

# Britishness as dependent on alienation in foreigners



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Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners* depicts three separate stories based on historical facts and accounts of three Black men living in Great Britain at different times. Their lives, though not literally intertwined, greatly inform one another due to what substance Phillips's writing highlights in each. The titular focus of the text is not necessarily about defining what it means to be a foreigner in Great Britain but, rather, how British identity becomes dependent upon non-Whites (foreign or otherwise) to help define its privileged group by treating all non-Whites as foreigners.

The book clearly focuses on African-Britons, chiefly Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin, and David Oluwale respectively. Barber was the servant of Dr. Samuel Johnson, living in England and attending Dr. Johnson's funeral at the start of "Doctor Johnson's Watch" (first chapter) in London. The earliest narrative discussions with the reader indicate that there is a status the speaker aspires to hold among his fellow Englishmen, and it establishes external perception as a point of interest. He speaks of his place in Dr. Johnson's wider circle, his apparent position as a "minor literary wit in London society," and his own biased explanations for standing with the "less celebrated" outside Bolt Court (Phillips 8). It is after these early discussions that he eventually turns the focus upon Barber, and with these ideas of status and perception in mind, he describes Barber as "Dr. Johnson's faithful negro servant." He proceeds to expound on what others in Dr. Johnson's circle thought of Barber—"a wastrel, a man who considered his master's needs only as an afterthought" (Phillips 11). He then describes Barber as antithetical to these things throughout the remainder of the chapter.

In the second chapter, "Made in Wales," Randolph Turpin takes his boxing career to new heights, experiencing ephemeral fame and fortune. Much of Phillips's depiction of this segment of Turpin's life and career focuses on how Turpin is perceived in much the same way Barber himself frequently preoccupied his own mind with thoughts of how he was perceived by others. The third chapter, "Northern Lights," delineates the aftermath of David Oluwale's immigration from Nigeria to Leeds in 1949, and in its entirety, the third chapter is perhaps the most profound example of Phillips's commentary on alienation because the reader is given arguably every perspective but Oluwale's. His story is told in full by piecing together others' perceptions of him.

The text constantly references, both directly and indirectly, this state of foreignness and describes its characteristics in relation to several people, places, and things. Speaking of Black boxers, the text reads, "They were allowed to fight for the British Empire title, but at all weights black boxers, even if they were, like Randolph Turpin, born and bred in Britain, were treated as foreigners and excluded from fighting for their own national championship" (Phillips 91). They were used merely as juxtapositions for White fighters until the racist restriction was lifted. More broadly, a vivid, lengthy description of travel through northern England in the third chapter concludes, "Row upon row of factories. Once you reached the bus station you'd wait for the bus to take you home. To 209 Belle Vue Road and your room in a house full of foreigners with their strange food, and their strange music" (Phillips 205). These ideas of what constitutes foreignness are ideas used to normalize concurrent Whiteness and Britishness.

Deconstructive literary criticism analyzes the ubiquitous meanings in a text and emphasizes the importance of difference in comparing the various meanings, drawing out contradictions that cause any given text to fall into state of meaninglessness. In so doing, the theory's focus on difference uses opposites to create meaning, often via binary oppositions like day/night or right/left. The basic principle is that, to truly be a binary opposition, the individual words or "lexies," which Dobie defines as "units of meaning," in each dyadic pair must be perfectly opposite yet necessary to define one another (Dobie 159). Without day, for example, there is no night, and without right, there is no left.

Analyzing the text according to deconstructive literary theory, no doubt, highlights a plethora of insights, but perhaps the most significant among them is the binary relationship Phillips establishes between Britishness and foreignness. They are rendered as opposite yet inseparable like day and night, necessary to define one another. When one of these lexies is present and the other absent, it signifies its absent opposite in the mind of the reader by necessity for understanding that which is present, and "Derrida called this ongoing play [of signifiers] *différance*, a deliberately ambiguous coined term combining the French words for 'to defer' and 'to differ'" (Dobie 163). Therefore, when the text reads, "Despite the fact that over 2,000 Jews volunteered for service during the First World War, Jews continued to be regarded as 'foreigners,'" Phillips is simultaneously differing Britishness and foreignness while deferring to Britishness as the normalcy that makes foreignness a negative concept in the first place (Phillips 239).

In light of these observations, the inherent contradictions in British identity become as apparent as the aforementioned, lexical contradictions. For instance, “ box offices depended upon a fighter bringing his loyal followers to a bout. Although many people in the Midlands did recognize Randolph Turpin as one of their own, there was no serious box-office support for a coloured fighter no matter how skilled or game he might be” (Phillips 91). In other words, White Britons in Turpin’s day felt compelled, even if only unconsciously, to alienate him and equally compelled to claim him at the same time—two sentiments that cannot (but did) coincide. This was the result of Britishness defining itself by foreign-izing Blacks; they were, indeed, part of what defined Britishness but only by delineating the perimeter of normalcy, which was only White Britishness.

The title of Phillips’s book signifies an imposition placed upon those who were, in fact, British citizens yet excluded from the privileged part of their national identity. Contradictorily, the main characters are not foreigners in every sense, yet for all intents and purposes, they are. Their strangeness, their foreignness—Britons highlight it to distinguish themselves from “ others” and thereby use said foreigners to define British identity.

## **Works Cited**

Dobie, Ann B. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. 4th ed. Boston: Thomson Heinle, 2015. Print.

Phillips, Caryl. *Foreigners*. 1st ed. New York: Vintage International, 2007, 2008. Electronic.