

Portrayal of The Scattered: Diasporic Reading of Caryl Phillips's *Crossing The River*

- Gils M. George & T. Deivasigamani

Abstract: Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), depicts the history of the African diaspora, their shattered families, and the struggle for survival. The present paper examines how Phillips depicts the shattered life of the African diaspora in his structurally fragmented novel *Crossing the River*. It also examines Phillips's use of various formal strategies which serves as complementary for portraying the scattered life of his characters in Africa, America, and Europe. The novel discusses notions such as home, question of belonging and unbelonging, racism, hybridity, and the silenced history of Atlantic slave trade and its consequences for the African diaspora. Phillips employs fragmented nature in the novel which acts complementary to the theme he deals with. He inextricably intertwines these fragmented narratives even they are spatially, temporally, or even culturally distant, but still share a similar sense of dislocation and solitude.

Keywords: Racism, Hybridity, Diaspora, Fragmented Narratives.

Caryl Phillips is one of the most reflective British writers of his generation. He has multi cultural allegiances as he was born in St. Kitts, grew up in Britain and lives in the United States. Like his life, Phillips's works are marked by complexity and plurality. His writings reflect notions such as home, question of belonging and unbelonging, racism, hybridity, and the silenced history of Atlantic slave trade and its consequences for the African diaspora. His works often render a fragmented nature which acts complementary to the theme he deals with. He inextricably intertwines these fragmented narratives even they are spatially, temporally, or even culturally distant, but still share a similar sense of dislocation and solitude. Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), depicts the history of the African diaspora, their shattered families, and the struggle for survival. The present paper examines how Phillips depicts the shattered life of the African diaspora in his structurally fragmented novel *Crossing the River*. It also examines Phillips's use of various formal strategies which serves as complementary for portraying the scattered life of his characters in Africa, America, and Europe. Phillips' *Crossing the River* shows how the legacy of slave trade between a destitute African father and the English master of a slave ship reverberates through two hundred years of oppression and alienation. The novel portrays the story of three black children- Nash, Martha, and

Travis- sold to slavery and their struggle with its consequences. The novel consists of four parts which are preceded and followed by a prologue and an epilogue in which the father of the three children explains why he sold his children and how he was regretted on his decision ever since. Throughout the novel Phillips prefers fragmented narrative style which offers a perceptive picture of psychologically and spiritually fragmented lives of the Blacks. The voices of the framework story open with a prologue in which the African father laments, “A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths, until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with crabs and gulls” (1). As Ledent notices the ancestral voice in the prologue serves as a confession of guilt and pain. She says, “ever since the 'shameful intercourse' that initiated the diaspora of Africa, the African father has been haunted by the 'chorus of the common memory’” (Ledent 56). He represents the nature of the rupture between Africa and those of the diaspora.

For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many tongued chorus. And occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I have discovered those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. Their lives fractured. Sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil. For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you. But understand. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. (1-2)

The four vignettes making up the novel match four of the voices heard among the “many tongued chorus that accompanies Africa's dispersal into the West” (Ledent 56). In *Crossing the River* Phillips uses the technique 'polyphony of voices' employed in his novel *Cambridge*, and each of the four stories reproduces scenes from two hundred and fifty years of African and Afro-American history” (Skinner 180). The first part, “The Pagan Coast” portrays the miseries of the oldest son, Nash Williams, an emancipated slave who is sent to Liberia as a missionary in the 1830s by his master Edward Williams. Nash feels a sense of rootlessness. The lack of belonging engendered by this dual identity and the hard living conditions in Africa makes him feel as a stranger in his 'native land.' Through a mixture of third person narration and letters exchanged between Edward and Nash, Phillips portrays the alienation Nash suffers in Liberia as a Western educated Black American and the abandonment Edward experiences when Nash dies. At the beginning, the innocent Nash devoted himself as a true missionary. “Neither climate nor native confrontation, diseases nor hardship of any manner would deflect him from his purpose” (10). Nash's experiences in new home are recorded in a series of letters which delineates his increasing desperation and imbalance. Further the lack of basic necessities for survival makes Nash a gradual deviation from a devoted missionary to compromise with

the harsh realities of his new migrated Liberia. Phillips describes how Nash, who crossed the Atlantic possess a sense of doubleness, a division of self similar to W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. Du Bois writes:

The history of the American Negro is the history of the strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America and would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 4)

Later in Liberia Nash experiences freedom and dignity that he did not enjoy in the country of his birth. "Liberia, the beautiful land of my forefathers is a place where person of colour may enjoy their freedom. It is the home for our race . . . in this republic the practice is to address me as Mr. Williams and not Boy" (31-32). Paradoxically with freedom comes a deep sense of rootlessness and an identity crisis; he is neither an American since America does not recognize him as a freeman nor an African as he cannot completely adjust to the way of life in Liberia. Thus Nash is a cultural hybrid as he is tormented between the two worlds. Hybridity is cultural mixture where the dispersed meets the host in the scene of migration. Bhabha calls it the colonial cultural interface. In his journey to Liberia, Edward Williams realizes his mistakes and admits that "this business of encouraging man to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own is, after all ill-judged. In the end Nash, the educated Christian changes into African heathen. He mentions that, "Perhaps you imagine that this Liberia corrupted my person transforming me from good Christian, coloured gentleman who left your home into this heathen you barely recognize" (62). The second part, "West" focuses on the experiences of Martha Randolph, the second slave child. The narrative opens with Martha freezing to near death in Colorado, having suffered the plight of losing her daughter and husband to slave auctioneers in the south of America. She is helped by a white woman and her life is presented in a series of flashbacks. Phillips describes Martha's life "by a voice which sometimes the narrators, sometimes Martha's; often the two voices merge marvelously in free indirect discourse" (Sarvan 624).

Martha Randolph. Squatting like a filthy bag of bones. Watching the snow. Don't know nobody in these parts. Barely recognizing herself. No ma'am, she thought. I doubt if I'll ever be able to stand by myself again. But no matter. I done enough standing by myself to last most folks three or four lifetimes. Ain't nothing shameful in resting now. No ma'am, nothing shameful at all. She squeezed. The woman's hand squeezed back. Can you stand by yourself? Martha shook her head. (76)

The narration of Martha's story is pervaded by fragmentation in thematic and textual level. The first layer in the multi-layered structure of "West" depicts Martha's present situation in Colorado whilst the second layer consists of her memories of the Hoffmans. Third layer describes Martha's escape interspersed with first person, parenthetical asides that have the tone of remarks one might make when telling a story to a friend. The third person narrator recounts:

Eventually Martha climbed to her feet and began to run. (Like the wind, girl.) Never again would she stand on an auction block. (Never.) Never again would she be renamed. (Never.) Never again would she belong to anybody. (No sir, never.) And then, later, she saw dawn announcing its bold self, and a breathless Martha stopped to rest beneath a huge willow tree. (Don't know body own me now) (81)

The mixing of first person and third person utterances stand as an example of the multi voiced discourse present in the novel. One can easily make a distinction between the sections that take place in the past and the parts that are set in the present, because the former is told by Martha herself and the latter are described by a third person narrator. The reader can put the narrator in Martha's position as he focalizes through her eyes:

Martha leaned against the woman and peered into a small dark room. Still cold. Through the half-light, she saw the single bed, the mattress rolled back and revealing an ugly grid of rusty wire. Then she left the woman's gentle touch guiding her across the room and into a Hard-backed wooden chair. Like a child. (77-78)

The third narrative, "Crossing the River" provides a western perspective through the logbook entries of James Hamilton, a slave ship captain. It is evident from the logbook that the desperate father sold the three children to Hamilton. As the logbook states: "Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought two strong man-boys, and a proud girl" (124) Phillips portrays Hamilton as being inhuman to his crew as well as to the slaves who are treated as mere goods for trade. In contrast to his cold behaviour, his letters show a deep love and care for his wife. He represents duality of nature, his struggle between occupation as a slave trader and his Christian values.

The section "Crossing the River" is constructed from white perspectives, and the slaves are seen through the eyes of Janus faced Hamilton. As Ilona says, "the diary of the captain is thrown into relief from the other sections of *Crossing the River* by the marked absence of any deeply felt personal emotions on the part of the African slaves who are represented as the objects for sale" (Ilona 8). Although the voices of African slaves are absent in this section, Phillips does indirectly identify the brutality of the agents of slavery. Hamilton later writes: "They huddle together, and sing their melancholy lamentations. We have lost the sight of Africa" (124). This problem of telling the story of those who speak no more or whose

voices are limited by situations is not a new one. Smith writes, "In each stage of their history, the presence of an intermediary renders the majority of the [slave] narratives not artistic construction of personal experience but illustrations of someone else's view of slavery" (Smith 10). The fourth narrative, "Somewhere in England" depicts the story of Travis through the eyes of a young English Yorkshire woman, Joyce. She is left alone during the World War II when her husband is jailed for black marketing. The story unfolds through journal entries written by Joyce who falls in love with Travis, a black American GI and ultimately gives up their biracial child for adoption. Joyce, who belongs to the White class never mentions about Travis's colour or race. As Elizabeth Wallace remarks: "An interesting aspect about their relation is the fact that Joyce does not seem to notice that Travis is a black man; she never describes him as a man of colour or does she mentions any clue to his blackness. It appears that Joyce is 'colour blind'" (Wallace 102). The white society looked with contempt on Travis and Joyce as she keeps relation with a black man. Joyce says, "I knew what they were thinking. That he was just using me for fun. There was no ring on my finger, but I didn't think that they had the right to look at me in that way. Just who the hell did they think they are" (202). Phillips mixes the disjointed and bewildering narratives which reflect the life of the characters that are psychologically and spiritually fragmented.

Finally, the novel ends with an epilogue in which the ancestral African father's voice returns to assume a choric dimension and lament for the black people throughout the world, and throughout the history. The epilogue represents diverse voices; we again read that what Hamilton thinks, we also hear the voice of Nash, who thanks his master Edward and God for his existence; of Martha, who finally reunited with her daughter and of Joyce, who happily sees Travis back when her son Greer returns. As John Skinner remarks: "the various figures in the novel are now revealed as at least symbolically, if not literally related" (Skinner 182). Phillips's *Crossing the River* highlights a range of human struggles and sufferings though his characters are separated by time, space, race and generation. Phillips also adopts a frame work associated with diaspora marked by fragmentation and displacement to represent and bring into dialogue diverse encounters between African's and Europeans. Fragmentation and displacement characterize both content and form of the novel. Phillips conveys the literal disruption of characters' lives primarily through multiple and alternating point of view, the nonlinear development of stories, and the incomplete disclosure facilitated by fragments such as letters, journal entries, logbook, and dreams. These narrative strategies renders a splintering effect of dispersal and proffer the challenge of drawing connections between stories or peoples that have been presented as distinct and/or at odds. *Crossing the River* ends when the circle comprised by the human

experience of all these stories is closed. The circular structure renders the novel universal.

References :

- Phillips, C. (1993). *Crossing the River*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1991). *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*. London: Bay Press.
- Du Bois W. E. B. (2004). The Souls of Black Folk. *The Norton, Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Jr and Nella C Mckay. New York: Norton.
- Ilona, Anthony. (1995). Crossing the River: A Chronicle of the Black Diaspora. *Wasafiri* 22, 3-9.
- Ledent, B. (2002). *Caryl Phillips*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Sarvan, Charles and Bulaila. (1998). Review of Crossing the River. *World Literature Today*. 68:3, 624-625
- Skinner, John. (1998). *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Smith, V. (1987). *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Wallace, Elizabeth K. (2006). *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*. New York: Columbia UP.

