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REVISIÓN

## Disentangling the Knots of Diasporic Identity through the Prism of Postpositivist Realism in Caryl Phillips' Crossing the River

### Desenredando los nudos de la identidad diáspora a través del prisma del realismo pospositivista en Crossing the River, de Caryl Phillips

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#### ABSTRACT

Crossing the River (1993) holds within itself a whole history of the Black Diaspora. This history churned through the memories of various characters unfolds before the reader the experience of exile, disillusionment, and loneliness and depicts the diasporic ambivalence and hegemony of the Whites. Through a story of three black people during different time periods and on different continents as they struggle with separation from their native Africa, the novelist invites readers to see how individual stories are intertwined in the wider tapestry of collective memory. Phillips is interested in how narratives of slavery inform the contemporary migrant condition. Phillips explores the myriad associations and connecting points within black history on the imaginative terra firma of his fiction. He calls upon the reader to delve deeper into the 'visible and obvious' and to see how the present identities acquired their shape and characteristics; how the cauldron of collective memories, narratives, and stories produced enduring tales of affirmation and resilience. The novel acquires new contours when seen in the light of the Postpositivist realist approach. The theoretical approach enriches the thematic understanding of the novel and substantiates the idea that the concept of identity necessitates a valid epistemological inquiry.

**Keywords:** Diaspora; Human Migration; Blacks; Enslavement; History.

#### RESUMEN

Crossing the River (1993) encierra en sí misma toda una historia de la diáspora negra. Esta historia agitada a través de los recuerdos de varios personajes despliega ante el lector la experiencia del exilio, la desilusión y la soledad, y describe la ambivalencia diaspórica y la hegemonía de los blancos. A través de la historia de tres personas de raza negra durante distintos periodos de tiempo y en distintos continentes mientras luchan contra la separación de su África natal, el novelista invita a los lectores a ver cómo las historias individuales se entrelazan en el tapiz más amplio de la memoria colectiva. Phillips se interesa por el modo en que los relatos de la esclavitud influyen en la condición migratoria contemporánea. Phillips explora las innumerables asociaciones y puntos de conexión de la historia negra en la imaginativa tierra firme de su ficción. Invita al lector a profundizar en lo "visible y obvio" y a ver cómo las identidades actuales adquirieron su forma y sus características; cómo el hervidero de recuerdos colectivos, narraciones e historias produjo relatos perdurables de afirmación y resistencia. La novela adquiere nuevos contornos cuando se contempla a la luz del enfoque realista pospositivista. El enfoque teórico enriquece la comprensión temática de la novela y corrobora la idea de que el concepto de identidad requiere una indagación epistemológica válida.

**Palabras clave:** Diáspora; Migración Humana; Negros; Esclavitud; Historia.

## INTRODUCTION

Crossing the River (1993) is a formidable tale built around three chief black characters and covers a span of about two hundred and fifty years of Black diaspora on a scale of stupendous imaginative veracity. Ledent in "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories" says, "The four stories making up the novel match four of the voices heard among the 'many-tongued chorus' that accompanies Africa's dispersal into the West and each voice speaks its particular language and they are inconsistent". The reader cannot help but feel the pain of blacks who after having endured slavery, are plunged into the darkness of racial prejudices or white condescending.<sup>(5,6)</sup> Their lacerated souls spin around the memories which do not hold any solace but are the only possession that they can claim to be of their own. The story is enacted on a huge canvas where the time duration is of nearly three decades and holds together stories of three blacks who are akin to each other by their common history.

## DEVELOPMENT

Gail Low suggests that "...Crossing the River is like a chorus of voices with their separate histories linked together under their permutations on the patterns of love, desire, loss, yearning that accompany the separation between parent and child, husband and wives, lovers and partners. They repeat, mutate, and transform the motif of exile from kinsfolk in the ordinary rupture of families under slavery, and in doing so achieve the vital task of connecting lives across time and space...".

Phillips focuses on how the history of oppression, brutality, and injustice has shaped present-day black identities. Different stories in the novel trace the pathways that have wounded the identities of black people.

Phillips' motivation behind this in the words of Jose Varunny is: "...While for many this difficult truth is hard to accept and reluctant to acknowledge, for Phillips the remembrance and acknowledgment of them are some of the essential means of a cure for the psychological damage that transatlantic slavery has created...".

These new identities are carved in the diaspora, but they carry the baggage of their history and ancestry, which lends them their unique character. The hapless African father in the novel says, "To a father consumed with guilt. You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree. But not lost, for you carry within your bodies the seeds of new trees. Sinking your hopeful roots into difficult soil".<sup>(2)</sup> The African father created by Phillips becomes instrumental in not only uncovering the shared consciousness of the Africans but in also keeping it alive and pulsating across time and space. The statement conveys that the chances of assimilation, and re-rooting in alien lands are available. Such efforts, however, entail myriad difficulties generated by prejudices. The impetus is towards creating new identities in new homelands as the uprooting has already taken place and there is no possibility of going back. Crossing the River depicts how the march of history is irreversible. Through the lives of three chief characters, over the centuries, Phillips draws our attention to the fading of the African past and shaping of new personal histories amid diasporic dislocation.

Diaspora entails a yearning and pining for the homeland. In the Black diaspora, attachment to the homeland is dealt with finesse by Stuart Hall who argues in "Negotiating Caribbean Identities" that: "...Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence. Black, brown, mulatto, white - all must look Presence Africaine in the face, speak its name. But whether it is, in this sense, an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt the original Africa is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalizes and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. Africa must at last be reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered...".

The novel shows the slaves' impossible return to their homeland while at the same time highlighting the bleak chances of assimilation into the dominant/host culture. Phillips lays stress upon the significance that the recovery of black identity in a racist society holds.

Crossing the River unfolds the play of memory and construction and interpretation of identities through its characters. The novelist has created a fact-oriented fictional history of the unheard and ignored subaltern in a Toni Morrison-like manner. Phillips takes the responsibility of documenting the history of subalterns through reminiscences offered by letters, diary entries, etc. The ideas pertaining to the structure and form of historical tales in Western culture are questioned in this work. The colonized person who was silenced to date shares his or her experience and stories. Such stories arise out of memories; memories that change their hues, contours as well and significance along the vagaries of time. Femke Stoke says about memories as they reflect in diasporas that, "Memories of home are no factual reproductions of a fixed past. Rather they are fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject's current positionings and conceptualizations of home" (24).

Identity of the colonial subject is centered on enforced family dissolutions, estrangement from one's birthplace, and other issues consequential from the master's disrespect for the dignity and sentiments of the slaves. The narrative employed for communicating the story also integrates the psychological turbulences of the storyteller. In this case, the Western style does not complete the intended goal. Phillips emphasizes the

requirement of constructing a different history that purposefully rejects Western ideas. He is also cognizant of Leela Gandhi's contention that white Western historians fabricate a narrative of history that enhances their dominance and then spread that version around the globe. Therefore, history develops as a "discourse through which the West [asserts] its hegemony over the rest of the world".

Critics have acknowledged the affinity of Phillip's style of writing *Crossing the River* with that of Toni Morrison. When questioned in an interview, Caryl Phillips replied: "...Beloved has been particularly influential. It's always easier for an author to see these things in retrospect and, looking back, yes, I can see the influences of all of these people. It's a novel which is fragmentary in form and structure, polyphonic in its voices, which means that a lot of my reading and a lot of the people whose work I've enjoyed have made their way in..."

The story purportedly is about two brothers and a sister, who were sold into slavery by their hapless father, not because it was the only way out of poverty, rather, he was not given any privilege of choice. The very first line in *Crossing the River*, "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children"<sup>(1)</sup> bespeaks the little, faint, and feeble murmur of agency in a wretched slave who proclaims that "I" sold my children, instead of saying that his children were taken away. Stretching the limits of imagination, Phillips wants us to travel two hundred and fifty years to find the knots of kinship between entirely different circumstances of three people, from three different epochs and places. He wants us to reimagine relationships and identities on the terra firma of memory and cultural legacies. The Atlantic slave trade uprooted blacks from their native lands in the most brutal ways and changed the course of their destiny forever.

David Eltis and David Richardson say that the Atlantic slave trade was a new phenomenon in the human experience. It was the largest transoceanic forced migration in history whereby relatively small improvements to the quality of life of a person on one continent (Europe)... were made possible by the removal of others from a second continent (Africa), and their draconian exploitation on yet a third (the Americas).

Nash's story plays out the critical realist's theory that reality, although influenced by discourses, is not determined by it and "revealed to us only through the active construction in which we participate" but "clearly we don't all participate in this process of construction on an equal footing". Nash endured the condescending aspect of the White Civilizing Mission and became a missionary, playing initially to the tunes of his white master, Edward Williams. Nash is that black offspring who becomes an instrument for the expansion of the Empire. The employment of former slaves as missionaries reduced the risk of white casualties in the inhospitable African climate. By appropriating the angst of blacks, they were used as tools to further the cause of White's mission. Nash's letters reveal how the other slaves were jealous of him for his being master's favorite who was picked over others for his deep loyalty. By insinuating competition for the master's 'affection', these slaves were pegged against each other, thereby blocking the already fragile channels of bonding. American Colonization Society deputed blacks as missionaries in Africa.

Apprehensive of retribution, they provided a rationale that, "...the natives would see reason, and that the prospect of welcoming home their lost children might help to overcome any unpleasant estrangement that the African heathens might temporarily experience...America would be removing a cause of increasing social stress, and Africa would be civilized by the return of her descendants, who are now blessed with rational Christian minds...".<sup>(8,9)</sup>

Aware of dirty politics, Whites were trying to varnish it with high-sounding albeit shallow philosophy. Having uprooted blacks from their soil in the most inhuman way, they were now acting magnanimously by sending 'lost children' back to their 'homelands'. They exhibited a stinking complacency by forwarding notions of their religion and civilization being superior. Blacks were the commodities from which profits in the form of religious propagation were to be harvested. Nash is a prototype of millions of descendants of slaves whose 'otherness' made them alien in both black and white cultures.

Femke Stock rightly says, "...Despite their attachment to certain places or social constellations both here and there, (descendants) of migrants sometimes feel unable to identify with these as homes because there is no place for them in collective memories or everyday interaction...".<sup>(26)</sup>

Nash's situation is emblematic of Blacks who have either been forced or cajoled to discard their heritage, thus creating for them a murky situation of cultural void. Rendered unable to align with any cultural image and heritage, they are shoved to adopt the culture of the White master.

Unable to fit into this unfamiliar culture and alien heritage, they feel estranged. Derek Walcott in *The Post-Colonial Study Reader* restates: "...I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestors who sold me and to the ancestors who bought me. I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost when you both whisper "history" for its attempt to forgive you both. I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiate, and it is not mine to forgive. My memory cannot summon any filial love...".

The statement bespeaks the sense of betrayal that Blacks put in such situations experienced. The blame for slavery, however, cannot be assigned only to the exploitative white master. It must be shared by the influential blacks who first pushed their kinsmen into slavery. Nash, in his letters, makes reference to the process of blacks

being sold into slavery by their own people. Moreover, Fanon's contention that "what is often called the black man's soul is the white man's artifact"<sup>(14)</sup> is so well explicated by Nash's initial behavior with Edward, where his thoughts are directed and maneuvered by the white master. His alienation and cultural obliviousness testify to Fanon's contention.

Nash, the good 'missionary', "former bondsman" who cannot deviate from his 'noble task' is "one of those most determined to survive and pursue the task that he had been prepared for...neither climate nor native confrontation, disease nor hardship of any manner would deflect him from his proper purpose". Nash's initial subservience to Edward is symptomatic of what Ashcroft says in *Post Colonial Studies*. The European slave traders "not only uprooted Africans from their home environments but through centuries of systematic racial denigration alienated enslaved Africans from their racial characteristics" (60).

Going back to his roots in Liberia as a black missionary, Nash initially struggled with the process of acclimatization and re-rooting, faced pangs of alienation, and finally rebelled against the master, thereby asserting his newfound identity and selfhood. Liberia created "the emotional conditions in which a new kind of knowledge is possible" (Mohanty 45). After sending many letters to Edward, enunciating his devotion and commitment, Nash is left disillusioned by his master's indifference. Gradually, he starts feeling at home in Liberia, where he does not face racial prejudice.

He writes to Edward "...I doubt if I shall ever consent to return to America. Liberia, the beautiful land of my forefathers, is a place where persons of color may enjoy their freedom. It is a home for our race. Its laws are founded upon justice and equality....Liberia is the star of the East for the free colored man. It is truly our only home...".

Snapping all ties with Edward, Nash finally finds himself at home in a place which despite its materialistic scarcity, is nevertheless a free place where he is his own master. What Nash did, finds an echo in David Richardson's viewpoint, that "Africans did not accept their fate impassively. They resisted and, at times, fought back- in Africa, on board ship, and in the Americas...In resisting they asserted their humanity and identity"<sup>(32)</sup>.

Nash leaves missionary work and starts farming. He starts a family and takes pride in being a family man. Separated from families, the black identity has suffered the pain of fractured homes and snatched relationships. In that context, Nash - the sold child- is trying to recuperate the black familial ties that were left mutilated and bleeding by Whites. To his wife, he is a man and not the 'boy', working at the commands of White master. He says "I am to her what she found here in Africa". Nash's newfound assertion with its tinge of ambivalence, so characteristic of diasporic identities is well explicated by what DuBois says in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

He says: "...The history of the American Negro is the history of this 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, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world..."<sup>(2)</sup>.

Nash turns the historical praxis up and down with his desertion of Edward, who comes looking for him in Africa. Nash's experience in America and then in Liberia, made an impact on his identity.<sup>(23)</sup>

Conveyed in an epistolary style, the story of Nash is one of hegemony-induced subservience and identity-driven defiance and assertion. Separated from family and acquaintances, the White man seems lost in a foreign land. For once, Edward, the White master was face to face with infirmity and loneliness, "how far he felt from home, from those like himself, and how he desired to be once more among his own people". The former slave denies him any chance to gain access to the knowledge that he is seeking. The tables are turned. Instead of poor 'heathens', it is Edward who is being pitied. The values, knowledge, and deliverance that he claims to embody are as strange concepts to these African people as his physical presence. Edward's experiment- a white civilizing mission through black missionaries- has failed and Africa has reclaimed its lost child. The situation substantiates the postpositivist realist stance that "the well-being (and sometimes even survival) of the groups or individuals who engage in oppositional struggle depends on their abilities to refute or dismantle dominant ideologies and institutions, their vision is usually more critical, their efforts more diligent, and their arguments more comprehensive..."<sup>(23)</sup>.

Africa has taken what was legitimately its own, which the 'other' had taken away through deceit and unscrupulous power. Nash won and laid bare the hypocrisy behind the imaginary truth propagated by Whites about the Civilizing Mission. Nash drives the final nail in the coffin in his last letter where he questions Edward. He writes with defiance: "...Perhaps in this realm of the thereafter, you might explain to me why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian Paradise...That my faith in you is broken is evident...Your work is complete. It only remains for me once more to urge you to remain in your country..."

Nash refers to America as Edward's "your country". He has denounced America and its values. His deliverance could come only after separation from the white master and freedom from the blind faith and devotion which he had for the master. Liberia gave him time to think and act upon his own will. He realized that he was just an experiment and America would never accept him as one of its own. For the first time, he calls Edward, his

accused and not the benefactor; the man responsible for his precarious in-betweenness. Talking about the acts of defiance and self-liberation, what David Richardson says, helps one understand Nash's defiance.

That process involved more than heroic acts of resistance and rebellion. It involved, too, efforts to dismantle the cultural divide upon which transatlantic slavery was built and to identify slavery as an exceptional affront to a common humanity.<sup>(33)</sup>

Through the story of Martha, Phillips brings to the fore the physical, psychological, and emotional devastation caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans, separated from their homes by the Europeans, had little hope of ever returning to their native lands. They were forced to work like beasts of burden for their entire lives. Denied any freedom or rights, they were incarcerated within the draconian boundaries created by white slave owners, who employed all means to keep the enslaved Africans separated from their culture, languages as well as religious beliefs and practices. Battered brutally, both emotionally and physically, these slaves tried hard to fight against their enslavement. They rebelled and resisted despite the intuitive knowledge that there was no hope of gaining freedom or of ever going back.

Throwing light on the harm done by slavery, Dave Lichtenstein observes: "...The institution of slavery tragically produced another unique issue in the history of the Caribbean and its people. It cut people off from their ancestry. Slaves were torn from ancestral homes in Africa and brought across the sea to North America (a voyage known as the Middle Passage). Once in the colonies, families were broken up and slaves were often renamed according to the master's whims, sometimes several different times if they changed owners. This coupled with the fact that remaining family lived thousands of miles across the ocean and had become untraceable due to the name changes and family disintegration made the development of a personal lineage, of family traditions as we know them, impossible..."<sup>(3)</sup>

Martha, the former slave, an old woman joining the pioneers moving the American West personifies the pain that the hearts of former slaves bear. Separated from their children most brutally, female slaves like Martha made incredulous efforts to start a fresh life but at every step, their blackness became White man's eyesore. Dejected, she questions, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?". Slavery is one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics included the idea that slaves were property; that they were outsiders who were alien by origin or who had been denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion could be used at will; that their labor power was the complete disposal of a master; that they did not have the right to their sexuality and by, extension, to their reproductive capacities; and that the slave status was inherited unless provision was made to ameliorate that status.<sup>(18)</sup>

Clinging to the last straw, she wishes to join a group of pioneers heading the American West, with the hope of finding her long-lost daughter, Eliza Mae. Her daughter is her imaginary truth, one which she will never get to realize. Blacks heading west, "...were just prospecting for a new life without having to pay no heed to the white man and his ways...prospecting for a place where your name wasn't 'boy' or 'aunty', and where you could be a part of this country without feeling like you weren't a part."

Martha's suffering has exhausted her both physically and mentally. Drained spiritually, she cannot repose faith in a Christian God. Separated from her husband, Lucas, and daughter during an auction, she has borne the brunt of slavery most inhumanly. She muses "I done enough standing by myself to last most folks three or four lifetimes".<sup>(5,7)</sup> Martha exemplifies the plight of slaves which as Richardson says were "ideologically and socially marginalized, exploitable 'outsiders' condemned in the word of sociologist Orlando Patterson to a status of social death."<sup>(29)</sup>

Martha is akin to millions of slaves who lived and died waiting for their loved ones to join them so that they could take a journey to their lost homes. Martha is one of those "...bought or captured in the African hinterland were incarcerated by European traders and administrators before beginning the second stage of journey- the middle passage- to the New World...women and men waited in the dark, crowded into confined and frightening spaces..., after months of imprisonment awaiting the arrival of the ships that would take them to the plantations of the Americas, were led into narrow tunnels to exit through the 'door of no return'..."<sup>(28)</sup>

Once freed, she tries to start life afresh with Chester. This life too is full of drudgery, but she has the solace of being in a stable relationship with a man, she is confident, and will not be sold into slavery. She relishes being loved and cared for and dreams of meeting her lost daughter someday. She says, "...I was free now, but it was difficult to tell what difference being free was making to my life. I was just doing the same things as before, only I was more contented, not on the account of no emancipation proclamation, but on account of my Chester..."

The former slave had "My Chester" to claim as her own. She laid a righteous claim on a relationship with a man who helped her forget her past pain, isolation, and dehumanization. But the blight of white supremacy soon took away her happiness. Whites could not tolerate a white man making progress. The jealousy against Chester engineered his murder by two whites. Such an incident was not an isolated case. The abolition of slavery did not end the vicious cycle of inhuman discrimination and prejudice. Blacks were still seen as inferior to others. Lichtenstein very rightly observes that although the late 1800s marked the formal end of slavery,

“the oppressive nature of

Colonialism led many to believe that the liberation of slaves was only an illusion”. The white master reluctant to forgo his authority, still wanted that “most blacks, though free, would still be living in conditions of poverty with low wages and little hope for advancement”.

Martha was once again looted of her relationships, once again her loved one was snatched away from her by the Whites. Having lost her faith in the White God, she dies a heartbroken and lonely woman in an unknown terrain deserted by pioneers. Dreading the past, refuting Christianity, Martha even in her death does not gain freedom. Her unclaimed body had to be buried and “They would have to choose a name for her if she was going to receive a Christian burial”. She was not free even in her death. Her tragedy shows that “even our deepest personal experiences are socially constructed, mediated by visions and values that are political in nature...”.<sup>(21)</sup>

Her plight and dreadful experiences were bred by slavery. Through her fate, Phillips focuses on the malpractice of re-naming the slaves. After making a purchase, the white masters re-christened their slaves to establish their superiority/mastery over them. Burnard states this as “Whites fostered such distinctions (naming) to further their belief that Blacks were inferior - more like animals than Anglo-European”.<sup>(2,3,9)</sup>

Martha died without an authentic identity. Her life was a tale of losses. She lost her real name, her daughter, her family, and consequently her faith in God. Much more severe than the cold weather of Colorado, it was her losses that led to her pitiable death. Her life is a painful saga of what realists say, “The social processes of domination and exploitation (which) benefits from the naturalization of social identities, which is also therefore the naturalization of domination”.<sup>(12)</sup>

Martha, however, asserts her feeble agency through her decision to look for Eliza Mae. The oppressive White society snatched her motherly rights to rear up a child; she like many others, was only a breeder for the Whites who would provide more workforce to the master. But she clings to her role as a mother and makes desperate attempts to look for her long-lost daughter.

Maria Rice Bellamy says that the society in which she lives forces Martha to relinquish her maternal rights but not her maternal identity. At a time when slave-based Western society identified black women as breeders, not mothers, Martha’s devotion to her daughter can be considered “an act of political resistance”. Martha searches for her daughter and clings to her maternal identity as a means of defining herself against the prevailing discourse of her society.<sup>(4)</sup>

Martha’s stubborn search for her daughter follows the “final claim of a postpositivist realist theory of identity is that oppositional struggle is fundamental to our ability to understand the world more accurately”.<sup>(23)</sup> She fights against the dominant structures of signification to claim her role as a mother and therefore poses a challenge to the imperial and racist societies. She proves that subjugated and downtrodden must know “what it would take to change [our world and in] ...identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is”.<sup>(21)</sup>

Travis, a black GI posted in a village in England during World War II is the third lost child who finds love and companionship in Joyce, a White woman. Through this story, Phillips explores the pathways of reconciliation between blacks and whites. Joyce’s love for Travis is unmindful of his race, a fact implied in the novel through her not mentioning his color or race. Theirs is a story of strong companionship, where the pain of one hurts the other one more. With war as its background, the story foregrounds the complexities of man-woman and mother-daughter relationships. With Travis and Joyce, we are presented with a new historical praxis, where human beings are seen as humans only and are not divided by suffocating labels. The voice of history, narrating the story of sold children, two sons, and one daughter, claims Joyce to be the second daughter (the other daughter being Martha) and the fourth child. “...the common memory begins again to swell, and insist that I acknowledge greetings from those who lever pints of alien the pubs of London. Receive salutations from those who submit to (what the French calls) neurotic inter-racial urges in the boulevards of Paris. But my Joyce, and my other children, their voices hurt but determined, they will survive the hardships of the far bank”.

Through Travis, Phillips explores the present-day repercussions of slavery- in the form of racism- on the lives and identities of blacks. Sharpe believes that the slavery past is “intimately bound up with the present, as a point of departure for the African diaspora or a condition of existence for fractured identities”. Travis- a ‘free’ man and no longer a slave- still has the distant slavery days as his whiplash in the form of racial prejudice. Though fighting a war for the ‘nation’ which demands his life, he is not considered a true citizen. One of the officers comes specifically to warn Joyce against her growing friendship with Travis. He tells her, “...I’ve come to talk to you a little about the service men we’ve got stationed in your village... A lot of these boys are not used to us treating them as equals, so don’t be alarmed by their response... They’re not very educated boys and they’ll need some time to adjust to your customs and your ways, so I’m just here to request your patience.

His diasporic status is confirmed by the connectivity and relation of his ancestral past with his present. His past and present are discernible by his state of constant exile and lower status. Slavery is as much a reality of contemporary times as it was of the past because it encroaches upon the diaspora’s contemporary circumstances and identity. The legacy of slavery stubbornly seeps into the presence of blacks. The juxtaposition of different

historical eras by the novelist suggests their interconnectedness and shows how the present identities of blacks are forged by slavery. Blacks “are always looking [...] to the past, always hyperaware...of the fact that the present is conditioned by the past”. The xenophobic bitterness that Travis experiences shows how history manifests itself in the form of racial discrimination. Although the circumstances are not as brutal and oppressive as that of slavery, it is acutely traumatic and painful and renders one unable to forge a link with the surroundings. Travis’ diasporic status and condition demonstrate how the historical experience continues to impact the everyday lives of the African diaspora.

Joyce-Travis’s relationship makes up for an interesting reading. Joyce’s experience can be analyzed through the prism of post-positivist realist theory. Her experience with Travis is completely at variance with the general white attitude towards blacks. She proves that realism “enables the expansion of possibilities for solidarity across difference”.<sup>(12)</sup>

She does not even seem to notice that Travis is black as nowhere in the novel does she mention his complexion or racial identity. Travis’ black identity is revealed to the reader after a dance party when she notices his “thin black wool” hair. Warnings by officers against her growing affinity with Travis lead her to “getting good at learning the difference between the official stories and the evidence before my eyes”. She registers the warnings as based on national rather than racial differences. The contempt and disapproval that she faces from the people, too is conceived by her as the result of her being in an extramarital relationship rather than being in a relationship with a black man. She thinks, “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 were. Joyce’s relationship triggers the fear of miscegenation among the white officers as well as among the villagers. It was a fear as Wendy Webster, in *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity* tells that “[t]he concept of “miscegenation” - widely used in race discourse in the 1950s - signaled not only the idea that races were biological categories marked by difference, but also that the mixing of these in heterosexual relations was deeply problematic and unnatural”. Joyce, however, was innocuously unaware of the danger she was setting her feet into. Her distinct experience with Travis and the consequences which she has to suffer proves that there is a “causal and referential relationship between a subject’s social location and her identity”.<sup>(23)</sup> Her experience is different from other whites. Her identity/social position of being white and being with an abusive husband makes up for an entirely different experience. Her positioning as a white is canceled by the positionality of love she takes up and is therefore accepted in the fold by her black father. Joyce’s life explicates the postpositivist viewpoint that “Reflexivity concerning one’s positioning is contingent on a series of factors. It may lead to complicity or a conciliatory compromise with given social structures and perhaps to a desire to maintain the status quo, or it may lead to transformative practices”. Through the African father’s acceptance of Joyce as the fourth child, Phillips provides the world a hope of a better future where human beings are not branded and consequently prejudiced against because of their color or race. Joyce’s experience with blacks is entirely different from other characters. She sojourns into a terrain of humanity that others have willfully avoided. Though White, her vantage point is different and ideology has not been able to seep into her thoughts to give her a perverted outlook. She becomes a paradigm to understand the postpositivist realist claim that: “The most basic questions about identity call for a more general reexamination of the relation between personal experience and public meanings-subjective choices and evaluations, on the one hand, and objective social location, on the other”.<sup>(21)</sup> She stands tall albeit scarred because of her different stance.

Joyce fulfills Phillips’ vision when he says in an interview with Maya Jaggi: “...I wouldn’t say I’ve always wanted to be an explorer of the fissures and crevices of migration. I have seen connectedness and ‘celebrated’ the qualities of survival that people in all sorts of predicaments can keep hold of with clenched fists. I didn’t want to leave this novel as an analysis of fracture, because I felt such an overwhelming, passionate attachment to all the voices, and I kept thinking it seemed almost choral. These people were talking in harmonies I could hear...”.<sup>(26)</sup>

Stories of three diasporic children are juxtaposed with the journal entries of a slave ship captain named Hamilton. This part concurs with the postpositivist realist stance that “knowledge is the product of particular kinds of social practice”.<sup>(23)</sup>

His journal entries involuntarily depict the draconian practices of the Atlantic slave trade as well as the utter indifference and callousness of those involved in the trade. Being a white man, his knowledge and experience are conditioned by his social location. His judgments are “based on structures of belief that can be justified (or not) with reference to their own and others’ well-being”.<sup>(23)</sup>

Leela Gandhi opines that Hamilton’s journal entries present a White Western account of history which establishes the supremacy of West and thus makes history a “discourse through which the West [asserts] its hegemony over the rest of the world”. Additionally, “the temporal disjointedness and narrative fragmentation of the novel mirrors the historical turbulence of the 250 years in which the African diasporic is caught”.<sup>(22)</sup>

The journal entries shock one with the cold and casual enumeration of loss and profit involved in the

business involving human lives. Hamilton writes about “a woman slave, whom I refused being long breasted”, then Mr. Lewis “came aboard with the promised slaves, most being remarkably fine and sturdy. I purchased 17, viz., 12 men, 5 women. In future the day must begin with arms and senitals, there now being above 50 slaves on board...

In a situation that looks tragically ironic, Hamilton talks about the pangs of separation from his wife while at the same moment listing the loss of cargo (slaves) during the voyage. While brutally separating and fracturing black families, Hamilton moans about his love and family, “of our future children, and our family life together.” The part consisting of log entries of Captain Hamilton is intrinsic to the structure of the novel since the slave merchant to whom the hapless African father sold his three children was Captain Hamilton only: “Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl”. Hamilton’s casual disregard for the plight of slaves can be understood through the concept of “cognitive conception of experience...which allow for both legitimate and illegitimate experience, enabling us to see the experience as a source of both real knowledge and social mystification”.<sup>(21)</sup> He presents the pangs of separation from his wife while at the same time rupturing the families of blacks. His experience and pain do not hold valid and are thus rendered illegitimate when placed in front of the inexplicable pain of black slaves.

Phillips<sup>(30)</sup> presents a unique interspersing of voices towards the end of the novel. Voices of diaspora, bespeaking memories as well as aspirations, lamenting losses, and projecting hopes, indicate how the past has shaped the future. The presence of Blacks in America or England cannot be understood without taking a recourse to the history of their immigration; a history replete with the memories drenched in the blood and tears of blacks, a history voicing the agony, anguish, perseverance, defiance and resilience of black diaspora. The novelist presents a hopeful vision where the identity of blacks will be strengthened by their close affiliation with whites who will not demand incorporation but would rather extend compassionate arms to those seeking succor from prejudices. The novel stresses the need to build a new historical framework where the memories are no longer haunting or scary. It is a world which is envisioned by Mary C. Waters in *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant, Dreams and American Realities*. “Yet for blacks and whites to move beyond the color line, and to prevent new Americans of many different origins from accepting that color line to be on its advantageous side, we must move beyond both cultural and vulgar racism”.

The epilogue presents a hopeful vision where blacks and whites stand together on a platform built on the foundation of love. This love (in the form of Greer, child of Joyce and Travis) may not find a ready acceptance but strong ties of love nurturing in hearts (Joyce) do indicate a hopeful future where Marthas will not die on roads, frozen to death; where Nashs will not die in oblivion and where Travis and Joyce will be able to build a sweet home and family together. The struggles of these characters prove that, the agency- even if fragile-ushers in a new dawn, and as postpositivists say “social actors’ knowledge is conditioned by social structures—the very structures that human agency can transform”.

The African father says, for two hundred and fifty years, I have listened. To the haunting voices... I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have listened to the sounds of an African carnival in Trinidad. In Rio. In New Orleans. On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten. A many-tongued chorus continues to swell. And I hope that amongst these survivors’ voices, I might occasionally hear those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. My daughter. Joyce. All. Hurt but determined. Only if they panic will they break their wrists and ankles against Captain Hamilton’s instruments. A guilty father. Always listening. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. Desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children. Bought 2 strong man-boys and a proud girl. But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved.

The polyphony of voices which Phillips uses in the epilogue to present his vision of diaspora, is worth appreciation. He wished to show the connection between the homelands and memories which blacks have left behind, and their present-day positioning. He says, “I wanted to make an affirmative connection, not a connection based upon exploitation or suffering or misery, but a connection based upon a kind of survival”.<sup>(7)</sup> He shows us the lives which have been shaped by diaspora. These people cannot go back. Their homes are in the diaspora and these have been acquired after a lot of struggles. This struggle lends dignity to their existence and forges a connection between African diasporic communities, who can no longer yearn for an ever-receding ancestral homeland. Phillips creates a black identity that is relational and not confrontational to the white culture and leads the reader toward an understanding of identity in a multicultural society.

It is worth quoting Bénédicte Ledent here who says in “Ambiguous Visions of Home: The Paradoxes of Diasporic Belonging” that, Phillips does not regard the diaspora as a notion to be exploited theoretically, but rather as an empirical and historical reality that needs to be probed without prejudices and from multiple and ever-changing angles. A pragmatic artist, Phillips has always examined the very concrete social and psychological implications of the diasporic for individuals striving first of all to understand their exilic plight, and leaving his readers and critics to derive the more abstract meaning from the predicaments he approaches imaginatively

in his novels.

Crossing the River shows us that the history of blacks is a saga of pain, injustice as well as resilience. Blacks were treated in the most inhumane ways and were denigrated as mere commodities or property of the White master. This pain of denied humanity and snatched relationships have shaped their present identities. The history of slavery and black oppression as well as resistance must be communicated vigorously so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. The vacuum that came into personal identities due to de-linking from own land and people, can be filled through such memories recorded in histories which in turn, will help in the creation of more constructive, rejuvenating, alert, conscious, and conciliatory identities. Through the lives of Nash, Martha, Travis, and Joyce, it becomes clear that “identities can be both real and constructed: how they can be politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other.”<sup>(23)</sup> Whites’ role has to be one of reconciliation and acceptance of blacks as one of them only. The very distinction based on colour needs to be demolished for a more egalitarian and humanist approach to flourish. Rebekah Bartley’s observation concurs with the postpositivist realist approach of the revisionary process to arrive at a better understanding of a said ‘truth’, when she says that “Crossing the River validates and legitimizes a history and a perspective that is non-white, non-traditional, non-European, and non-existent”.<sup>(23)</sup>

The characters acquire their agency, even if feeble or momentary, by understanding their subservient positioning in society and thereby, making efforts to reject or surpass it by acquiring a consciously chosen assertive and confident positionality. Stuart Hall talks about the positioning and creation of identities within the discourses of history and culture: “Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture”.<sup>(4)</sup> Crossing the River proves that the interface of historical and cultural praxis creates these ‘unstable points and each individual’s experience of it and reaction to it is diverse and distinct. For Nash, this instability came vis-à-vis his interaction with Liberia; for Martha, it came in the form of westward-bound pioneers, and the inter-racial blossoming of love between Joyce and Travis introduced the instability. The novel through the experiences of its characters depicts that displacement and belonging are the central grounds of identity formation in the diaspora. The chronicles and discourses produced by these identities, both by individual characters as well as by the writer, are divergent, and therefore open up new avenues of analysis.

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