

Postcolonial Writings and Transgression of Boundaries: Reading Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* as a Dialogic Text

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Abstract

Although Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* has received considerable critical attention, the focus has been mostly on the issue of diasporic/exilic consciousness in the novel. However, its dialogic strain, the constant, endless intentional and value-laden dialogue into which it enters has not been adequately recognized. This critical gap forms the focus of this essay, whose central thesis is that a close reading of *Crossing the River* will demonstrate the untapped potential of Bakhtin's dialogic theory for interpreting the spirit and the structure of this novel which coalesces genres, geographical spaces, historical events, languages, cultures, philosophies and beliefs to produce a 'communal', many-voiced text that crosses a number of borders and transgresses multiple boundaries. This is in line with Stuart Hall's argument that fictional recreations of history and identity in postcolonial literature often rely on appropriate narrative techniques that can capture and foreground the complexity and enormity of the peoples' experiences. In Hall's words: "The past is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (1996:13). This paper, therefore, examines the strategies employed by Phillips to negotiate the narration of the phenomenon of slavery in his novel, *Crossing the River*.

Introduction

Since slavery has severely created Africa the problem of underdevelopment in all its ramifications, which persist till today, creative writers, including Caryl Phillips, attempt to restore, reconceptualize and reinterpret this phenomenon to address African present issue of underdevelopment. This paper therefore explores how a close reading of Phillips's *Crossing the River* reveals concentric materials, physical and conceptual routes, which link with overlapping and disparate black diasporas signaled by the novelist reliance on cross-cultural dialogues, multi-genres, multi-locales, and multi-nationalities. One central theoretical assumption of the paper is that the multi-voiced chorus of *Crossing the River* is an apt technique for imaginatively capturing the issues of human displacement and dislocation associated with the migratory experience of African peoples. This is in support of Kathie Birat's argument that Phillips's fiction privileges that narration of the "displacement of Africans within the context of the slave trade and the multiple forms of dislocation and fragmentation that have been the consequence of this phenomenon" (2004:195). *Crossing the River* is a landmark in the fictional rendition of the history of slavery and slave trade in Africa, and it offers a unique dialogical intercourse between ages, epochs, genres, cultures, the colonial and postcolonial, modernist and postmodernist. In fact, the novel prioritizes a rethinking of the questions of identity and culture contact

by going beyond the polarities of Self and Other, and it gives an exhilarated sense of alternative possibilities in human interactions. It is also going to be proved that this novel represents, perhaps, the most impressive, provocative and objective statement on the issue of slave trade in Africa.

Based on the foregoing contextual and ideological background of Phillips's fiction, it is revealed that working through a dialogic framework, Phillips, in *Crossing the River*, adroitly yokes the oral and the written, the traditional and the (post)modern, and the East and the West. This is done with a conviction that literature can never be an autonomous activity; the literary, socio-economic and political situation of the African diasporas makes this unavoidably clear. It can be conveniently stated from the outset that Phillips's *Crossing the River* is against univocality and autonomy. Rather, it is polyvocally and multiculturally located. This entails constant interaction between Self and Other. As a dialogic novel, *Crossing the River* encourages a verbal sparring match between author and reader within a carnivalesque atmosphere. It is a unique novel about slavery that allows white slaveholders to have a voice as well. Allesandra Di Maio offers some illuminative comments about the dialogic strain of Phillips's *Crossing the River*:

A complex phenomenon that stretches across time and space, class and gender. The 'crossing' in the title expands and assumes multiple dimensions throughout the narration, becoming at once geographical, historical, individual and racial. But the ultimate crossing takes place in memory, above all in the memory of the symbolic African father that holds all the threads of the narration together. Remembering is a process of re-construction; it is an act of recreation (1998:443).

The novel weaves across genres and regions, collapsing the presumptive structures and running together objects of analysis, which the novelist exploits for the sake of foregrounding multiculturalism and societal complexity. This claim pushes forward a similar one offered by Peter Caws that "the value of alternative cultures and their utility as vehicles for self-identification in the face of an oppressive dominant culture are two of the key elements of multiculturalism" (1995:373). Steven C. Rockefeller (1992:97) makes a similar observation in these words:

The call for recognition of the equal value of different cultures is the expression of a basic and profound universal need for unconditional acceptance. A feeling of such acceptance, including affirmation of one's ethnic particularity as well as one's universally shared potentials is an essential part of a strong sense of identity.

Exploring The Transgression of Boundaries in *Crossing the River*

Since the West Indies is a world that is irreversibly plural, culturally and socially, its writers have to transcend their own culture of origin by avoiding cultural particularity or prejudice, with a view to proposing harmonious coexistence of cultures by a mutual sharing of what is convergent and in mutual respect for what is divergent. Phillips's *Crossing the*

River is, therefore, governed by a profound sense of plurality that serves his vision of the world as a global phenomenon. It vividly offers a better understanding of the concepts of displacement, hybridity and metamorphosis. Phillips has used the novel as a dynamic space where contradictory viewpoints are juxtaposed. This brings to mind Bakhtin's assertion that the novel as a genre flourishes on diversity; it is a unique genre because it is able to embrace, ingest and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel (1981:59). Thus, Phillips successfully subverts received historical documents in his novel in order to portray why the black peoples in the diaspora find themselves in their present pitiable, pathetic predicament of despair and hopelessness. A cosmopolitan writer, Phillips believes in fruitful amalgamation of seemingly antithetical cultures to mimetically signify the ambiguous and polyvalent status of the contemporary age of postmodernism and ever-rising globalism. Caws supports the foregoing claim, by saying that "nobody is going to be at home everywhere. But it is one of the rewards of postmodernity to have many homes, not just one" (195:386). Caws is trying to advocate inter-racial and inter-ethnic cooperations. It is implied in his comment that an affirmation of ethnic particularity weakens one's sense of identity, and over reliance on one's own group can hamper the social development of the individual. In Phillips's *Crossing the River*, there is a dialogue between seemingly antithetical cultures, that is, the culture of the ex-colonizers and those of the ex-colonized; he foregrounds both the virtues and vices of African culture, instead of the popular portrayal of the negative aspects of the culture. This is in line with the postulation of Amilcar Cabral that "any culture contains essential and secondary elements, strengths and weaknesses, virtues, defects, positive and negative aspects, factors for progress or for regression (Quoted from Biodun Jeyifo, 2004:viii).

Phillips also uses *Crossing the River* to explore the various reasons behind the institutionalization of slavery. The Other is used in the novel as a metaphor for black Africans, African Americans, black British, Asians, the Caribbeans, the Jews and other categories of the less privileged. This is with a view to comparing and contrasting the different degrees of racial, social and gender discrimination largely informed by their diasporic status. With this novel, therefore, Phillips has elaborated the history of slavery in Africa that seeks to take the African experience beyond a limited history and to place it within a universal context; that is, a place "where the tributary stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea." (1). Caribbean writers have two alternatives in the narration of a dislocated history and identity. They may view the past as a vista of the disabling theft of language, culture and ethnicity, which has culminated in the assumed radical historylessness of the West Indies. On the other hand, they may view the problem of dislocated history and identity as liberation from history, a freedom from the constraint of traditions whereby West Indian history has uniquely enabled the writer to draw upon any and all forms of literary traditions and experiences by mixing historical epochs, geographical settings, disparate cultures and polyphonic voices (David Richards, 1991:1200). Phillips in *Crossing the River* leans heavily on this latter all-inclusive alternative. Through this novel, Phillips has been able to represent the processes of cultural mixing and (con)fusion to which, under a variety of names – creolization, hybridity, metissage – postcolonial theorists and writers have increasingly turned in order to understand the complexities of cultural identities in today's transnational world. He has been able to imaginatively capture the psychological and personal consequences of power inequities. This is achieved through the

plot of the novel which moves across time by juxtaposing stories of personal displacement from the eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century setting. Consequently, experiences, prejudices, conflicts, genders, classes and races that are featured across time and culture are interconnected.

In the novel, there is a dialogue between transculturality, that is, interconnectedness of multiple cultural elements in the transnationalized world and traditional notions of cultures as monolithic entities. For instance, Phillips's proclivity towards transculturality is shown in "Somewhere in England", which has an intertextual link with the mode of African storytelling. In the main, the narrative has multiple locales. This is the practice in most traditional African oral tales where the dead and the living, the ancestors and their progeny, mingle freely. Thus, it is convenient to claim that "Somewhere in England" provides a perfect example of a hybrid and intertextual prose that reflects the cosmopolitan status of Phillips. It is difficult to connect him to one particular context. Phillips was born in the Caribbean in 1958, but his family migrated to England when he was just an infant. His adult life has also been migratory. He currently teaches in the United States and travels to England and the Caribbean. His multiple affiliations have therefore enabled him to draw upon many literary traditions. It also foregrounds the intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial to convey an understanding of postcolonial existence. This is done by drawing on different sub-genres and literary conventions, including traits of epistolary narration, modernism, realism, historical novel, and postcolonial fiction. For instance, Phillips relies heavily on the convention of epistolary narration in the section titled "The Pagan Coast", where there are four long letters from Nash to his beloved father, Madison Williams. There are also two emotionally-laden letters from James Hamilton to his wife in the "*Crossing the River*" section of the novel. This approach of generic miscegenation in Phillips's fiction validates the postulation of Salman Rushdie, most especially his evocative contention that hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation of the new, and the unexpected combination of human beings is the most effective way to codify the experiences of the Diaspora across the globe (Jaina Sanga, 2001:241). Edward Said also avers that "Cosmopolitan consciousness" is preferred to localized identity. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he argues convincingly for what he calls "overlapping territories and intertwined histories," that is, "integration and connections between the past and the present, between imperializer and imperialized, between culture and imperialism" (1994:72). Likewise, the effort of Phillips in *Crossing the River* is to negotiate a link between histories and territories, and also encourage the unravelling and retrieval of the history of the silenced subaltern.

To Bakhtin (1981), cultural dialogue permits ambiguities or internal contradictions; it expects and requires a simple opposition. He sees cultural dialogue as similar to two people gazing at each other horizontally. However, V.V. Provarkin comments that "the method Bakhtin proposed for studying culture was not visual, but auditory. One cannot just see a culture, one has to be able to hear it." (1997:15). Phillips employs this tenet of dialogism in "The Pagan Coast," most especially in his depiction of the cultural encounter between Edward Williams and 'the natives' in Liberia. Since both cultural groups refuse to engage in phatic communion, they cannot understand each other's ways of life and cultural practices. The following extracts from the text vividly capture the problem of cultural dissonance:

Everywhere he turned, Edward's eyes were assaulted by natives who squatted idly, their bodies resting awkwardly on their foundations, like the infantile shacks. Edward attempted to paint his face with a thinly benevolent smile, but realized that he was ill-equipped to disguise his true feelings of disgust in the midst of this specter of peopled desolation (*Crossing the River*, 69).

The natives stared at him, and watched as the white man's lips formed the words, but no sound was heard. Still, Edward continued to sing his hymn. The natives looked on and wondered what evil spirits had populated this poor man's soul and dragged him down to such a level of abasement. Their hearts began to swell with the pity that one feels for a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose. This strange old white man (my emphasis, 69--70).

Social encounters between individuals who have never met or are unfamiliar with each other are supposed to be initiated by at least small talk in which 'light' conversation is made about topics of general interest or in which personal experiences, preferences, and opinions are shared. The purpose of this small talk is primarily to build rapport and trust among the interlocutors. However, this is not done in the encounter of the two cultures in contact -- Western and African -- represented by Edward and the natives of Liberia. Thus, while Edward sees the Africans as suffering, idle, dirty and despicable beings, they also conceive him as a pitiable sight. The second scene depicts mutual incomprehension which makes interlocution difficult, if not outright impossible. However, Phillips is using the two scenes to recommend mutual respect and constant dialogues among the peoples of the world.

Culture can be experienced, and it can be studied. However, it is more beneficial to do both. One who is born into a particular culture and grows up within its intricacies is in a better position to understand and appreciate it than somebody who just encounters the culture. Nash is unable to adjust to the African cultural practices and cosmos because he has been marooned in an 'alien' locale (Liberia in Africa) from his hitherto social and physical environment (the United States of America). The popular African fable of the Monkey and the Fish can illuminate Nash's ordeal more vividly:

Once upon a time, a monkey and a fish were caught up in a great flood. The monkey, agile and experienced, had the good fortune to scramble up a tree for safety. As he looked down into the raging waters, he saw a fish struggling against the swift current. Filled with a 'humanitarian' desire to help his less fortunate fellow, he reached down and scooped the fish from the water. To the monkey's surprise, the fish was not very grateful for this aid (Gorge Foster, 1962:1).

The monkey here can be seen as a literary cousin of the colonizers. Although the intention of the Monkey is laudable and kind, the decision is highly disastrous for the fish. This centres on the eternal theme of human geography and the interface between humans and the environment. Humanity's long-term welfare is dependent on a fruitful, familiar and resourceful environment. No individual suddenly and easily flourishes when the habitat is new and very different from the known one.

It should also be stressed at this juncture that Dialogic techniques are employed by Phillips in *Crossing the River* to connect cultures and promote hybridizing poetics and politics championed in postcolonial theory. Phillips's *Crossing the River* relies on the tenets of dialogism to express the numerous contradictions and multiple allegiances of which most postcolonial writers are aware. This is even complicated by Phillips's socio-cultural origin -- a West Indian who has lived and worked in the United States, Africa and Britain. Actually, Phillips's life (and work) in some ways has been defined by the water that separates England from the West Indies, North America from Africa. Commenting on the interface between his multicultural/multi-racial identity and his writings, Phillips argues convincingly that:

I hold a British passport and I hold a St. Kitts passport. I see no reason why, for the sake of my idle gesture, I should toss one in the fire. I have them both, and I will use them as I deem fit. I write about both places (1993:593).

Therefore, Phillips is able to chart a new diasporic sensibility, grounded in his Caribbeanness, but also expressive of Britishness. He has gone beyond the obvious thematic unity of displacement and exile. What one finds emphasized in his novel is a web of diversity in the renewed forms he uses to tackle his themes and probe even deeper into them from different angles

It is evident that *Crossing the River* shows an effective and functional interface between form and content, which has a central importance in Bakhtin's dialogic theory. A close reading of the novel reveals varieties of voices and heteroglossic discourses. Six categories of such compositional-stylistic unities are found in the text. These include direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants -- moral, philosophical and scientific statements), stories-within-a-story, inserted literary texts, other inserted semi-literary and non-literary texts (letters, memoirs, diaries, for example), that is, various forms of oral everyday narration, and the stylistically individualized speeches of characters (Bakhtin, 1981:262). Due to this amalgam of polyphonic voices, *Crossing the River* does not have a central point of view but shifting points of view, from one character to another. For instance, the first two narrations in the novel ("The Pagan Coast" and "West") are narrated mostly from the omniscient point of view, whereas "Crossing the River" is narrated from the point of view of a sea captain making entries in his ship's log, and "Somewhere in England" is narrated from the perspective of the diary of a young English woman during world war II. These shifts in points of view appropriately foreground the "many-tongued chorus" "of a common memory" (1) to lend credence to the throes and harrows of blacks in the Diaspora. The six varieties of heteroglossic voices combine to form a structured artistic system. Thus, although Phillips's novel is a combination of styles and narrative

points of view and a diversity of voices, it is artistically organized. It is obvious that the formal impacts of dialogic fiction are replete in *Crossing the River* -- loose structure, many seemingly unconnected incidents, round characterization, plot with multiple social classes, ironic stories and parody. The deployment of the techniques is informed by the fact that it is always an arduous task negotiating a way through varieties of memory -- common, deep, collective, cultural, counter-memory, re-memory, and post-memory -- all linked with diasporic consciousness. Thus, the novel leans heavily on the narration of the complex politics of home(lessness), migration, displacement, deterritorialization and transnationalities. The story has many levels, plots within plots and motives within motives with a view to effectively narrating the complexity and hybridity of the lives of the African diaspora.

The novel is fragmented into three separate sections featuring different narrative voices. There is a dialogic intercourse between characters from a wide variety of historical and cultural setting. It commences with a prologue, followed by great narratives of different eras in the history of the African Diaspora and ends with an epilogue. All these events span more than two hundred and fifty years. The prologue is a narration of the harrowing experience of an African father in eighteenth-century Africa who sold his two sons and his daughter into slavery because of a natural disaster. He laments: "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children" (1). This fracture within the family continues through a common memory for 250 years. "The Pagan Coast," "West" and "Somewhere in England", the three major sections of the novel, dwell on the lives of the sold children in their individual diasporic settings. Each of the narratives is set in a different time and at a different corner of the slave triangle, with a view to depicting the continuing history of displacement for black peoples. "The Pagan Coast" centres on the ordeals of Nash (one of the children sold by the African paterfamilias), a former slave, the property of plantation owner and do-gooder Edward Williams. Nash was repatriated to Africa in 1834 as a Christian missionary. In Liberia, he desperately tries to convert his African brethren, but their adherence to their autochthonous religion is too strong. Actually, Nash is torn by a double sense of belonging and unbelonging, divided between a painful past and an unwelcoming present. He is unable to find a place he can call home. Due to his dual identity, Nash feels as a stranger in his 'ancestral' land. What he experiences in Liberia is a culture shock. Africa does not recognize him as a son, and America does not acknowledge him as a free person. He, therefore, represents a group of blacks that continue to deny their black roots, claiming to be Westerners, imbibing the white man's ways of life which include their speech and clothing habits. They are blacks only in skin. Such people always dogmatically accept the ways of life of the white man, while despising their own history and culture. The reason for this is obvious: the constant show of inferiority, violence, through whipping and killing, dehumanizing treatment and criticism of the white people by the black people has sunk deep into their hearts and mentality, making them hate themselves and their race.

Crossing the River codifies the process of cultural interface in the African diaspora. This is shown through Nash who gradually abandons the Christian tenets and returns to polygamy and Animism. His life in Liberia is a virtuoso performance of "double consciousness" and demonstrates the dilemma of striving to be both African and American. Nash is unable to re-localize his self "by negotiating his own identity in its situatedness in space and time" (Rita Nnodim, 2003:12). In fact, Nash's ordeals in Liberia prove that

modern man is a product of evolutionary symbiosis, a fossil (Kirsten Petersen and Anna Rutherford, 1995:187). One-half of postcolonial man's fossil values is constantly battling the other half. However, Nash's eyes open later to the realities of life. He seems to belong to the group of people who change their ways of lives for the better after subscribing to a wrong and idealistic perception of life. Although he falls, he is still able to stand up later and learn from his previous mistakes in order to achieve higher goals. Bakhtin has once commented that dialogism encourages varieties and conflicts of views that can confer knowledge on the participants in a dialogue. To Bakhtin (1981), the site of consciousness is always dual, as in the case of Nash, who is conscious of his culture through his 'dialogue' with it. For instance, it takes Nash time to undergo a deformation of an already formed identity. He is aware of African culture by coming into contact with it; he now sees the true nature of the culture, which is far much different from European representations of the continent. It is significant to note that the claim of Bakhtin that "there can be no consciousness without a sense of the other" (Bakhtin, 1981:271) is proved right by Nash's ordeals. For instance, in "The Pagan Coast", there is a call for mutual interaction. It can be inferred that Phillips is trying to advise the various peoples and regions of the world to avoid breakdown in communication which prevents Edward from receiving Nash's letters. This communication barrier makes Nash to become disillusioned with the ways of the white man and the notion that Euro-American civilization could work in Africa:

That my faith in you is broken is evident. You, my father, did sow the seed, and it sprouted forth with vigor, but for many years now there has been nobody to tend to it, and being abandoned it has withered away and died. Your work is complete. It only remains for me once more to urge you to remain in your country (63)

Therefore, Phillips, like Edward Said (1994), is recommending overlapping territories and intertwined histories between the colonizer and the colonized, that is, the postcolonial idea of cross-culturality, instead of the opposition between "your country" and "my country" espoused in Nash's letter to Williams.

In fact, *Crossing the River* is against the one-sided cultural assertion of colonialists, who exclude the Other, and offers a counter-discourse to the rhetoric of blame and essentialist ideas of race promoted by the Negritude movement and the Black Power activists of the 1960s. The postcolonial identity suggested in the novel encourages a nexus of multiple identities across time and spaces. Hence, Nash, Martha and Travis, the three children of the guilty African father, who were sold into slavery, possess a common identity, but slavery has ruptured their history and belonging. However, they are fictional representatives of plurality of selves whose experiences leak across the boundaries of race, place, time and gender. In an interview with Davidson, Phillips opined that one of his thematic preoccupations in *Crossing the River* is to "make connection between the African world which was left behind and the diasporan world which people entered once they crossed the water--to make an affirmative connection, not a connection based on suffering or misery, but a connection based upon a kind of survival." (Carol Davidson, 1994:92).

Crossing the River is not a one-sided monologic discourse; this is in line with Bakhtin's thesis that the enduring signifier of the novel genre is heteroglossia. It teems with many

voices that represent both the colonial worldview and the resistance to that dominant ideology; it offers differing perspectives on colonialism and slavery and transgresses multiple boundaries. For instance, the letters of Nash to Edward Williams are inseparable from the former's worldview and that of his people. Nash's messages are replete with varied and opposing beliefs and complex colonial/postcolonial discourses in the twentieth century. Thus, Nash's letters represent the gradual resistance to the general voice in the twentieth-century that preached virtues, domesticity and reason. The contacts between the slave and his ex-owner are seen in terms of co-presence, interaction, understanding and practices within hierarchized systems of dominance. Actually, the letters constitute a dialogic discussion of the notion of Africa as *terra incognita* (from the perspective of Europeans), that is, the negative depictions of Africa in European literature as a mysterious land inhabited by people who practice unspeakable rites, which have been aptly described by Christopher Miller (1985:190) as "empty myths and myths of emptiness. Despite the apparent and much-vaunted end of colonialism, the unstated assumptions on which empire was based linger on, snuffing out visions of an 'other' world without domination, constraining the imaginary of equality and justice.

Having explored the dialogic nature of the first narrative in *Crossing the River*, it is convenient to attempt a close dialogic reading of the second stand-alone vignette in the novel, "West". It is a richly symbolic story of an old escaped slave (Martha), the proud daughter of the African who sold his children into slavery, and who, due to necessity, is abandoned by fellow blacks in a doorway in Denver, Colorado, during a winter buzzard. A dialogic story, "West" straddles the pre- and post-Civil War period (1861 --1864) and the abolition of slavery in the United States (1869). While "The Pagan Coast" dwells on the sociological and spiritual effects of slavery, "West" deals with the psychological damage caused by the breakdown of family, constantly menaced by the selling, hiring and killing of its members. By combining sociological and psychological approaches, Phillips is able to capture the side effects of slavery -- loneliness, bereavement, family disintegration and psychic breakdown. Also, "West" is a quintessential story about slavery and slave trade in Africa because it captures the lives and exploits of Martha, her husband and their daughter sold to different owners when their original master died.

The third narrative, which is the title section of the novel, "Crossing the River", leans upon the sub-genre of proto-historical fiction. It takes the form of a ship's log, dwelling on the journey of the Duke of York, which sets out from Liverpool on August 24, 1752, bound for the coast of Africa to take on a load of slaves for transportation to America. The truncated journal provides a history of slavery and slave trade. Thomas Bonnici provides an illuminative insight into the historical nature of this segment of the novel: "it is a chronicle narrating the steady accumulation of human livestock slowed down by prices and death" (2004:18). This historical strain is used as a weapon to search for connections between biography and history, between individual experience and the transformations of society. Here, Phillips's communicative approach changes toward a keener sensitivity about how the human mind experiences and reacts to historical events. Thus, in *Crossing the River*, Phillips seems to have suggested that the Gold Coast Slave Trade was no particular group's fault. Hence, he traces the origin of the act to the blacks themselves. The original sellers of slaves were black men, though there might be white intermediaries between the various points of sales. Therefore, *Crossing the River* does not depict slave trade as a racial or moral

issue; rather, it is portrayed as a business. It does not offer a one-dimensional narration of slavery; rather, it introduces the reader to relatively underdiscussed issues of multiple complexities of slavery and slave trade in Africa and the ethical complexities faced by slaves, former slaves, and descendants of slaves. Benedicte Ledent sums up the ideological strain of Phillips's narration of slavery by saying that he tries "to fathom and expose its complex mechanisms and so fight the racism it has given rise to (1997:279). In *Crossing the River*, Phillips, as an objective writer, also dwells on the role of internal collaborators, or more appropriately compradors, in the emotionally traumatic experience of slavery. The characterization of the guilty African father who sold "2 strong man-boys and a proud girl" (1) into slavery reveals that both the foreign compradors and the African collaborators are culpable in the act of slavery.

The fourth segment of the novel, "Somewhere in England," like the first section, is a novella. Privileging the voice of a young woman in rural England (Joyce), it focuses on another historical context, World War II. It comments vividly on Joyce, a white English woman who falls in love with an African-American serviceman called Travis (one of the three African children sold into slavery by the father) and the attempts of the duo to search for their roots. However, unlike the stories of his siblings, Travis's story is not told by himself, but by his wife. The temporal setting of the narrative falls between 1936 and 1945, with a brief interlude foreshadowing 1963. However, the spatial setting, most especially the locale, remains unnamed with a view to reflecting the title of the final independent work within the novel ("Somewhere in England"). The narrative also relies on the fundamental features of the modern novel, including fragmentation of settings and achronological plot structure. As with "The Pagan Coast", the action flits back and forth between years rather than proceeding in strict chronological order. The result is that Joyce and Travis's lives are presented as a series of episodes without any chronological plot, and their stories are told in fragments with a view to depicting their plural perspectives and dislocations.

The "Epilogue" centres on the worldwide vision of the African who sold his children into slavery. Although it has some spatial considerations, because of its dialogic nature, it lacks temporal and spatial focus. It coalesces the human experiences of the blacks in Brazil, Santo Domingo, the United States and the West Indies. This segment of the novel also foregrounds African culture, music, and dance. It is used to counter the monolithic master-narratives, closed and homogeneous. This segment of *Crossing the River* is employed to rework and re-imagine some colonial metaphors, that is, the realities of the contemporary world, calling into question issues that emerge from realities -- identity and geographical place, raising important and engaging questions about how we know or think we know about cultural others. The reader comes across a continent pondering the dispersal of its children to many far places over many years. The novel opens and closes with a very brief but highly lyrical narration from the shore of the River, which is actually the Atlantic Ocean. In the opening, the voice ostensibly emanates from an old man who is forced by dire circumstances to sell his children into slavery. In the final section, it is clear that the strong descendants of Africa's children will survive, as long as they do not panic. The end of the novel shows that the characters who "cross the river" are loved. This is a relief to the grieving father. As observed from the stories that make up *Crossing the River*, private and public, past and present, the psychological and the social develop an interstitial cohere and interact peacefully and intimately. This is with a view to deconstructing the

binary divisions through which such spheres of experience are often spatially opposed (Homi Bhabha, 1994:13). Also, the epilogue is narrated in the present tense, unlike the previous sections which are narrated in the past tense. This conflation of the past and the present depicts Africa that is animated by responsiveness to the vicissitudes of a collective experience. One conclusion that can be inferred from the paradoxically fragmented and trans-historical narratives is that black diasporas across the globe have a common ancestry ruptured by slavery.

Also, like a typical African folktale, there is a polyphony of voices where three siblings in different spatial settings take turns to tell their own private stories, and, at the end, they join in a chorus, as it is also done in traditional Greek plays. *Crossing the River* is replete with thematic and technical motifs that are present in African folktales. For instance, the non-linear narrative where the reader comes across different voices (terrestrial beings, celestial beings and subterranean beings, the living, the unborn and the dead), removal of the dominant voice to the margin and the collective voices converging at the centre are akin to the architectonics of African folktales. In fact, the four stories that make up the novel ("The Pagan Coast", "West", "Crossing the River", and "Somewhere in England") are similar to a typical African elegy. The guilty African father resorts to chanting an elegy because soon after he had sold his three children into slavery, "the chorus of a common memory began to haunt" him. It is not an overstatement to say that *Crossing the River* is an elegy of human experience through a series of private narratives that give an overview of years of African diaspora. The voices of Nash's African father, his American father, Nash himself, Martha, James Hamilton, and Joyce reflect Phillip's interest in history, memory and time. According to Benedicte Ledent, "the reassessment of the past is indeed a source of regeneration and identity for the rootless and dismembered peoples of former colonies, even though such (re)construction inevitably involves some suffering," (1997:271). In *Crossing the River*, there is a dialogue between African beliefs, African judicial system, African philosophy, African religions and those of the Western world. Although this novel views one aspect of the African judicial system as an unjust method of administering justice, it still highlights its advantages. For instance, the punishment always meted to suspected witches is subjected to a dialogic examination:

If someone dies suddenly, they are sure that somebody must have bewitched them, and off they will go to the grand devil man of the village who will, in exchange for some small trifle, tell who it was that bewitched the person that died. This person will then be fed some poison in order to dispatch him for his wrongful deed. (31)

The quotation exemplifies a few of the weaknesses of African judicial system, which is replete with unjust and pseudo-legal acts. However, the narrator also dwells on the advantages of the traditional judicial system. For instance, it is still a potent way of getting to the root of the matter. The portrayal of the traditional judicial system in *Crossing the River* shows that it encourages violence and crimes against suspected witches in African states, and it gives disturbing information about the witch-hunts taking place in Africa today, similar to the witch-hunts in Western Europe centuries ago. The foregoing is a dialogic contest between the European past and the African present, a dialogue between

the pre-scientific, low-technology societies, where there are few rational explanations for illness and misfortunes. Crossing the River does not, however, fail to comment on the positive side of this African method of dispensing justice and unearthing the root causes of mysterious events: “This appears to me not an entirely unjust method of administering justice, and one from which we of the so-called civilized world might learn something valuable” (31). This is to reiterate the ideas of cultural relativity and universality.

Moreover, *Crossing the River* dwells on the convergences and divergences in African and Western notions about witches. For instance, in the Yoruba cosmos, witches, E su \exists and Ifa \approx have a lot of influence on human beings. They seem to portion out the human beings among themselves with the consequence that people have to appease them perennially in order to avoid seemingly ubiquitous calamities (T.M.Ilesanmi, 2004:72). Nobody has enough power to combat the attacks of the malevolent forces. People are left with the option of appealing to the higher powers of the ‘O ri \exists sq \exists ’ (deities) to save themselves from the ‘ajogun’ (malevolent forces). The fertility cult in the Yoruba cosmos does not see the witches as nefarious; rather, they are ‘powerful’ women who hold the reins of the world in their hands, controlling everything by their cult power that exposes them to the special knowledge of production and preservation of animal, human and plant life. The witches are at the centre of most Yoruba cults regulating the powers of human beings and thus effecting the balance of power in each community. The witches are also referred to as ‘i ya \approx mi’ (my mother), giving them the honour of ‘dear mothers’. Therefore, while the Euro-American world sees ‘A je \approx δ’ (witches) as wicked people, Africans see them as ambivalent characters who are capable of doing good and evil. They can be divided into two groups, namely “black witches” and “white witches”. We are thus confronted with the reality that the Euro-American philosophy and cosmology cannot capture the African worldview, which has its own philosophizing approach. It is not always easy to get rid of a religion that a people have been accustomed to, and despite all Nash’s efforts, he finds it difficult converting many Africans in Liberia to Christianity. A further testimony to the initial bottlenecks that the European evangelists faced in their attempt to convert African into Christianity is revealed in the portrayal of Liberia as “a country in which fewer than two hundred heathens had been converted in almost twenty years” (7).

Thus, in *Crossing the River*, there is ample evidence of interactions and counter-interactions between ontological beliefs, cultures, philosophies, and religions. This dexterous manipulation of disparate norms and practices confirms the claim made by Hena Maes-Jelinek and Bénédicte Ledent that Phillips is “the most original and versatile among the new Caribbean voices” (2001:171). He depicts religion as a supernatural phenomenon in human societies, with experience far above the physical realms. He seems to be suggesting that where physical senses stop, religion starts. One can deduce from Phillips’s handling of the issue of religious conviction in his novel that religion emphasizes the moral principles dictated by the supra-natural beings -- God, deities or spirits. Also, religion is depicted in the novel as an agent moulding peoples’ conscience much more than law or any other moral instruction can do.

In Bakhtinian scholarship, the open-ended nature of dialogic truth finds English expression in the (somewhat clumsy) word “unfinalizability” (1984:322). Hence, in a dialogic novel, like *Crossing the River*, no human dialogue can ever be ‘finalized.’ Carol Newson explains this issue thus: “Whereas monologic conceptions make it possible to

‘sum up’ a person, a dialogic orientation is aware that persons have never spoken their final word and so remain open and free” (1996:294). Phillips’s novel is not a story that is a cohesive whole. This narrative technique is used to question the traditional European emphasis on the Aristotelian conception of linear narrative; it interrogates fixed sequences in prose narrative, including definite beginnings and endings. Instead of linearity of plot, Phillips’s novel leans on postmodern fragmentation by segmenting the stories that are juxtaposed for thematic effect – that is, it reflects the spatial fragmentation experienced by people of the African Diaspora. It depicts the lives of “People primarily of the African diaspora whose lives have been affected by a heritage of slavery and of migration, both experiences of migration” (Renee Schatteman, 2000:28). Phillips has employed suitable techniques to narrate the socio-historical realities of the African diaspora – the dislocation of people from their families, their homes and from their past. According to him, “the real test of a writer’s ability ... is the degree to which that writer applies himself or herself to the conundrum of form, to the task of imposing a form upon these undisciplined stories” (See: Graham Swift, 1989:100). Therefore, Phillips neither judges, spells out his message, nor provides a tidy conclusion in *Crossing the River*. Rather, the story has an enigmatic, postmodern conclusion: “Nobody Knows My Name. 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” (237). This scene is replete with instances of dreaming, ignorance of identity and tentativeness.

In consonance with the tenets of dialogic fiction, Phillips, in *Crossing the River*, does not present the characters as all good or all evil, and he refuses to judge or condemn even those characters that appear in a highly ambiguous light. For example, the reader of *Crossing the River* is presented with two histories of Hamilton. Initially, he is depicted as a very cold and calculating man, who does his business for the sake of colonialism. However, as the story unfolds, through his log entries and his love letters to his wife, the reader is given another image of Hamilton – his humane virtue, which contrasts with the first impression of him. The following quotations from the novel corroborate this claim:

Thursday 25th March. At daylight saw a longboat on shore. She came aboard at 9 a.m, brought with her 5 slaves, 2 fine boys, and 3 old women whom I instructed them to dispose of. Had a very discouraging account of the state of affairs to Leeward, all about the river being full of an epidemical sickness that is ravaging amongst the slaves. The Britannia, Parson, of London, was obliged to off before he had finished, having buried 25 on the coast... (113-114).

My Dearest,

These last few days have been amongst the most fatiguing I can ever recall. I, therefore, write to you in the hope of making some amends for this misfortune. Those, myself aside, who have experienced pleasant and agreeable evenings in your company, could never imagine the contrast between such sweet times, and the present miserable situation. I am continually assaulted by the

combined noises of slaves and traders, suffocated by heat; and subjected to perpetual talking, the greater part of it to no serious purpose. Last night I managed some two hours of sleep, and I dreamed of you. I saw us walking together, and discoursing on the many things which have occurred since our parting (118).

James Hamilton is thus depicted as a man worthy of love and hatred. Similarly, colonial history is characterized by both positive and negative elements. European colonialists built hospitals and schools and extirpated obnoxious practices such as killing of twins and at the same time exploited human and material resources of their colonies. This recourse to metanarratives in Phillips's novel is to revise history and call into question the idea of the existence of a grand narrative scheme. Peoples, places, histories, languages and poetics are considered dynamically, in relation to each other, rather than as mutually exclusive absolutes. In fact, in his novel, Phillips gives a subtle and innovative re-reading of precursor texts about slavery and slave trade in Africa. Abigail Ward offers an illuminative insight into this feature of Phillips's *Crossing the River*. In her words, "Instead of gesturing towards a literature of recrimination and retribution, Phillips's novel envisages a meeting between black and white people, an acknowledgement and understanding of the past of slavery which rejects a rhetoric of blame" (2007:22).

Another instance of dialogic strategy in *Crossing the River* is the recourse to intertextuality, that is, the relationships between different texts (Julia Kristeva, 1980:23), and between readers and texts. It should be stated that Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality actually derived much from Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and heteroglossia as they function within the space of the novel. Despite its undeniable originality, *Crossing the River* reprises the themes and strategies of few precursor texts. In this novel, Phillips forges a discourse out of disparate textual fragments, polymorphous cultural contexts and circling heteroglossia. To adapt Kristeva's words, in the space of Phillips's novel, "several utterances, taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another." (Kristeva, 1980:36). According to Benedicte Ledent, intertextuality in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and, extensively, *Crossing the River*, is to depict Phillips's unwillingness to participate in a discourse of polarities due to the fact that he is not a chronicler of only one culture. Hence, "the counter-discursive paradigm seems to have lost some of its relevance for migrant writers who, like Phillips, are at crossroads, both inside and outside of several literary traditions" (Ledent, 1996:302). In *The European Tribe*, Phillips acknowledges the inspiration he got from reading Richard Wright's fiction: "The emotional anguish of the hero, Bigger Thomas, the uncompromising muscle of Wright, his deeply felt sense of social indignation, provided not so much a model but a possibility of how I might be able to express the conundrum of my own existence" (Phillips, 1987:7-8). *Crossing the River* is, thus, a literary feast attended by canonical writings from across the globe; it is a skillful weaving of literary traditions, as many disparate texts are joined in a relation of epistemic complicity. For instance, the influence of old and new generations of Caribbean writers is evident in the text. The title of the novel, *Crossing the River*, might have been derived from Edward Brathwaite's (1973) collection of poems, titled *The Arrivants: A New World Trilog*. In "Masks", Brathwaite's persona says:

So crossing the river
And walking the path
We came at last to Kumai (1973:136).

One is not sure whether Phillips consciously chose to borrow the phrase (“Crossing the River”) from Brathwaite’s poem; however, like Braithwaite, who struggles to regain his lost identity, Phillips also appropriates the metaphor of ‘crossing’, the issue with which he grapples; that is, the fractured collective will resulting from a disrupted history of the African slaves, represented by Nash, Martha and Travis, and the irrepressible inner spirit, which lays upon their undeniable burden of understanding their identity and history. From the beginning of the story, Phillips himself confirms the intertextual nature of his text. In the “Acknowledgements,” he admits his reliance on precursor texts:

I have employed many sources in the preparation of this novel, but would like to express my particular obligation to John Newton’s eighteenth-century *Journal of a Slave Trader*, which furnished me with invaluable research material for Part III.

The above statement has parallels in traditional Yoruba oral renditions where the chanter commences his/her chant with ‘*ìṣbaṣ*’ (homage) to his/her bosses, superiors and others who had chanted before him/her. Similarly, in Yoruba hunters’ dirge (‘*Ija=la=’Are=O8de8*’), paying homage to superior bards and chanters is a common practice. The chanter always honours his trainers, superior chanters and professional colleagues, using this formula: “*Orin mi ko=8, orin o8 re=8mi ni*” (Not my song, but my friend’s).

Conclusion

If the popular assumption that the narrative voice is synonymous with the voice of the novelist, then the optimistic vision of the African father at the end of the narration is that of Phillips too. He is undoubtedly the individual person lurking behind the four stories making up *Crossing the River*. This novel has thus offered the reader a debate, a dialogue and a persuasive explanation of the problem of hybridity and heterogeneity by exploring disparate and different perspectives, a variety of voices and a multiplicity of points of view, including ones that are even outside the immediate experience of human purview. This approach allows Phillips the subversive space within which to challenge, reverse and revise the status quo by giving voice to the marginalized and the voiceless. It is also a form of narrative disguise, which permits the novelist to take on the masks of different faces, different bodies and different voices. The clash of civilization and shocking world events demand a new form of novelistic discourse. This is why Phillips’s *Crossing the River*, through the convention of the dialogism, has been able to demonstrate the inadequacies of binary concepts such as West versus East, First World versus Third World, and High versus Low cultures. Rather, there is an intertwining of cultural, religious and linguistic identities. In this novel, therefore, peoples, places, histories, languages and poetics are considered dynamically, in relation to each other, rather than as mutually exclusive absolutes.

Therefore, *Crossing the River*, through its dialogic nature, calls for cross-fertilization between constituent elements. The novelist relies on various cultural elements from different continents to achieve his objective of capturing the socio-political, cultural and mental dispersion of the African Diaspora. For instance, unlike many precursor

postcolonial texts, *Crossing the River* disrupts the self-other binary by positing the other as another subject rather than the object. Henry Louis Gates offers an illuminative insight into the type of global society envisioned by Phillips in *Crossing the River*: “the society we have made simply won’t survive without the values of tolerance and cultural tolerance comes to nothing without cultural understanding” (1995:205). Phillips is able to render a slice of African history very objectively, holistically and realistically. He has been able to negotiate the narration of the historical issue of slavery through a new approach which has no precedence in the growing corpus of African historical narrations.

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