



Caribbean Narrative Genre and Its Pertinent Contemporary Literary Traumatic Avant-Gardism in Caryl Phillips’ Writings

Abdalahdi Nimer Abdalqader Abu Jweid^{[a],*}; Hasan Khalil Abdallah Ghanem^[b]

^[a] Assistant professor of English literature, Faculty of Educational Sciences & Arts, FESA, UNRWA, Amman, Jordan.

^[b] Teacher of English, Khazna Prep. Boys School, UNRWA, Amman, Jordan.

* Corresponding author.

Received 21 November 2024; accepted 20 December 2024
 Published online 26 December 2024

Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel the characteristics of Caribbean literature through some vernacular works. In this respect, it will trace the historical, cultural, psychological, and social attributes of Caribbean literature. These will be accentuated as the core conceptual consideration of the Caryl Phillips’ writings which reflect the true sense of vernacular style. Such style copes with the recent avant-garde literary genres, especially the novels, which have profound impact on the way by which readers perceive the implied narrative nuances of contemporary literature that deals with traumatic experience. The discussion sheds light on the latent peculiarities of the Caribbean literature and how it is projected in the course of the narrative genres. In doing so, the study reveals the traditional and contemporary writings modes utilized by Caribbean novelists including Phillips. Such modes provide the readers with stereotypical notions about the function of narrative literature and its influence upon the audience concerning trauma. Therefore, the study’s methodology will be a textual description of contemporary Caribbean literature and some related novels by Phillips.

Key words: Avant-Gardism; Caribbean literature; Narrative; Novel; Phillips; Trauma

Abu Jweid, A. N. A., & Abdallah Ghanem, H. K. (2024). Caribbean Narrative Genre and Its Pertinent Contemporary Literary Traumatic Avant-Gardism in Caryl Phillips’ Writings. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 29(3), 6-10. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13684>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13684>

1. INTRODUCTION

Caribbean literature parades divers and significant literary features that are closely related to contemporary literary avant-gardism. It copes with the essential components needed to reinvigorate the true sense literature and its pertinent genres. It delves into the deep essence of writing works which abound with various themes and techniques to provide the reader with particular attributes of Caribbean life in narrative contexts (Accilien, 2008, p.14). Being so, Caribbean literature has its own distinctive features that might be elaborated in the broad scope of writing works reflecting the drastic changes affecting the genuine spirit of literature as a whole.

There are tremendous change in the positive quality of Caribbean literature, which makes it able to emulate world literary changes. In *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, Alison Donnell (2006) discusses the literary boom of the Caribbean literature; and how it had reached exceptional quality making it relatively unique and identified by its experimental style. As such, Caribbean literature had begun to evolve in national environment as a specific form of literary expressions in a universal appeal; Donnell (2006) writes: “Caribbean writing often seems to generate an extraordinary myth of a doubled spontaneous genesis” (p.11). In this sense, Caribbean literature is diverse and rich with literary motifs. Donnell (2006), consequently, contends that Caribbean literature inherently deals with the motif historical colonialism rendering it excellent thematic insights on the development of realistic characteristics: “perhaps the most important debates with which Caribbean writers have persistently engaged have been those concerning history – both the history of colonialism and the history of English Literature. Yet the history of Caribbean writing is rarely addressed as a subject of such struggle or Contestation” (p.1).

The motif of historical colonialism, in this sense, is annexed to the notion of resistance in the Caribbean

literature, which is definitive feature of its narrative stereotype. Donnell (2006) contends that the Caribbean literature offers profound nuances of Caribbean vernacular cultures explored in the concepts of different genres. It is highly concerned with how to evolve in tandem with contemporary thematic issues of the twenty-first century “holds enormous potential for exploring the issues and debates about cultural politics, ethnicity, gender and sexuality that continue to be intellectually urgent in the twenty-first century” (p.4). Consequently, the essence of colonialism in the Caribbean literature comprises other colonial issues, such as diaspora which “unravels the allegorical references made by the author” (Kaur and Abu Jweid, 2018, p.7). Donnell (2006), furthermore, ascribes the notion of colonialism in the Caribbean literature to the African Colonialism which represents the bulk of its contextual traits. As such, this study tries to unravel the characteristics of Caribbean literature through some Caryl Phillips’ fictional writings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Benedicte Ledent (2004) studies Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* (2003) from diasporic perspective. Ledent acclaims Phillips’s distinctive way to tackle the African diasporic affairs and projecting them in his work: “for a novelist who has occasionally been labelled a chronicler of the African Diaspora, this new book constitutes another memorable stage in Phillips’s subtle, yet dogged fictional exploration of the tension between attachment and detachment, between belonging and unbelonging that has been part of human life since the beginning of times, especially for the migrant” (p.152).

In another study, Ledent (2011) approaches the narrative style in Phillips’s *Dancing in the Dark*. Ledent (2011) contends that “Phillips’s sensitive and subtle narrative raises such crucial questions as the responsibility of the artist and the difficulty of being oneself in a society that pays exclusive attention to what you look like at the expense of who you are” (p.3). In discussing Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, Ledent (2011) claims that the novel embodies a story “of public figures and raise vital questions about the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of black people in Western traditions” (p.72). Furthermore, Alice Currie (2011) tackles the sense of identity in Phillips’s *In the Falling Snow*. She adds that the novel “represents the idea that identity is also complex and migratory” (p.104). Here, identity and migration intermix to produce a new sense of colonial immigration.

3. DISCUSSION

Neil Kortenaar (2011) expounds the literary influences upon the Caribbean literary aspects in *Postcolonial*

Literature and the Impact of Literacy: Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction. Kortenaar (2011) asserts that influence of the African oral literary traditions upon the Caribbean literary genres: “indeed, in Caribbean literature, the divide between literacy and orality can seem even wider than it does in African literature” (p.7). Such tradition results in genuine literary traditions in the broader sense of the Caribbean literary modes: “the same tension between orality and literacy exists in the literature of the Caribbean, where the bulk of the population is descended from African slaves” (p.7).

Kortenaar (2011) alludes to historical aspects of Caribbean literary genres and how they intersect with drastic changes regarding the Caribbean literary experimentation: “throughout most of West Indian history, only a small elite was ever literate, and the vast bulk of the verbal culture of the Afro-Caribbean was and is oral in expression” (p.7). This is an evident impact of the African literary traditions upon the Caribbean literature is conveyed through “oral culture [which] has commonly been regarded as the repository of Afro-Caribbean cultural authenticity” (p.7). As such, Phillips’ literary motifs portray the influence of displacement, which is an indication of colonial sequences, upon the fictional characters’ psyches. Phillips’s utilization of fictional personas suggests a profound concern with Caribbean literary adoption of new styles and techniques that integrally related to other ethnic origins via “the surrounding family circumference” (Sasa and Abu Jweid, 2022b, p.326).

Vanessa Rosario (2010), in *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration*, argues that colonialism is a hallmark of the Caribbean literature: “colonialism is a tricky term when we refer to the Caribbean” (p.190). This is due to the fact that the “Caribbean literature has traditionally played an important role in documenting significant historical moments, particularly in reference to the dictatorships, colonialism, imperialism, and migration” (p.41). In essence, the Caribbean literature exposes vital colonial issues, like diasporic displacement and metropolitan concerns; Rosario (2010) comments: “conjuring the distant homeland and a distinct future through bitter, intimate knowledge of the metropolis, voices in transit transform displacement and loss into a counter-memory of empire in Hispanic Caribbean writings of the diaspora” (p.34).

These colonial issues are representational factors of Caribbean nationalism that carries out the narrative characteristics of the Caribbean literature since “Caribbean nationalism was clearly not the answer for any of them. Their texts can be read as narratives about the limits of an incomplete postcoloniality that interrupts the masternarrative of a global, post-minoritarian, and postracial society, interrogating a metropolitan fantasy that crumbles beneath the undeniable embodiment of

otherness depicted by these Antillean narrators" (Rosario, 2010, p.199).

Victoria Follette's and Josef Ruzek's (2006), in *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies for Trauma*, discuss the pertinent attributes of Caribbean literature in relation to trauma studies. Follette and Ruzek (2006) say that trauma remedies require certain observations to come up with definite remedial outcomes for trauma: "cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for trauma represents a broad class of therapies unified by a shared emphasis on observable outcomes, symptom amelioration, time-limited and goal-oriented intervention, and an expectation that patients will assume an active role in getting better" (p.1).

Follette and Ruzek (2006) add that the traumatic features concerning the themes of Caribbean literature are connected with "posttraumatic reactions were no exception to this theoretical organic orientation. Some of the most detailed writings and elaborated conceptualizations of traumatic reactions are found in the literature on combatants" (p.2). Consequently, the expected reactions of the combatants will be interpreted as the outcome of traumatic events that severely affect the human psyche which is imitated by "the textuality, style, stereotypes, and images of previous works to give them a vivid and complimenting voice, but in terms of historical implication" (Abu Jweid, 2023, p.21).

Caribbean literature, in addition, posits literary mechanisms to deal with "traumatic events overwhelm the psyche, traumatized individuals must engage extremely primitive defense mechanisms such as dissociation, repression, and denial" (Follette and Ruzek, 2006, p.3). This is because traumatic events represent "the operational definition of stressful experiences was also expanded to include observing or receiving information about the traumatic events suffered by others [traumatic patients]" (p.5). Hence, Follette and Ruzek (2006) contend that Caribbean literature unravels the psychic "distress that follows exposure to traumatic events that should not be construed as pathological" (Ruzek, 2006, p.6). This statement refers to some events that might not lead to trauma approached by the Caribbean writing styles. This is because such styles reveal the "subtle molecular changes in the central nervous system following exposure to trauma" (p.2).

The Caribbean literary conceptualization of trauma entails that anxiety is one representative outcome of trauma. Thereupon, the traits of trauma and its influence upon the psyches of fictional characters are apparent in in Phillips's *A Distant Shore*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, and *In the Falling Snow*. Moreover, the novels blatantly tackle the manifestation of trauma in the context of immigration. The novels' characters come from different ethnical origins. Their national origins change according to the host lands' cultural traditions. Yet, immigration is utilized by Phillips

as a tool of portraying the influence of such immigration upon the immigrants' psyches. This is due to the fact that immigration makes them traumatic, which is a definitive feature of Caribbean literature through "the interpretation of human behaviors, therefore, relies on the way in which certain personalities are perceived and judged by other people" (Sasa and Abu Jweid, 2022a, p.948).

In *A Distant Shore*, for instance, the protagonist Solomon lives in England. However, he essentially comes from Africa. He experiences tragic events in London. He is robbed by thieves, threatened by racists, and marginalized. At the end, he is murdered by a band of racial thugs. Before he dies, this experience makes his so traumatic since he suffers a lot at the hand of British people, and he feels that England has undergone tremendous change; and the opening paragraph of the novel conveys this: "England has changed" (p.1). In this respect, Phillips tackles this trauma in terms of the Caribbean thematic peculiarities projected in the course of the novel; this is because narrative fiction "acts as an influential proxy on suppressed people. The oppressor is undoubtedly motivated by a desire to impose his power on the oppressed" (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.531).

In *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), Phillips brilliantly depicts the African immigration in the Bahamas. Bert Williams, who is the chief the protagonist of the novel, becomes traumatic in his unrelenting pursuit for identity since he lost his ethnical origins that are distorted by immigration. *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) also hinge critical issues in the course of colonial immigration. There are three foreigners who leave their lands to settle in London. Consequently, they become three Englishmen. They are Francis Barber who descends from Jamaican origins, Randolph Turpin mix-race boxer and David Oluwale who is killed by the police at the end of the novel. These characters' bleak experience makes them traumatic in the colonial sense.

In the Falling Snow similarly involves some kind of traumatic experience. The novel's protagonist, Keith Gordon, descends from West-Indian black migratory parents. He has some family troubles with his wife. The reason behind his traumatic experience lies at the heart racial origins. In other words, his racial ethnicity makes him seem strange to others. In this sense, his paternal displacement is the authentic cause of his trauma that develops severely in the host country, England. As such, immigration relates to Frantz Fanon's (1967) postcolonial notions of displacement because he contends that "the jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory, refuses the ambition of any "total" theory of colonial oppression" (p.xxiv). Such experience cops with the reality of traumatic characters perceived by Phillips' fictional depictions of Caribbean reality since the colonized subjects, generally, might be "tormented and

suppressed” by severe practices (Abu Jweid, 2021, p.30).

In this sense, Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, and *In the Falling Snow* are approached by an interdisciplinary perspective since they deal with intricate social and cultural issues. This interdisciplinary encompasses post-colonialism and trauma prevalent in the core of the Caribbean literature. On that account, the novels pursue the psychological and postcolonial traits within the broad context of Caribbean narrative literature. On the one hand, they attempt to reflect scenes of displacement in relation to the entire Caribbean society by dint of “spatial concomitant relation with life styles” (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.206).

On the other hand, they inherently demonstrate the influence of this displacement upon the psyches of the protagonists and their experience. To explain, the colonial displacement leaves its apparent impact upon the fictional characters’ psyches. As a sequence, they become traumatic i.e., they suffer from the reminiscences of colonial residuals during their diasporic experience. This is due to the fact that trauma refers to a severe emotional, or even psychic, shock or agony caused by an awfully exasperating experience. This colonial experience causes psychic trauma by its very nature due to the fact that the novels shed light on the inherited notions about the Caribbean ways of life and social circumferences.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has pinpointed Caribbean narrative genre and its pertinent contemporary literary avant-gardism in Phillips’ fiction. Top of Bottom oIn Caribbean studies at present, the celebration of the literary also seems to be waning as many key theorists and critics look to the popular and the oral as the primary sites of cultural invention and resistance. Others still seem to have reconfigured the Caribbean as a cultural idea rather than an actual region, a dislocated, mobile, hybrid space attractive to the demands of postcolonial theory and its alliances to migrant subjectivities and writings. The discussion of Phillips’ fiction from this perspective would pave the way for exploring his treatment of colonialism and its influence upon the colonized people’s character’s psyches, especially via Sigmund Freud’s arguments.

Furthermore, trauma would be elaborately tackled in terms of psychic complications in order to infer Phillips’s view of the colonized people, ad being the oppressed social group which must be considered more than ever. Being so, Phillips’s fiction would be discursively discussed as reflection of the whole Caribbean colonial and psychic experience. In this sense, further studies would concentrate on the colonial aspect of identity and immigration. Moreover, they might focus on the appearance of trauma as a result of immigration. In this manner, the colonial immigration would be pursued as

being depicted in Phillips’s fiction that formulates the characters’ trauma.

The characters, or their relative, undergo certain kinds of displacement immigration. They leave their homelands to settle in others. This immigration results in trauma since they keep remembering or bemoan their present marginalized state in the host lands. Both repeating the past experiences and their marginalize status make them traumatic. Ultimately, trauma makes the characters psychically disordered because they became extremely anxious. Being so, future studies would interpret the Phillips’s fiction from an interdisciplinary perspective. They would involve both Freud’s conceptualization of trauma and colonial immigration. The colonial immigration might be discussed by applying Homi Bhabha’s critical arguments on colonial displacement.

REFERENCES

- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2016). The fall of national identity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 24(1), 529–540.
- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2020). Regional commitment in Eudora Welty’s ‘Petrified Man.’ *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 7(3), 206–214.
- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2021). The duality of magic and memory as the structure of narrative repetition in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 20(2), 25–32.
- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2023). Narcissistic pastiche: Towards exploring the concept of “cras es noster” through nostalgic postmodernism in John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 13(1), 21–32.
- Accilien, C. (2008). *Rethinking marriage in Francophone African and Caribbean literatures*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Currie, A. (2011). “Caryl Phillips has maintained that a migratory condition, and the subsequent sense of displacement, can be a gift to the creative mind.” *The University of Nottingham School of English Studies*, 3(1), 99–105.
- Donnell, A. (2006). *Twentieth-century Caribbean literature: Critical moments in Anglophone literary history*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Follette, V., & Ruzek, J. (2006). *Cognitive-behavioral therapies for trauma*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Kaur, H., & Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2018). War allegory in Narayan Wagle’s *Palpasa Café*. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 26(T), 1–12.
- Kortenaar, N. (2011). *Postcolonial literature and the impact of literacy: Reading and writing in African and Caribbean fiction*. Leiden, Netherlands: Cambridge University Press.

- Ledent, B. (2004). "Of, and not of, this place": Attachment and detachment in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*. *Kunapipi*, 26(1), 152–160.
- Ledent, B. (2004). Caryl Phillips: A master of ambiguity. In *Engelstalige literatuur na 1945 - Deel 1: Proza, De Britse Eilanden* (Vol. 1, pp. 179–193).
- Ledent, B. (2011). Caryl Phillips: The dignity of the examined life. In *The Routledge companion to Anglophone Caribbean literature* (pp. 72–77).
- Phillips, C. (2003). *A distant shore*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Phillips, C. (2005). *Dancing in the dark*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Phillips, C. (2007). *Foreigners: Three English lives*. London, UK: Vintage.
- Phillips, C. (2009). *In the falling snow*. London, UK: Vintage Books.
- Rosario, V. (2010). *Hispanic Caribbean literature of migration*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sasa, G., & Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2022a). Paranoia, neurotic trauma, and re-traumatization as the triad of psychic monomania in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(5), 948–956.
- Sasa, G., & Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2022b). Countryside, domestic picturesque, and scenic sublimes: The triad of eco-feminism in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron." *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 49(5), 325–334.