

CARYL PHILLIPS' "CROSSING THE RIVER": A POSTCOLONIAL READING**Smita Adimani**Research Scholar
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The present paper is an attempt to examine Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* from postcolonial perspective. Caryl Phillips is one of the most reflective international writers, who continuously deals with problems of blacks .Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* is one of the most interesting postcolonial novels ,shortlisted for the Booker Prize that presents evidences of grim reality of the blacks, their shattered families, and struggle for survival . Phillips not only voiced the problems of marginalized but also made a personal crusade for equality through his writings.

As we know, various talented writers have enriched contemporary postcolonial English literature. However, Caryl Phillips' contribution to English fiction is realistic, formal, and thematic. He is one of the few genuinely sensitive and creative writers .He has achieved international status among post-colonial Black British writers who belong to second generation and have opened new subject for British writers. The vexing question of belongings is literally at the heart of Caryl Phillips' writing. Mostly he prefers issues about the legacy of Atlantic slave trade and its consequences for the African Diaspora. He has incessantly writing about rootlessness, disinheritance, racism, and hybridity.

It is fact that no man is free from the impact of social forces and life around him. The environment in which he grows conditions man's character. Similarly, Caryl Phillips was the product of racial discrimination in society. The racial experiences he has explored in his novels are results of his first hand experiences. Therefore, we can trace strong autobiographical element in his writing.

In the same way, another interesting aspect of his work is the handling of historical material about lives of Blacks. Through his fiction, he has given voice to the marginalized that are fighting against inequality and struggling for acceptance in a white society. The bulk of output is very large, sufficiently large to place him in the forefront of the recent black British writers. He won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, for *Crossing The River*.

The intricacy is outcome of his multiple belongings to Africa, Britain, and United States .This sets him to define his own place in white dominated society .Hence vexing question of belonging aroused by exile pervades throughout his works.

The present paper attempts a reading of his novel *Crossing the River* by locating it in the context of literary Atlantic Diaspora .It also tries to examine its concern with vexing question of belonging and curse of slavery

In turn, they are related to Diaspora, which at its core consist the image of a home. According to Baumann:

There is hope nostalgic home. There is hope of return .The home may not be really exist or it may be center of nostalgia may be recently left generation ago. It is a place were we feel welcoming .Bi contain both physical localities and metaphorical symbolizations of belonging .The moving between two settings may be liberating for some at sometimes but for others it is disturbing between's of belonging nowhere. (324)

Similarly, the problems, tackled, in the present novel are universal in time and place through which Phillips presented worldwide class struggle. The struggle between indigenous and host culture is the basis of friction in the novel. Through it, he presents the universal trauma of diaspora as well as the grim reality of racism. He points out the never resolving questions of the displaced people through his characters like Nash, Martha and Travis. It is important to note, here, that Phillips's artistic skill reveals through his delineation of themes that forms a vicious circle. The racism gives rise to the evils of slavery, which in turn results, into displacement. The

displacement results into identity crisis. In this novel, all black characters are caught in this vicious circle. Nash, Martha and Travis all suffering from racism, slavery .All these characters are engulfed by identity crisis, and question of belonging and unbelonging.

Slavery, hybridity and theme of racism are intertwined beautifully in the novel. *Crossing the River* has an epic sweep covering the whole prospect of the traumatic experience of Black people. Caryl Phillips depicts this novel through both type of characters slaves and masters, blacks and whites, victims and victors. Caryl Phillips deals with different diasporans spread throughout the world .He prefer fragmented narrative style to traditional linear one. The selection of fragmented narrative has offered a very perceptive picture of psychologically and spiritually fragmented lives of blacks.

The novel covers the long span of 250 years of the African Diaspora. It portrays story of three black children Nash, Martha and Travis sold to slavery by their father due to the failure of crops. They belong to different time periods and different continents. The individual stories put forth their sufferings. But at base of all there is question of belonging, centuries old nostalgia for a homeland which does not exist. At the end of the novel his characters are poised between two worlds suffering from loneliness.

“A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths / believe my trade for this voyage has reached its conclusion” (1).

This unusual and touching opening of Caryl Phillips ‘novel *Crossing the river* not only reflects the sufferings of characters also gives insight in to the inhuman practice of slave trade in Africa . In prologue, Phillips used ‘a many-tongued chorus, to represent desperate father. From that moment, a “many-tongued chorus”, (1), has haunted the father.

In the first part “Pagan Coast”, there is account of miseries of Nash William, a is a emancipated slave in 19th-century who is sent to Liberia as missionary by his White master Edward Williams to convert the African population. Through letters to his master, Nash depicts the harsh realities of Liberia and asks for help to his but he gets no reply. Nash feels very disappointed and frustrated. However, keeps sending his master letters at last says,

" I fail to see what hurt I ever inflicted upon you that could justify such a cruel abandonment of your past intimate, namely myself in his last letter (60) .

At the beginning, the innocent Nash passionately devoted himself to do Gods work. "Neither climate nor native confrontation, diseases nor hardship of any manner would deflect him from his purpose."(10)

But as time passes due to lack of basic necessities he fails to survive and to adjust the way of life in Africa .Further there is a picture of gradual deviation of devoted missionary and of his continuous compromise with harsh realities that shows how a educated Christian changes into African heathen . Phillips shows how Nash is tormented between American and African belonging and unbelonging. At a time he says.

"Liberia the beautiful land of my forefathers is a place where person of color may enjoy their freedom. It is the home for our race..." (18)

At the end, he mentions that,

"Perhaps you imagine that this Liberia corrupted my person transforming me from good Christian, colored gentleman who left your home into this heathen you barely recognize (61)

On one hand, he shows that he is happy in Liberia and on other hand urging his master to meet in America. Thus, in his own homeland he is treated like a white where he feels like a stranger and fails to assimilate in heathen culture .Where as for America where he was grown up he is a freed slave not accepted by society.

Hybridity is cultural mixture where the despotized meets the host in scene of migration. Bhabha calls it the colonial cultural interface. Thus Nash is a 'cultural hybrid' as he adopts aspects of American culture. He is tormented between the two worlds feels lonely and this isolation takes away his life. Racism is another theme in pagan coast.

Race functions as the most powerful markers of human identity, skin color Black or white has become the privileged marker of races .It is supposed that Blacks are violent ,brutish ,savage ,inferior .As colonialism advanced ,European fears of contamination also increased .One of the reason of sending American blacks to Africa was removing a cause of increasing social stress.

In it Nash mentions belief of black people is

“God had asked them to choose between land and their livestock or books and they had chosen the former.” (32)

On another occasion he speaks about superstition prevailing in them .Thus we can see that some fixed notions that black means relaxed, savage, governed by caprice. White means superior and blacks means inferior are instilled in their mind.

Under transatlantic slavery, Africans were the legal property of others who largely controlled the disposition of their output. This can be seen in the west.

The second narrative mainly deals with theme of slavery and racism. In "West", Martha Randolph is a victim of slavery who later becomes a frontierswoman in the American Wild West. On her way to California, (to meet her daughter) she is abandoned in Denver. She is helped by a kind White woman and is invited to stay at her house. Her story puts forth through her memories of her miserable life, including the scene of being sold like animals by her father, then in auction in which her family gets shattered, where she loses her daughter and husband. Her own misery was so deep that she lost her faith in religion and became indifferent. Secondly when her second husband Chester was killed by white men in her middle age she feels isolated .Martha's story pictures bitter ,inhuman to consequences' of slavery on individual life, her distorted family , how each time she left was lonely to survive. It depicts how she runs away to avoid to stand on an auction block, to avoid to belong to anybody ,to avoid to be renamed again. This curse of slavery affected her life so badly that she dies without fulfilling her last wish to meet her daughter.

“I was free now but it was difficult to tell what difference being free was making to life.” (84)
 When she was on the road at Denver and a tall man passes by her she felt worried that he might split on her but he didn't.” From this we come to know harsh realities of slavery and racism.

The third narrative, James Hamilton is a white English captain depicts his account of selling and buying slaves in his logbook."Crossing the River" is a special one. He is one who bought the three children in 1753. We are shown the detail of his trade of Africans, with his logbook and his to his wife. He is depicted as being inhuman to his crew and the slaves who are regarded as merchandise only. On the other hand, he is ironically depicted as a loving husband at the same time. In this part, he tells his wife about rape of black women on ship but there are no

feelings. He represents a duality of nature, his struggle between his occupation as a slave trade and his Christian values.

In the fourth narrative, “Somewhere in England ‘narrator, Joyce is a 20th-century white English woman. She does not get along well with her mother and the only solution she finds is to get married unfortunately, her husband is selfish and irritating to her. She is left alone during the Second World War when her husband is jailed for black marketing. Then she meets Travis, a black American GI stationed in England. She falls in love with Travis and this gives him some troubles, as the army does not traders. Joyce gives birth to a black child, Greer .As Travis dies she cannot able to raise a black child puts him in orphanage.

In fact, Joyce also belongs to white class but she never mentions about anything about his color or race. According to critic’s it as:

An interesting aspect about their relationship 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 nor does she mention any clue to his blackness. According to Wallace Joyce is “colour-blind” (101) whereas Ledent calls her “prejudice-free” (122).

Same thing can be proved from the other instances as when Joyce and Travis were on the walk people in the village stare at them strangely but they do not speak with her. Further, when they missed a bus they take lift from military officers and then he is badly punished for this. They beat him with their sticks just because they afraid of any incident which may be difficult for both thus Phillips portrays how the people strictly bound to codes of manners and social traditions. They wanted to maintain the position of supreme power over blacks by dominating them .That means they do not want any relations between blacks and whites. Peoples pointing towards Joyce their staring at her, what does all this suggest?

It shows their aggressive and long-established approach towards blacks. Even when Joyce gives birth to a black boy, she is unable to raise him at her own in the white society. Even though the baby has mother he sent to orphanage because of helplessness of Joyce to raise him against hostility of society. Racism is blot on humanity. It is just, an instrument in the hands of white, by which they can subjugate and persecute the blacks. It is important here to think over

some questions raised by Ania Loomba; Are human beings essentially the same or different? Is difference defined primarily by racial attributes? (91) In addition to this we have to contemplate over the following questions: Are these children of god destined to suffer? Is there any end of their suffering?

A number of such questions remained unanswered even in the today's globalised world. The themes of slavery and racism in the novel not only appeal to the heart but also make us to think over it seriously. The readers must feel sympathy for thousands of blacks who even today get humiliation. Number of events show inhuman treatment given to blacks. Racism is like a virus that destroys everything. So it is open-ended debate, compels us to think and to introspect ourselves for some hopeful change. Thus, racism and hybridity are explored in this part.

In the novel author shows three white characters Edward William Hamilton and Joyce in different shades. They are not described thoroughly but to some extent their hypocrisy is revealed.

The novel ends with the voice of an ancestor. Phillips introduces chorus at the end. The end is not clear but hopeful. voices says,

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaves' owners will be able to sit down together at of the brotherhood.”(237)

The voices which are separated from each other but they have common experience of pain and almost instinctive urge to hope against all odds. Thus in this novel author explored souls of individuals. In this way, characters suffer from isolation, which is resulted by uncontrollable situations. There are some gaps which Phillips dropped to be filled by readers. He inspires his readers to think over it. Thus the novel *Crossing the River* is open-ended.

In short, Phillips is the product of his age. Therefore, the present paper embarks on postcolonial perspective that means implication of a new approach to study the different notions. That is to superimpose issues of race, cultural identity, and displacement over the other issues. In short, the present Paper explores and connects the theme of displacement, racism, slavery, and identity crisis in the *Crossing the River*.

It can be noted that Phillips in this novel portrays the suffering and curling grief that follows the destruction of human lives. Besides, it points out the fact that though these displaced

characters try to adjust in alien country, and accepted changing circumstances. Their hearts are longing for their motherlands. This duality results into frustration. There is no return to the diaspora. Overall, these characters echo: there is no place to belong to; there is no one to belong to. They are left alone resulting into a deep feeling of hatred about host country. For them displacement is fate.

It is important here to point out that, Phillips highlights a range of human struggles and tensions in this novel. However, Nash, Martha and Travis all the three characters are suffering from evils in society the situations they face are different. It proves that through his stories he steps forward from particular to general. It gives universality to his work. In short, he has given a new perspective to the universal problems of diaspora and its related issues.

Phillips in his novel *Crossing the River* reveals many approaches into the lives of blacks and presented the problems of assimilation. In fact, he questions an age-old belief, which needs serious social scrutiny and reconsideration. However, he does not offer any perfect solution predicament of blacks but suggests reform.

The picture of the west portrayed in *Crossing the River* proves that problems of class difference are same all over the world. It displays how germs racism and class discrimination plagued minds of people all over the world. Power in the hands of some so called civilized people rules over the millions of unprivileged and exploited for centuries. It questions the existence of humanity. It doubts about the presence of feelings like love, compassion, sympathy, kindness, and affection in the mind of modern man. It raises question if man has converted in machine. By showing the interconnection between the different social and racial groups *Crossing the River* casts light on various diasporic issues like exile, displacement, alienation, multiculturalism. Caryl Phillips in his novel exploited past to present contemporary problems. Though he is dealing with pains and sufferings he gives real picture avoiding melodrama. He deals diaspora with broad vision and presents a hopeful picture for future.

To conclude it can be thought that the present novel of the present study is thought provoking one. It grapples our mind and makes us to think rather to step forward positively. It

can be thoughtfully conceived and appealingly presented ,showing how the issues of emigration , displacement are vibrantly alive in and to the world .

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