

White Woman as a Commodity in a Patriarchal World: A Study of Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*

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Abstract

Caryl Phillips (b. 1958) is one of the major black British writers of the Caribbean, known for his layered treatment of black characters affected due to slavery. His novel *A Distant Shore* (2003) depicts a white woman protagonist Dorothy who lives in Stoneleigh. She is actually born in a traditional patriarchal family where her mother has no voice. She has a sister named Shiela. It is no doubt that her father provides a good education to his both daughters but he always considers Dorothy as “the son he’d never had” (ADS 10). Since childhood, Dorothy’s life is protected by her father as she and her sister are not allowed to return home late in the evening. And when she gets married to Brain, he becomes the master of her life. Both get divorced as Brain has an extra-marital affair with one of his colleagues in the office. Life is not easy for her after divorce as it is the general nature of the society to not accord a dignified space to a divorcee woman. After her divorce, Dorothy falls in love with Mahmood and Waverley as she seeks emotional fulfilment. Unfortunately, she is abandoned by both the men and the novel ends where she is seen all alone in the mental asylum.

The paper contests the stereotypical depiction of a woman in a patriarchal world where she is considered as a part of the society only as long as she obeys all the traditional rules. Nowadays, undoubtedly, she has got a right to utilise her credentials outside the family, but her traditional roles as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother simultaneously stifle her independent existence. The paper further attempts to highlight the oppressive ambience of society which tries to engulf many women in its stranglehold, assuming her to be sexual commodity.

Key Words: Divorce, Oppression, Patriarchy, Stereotype, Tradition

Legally and economically the husband/father controlled the family, but rhetorically the vacation of domesticity gave women the domestic sphere for their own, to control, and influence. Motherhood was proposed as the central lever with which women would bridge the world and, in practice it offered the best opportunity to women to heighten their domestic power. The author of “domestic education” books assumed that children lived mostly in the presence of their mothers and not their fathers, even though final authority (legally and conventionally) was patriarchal. (qtd. in hooks 46)

It is the patriarchal structure of the society that subjugates women and does not allow them space to grow. Every society all over the world is based on the patriarchy where the entire family is dominated by the “patriarch” or the male and females have no voice. It is due to this reason that women suffer oppression, domination and humiliation over the centuries. They are forced to follow the traditional rules and social conventions and are also restricted to the domestic sphere only.

Like other women, African women were also meted out ill-treatment in their societies. Apart from household chores, African women were expected to produce more and more children for a huge labour force to work in the field. These poor black women faced double marginalization: one on the basis of gender and other on the basis of their race. It is not only about black women, but the identity of even white women is also seen in relation to men only. These women are also powerless like black women despite having fair skin and good education.

Caryl Phillips’s novel revolves around the issue of gender oppression in terms of both the women, black as well as white. The novel *A Distant Shore* throws light on the issues pertaining to race and gender. The main protagonist Dorothy having white colour and good education becomes a puppet at the hands of men. The novel opens where she is seen all alone and later on comes to know why it is so. She is actually born in a traditional patriarchal family in Stoneleigh England where her mother is voiceless. She has a sister named Shiela. It is no doubt that her father gives a good education to both his daughters but he always considers Dorothy as “the son he’d never had” (ADS 10). Since childhood Dorothy’s life is controlled by her father as she and her sister are not allowed to come late in the evening. As far as their mother is concerned, her opinion is never respected in the family as Dorothy reveals:

I think Mum would have liked Stoneleigh, but Dad would have hated it. She would have liked the idea that by living up the hill you'd moved on with your life and left something behind. But Dad wasn't moved on with your life and left something behind. But Dad wasn't burdened by her ambitions, which is one of the reasons why they argued and why Mum ultimately fell silent. . . . Mum sided with Sheila, but her voice didn't count for much with Dad, and so Sheila began to resent Mum's impotence in the household. (ADS 10-11)

Dorothy actually lives in a rigid patriarchal family where woman's opinion is not taken into consideration in the matters related to family, marriage, job and so on. Even nowadays many women are not considered capable of taking any decision. It is induced in their mind since childhood that she is only destined for the domestic zone:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the examples of their mothers, that little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives. (qtd. in Geetha 19)

Dorothy has also seen her mother blindly following all the traditional rules and social conventions since childhood. It is not about her mother only; she also remains submissive in her life. In her parental home she lives under the protection of her father. After meeting Brain in the university this protection shifts to Brain as, "for three years he protected her as she struggled with her degree in music, while she seemed to breeze through his `course in mathematics, which he regarded as an unwelcome distraction from his passion for beer and rugby" (ADS 205). Later he becomes the master of her life as both get married after completing their degrees and shift to Birmingham. For the first time, Dorothy realises that she is non-existent in this relationship as it is painfully captured:

Brain never listened to her when she said that he ought to walk but just be vigilant, and because he used the preponderance of street crime to justify his laziness, Brain began to grow tubby. Their infrequent love-making became, for her, deeply connected with the problem of shifting one's weight. Brain hated her to mention his little potbelly, so she stayed quiet on this subject. Which was generally how they passed through their thirties and forties with each other. By staying quiet. (ADS 196)

Both are a happy couple in the initial years of their marriage. “Brain was happy, for he had secured a job in a city-centre merchant bank” (ADS 206). The estrangement between the two widens when it is discovered that they do not have a child and “that the problem was his” (ADS 206). Brain’s “affairs at the bank with backroom girls” (ADS 206) deepen this estrangement. After sometime, “Brian’s affairs seemed to stop, and she realized that there must be somebody special. She herself had not been totally ignored” (ADS 206). Eventually Dorothy is abandoned by her husband for no fault of her. Her husband simply leaves her for another woman by leaving “the note on the kitchen table. It simply said, ‘Sorry’ (ADS 207).

No doubt that Dorothy is an independent woman working as a teacher but she has no right to take any decision on her own. Even she lets Brain go from her life for another woman without asking anything. If truth be told, it is Dorothy who gives her husband the right to do everything according to his will.

She quickly learned that Brain had absolutely no interest in her opinions, but by not answering back she allowed him to look through and beyond her, until he finally convinced himself that she did not exist. When Brain walked away, she too was convinced that he was walking away from nothing, and it hurt. (ADS 199)

This is how Brain deserts Dorothy as she fails to charm him or appeal to him. William J. Duiker in his book *World History to 1500: 1500*, observes: “She [a woman] should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons, she should never enjoy independence” (50).

Life after divorce is not easy for any women. They have to face many problems in the society. Divorce fills women’s lives with angst, misery, depression, dejection, gloominess most importantly alienation from which they cannot come out throughout their life. Even divorcee women do not get respectable position in the society as happens in the case of Dorothy.

There had been staffroom flirtations; the head of physics idly pushing an arm through hers and looking at her in a particular way; and the cricket master forever offering his services as a driver to run her to a concert, or to the supermarket, or to anywhere that took her fancy. Once or twice a month a man would sit next to her on the bus and

attempt conversation, but she knew that her days as an object of desire were firmly rooted in the past. She imagined that either pity or curiosity motivated these men, and it never occurred to her that there might be any possibility of her seriously pursuing a liaison beyond the one she endured with Brain. (ADS 206-207)

In this way men starts taking advantage of Dorothy's divorce. Their evil eyes are always on her. Living all alone by herself, Dorothy becomes dependent for love and emotional support on Mahmood:

But he looked at her with disbelief writ large across his brown face. With some effort she was able to imagine that his curdled face was rejecting the art and not her company. She smiled. But inwardly she decided that she would never again suggest anything beyond the boundaries of their arrangement. She was not a woman who coped well with rejection. But, if truth be told, Mahmood had not rejected her. He had simply arrived at a place where she no longer felt it necessary to either woo or enchant his fifty-five-year-old mistress. (ADS 200)

Surprisingly, Dorothy does not feel at ease with Mahmood as she is unable to express her feelings with him. The reason is that he is after all a male who only wants things according to his will. What matters for Dorothy is not of any consideration as she realises:

Dorothy says very little about her own life, being concerned to make sure that the dominant narrative is male. After all, his story involves passion, betrayal, migration, sacrifice and ultimately triumph. Mahmood is a success. Her story contains the single word, abandonment. Curiously enough, she realizes that both stories seem unconcerned with the word 'love', but she keeps this thought to herself. (ADS 203)

Being aware of the fact that Mahmood is a married man, Dorothy does not want him to come to her daily. She feels that her relationship with him is very prosaic, lacking warmth.

These days their bodies separate with indifference and Mahmood is quick to give her his back. Sadly, her lover seems to have bolted down the short slope from attentive to perfunctory without any intervening stages of incremental boredom. One week he took the time to speak with her before, during and, most importantly, after their

relations. The following week he was racing through the motions as though he was late for an appointment. (ADS 198)

And all of sudden he stops coming to her without taking Dorothy's opinion into account. He breaks all his relations with her. Although Dorothy belongs to a dominant white group and he is an Indian living as an immigrant in England, she has to accept his decision because of being a female. Earlier women had to make compromise with their wishes. But nowadays women have also started acknowledging themselves on an equal footing with men. They are equally performing their duties in professional life and also doing well in household. But they still are not seen equal in sex hierarchy. Their identities as females become an obstacle for others.

Dorothy's life again fills with a sense of alienation after Mahmood leaves her. She feels a sense of loneliness until she again gets infatuated towards one of his colleagues Geoff Waverly. Dorothy wants nothing but a companionship so she does not feel it wrong to have a relationship with a married man again. She thinks this decision as a relief from her boring routine as she herself states:

Why not? She thinks. It has been a fortnight now since Mahmood put the phone down on her. Apart from the twice-weekly games of tennis with the boring woman who is the head of English, her life has returned to a familiar routine of time spent at the keyboard, assiduous reading, undemanding television programmes and fitful bouts of sleeping. She misses the idea of Mahmood, almost as much as she misses the man himself. Even when he went at her without any intimacy, she felt connected to something that existed beyond the narrow scope of her own predictable world. (ADS 217-218)

Abandonment is a word which is very akin to Dorothy. She only needs love, companionship and affection but her life is only centred around one word that is rejection. Waverly also leaves her as he wants to save his marriage. He even starts ignoring her in the school and one day she calls his wife that makes the situation worse. He in anger accuses Dorothy of sexual harassment and this results in her early forced retirement. Erich Fromm (1900-1980) in his book *The Sane Society* (1955) argues that "the alienated person does not experience himself as the center of this world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences

have become his master's. . . . The alienated person is out of touch with himself. . . ." (120). Her early retirement makes her more depressed. She comes to her childhood place Stoneleigh in the hope of a change. But here she feels more isolated as she has no work to do except watching Solomon (a black man and also an immigrant in England) through the window.

In the morning I wake up in the same place with the pages of Sheila's letter scattered about me like confetti. My neck aches from the awkward way in which I've been resting it on the edge of the chair and I immediately recognize that I'm in some pain. But there is also another feeling, although I've no words to describe it. . . Loneliness. Carla won't be coming today. I stare at the piano and realize that music lessons won't be coming today. (ADS 37)

Dorothy's coming to Stoneleigh only aggravates her loneliness as she is all alone after her divorce. There is none in her family to solace her as her parents and sister Sheila are no more now. Living all alone, she becomes psychologically depressed. Even her doctor Williams advises her many times to deal with the situation:

'The death of your parents, your divorce, the death of your sister, early retirement, and then moving home, that's a lot of pressure for anybody to have to deal within a short space of time. . . . you have to start planning a new life, Dorothy. Your sister has gone, but you're still a relatively young woman, and there's nothing wrong with you physically. You've still got a significant expanse of life ahead of you, and you must start to plan and reach out and take it. (ADS 17-18)

The problem with Dorothy is that she always runs from reality. She never accepts that her sister is dead now and she is alone. She does not even reveal this to Solomon whom she inwardly likes. "After Sheila died I wrote to myself and pretended it was her doing the writing. It was all I had left of her. My imaginary Sheila who likes me and still needs my help. But my cowardice had lost me my real sister. My poor, grieving Sheila. Daddy's little pet" (ADS 71). For Dorothy Sheila is still alive. This situation makes her physiologically ill. Even she goes to meet her sister near the coast as she reveals to Dr Williams:

However, when I got to the hospital Dr Williams took a quick look at me, and then he stared at my suitcase. He asked me to sit and then he began to quiz me about where I'd been, and so I told him that I'd just been to see my sister. I knew this would upset him, and I was right. 'Dorothy,' he said, 'your sister is dead. She died earlier this year

in London. You know you haven't been to see your sister, so where have you been? . . . Dorothy, you're going to have to learn to live without Sheila. I know it is difficult for you, but if you can't let go then we'll have no choice but to get you some help.' (ADS 49-50)

Caryl Phillips also writes, "abandonment is a state that is not alien to man" (ADS 203). It is because of her alien state that she sometimes behaves strangely with her student Carla who comes to Dorothy to take piano classes at home. Carla's mother tells Dorothy about her weird behaviour:

I think you need help, don't you? Carla likes you all right, but she says you shout, and then at other times you're nice, but most of the time you just stare out of the window and you don't hear anything that she's saying to you. Can I ask you frankly, Miss Jones, What's the matter? (ADS 23)

Here, for the very first time Dorothy realises that she is not psychologically stable. She now talks only to Solomon who drives her to her doctor. Dorothy feels some inclination towards him but never reveals this to Solomon. Later Solomon's murder by some racist people makes her ill to the extent that she is seen in the mental asylum all alone.

Therefore, it is the patriarchal system of every society that relegates women to marginalised beings. Their identity is never seen without men as Simon de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental He is the subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other" (16). Women are taught to be dependent, polite and gentle. It is done as if liberty hardly matters for them. They are not allowed to take any decision even related to their own lives as in the case of Dorothy who belongs to a dominant group but is unable to speak against ill treatment. Although she is an educated woman working as a teacher, she does not raise her voice against her husband who has an affair in the office and who also leaves her without consulting her. Mahmood and Waverley also do the same with her. They also abandoned her without seeking her consent. At the end she is left with nothing but with her identity as a commodified object in a patriarchal world where she is not able to realise her true self.

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