

"Omnipresent and Everlasting Imperialism: Race and Gender Oppression in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*"

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Caryl Phillips published *Cambridge* in 1991 and *A Distant Shore* in 2003. Twelve years and two novels separate these two books, whose stories also take place almost two centuries and two thousand kilometres apart. Yet these narratives may be viewed as strikingly similar in many respects. In what follows, I wish to examine how the similarities and differences between *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore* operate to convey the idea that imperialism – the dominion of one nation or group of people over another – has lived on from the nineteenth century depicted in *Cambridge* to the twenty-first century of *A Distant Shore*.

Cambridge recounts the stories of Emily Cartwright, a white Englishwoman who travels to her father's plantation in the Caribbean, and of Cambridge, a black African slave who ends up on Mr Cartwright's plantation after going through two middle passages. The narrative unfolds at the beginning of the nineteenth century, between the abolition of the slave trade and that of slavery. *A Distant Shore* follows Dorothy Jones, a white Englishwoman, and Solomon Bartholomew, an African political refugee who has fled to England. The two characters meet in Weston, a small village in the north of England, and eventually become friends. The novel is set in contemporary England, about twenty years after "Mrs Thatcher clos[ed] the pits."¹

Because of their different settings, *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore* may at first sight appear to be very dissimilar. But, like their main characters, they have significant features in common. Both novels discuss racial and gender oppression by presenting a black man from Africa and a white Englishwoman, two protagonists "separated by gender [...] and ethnicity"² but nonetheless both subjected to "white male supremacy."³ Moreover, both novels can be

¹ Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 2003): 4. Further page references are in the main text after "DS."

² Sylvie Chavanelle, "Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*: Ironic (Dis)empowerment?" *International Fiction Review* 25.1-2 (1998): 78.

³ Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Contemporary World Writers; Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002): 100.

read as allegories for "the late twentieth-century human condition everywhere in the world."⁴ I hope to demonstrate that, when examined side by side, these works convey an even stronger message about how imperialism has evolved since the nineteenth century.

The protagonists of each novel bear a strong resemblance to their counterparts in the other book. In *Cambridge*, Emily does not have any kind of influence or power over the men she encounters, not even the slaves, for, as Evelyn O'Callaghan writes, nineteenth-century English and plantation society "confined and silenced women."⁵ In the same way, in *A Distant Shore*, Dorothy's life is marked by female insignificance: she was brought up in a family where her mother's "voice didn't count for much with Dad" (*DS*, 11), which is why "Mum ultimately fell silent" (*DS*, 10). In her adult life, Dorothy reproduces the same pattern, first with her husband Brian, whom she allowed "to look through and beyond her, until he finally convinced himself that she did not exist" (*DS*, 199), and then with her lover Mahmood, with whom she often keeps silent, "being concerned to make sure that the dominant narrative is male" (*DS*, 203).

The two black protagonists of *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore* are also similar in terms of alienation. While Cambridge stands for the oppressed and the downtrodden in a predominantly racist society, the twenty-first-century political refugee Solomon has to endure racism every day, first in his African country, where he was a member of an ethnic minority, then in England, where nearly all the white people he meets reject him because he is black. But Solomon's likeness to Cambridge also comes from the suggested association of his situation with that of a slave. In Stoneleigh, where he is "the only coloured" (*DS*, 45), he works as a "handyman-cum-night-watchman" (*DS*, 14); just like the slaves who served their white masters, he is a black man in the service of an all-white community. His "great desire to learn" (*DS*, 277) echoes Cambridge's Christian education in England. As for Solomon's dependence on Mr and Mrs Anderson during the first year of his stay in England, it reminds one of the slaves who, according to Emily, "are in our charge and must be provided for."⁶ Like the "black Hercules of a brute" (*C*, 41) who was forced to abandon his real name Olumide to become Thomas, then David Henderson and eventually Cambridge, Solomon also undergoes "abusive multi-naming."⁷ He was originally called Gabriel, but his soldiers in

⁴ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 80.

⁵ Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29.2 (June 1993): 40.

⁶ Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991): 72. Further page references are in the main text after "C."

⁷ Françoise Charras, "De-Centering the Centre: George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* (1972) and Caryl

Africa prefer to address him as Hawk. Solomon is a name that he chooses later, but only because he knows that it is dangerous to be recognized as Gabriel in England.

The echoes of *Cambridge* in *A Distant Shore* become even clearer when we focus on Phillips's use of language. Indeed, Dorothy's and Solomon's narratives contain clear textual references to some of *Cambridge's* sections; Phillips, then, seems to be encouraging the reader to draw a parallel between the two novels, thereby stressing their characters' similarities. If Dorothy's situation reminds one of Emily's in terms of gender oppression, the use of the word "sacrifice" in the two texts reinforces the resemblance between the two women. The term clearly defines Dorothy's relation to men (*DS*, 212), and equates her predicament with that of Emily, who lives in a society that is characterized by "daughters *sacrificed* to strangers" (*C*, 3, my emphasis).

In the same way, Solomon's story echoes Cambridge's narrative. Both abound with sentences taken from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*.⁸ This common reference to Equiano's text and the ensuing association of the two black protagonists with the famous slave confirm the analogy between Solomon's predicament and that of Cambridge and of African slaves in general. This parallel is even more striking when one realizes that Phillips sometimes uses almost exactly the same words from Equiano's narrative in the two novels. While Cambridge says about the white traders that "their most constant practice was to commit violent depredations on the chastity of female slaves, as though these *princesses* were the most abandoned women of their species" (*C*, 138; italics in the original), Solomon describes Denise (the teenager who secretly brings him food when he arrives in England) as a "poor girl, who was one of the most abandoned of her species" (*DS*, 278).

The likeness between the protagonists of the two novels might, then, indicate that the subjection of black people and of women – which may be considered as two different forms of imperialism – has not disappeared in contemporary England, an idea which is certainly reinforced by Phillips's use of Equiano's narrative in the two texts. As María Lourdes López Roperó remarks, Phillips "alters the conventional teleology of the slave narrative, wherein the

Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991)," in *Mapping African America: History, Narrative Formation and the Production of Knowledge*, ed. Maria Diedrich, Carl Pedersen & Justine Tally (Hamburg: LIT, 1999): 74.

⁸ This fact is mentioned in relation to *Cambridge* in O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History," and in relation to *A Distant Shore* in Bénédicte Ledent, "Family and Identity in Caryl Phillips's Fiction, in particular *A Distant Shore*," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 29.2 (2007): 71, and is explored in the context of other colonial 'pre-texts' by Lars Eckstein in *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (Cross/Cultures 84; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006): esp. 74-96.

slave progresses from bondage to freedom,"⁹ since he describes his protagonists' passage – literal for Cambridge and symbolic for Solomon – from freedom to bondage. By doing so, Fernando Galván observes, Phillips is "trying to write [...] a new history of slavery,"¹⁰ and refutes the notion that the end of colonialism coincides with the disappearance of imperialism.

Admittedly, Dorothy and Solomon's situation cannot be simply equated with that of Emily and Cambridge, if only because they live in different centuries. Still, the differences between the characters are mainly superficial: both women enjoy a comfortable social standing, but while Emily owes her situation to "her genteel upbringing and status as a lady in English society,"¹¹ Dorothy has secured it for herself by working as a teacher. Dorothy is divorced and has lived alone since her husband left her, a position that was not in the least conceivable for a nineteenth-century woman like Emily. However, things change for Dorothy when she is forced to take early retirement because of a colleague's complaint against her for sexual harassment. Quite significantly, it is a man who deprives her of what partly embodies her relative independence: i.e. her job. So her new single life is not really synonymous with emancipation. Unlike Emily, who preferred leaving England to marrying Thomas Lockwood, Dorothy did not choose the lonely life that started with rejection by a man who, at the end of their relationship, no longer noticed her. After her divorce, she episodically sleeps with married men like Mahmood and her colleague Geoff Waverley, a situation reminiscent of Emily's romance with Mr Brown. In this respect, it is interesting to consider what Evelyn O'Callaghan calls "the indeterminacy of the title 'mistress'"¹² for Emily, "one in which the powerlessness of the mistress of the Great House overlaps with the illegitimacy of the mistress of the overseer,"¹³ as Jenny Sharpe observes. While Emily's status as the plantation-owner's daughter should confer a form of authority on her, she turns out to be powerless. Her helplessness is reinforced by her position as Mr Brown's mistress, an illegitimate relationship evocative of those the white men on the plantations often had with their female slaves. Though not openly expressed, Dorothy also appears as a powerless 'mistress': she is, indeed, a

⁹ María Lourdes López Roperó, "Irony's Political Edge: Genre Pastiche in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*," in *Beyond Borders; Re-Defining Generic and Ontological Boundaries*, ed. Ramón Plo-Alastrué & María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro (Heidelberg: Winter, 2002): 135.

¹⁰ Fernando Galván, "Between Othello and Equiano: Caryl Phillips' Subversive Rewritings," in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. Susan Onega & Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004): 200.

¹¹ Gail Low, "'A Chorus of Common Memory': Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*," *Research in African Literatures* 29.4 (Winter 1998): 127.

¹² O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History," 41.

¹³ Jenny Sharpe, "'Our History was Truly Broken': Writing Back to a Slave Past," in Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 2003): 108.

dismissed school 'mistress' before becoming the illegitimate 'mistress' of married men. In the end, the differences between Emily's and Dorothy's lives appear to be counterbalanced by their similarities, which suggests that the condition of women has only undergone superficial changes.

On the surface, too, Solomon's situation looks different from Cambridge's. Solomon is a free man who acquires legal status in England. But this does not guarantee fuller acceptance into British society, since he is soon murdered by local skinheads. Like Cambridge, he is killed by white people, and, like him, he too suffers from racism, which manifests itself in different ways. Indeed, the rise of neo-imperialism in contemporary Britain can be seen, for instance, in the recent development of far-right political parties and in the racial hatred that triggered off the murders of Stephen Lawrence and Anthony Walker, to mention but two examples. Another type of racial discrimination to which Phillips seems to allude in Solomon's story is the unequal treatment of black and white people in the legal system. Even though Solomon's homicide is officially considered to be a crime – therefore punishable by law – Dorothy is "not sure how hard [the police are] trying" (*DS*, 47) to find the culprit when she observes the way they are enquiring about the murder. This might imply that the killing of a black man is still regarded as less serious than that of a white person. Finally, in the second section of *A Distant Shore*, Phillips demonstrates that Solomon's migration is not so different from Cambridge's, in the sense that Solomon, too, is, in a way, forced to leave Africa. In fact, Solomon flees his country only to save his life after the government troops have massacred his family. He pays a fortune to travel in very precarious conditions in the hope of reaching England, which seems to be the country where "freedom is everything" (*DS*, 78). Although Solomon's forced journey takes place in the twenty-first rather than the nineteenth century, it can be viewed as a consequence of imperialism. The second section of the novel in particular serves to underline the two main reasons for the massive migration that has taken place since the second half of the twentieth century: i.e. the idealization of the 'mother country' and the wish to flee the difficult life circumstances in the former colonies, both of which appeared in the wake of European colonization and were caused by it.

Here, the differences between Cambridge's and Solomon's situations are once again outweighed by their similarities, so that the reader of the two novels can better understand that Solomon's migration is actually one of the consequences of nineteenth-century imperialist ideology. In *A Distant Shore*, Phillips ironizes about the English people who are intolerant of the newcomers and who do not seem to be aware of the connection between colonization and

immigration. This irony clearly appears when Mike talks to Solomon about 'blacks' in England:

'I'm an old traditionalist, Solomon. I want fish and chips, not curry and chips. I'm not prejudiced, but we'll soon be living in a foreign country unless somebody puts an end to all this immigration.' (*DS*, 290)

In saying this, he does not even realize that, at the time of colonization, the question of whether the colonized accepted the people, language, and culture of Britain could not even be considered, since these were imposed on them in their own country, without any possible discussion. Nor does Mike seem to understand that this new "foreign country" is in great part the result of Britain's involvement in colonization.

The last – and most obvious – *alleged* difference between the two novels that I would like to examine can be found in the relationship between their characters. Franca Bernabei points out that in *A Distant Shore*, "Phillips repeatedly shows the symbolic and literal act of knocking on someone's door,"¹⁴ a pattern that also appears in *Cambridge* but does not prompt the same reaction on the characters' part. While, in *Cambridge*, Emily "quickly closed in the door" (*C*, 93) in her black sentinel's face, Dorothy welcomes Solomon inside her bungalow when he knocks on her door for the first time. If it seems that Emily's "character makes evident that the shared oppression of white women and black slaves does not create the conditions for a common sisterhood,"¹⁵ Dorothy is conscious that, "like [her]," Solomon "is a lone bird" (*DS*, 14), which is one of the reasons why she lets him enter her house and her life.

However, this friendship might not be indicative of much change in British society. The first reason for this is that the person who accepts Solomon in Weston is herself an outsider, also greatly in need of company. Like her African friend, Dorothy is rejected by the local people, who form "a village that is hardly going to give up its name and identity" (*DS*, 3) and who are thus afraid of newcomers, as is made clear both by the hate-mail Solomon receives from his neighbours and by his eventual murder. The Westonians' rejection of newness reflects England's attitude as a whole, which is symbolized by Mrs Anderson's relation with Solomon. Mr and Mrs Anderson have always played the role of surrogate

¹⁴ Franca Bernabei, "Guests, Strangers, and Non-Persons: *Ius Migrandi* and the Risks of Hospitality in a Circumatlantic Perspective," in *Approaching SeaChanges: Metamorphoses and Migrations across the Atlantic*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Padua: Unipress, 2005): 42.

¹⁵ Sharpe, "Our History was Truly Broken", 109.

parents to Solomon and also to Mike, the Irish truck-driver: the two men call Mrs Anderson 'Mum' and she once tells Solomon that "Mike and [he] were like the sons that she had never had" (*DS*, 287). Mrs Anderson becomes the 'mother' of two foreigners originating in former colonial territories; she might therefore be considered to be a metaphor for the 'mother country' that England was for the colonies in her imperial heyday. Even though Mrs Anderson is a very generous host, her endeavour to be a mother to two adult men in their thirties implies that they need to be taken care of. She thus adopts a patronizing stance that is reminiscent of England's relationship to its colonized 'children.' In *A Distant Shore*, Phillips associates Mrs Anderson's behaviour towards her adoptive sons with England's attitude to its former colonies, which suggests a wish on Britain's part to maintain power over foreigners. This testifies to a deep unwillingness to substitute the title of 'host country' for that of 'mother country', and thereby reveals that the acceptance of the 'Other' in British society remains partial.

Dorothy's tolerance seems to apply only to her relationship with Solomon, for, if she finally accepts her African friend, she keeps rejecting and despising all the other outsiders. To her, homeless people are "disgusting, dragging themselves and the country down like this" (*DS*, 65), and she views the other blacks in Britain with suspicion, even describing some of them as being "two steps removed from the jungle" (*DS*, 265). As for homosexuals, embodied by her sister Sheila, she vigorously disapproves of their "lifestyle choices" (*DS*, 25). The female protagonist of *A Distant Shore* can therefore be said to be in the ambivalent position of "alienating agent and [...] alienated subject," as Ledent puts it in another context.¹⁶ Such behaviour is reminiscent of Emily's in *Cambridge*, who feels superior to all the other subjected people on the island. Ambivalence also characterizes Cambridge's and Solomon's stance towards the others. In spite of Cambridge's deep alienation, the Christian instruction that he received informs his oppressive actions towards his black brethren, whom he tries to convert and dominate in the name of God and England. When he is enslaved again and sent to the Caribbean, he "reproduces on the domestic level the paternalism that is part and parcel of slavery"¹⁷ by demanding of Christiania that she obey him because "a Christian man possesses his wife" (*C*, 163). Paradoxically, he does not see that his idealization of England and God supports the very system that subjugates him: i.e. imperialism. Solomon is not only an oppressed person, either. Although he explains that the massacre of a whole village in his

¹⁶ Bénédicte Ledent, "Voyages into Otherness: *Cambridge* and *Lucy*," *Kunapipi* 14.2 (1992): 53.

¹⁷ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 102.

country was not of his own making, he still feels extremely guilty about this incident and the ensuing tragedy, which might hint at the fact that he is not wholly innocent. Phillips leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty by shifting the perspective to the first person for this short passage about Gabriel's experience in the Liberation Army, thereby suggesting that what Gabriel says is subjective and only one version of reality. Solomon also becomes an oppressor of sorts in England, as testified, among others, by his irritation at women who do not have good manners. Significantly, Phillips chooses a black *man* and a *white* woman as the protagonists of *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore* because each of the main characters is in this way made complicit in *white male* imperialist power. This is interesting, since it generates the ambiguities and paradoxes that I have underlined above, and it reveals that human relationships have always been complex.

This complexity also shows in Dorothy and Solomon's short-lived friendship, brutally interrupted by Solomon's murder, a tragic event which does not seem to be the only cause of their estrangement. I agree with Ledent when she writes that "Phillips also presents his protagonists' isolation as being [...] of their own making."¹⁸ Dorothy, for instance, is very ambivalent in her relationship with Solomon. She likes being in his company, but she decides to leave him for a few days, partly because she is afraid that he might "become a problem in [her] life" (*DS*, 45) and partly because she believes that her departure will be "a means of attracting Solomon to her."¹⁹ Ledent attributes the characters' fear of becoming too close to each other to "their experience of a world plagued by solitude";²⁰ a loneliness that results from oppression, and from the impact of several centuries of imperialism.

Finally, the endings of the two novels also illustrate this constant movement between a sense of community and one of detachment. In *Cambridge*, despite Emily's initial contempt for the slaves on the plantation, she eventually establishes friendly links with Stella, who even becomes "the legitimate substitute for Isabella," who used to be Emily's white servant.²¹ But Emily's baby, who represented what "Stella had hoped [...] they might share" (*C*, 178), is stillborn, which might indicate that the encounter with other oppressed people is not easy. The novel ends with a tension between the willingness to come together and the extreme difficulty of doing so, which also reappears in *A Distant Shore*, where the protagonists long to open up to the other, but are soon confronted with the impossibility of such closeness.

¹⁸ Bénédicte Ledent, "'Of, and not of, this Place': Attachment and Detachment in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*," *Kunapipi* 26.1 (2004): 153.

¹⁹ Ledent, "'Of, and not of, this Place'," 154.

²⁰ "'Of, and not of, this Place'," 153.

In conclusion, the social evolution that takes place from *Cambridge* to *A Distant Shore* seems to be mainly superficial. Society has changed on the surface but deep down imperialism still exists in the twenty-first century, even if it emerges in different, perhaps less obvious ways. Just like Emily, for whom, as Gail Low puts it, "realization of her complicit relation to the institutions of slavery is a necessary step in her uneasy path to maturity,"²² contemporary Britain needs to look back on its past in order to understand its present situation. Setting *A Distant Shore* in England might be Phillips's way of prompting Britain and Western society to face the history they have been trying to forget, and to acknowledge that what is happening at the moment is only the logical continuation of some age-long imperialism, in the same way as *A Distant Shore* may be read as a continuation, an echo of, *Cambridge*.

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²¹ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 91.

²² Low, "'A Chorus of Common Memory,'" 127.

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