



Middle Passage: Discrepancy of Liberation and Circumscription in Caryl Phillips' Novel *Crossing the River*

Dr. Anchal Chandak

E-mail- anchalmaheshwari01@gmail.com

Date of Submission: 29-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 09-10-2024

Abstract:

Transatlantic slavery and its reverberation on the lives of its sufferers and its executioner are some prominent thinking affairs of the post-colonial studies. Transatlantic slavery unhesitatingly provokes the barbaric treatment of the Europeans on the African coasts. The painful voyages brought by the Africans throughout the Atlantic recognized as Middle Passage. In the middle passage, human beings were treated like 'commodities' or 'things' and it became one of the most treacherous systems of slave treatment under positive thinking. Although the issues of Middle Passage could not be arisen without the active co-operation of Africans, it necessitates one to examine their responsibility. The cognizance of this responsibility leads them into a state between liberation and circumscription. Atlantic slavery was willingly accepted by several slaves for enjoying freedom. They were only technically free but mentally, they were still in the trap of white culture that refused to assimilate them into their culture. It created great havoc for the slaves as they found themselves in a great complexity to deal in this plural Caribbean society. Caryl Phillips has introduced the theme of this transatlantic slavery in his fifth novel *Crossing the River*. Caryl Phillips has portrayed this theme of the slave trade in his many works but particularly in *Crossing the River*, he sketches the abandoning parent searching for his children. In the novel, Phillips has explored the predicament of three siblings during and after the middle passage. This paper is an attempt to reach these fewer thought affairs of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Keywords: Slave Trade, Slavery, Middle Passage, Transatlantic.

The issues of middle passage or border crossing are very flammable in recent years and at the core of the debate in the post-colonial literature. Several post-colonial and cultural critics such as Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Gaston Kelman and Adrun Appa have explored the

issues of exile and migration including the less observed issue of middle passage which is considered an essential part of the Atlantic slave trade.

The dreadfulness of middle passage and slavery is expressed in all works of Caryl Phillips, particularly his fifth novel *Crossing the River* appears with the issues of middle passage, which ultimately turns into diasporic concern. Several characters of Phillips present the notions of return migration including the key issue of black identity. Phillips states, "Race is scientifically a matter of a few physical characteristics that bear no relationship to intelligence or behavior" (*A New World Order* 16). In his novel *Crossing the River*, characters usually stray from one institution to another to seek out a secure identity and shelter.

Phillips has woven the structure of the novel in four chapters including a proper epilogue and prologue- 'Pagan Cost', 'West', 'Crossing the River' and 'Somewhere in the England'. For tracing the critical circumstances of the characters, Phillips has introduced the epistolary technique in the first chapter. Further, Phillips puts the third chapter in the form of a journal and the fourth chapter is written in the form of a diary. In short, Phillips has used a number of techniques for building a unique and effective novel. The story moves between past and present that makes the novel quite difficult for grasping its whole sense but this procedure proves to be a landmark in the history of novel-writing that creates suspense and excitement in the mind of readers.

The novel starts with an epilogue in which a father cries due to the negotiation of his three loving children in a slave fair. The beginning phrase of the novel indicates the melancholy of a father, "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary path" (1).

The first chapter, 'Pagan Cost' narrates the story of Nash who is one of the three selling children. The readers find Nash on a journey to Liberia for promoting Christianity, told by his



former master. His former slave owner, with whom Nash has a parental relationship, promises him to provide the required goods and types of equipment for fulfilling this purpose and for his survival. The notion of higher respect and love is revealed towards his former master by Nash as he states, "I bid you adieu and do remain your most sincere and affectionate son until death" (22). Nash enjoys his journey to Liberia as a reward and does not think about the consequences of this forced migration. He takes it positively, "Being chosen for colonization was regarded by most slaves and their masters as reward for faithful service" (9). In the beginning, Nash regards himself lucky and cherishes a wrong assumption of being free from the clutches of slavery, as he remains unknown about the unknown reality behind this so-called freedom. During the middle passage, slaves are told that now they are free to reside in the world, as they want. However, they experience the reality when they are sent into the sale market. After some time, Nash cogitates about the veracity of this vindictive negotiation and he writes to his former slave owner, Edward:

Two months past I paid a visit to Monrovia to try to force the hand of that scoundrel who clings to what is rightfully mine. There I encountered others of a similar mind Mr. Gray, unchristian in their behavior and vulgar in their demeanor, whose only visible occupation seemed to be to prey upon poor unfortunate creatures such as myself. (26)

Nash always remains in a rummage of satisfaction, which he never finds in his destiny due to the slavery or continuous migration. He always finds himself puzzled in a fractured identity. He states, "All that I now wish for is enough to give me comfort and some small happiness. (25) The pronouncement of Nash's arrival to his fatherland is taken by the American colonial society whose principal aim is as stated, "Africa would be civilized by the return of her descendants, who were now blessed with rational Christian minds" (9). Nash consigns a description of the surroundings of Liberia, which is adjudged as a sympathetic or gratifying accommodation for Blacks. Liberia is an abode where blacks can construct their identity but Nash brings to light the heartfelt predicament of Liberia by rationalizing that the work is more substantial and people are treated like 'commodities' or 'things' which visualized the horror-struck consequences of the middle passage. In this context, Nash claims, "But invariably this means that the poor, unskilled people who come from America have no chance to make a living, for the natives do all the work" (35).

The farewell message of the sire proves accurate in the life of Nash, which reflects a permanent dispersed situation, "Broken-off, like limbs from a tree" (2). Edward also desires to see Nash from the core of his heart but he gets himself indulged in the middle passage. Despite bearing a lot of troubles during the middle passage, his dream of a reunion with Nash remains discontented. 'Sinking' is a word that expresses the loss of a number of lives during the middle passage, which eventuated in the decampment of the countless Africans from their families and shifted overboard with every next tide. These unmentioned consequences or trepidation of middle passage are described by Phillips in his works. Phillips states in *The Atlantic Sound*, "Those who perished at sea either by their own hand, or through disease, or by being simply tossed alive in the depths" (32). The repugnance of the middle passage can be found in *A New World Order*, "Malnourishment, beatings exposure to contagious diseases, and many other deprivations of an unimaginable nature" (183). The exile of Nash begins from the African coast then he bears the malnourishment of the middle passage after accepting himself as a slave in America. On his fatherland, he wanders through such places as Liberia, Monrovia and Sierra Leone as ordered by his white owners for fulfilling their aim of spreading Christianity.

The letters of Nash to his owner reminds Phillips' third novel *Higher Ground* in which Rudi writes letters to his family during the confinement as a slave. Like the call of Nash to his master Edward, Rudi's call to his family members, friend and even to the higher authority of the freedom movement becomes useless and ultimately, they both submit themselves before the jaw of slavery. Through these characters, Phillips penetratingly points out that once someone has been convoluted in slavery, he can not achieve freedom again.

The second chapter, 'West' narrates the story of Martha, the second child who has forcefully been involved in the middle passage for bearing its consequences after being apart from the homely affection. Martha's destiny takes her to the extreme level of maltreatment by losing her fatherland, father, brothers, little daughter and husband. Martha decides to go on a number of travelling in order to meet her daughter but she meets death instead of her daughter. As a slave, Martha roams on several places among Denver's "thick snow" (94), Kansas, Africa, Atlantic, Virginia Colorado the Rockies and the Missouri. Despite having a family, she survives in loneliness, "Martha Randolph. Squatting like a filthy bag of bones. Watching the snow. Don't know



nobody in this part. Barely recognizing herself” (75). Moreover, Martha’s seclusion and her state of solitude can be found in these words of Phillips, “In this Kansas, Martha sometimes heard voices. Perhaps there was a God. Perhaps not. She found herself assaulted by loneliness, and drifting into middle age without a family. Sometimes she recognized. Some she did not” (79).

Because of the middle passage, Martha isolates herself from her child and sells her to an auctioneer. This crucial behavior is narrated by Phillips, which arose the goose bumps of readers when they come across the dispersed Eliza Mae, the daughter of Martha:

Then the auctioneer slaps his gavel against a block of wood. I fall to my knees and take Eliza Mae in my arms. I did not suckle this child at the breast, nor did I cradle her in my arms and shower her with what love I have, to see her taken away from me. As the auctioneer begins to bellow, I look into Eliza Mae’s face. He is calling the date, the place, the time. Master would never have sold any of us. I tell to this my horrified child. (76).

In the context of Martha’s loneliness Abid Larbi Labidi states, “Neither the alteration of place nor the drift of time has brought a cure to Martha’s “loneliness” and “despair.” Her “despair” results from her interminable wandering and tragic loss of family” (56).

Martha’s heart fails when she migrates forcefully by her owners in the shadow of her better future, “We are going to California, but we shall have to sell you back across the river in that we can make this journey. Martha’s heart becomes like a stone. No. We shall do all that we can to ensure that you are rewarded with good Christian owners” (80).

Indeed, Martha crosses her life as a ‘commodity’ that can be re-stationed from one place to another without thinking about her feelings or identity. Even, she deliberately accepts her services as a slave in order to look for her daughter. She forces the slave owner in California to keep herself as a cook for them, “You just tell your people that you have done found a cook . . . My daughter. The energy of youth once more stirred within her. I know I’m going to find my child in California.” (89) In the quest of her daughter, Martha tolerates all evil treatments and meets her tragic end instead of her daughter.

The third chapter ‘Crossing the River’ on which the novel is titled, describes the arrival of numerous slaves and their problematic predicament through a journal of James Hamilton. In this journal, readers also find the complete elaboration of the three children’s middle passage. Throughout the

middle passage, slaves are called by the numbers as they don’t have their name by which people can recognize them. No matter how much the owner demeans the slaves, the matter is congested in an uncomplicated mode as stated by Phillips, “George Robinson seduced a woman slave big with child, and lay with her in view of the whole quarter deck. I suspense this has not been the first affair of the kind on board. Her number is 72” (115).

The novel concludes with the fourth chapter, ‘Somewhere in the England’ which narrates the life of Travis, a black soldier in the American army, through the mouth of Joyce, a white woman. The story of Travis, as his name suggests traversal, roams between the eighteenth century slavery days and the era of Second World War along with the moves among contrasting worlds such as Africa, the Atlantic, America, and Europe. From the opening of the chapter, readers can clearly get that Joyce is not a part of the small and local community or civilization. She is completely reasonable unlike the other people of her community and her friendly behavior establishes a different identity among the Blacks. She feels amused when she hears some pleasant words from Travis about her nature, “I guess you don’t act like them in some ways. Can’t say how exactly, but just different. Inside I was smiling. That was just what I wanted to hear” (163). Several critics called Joyce with the tag, ‘colour-blind’ which gives her a unique identification. She doesn’t stand by Len when he gets arrested for dealing on the black market. On the contrary, she stands by Travis and it resulted in her separation from her community. Wendy Webster writes in *Imagining Home: Gender, ‘Race’ and National Identity*, “The concept of “miscegenation” – widely used in race discourse in the 1950’s- 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” (48). Just like the statement of Webster, the army officer warns Joyce - “It’s not that we don’t want our men to mix with you village girls, it’s not that at all. It’s just that we don’t want any incidents” (206). The relationship of Joyce and Travis is not accepted in the United States due to the different laws and the stink of slavery can be felt in their relationship. In the duration of the world war era, the enmity does not remain confined only to Joyce or the American service members but evacuated children shifted to the village are also begrudged in it. Len asserts, “They can bloody well go back where they come from” (144). These words clearly indicate the predicament of Blacks in the latter half of the twentieth century. The description



of the children in a slave trade given by Joyce also asserts the real condition of Blacks, "Before us stood a dozen frightened children, the farmers eyeing the husky lads, the girls and scrawny boys close to tears" (144).

Nash, Martha and Travis meet death after bearing a lot of negativities in the life on several places without any identity but one can see the beam of hope in the son of Travis, Greer, who is a positive product of the relationship of Travis and Joyce. The arrival of Greer in 1963 into Joyce's house indicates an optimistic view for the future but it does not mean the reunion of a family that expresses his come back to the 'home'. Like the characters of other novels, the characters of *Crossing the River* fail to find their home in their migrated life. Joyce reacts on the arrival of Greer, "Come in, come in. he stepped by me, dipping a shoulder as he did so in order that we didn't have to touch . . . I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that" (131-132). In short, the issues of 'home' and 'belonging' crop up in the course of the novel, even the arrival of Greer is not a positive sign towards the family.

To wind up, this paper is an attempt to render the issues of middle passage in which the consolation of liberal life is provided to the slaves but in reality, they have to face something much crucial. For the slaves, it becomes too obscure to analyze or recognize the discrepancy of liberty and circumscription due to this false consolation. In the novel, the father of children waits for them for a long time but he gets only disappointment, "For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices. Singing: Mercy, Mercy Me (236). Further, he undoubtedly states in the context of his children's arrival, "There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return" (2). Once the jaw of slavery, middle passage or diaspora catches the Blacks voluntary or involuntary, they swirl in this resentful and horrifying system under the shadow of awesome life but ultimately they meet to their awful climax.

Bibliography

- [1]. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. 1995.
- [2]. ---. *Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge. 2007.
- [3]. Labidi, Abid Larbi. *Broken-off Like Limbs from a Tree: Fractured Identity in Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River* (Advances in Language and Literary Studies). Australia: August 2006.

- [4]. Phillips, Caryl. *Crossing the River*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993.
- [5]. ---. *A New World Order*. New York: Vintage International Original, 2002.
- [6]. ---. *The Atlantic Sound*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- [7]. Rushdie, Salman. *Minority Literatures in a Multi-cultural Society. Dispalced Persons*. Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1988.
- [8]. Walvin, J. *A Short History of Slavery*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt.Ltd, 2007, Print.
- [9]. Webster, Wendy. *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity*. London: Routledge, 1998.