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Caryl Phillips's Portrayal of the Varied Relationships between Black and White People in *Crossing the River*

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Abstract

The present article will focus on Caryl Phillips's novel, *Crossing the River* (1993). Apart from the prologue and epilogue, there are four major sections in the novel, "The Pagan Coast", "West", "Crossing the River", and "Somewhere in England". In each of these sections, black and white characters have been talked about. In "The Pagan Coast", the story of Edward Williams and his former slave, Nash Williams, is told. In "West", there is the story of Martha, a woman of colour who suffers greatly in her life. In "Crossing the River", there are journal entries and letters of James Hamilton, a slave trader. And in "Somewhere in England", the story of a woman named Joyce is told. Sometimes the lives of black and white characters are brought together. They meet under different circumstances. Sometimes their relationship or connection is marked by cruelty, sometime affection and sympathy, sometime respect, and sometime even love. In the present article, an attempt will be made to examine some of the relationships sketched by Phillips between different types of black and white characters. The article will contain discussion on each of the major sections. There will be an attempt, in the article, to see how Phillips brings black and white people together at different times, in different places, in different situations.

Keywords: blacks, whites, relationships, impact

Crossing the River is one of Caryl Phillips's most important works in fiction till date. Originally published in 1993, the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize that year, and won the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1994. Alongside the prologue and epilogue, the novel has four main sections: "The Pagan Coast", "West", "Crossing the River", and "Somewhere in England". The dispersed black diaspora is one of Phillips's main concerns in the novel. In his fiction, Phillips has, on different occasions, depicted white and black characters whose lives intersect, one receiving some kind of effect from the other.

In *Crossing the River* too, blacks and whites have been shown side by side, under different circumstances, at different times, and in different places. At times, the meeting of the blacks and whites have impacted their lives. In the present article, some instances from the novel will be examined, where blacks and whites are brought together.

In each of the four main sections of the novel, black-white meetings and some form of relationship are projected. In "The Pagan Coast", Nash Williams, a former slave belonging to Edward Williams, now emancipated, is sent to Liberia. It was expected of him that he will settle down there and work as a missionary among the Africans. But with time, changes come over Nash, and later he dies in Africa. In "West", Martha Randolph, a former slave, journeys towards California with a group of pioneers. The third major section, "Crossing the River" chronicles journal entries and letters of James Hamilton, Captain of "a slaving ship" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 105). And in "Somewhere in England", a white Englishwoman falls in love with a black American soldier, Travis. Of course, the novel contains many more things than this bare outline.

Phillips is a master of hinting at connections and sketching relationships. Abigail Ward writes, ". . . *Crossing the River* traces the unexpected connections between people, centuries, countries and histories made possible because of the transatlantic slave trade" (Ward 46). In *Crossing the River*, black-white relationships are projected in varied colours.

Although the sections titled "West" and "Crossing the River" are shorter in length than "The Pagan Coast" and "Somewhere in England", they are not of less importance. As the novel opens, an African father's voice is heard. Because of financial crisis, he has sold his children—"two boys and a girl" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 1). It seems that Nash, Martha, and Travis are his children, but the great differences among the times of their stories makes readers question whether the man can actually be the father of the said characters. In a literal sense, the character of the African father cannot be one human being. Phillips writes, "For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 1).

"West" is about the experiences of Martha Randolph. She was one of the slaves on a plantation in Virginia. She had a husband, Lucas, and a daughter, Eliza Mae. When their master dies, his nephew becomes the new master. He ". . . has no interest in plantation life" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 76), and arranges for everything to be sold, including the slaves. Martha's family is broken. The three of them are bought by three different buyers. Martha is bought by Mr Eugene Hoffman. Mr Hoffman and his wife sense that Martha is strongly attached to Eliza Mae, and ". . . so they had bundled Martha into their wagon and left quickly" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 79). "Once they had passed out of sight, the woman offered Martha a lace handkerchief, which Martha ignored" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 79). Martha's gesture bespeaks the rejection of offer of comfort after a devastating loss.

Martha is taken to the Hoffmans' home in Kansas. "In this Kansas, Martha sometimes heard voices. Perhaps there was a God. Perhaps not" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 79). She is taken to a "young circuit rider named Wilson" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 79), an evangelist. He tries to instil Christianity in Martha, but fails. Later, when Martha is informed by Mr Hoffman that they will leave Kansas and move to California and that Martha will be sold, she leaves their house at night. She goes to Dodge, gets married to a man named Chester, but some years later, he is killed. In Dodge, Martha had met a woman named Lucy, who loved her deeply. After Chester's death, Lucy and Martha move to Leavenworth to "establish a laundry" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 85). Lucy falls in love with a man and leaves for San Francisco with

him. Martha is happy for her. Lucy leaves, but wishes Martha to come to San Francisco. "Lucy had left behind a letter, not so much inviting Martha to come out and join her and her future husband in San Francisco, but begging her to do so" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 87-88). Martha meets a man who is about to journey to California "with a group of colored pioneers" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 87). She joins them. Alongside Lucy's proposal, Martha also thinks about the possibility that in California, she may be reunited with her daughter, Eliza Mae, from whom she was separated many years ago.

Although Martha joins the pioneers, she cannot keep up with them for the entire journey. Her age and physical condition make it impossible for her to continue her journey with the others. She is taken off the main route, to Denver, and left at Main Street. A white woman finds her in the extreme cold, and offers her a shelter for the night. Various feelings come over Martha. The woman's gesture may be somewhat friendly, but several of Martha's experiences with the white people have left an indelible mark on her mind, and her feelings are complex:

> 'I have a small cabin where you can stay the night.' . . . . Perhaps this woman had bought her daughter? . . . . 'Can you get up?' The woman stretched out her gloved hand and Martha stared hard at it. . . . This hand could no more lead her back to her daughter than it could lead Martha back to her own youthful self. A small cabin. This woman was offering her some place with a roof, and maybe even a little heating. . . . After countless years of journeying, the hand was both insult and salvation, but the woman was not to know this. . . . Martha uncurled her fingers and set them against the woman's hide-bound hand. The woman felt neither warm nor cold. . . . She squeezed. The woman's hand squeezed back. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 74-75)

Martha dies in the cabin. And after the woman returns to her in the morning and finds her dead, she ". . . wondered who or what this woman was. They would have to choose a name for her if she was going to receive a Christian burial" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 94). Martha suffered greatly during her life on account of the cruelty of the whites. In Denver, the white woman treats her kindly, but she dies not long after meeting her. Martha's first master too may not have been a very bad man. "Master would never have sold any of us" (Philips, *Crossing the River* 76). Black-white relationships are not monochromatic in Phillips.

The third major section of the novel, "Crossing the River" comprises journal entries and letters of a slave trader, James Hamilton, captain of the *Duke of York*, a ship which started its journey for Africa from Liverpool. Phillips writes about the slave trade in both fiction and non-fiction. "The English first began to trade with Africa in 1553, when goods were exchanged for gold, ivory and other native materials. However, some twenty years later the trade turned its attention to the more profitable cargo of human beings" (Phillips, *Atlantic Sound* 40). Towards the beginning of "Crossing the River", there is a list of names of the crew of the *Duke of York*. The journal entries are about different matters like certain details of the journey, the weather, slaves bought, diseases afflicting blacks and whites, etc. Interspersed with the journal entries are letters from Hamilton to his wife. His vocation as a slave trader and his strict attitude contrast with his professed feelings of great love for his wife. While his journal entries are mostly brief and devoid of ornamental language, his letters to his wife are characterised by elaborateness of expression and flowery language, at times.

The fact that human beings were often treated like material goods in the slave trade is evident from Hamilton's journal entries. One can take a look at a random instance from the novel: ". . . I went on board Mr Sharp's shallop to Whiteman's Bay to view some slaves. Was

shown 10, but bought none. Lame, old, or blind" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 103). Phillips uses deft satire in projecting Hamilton's deep desire to live peacefully with his wife and future children (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 110), while all the time keeping readers aware that Hamilton shares responsibility for breaking up many African families. Part of his writing about the death of Mr Foster, his Second Mate on the ship, hints at insensitivity: "This afternoon departed this life my Second Mate, Francis Foster, after sustaining the most violent fever. I am afraid his death will retard our trade, for he is very diligent, and always gained a great influence upon the natives. It stands fortunate that our ship is almost slaved" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 117).

Phillips's sketch of James Hamilton and the blacks is important. Hamilton is an agent of their *crossing the river*, or the ocean. To the captured blacks, he is almost a stern symbol of uncertainty as to their future. He decides upon the kind of punishment of those who misbehave—whether black or white. The section dealing with Hamilton is extremely significant—depicting the pain, the misery of victims of the slave trade. Phillips's objective portrayal of a man engaged in a heinous trade and at the same time feeling great love and tenderness for his wife is quite remarkable.

One of the most complex black-white connections in the novel is sketched in the section, "The Pagan Coast". Edward Williams inherited his father's estate and slaves (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 13). But he did not like the system of slavery. He encouraged his slaves to learn how to read and write. One of them, Nash Williams, became a devout Christian. He was a disciplined, hard-working man. Edward saw it fit to send Nash to Liberia ". . . under the auspices of the American Colonization Society" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 7) The Society tried to ". . . repatriate former slaves on the west coast of Africa. . . . America would be removing a cause of increasing social stress, and Africa would be civilized by the return of her descendants, who were now blessed with rational Christian minds" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 8-9). But some years after reaching Liberia, Nash ". . . had disappeared from the known world" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 7).

Nash was very enthusiastic about his new life in Africa. He reaches Africa. He tries to establish and run a school. In his letter to Edward, he writes, "I am truly now a pioneer of sorts. I am striving to do all the good I can amongst these natives, . . ." (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 23). In his letters, he shares many details of his new life, but he does not receive many letters from his former master. Nor does he receive assistance in the form of certain items that he requires and requests for. The great contrast between Edward's previous kindness towards and affection for him and his present aloofness hurts Nash very much. In reality, Edward did not have the opportunity to read Nash's letters as they were destroyed by Amelia, Edward's wife. A letter written by Edward to Nash was not sent to him because Amelia found it.

After the death of Amelia, Edward receives Nash's message in which he lets him know that ". . . he had no desire ever to hear again from his former master, and informing him that his own communications would now cease" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 8). Edward sends Madison Williams, another of his former slaves then living in Africa to ". . . secure news of Nash's whereabouts and, if possible, his general state of health" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 8). Madison cannot find Nash. A deeply worried Edward sets out for Africa. Experiencing severe illness, he finally reaches Liberia, and comes to know about Nash's death. Madison gives him this news. Edward is deeply saddened. Later, Edward expresses his desire to Madison to go to the place where Nash lived. Going there, he is struck by the squalor of the place. Phillips writes,

> Madison took the lead and ushered Edward forward and into the unkempt filth of the place. Everywhere he turned,

> Edward's eyes were assaulted by natives who squatted idly, their bodies resting awkwardly on their foundations, like their infantile shacks. Edward . . . realized that he was ill-equipped to disguise his true feelings of disgust in the midst of this specter of peopled desolation. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 69)

Edward feels that he has been "abandoned" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 69). He ". . . drew deeply of the foul air" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 69), and tries to sing a hymn. But though he sings, people around him cannot hear any sound. The natives feel pity for him. The relationship between Edward and Nash is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Edward showed great benevolence towards Nash in the past. On the other, although Amelia tried hard to ensure that her husband and Nash did not communicate with each other, Edward's attitude towards Nash too became somewhat aloof. In a letter, which was not sent because of Amelia's intervention, Edward writes, "Our whole experiment depends greatly upon your success. Your resolve may be firm, but we are all flesh and blood" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 11). The use of the word "experiment" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 11) is somewhat disturbing as one may question whether sending human beings to some place and exposing their lives to great unpredictability can be right. Abigail Ward mentions "implied sexual relationship" (Ward 51) between Edward and Nash.

The fourth major section of the novel, "Somewhere in England" is about a white Englishwoman named Joyce. She is married to Len, who runs a store. Len is an abusive man. Joyce is projected as somewhat different from people around her. She views things somewhat differently from others. She loves to read books, is not very good at talking to people. Sometimes, she says things that others find unusual. During the Second World War, Joyce's husband is imprisoned for ". . . trading in the so-called 'black market'" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 198). several American soldiers are posted to their village. Joyce falls in love with one of them—a man of colour named Travis. Travis too becomes close to her. When Joyce's husband is released from the prison, he treats her very badly because of her relationship with the American GI, Travis. Joyce becomes pregnant with Travis's child, and after the divorce with her husband, marries Travis. However, before the end of the War, Travis dies in Italy, and does not get to see his son, Greer, who is placed ". . . into the care of the County Council as an orphan" (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 223). Several years later, a grown-up Greer visits Joyce, who is now married to another man and has children with him.

In the sketch of the relationship between Joyce and Travis, Phillips shows how people can come together irrespective of difference of race. Travis accepts Joyce wholeheartedly. And Joyce too, who cannot always express herself properly in front of people, finds security, dignity, and peace in her relationship with Travis. Travis appreciates her for who she is. Their relationship may have ended because of Travis's untimely death, but the love, warmth, and respect that they gave each other are remarkable. Abigail Ward notes, ". . . the ending of *Crossing the River* implies hope for the future in the character of Greer. As the child of Joyce and Travis, and the result of their relationship and love, he is a positive outcome of this meeting between black and white cultures" (Ward 58).

Crossing the River is a great work in the context of sketches of black and white characters and their meetings and relationships. It is interesting to note than Phillips's great range of important characters includes the white Joyce. This hints at Phillip's wide approach. He depicts Joyce's problems, her pain, and does not remain committed to telling the stories of black characters only. He tells stories where blacks and whites are projected in different situations, and treat one another in different ways. And

often their meeting and relationship leave an impact on their lives.

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