The Nature of Refuge*

BY JOANNA SCOTT

The fiction of Caryl Phillips is full of unsettling propositions about the nature of refuge. In *A Distant Shore*, refuge proves just as bleak, or bleaker, than the confinement preceding it. The two main characters, Dorothy and Solomon, leave home for different reasons—Solomon attempts an actual physical escape from a brutal civil war, and Dorothy retreats into solitude after a series of losses and humiliations. The novel follows the characters into their pasts and then returns to the present to describe their fragile isolation within an oppressive, antagonistic culture. Ultimately, there can be no escape in life either from the surrounding culture or from the hell of memory, Phillips suggests. Even insanity—especially insanity—can't erase the past.

The little town of Weston in the north of England, where these two characters end up, is a dreary place—a world of dull bungalows, dead fish floating in dank canals, "slovenly youngsters, with their barrack-room language," homeless people "with their matted hair and their bottles of meths." The place is introduced to us first through the point of view of Dorothy, who, in her mid-fifties, has moved to the new development on the hill above Weston after being accused of harassing a male colleague and pressured into early retirement. Her isolation is extreme—her parents and

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*Review of Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (NY: Knopf, 2003)

only sister have died, her husband has run off to Spain with a younger woman, her lovers, each in their turn, have rejected her, and she has no lasting friendships. The only company she keeps are the phantoms existing in her imagination.

And then she meets Solomon, a refugee who, like Dorothy, has lost everything. At first it seems that he might fill the vast emptiness of Dorothy's life. Though in Dorothy's eyes he first appears to be a "somewhat undernourished coloured man," she is drawn to his quiet dignity. She's intrigued by the care he takes with simple matters. He combs his hair with "sharp razor parting." He keeps his car washed and buffed. And he leaves his window blinds partially open, which might indicate that unlike Dorothy, he is looking for ways to bring light into his home.

Phillips's novel can be read as the simple story of two lonely, vulnerable cast-offs who are briefly heartened by each other's company. Dorothy and Solomon forge an unexpected friendship. If the world wants nothing to do with them, they can have something to do with each other. Living as exiles in a hostile society, they begin to create their own rules—and even, in Dorothy's case, her own alternative reality.

At their most topical level, the propositions in *A Distant Shore* are logical responses to the difficult condition of exile. There's honor even in the most eccentric forms of independence, Phillips suggests. Society is rough with loners and brutal to outsiders who dare to cross its borders without permission. And the ironies of a "developed" society are cruelest of all. While Solomon—born Gabriel—manages to survive, barely, in his war-ravaged African country, he fails to escape the thugs of northern England. No one escapes in this novel. Even Gabriel-Solomon's radical effort of renaming himself fails to create any sustaining improvement. Violent crime takes the place of war. Racism takes the place of personal vendetta. Poverty is pervasive. Hope is useless. The lorry driver who dreams of driving across Europe dies in an accident before he ever leaves Kent. A woman on the verge of falling in love is left alone. A son who survives the slaughter of his family in Africa is found floating face-down in a filthy canal in England.

Phillips's characters appear to have two choices: they can choose to be guilty or innocent, to be the victimizer or the victim. They can run

from one position to the other, but they can't run away from the alternatives. There is no satisfying state of exile. Gabriel, an officer in the rebel army, becomes a prisoner in a British holding cell. "'Drink your own piss,' the guard says to him. 'Isn't that what you lot do in the jungle?'" Aging Dorothy can't help but invite pity and contempt from her neighbors. There is no place of refuge, no position that is neither abusive or abused. As Dorothy says to herself as she watches a young man shouting curses at a bus driver, "These are not happy times for anybody."

There's a clarity and uncompromising logic to the pessimism in this novel. But what makes Phillips's interesting ideas more than interesting is a powerful uncertainty—an attitude introduced in the first paragraph of the novel ("These days it's difficult to tell who's from around here and who's not. Who belongs and who's a stranger") and continuing to Dorothy's final soliloquy as she lies on her bed in the psychiatric hospital, staring at the ceiling. While the oppositions are fortified by fierce judgments and social convention, the private world of thought turns out to be a much more chaotic place than the public world. It's not just that oppositions break down amidst the contradictions of thought. It would be too easy to say that Phillips resists binary logic in his explorations of moral action. Rather, Dorothy and Solomon are characters in perpetual motion, playing and trading parts, holding multiple, contradictory opinions. There's a fascinating underlying madness to this novel, with logic used to disguise the blurry mix of understanding and confusion. Though Dorothy and Solomon both see themselves as victims, it's not at all clear that they are innocent. Dorothy acts in extraordinarily destructive and self-destructive ways, complaining about the rudeness of others and yet proving profoundly rude—if we use her notion of rudeness as a measure—with her sister, her lovers, and her lovers' wives. She calls the wife of one lover to complain about the man's troubled behavior. Somehow she's ignorant to the fact that the wife of another lover is pregnant, yet after the woman has the baby, Dorothy offers her a doll as a token gift. She is disgusted by homeless people and blames them for their miserable condition. And when her sister tells her about being abused by her father as a child, Dorothy secretly feels jealous ("Did he love her more than me?") and tries to change the subject.

Similarly, Solomon is not nearly as innocent as the category of victim would suggest. Throughout his life, his degradations are matched by his own aggressions. Nicknamed "Hawk" for his combination of fierceness and reticence during the civil war, he simply stands by and listens while his men are slaughtering women and children in a village. "I did not have the heart for this savagery," he says—a weak explanation for his passivity. Here, his dignity hits a strikingly disingenuous note. "My father had sent me to fight, and I could fight and kill if necessary. But only if necessary. Now I had little choice but to make my way back to the capital and warn my family." Back at his home, he hides in a cupboard while soldiers systematically rape his sisters and shoot his entire family. When the soldiers leave, he climbs out of the cupboard and discovers that his mother is still alive. Astonishingly, he leaves her bleeding on the floor, and without giving her a second thought he runs from the house, from the country, from his past. When he finally arrives in England, he is treated like an animal. Yet he manages to match racism with racism: "I had long ago learned that there was little point in attempting conversation with the Indians or Pakistanis," he admits, "for they were worse than some of the English people."

Moral ambiguity is a common source of tension and suspense in fiction. Perhaps among contemporary writers it has become an overused technique—a formulaic defense against simplistic morality. But in *A Distant Shore,* ambiguity has a powerful destabilizing effect and reveals the illogical opinion shaping what the narrators themselves believe to be objective observation. Yet the most artistically satisfying aspect of this book is not the fact of ambiguity; rather, it's the effect that the predicament of ambiguity has on language. In the passages where Phillips describes the confusions of his characters, the prose combines precision and a subdued wildness, adhering to the logic of syntax and at the same time allowing the imagination to take flight through deceptively simply associations. When the characters are lost in nightmares, when they are confused by events that make no sense, when they mistake their fantasies for realities, the language best expresses, with impressive understatement, the productive, unresolved complexity that is at the heart of this novel.

Robert Frost's account of a poem as "a momentary stay against confusion" is echoed by Phillips, who has described writing as a way to "organize confusion." In *A Distant Shore,* he has organized confusion into a set of clear, logical oppositions. But he goes on to show the inadequacy of logic. At a certain point, the organization of the narrative fails to accommodate the swirling, unpredictable motion of life. These characters have desires they can't articulate. They make judgments they can't justify. From beginning to end, they remain fundamentally confused about themselves and their connection to others. But it's a productive, dramatic confusion. Confusion generates opinions. Confusion generates meaning. Confusion keeps these characters stumbling along, independent and rebellious.

"She's supposed to watch over us and make sure we're all right, but I can see that she has to strike a fine balance," Dorothy says, late in the novel, referring to a psychiatric nurse sitting near her in a garden. "On the one hand she wants us to be free to be ourselves, but on the other hand she doesn't want to neglect us. If truth be told, she can't really win either way." It's an emblematic comment. While Dorothy's pessimism doesn't come as a surprise at this point in the novel, her description of what she thinks won't happen is rich with possibility. In a better world, she could be her own eccentric, unreasonable, imaginative self and still be loved.

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