the platonic, almost familial relationship between an older white English woman and a younger black man from the former Empire.

If surrogacy in *A Distant Shore* mostly concerns Solomon, it applies to some extent to Dorothy as well, for her compulsive need to seduce men might also be seen as a search on her part for an alternative to the unsatisfying father-daughter relationship of her childhood. Quite ironically, the only parental substitute that she eventually finds after Solomon's death is the mental home in which she ends up, and where she is looked after as a child would be. Very much like a family, the 'unit' where she is an inmate is "A retreat. Somewhere where you can lick your wounds and gather some strength before going back to the world" (312). For Dorothy, then, like Irina in *Higher Ground* and Eva in *The Nature of Blood*, the mental home is a family of sorts, a space that oppresses even as it protects.

Clearly, the above examples from *A Distant Shore* testify to Phillips's pervasive interest in genealogy, and more generally to a world vision that in its examination of man's suffering replaces blind essentialism with a more inclusive approach to human relationships. His representation of disrupted family relationships indeed conveys what he has called "a new world order" in the eponymous collection of essays, a world in which "nobody will feel fully at home" (5), where "we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions" (6). In this world, the traditional family structure, defined by Paul Gilroy as "the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced" (197), cannot hold, even if it keeps haunting us. In its place, Phillips suggests a multiple, unpredictable formation, which results from man's ability to create new links, even if fleetingly, with people who are not his kin. Paradoxically, this new, ambiguous family is perhaps all the more resilient for being so imperfect.

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