

## **Piecing the Puzzle of the “Shameful Intercourse”: How Polyphony Serves Healing in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River***

**Brahimi Sarra**

University of Badji Mokhtar Annaba, Algeria  
Faculty of Letters, Social and Human Sciences  
Department of English

**Maoui Hocine**

University of Badji Mokhtar Annaba, Algeria  
Faculty of Letters, Social and Human Sciences  
Department of English

### **Abstract:**

This article explores the polyphony as a narrative strategy in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* 1993 and how this polyphony serves the healing process the author engages in through his revision of history that thematizes black slavery as a key episode in black modern history. Phillips, the Kittitian-British author, interweaves a variety of narrative voices of both black and white characters in an attempt to provide a thorough scrutiny and a deep diagnosis of a traumatic past that contains the underlining fundamentals of present racial issues and identity dilemmas that black communities suffer from in both the United States and Britain. This study is primarily focused on deconstructing and reconstructing Phillips’s portrayal of what he calls “the shameful intercourse” between the slave trader and the African father. The aim of this analysis is to uncover the author’s polyphonic strategy that equally voices both the “white” and the “black”, “the oppressor” and “the oppressed”. This rather experimental study allows us to understand how polyphony is used to serve reconciliation and healing.

*Keywords:* diaspora, healing, polyphony, slavery, trauma

**Cite as:** Brahimi, S., & Maoui, H. (2018). Piecing the Puzzle of the “Shameful Intercourse”: How Polyphony Serves Healing in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 2 (2).

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol2no2.15>

## Introduction

This study explores polyphony as a narrative strategy that is more than a structural element but also a healing device in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993). The black British writer who affiliates himself with Black Atlanticism digs so deep in the black diaspora past to explore slavery not only as a main thematic concern but also as believed to be the origin from which stems the dilemmas of black minorities in both the US and Britain. Aware of the Euro-American plot to bury the history of slavery by a biased historiography, the author engages in a process of history revision that aims at elevating the black voices from the footnotes of mainstream narratives to tell their stories as believed to be inherited across generations and stored in the black collective memory. Phillips's narrative strategy advances black voices but not in an exclusionary way, i.e., the author strives to equally voice white characters in an attempt to reach a more holistic perspective that encompasses narratives from both camps. This article aims at analysing the narrative strategy in order to prove that the use of such multiplicity of voices serves the author's quest for healing the wounds of the black intergenerational trauma as believed to be the outcome of slavery and diaspora.

Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) is a revisionist historical novel that covers a wide timeline that extends from 1750's to 1963. The story sheds the light on one of the most tragic eras in human history; African slavery and diaspora when people were deported, sold, and bought in the most atrocious conditions. The author highlights the major role of European imperialism in the creation, implementation, and practice of slavery as a significant pillar in the imperial system under which the black individual was dehumanized and reduced to a half man half animal creature. The novel is divided into four parts, “The Pagan Coast”, “The West”, “Crossing the River”, and “Somewhere in England”. Each part represents a chapter in African American history from the heydays of slave trade in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the intervention of the US military forces in Europe during the Second World War and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Though set around historical dates and events, the parts in the novel do not follow a chronological order as chronology is interrupted by the slave trader's account in the third part under the same title of the literary work. Even the narrative in each part is fragmented as the characters keep going back and forth in their accounts making the reader feel as if taken in a journey inside human memories to relive their experiences as stored in the most disordered way.

Nash, Martha, and Travis, the three black protagonists, belong to different African American generations for each one represents a significant chapter in the history of the whole community. They are the pivots around which the story revolves. Edward Williams, James Hamilton, and Joyce are the white characters whose lives intersect with those of the African diasporans. They represent the author's belief that they constitute the white victims of the cruel imperial system and those who are dragged into the imperialistic plot to enslave the other human race, and who are injected with false unfounded conceptions and assumptions that created the binaries of black/white, dark/light, savagery/civilisation, and good/evil. The author does not only

voice the subaltern, but he rather provides a set of multi-coloured narratives, of both black and white characters, so that everyone has his/her fair share of telling his/her story in a profound quest for truth that is more complex than reversing timeworn binaries. He provides a broader scope that includes all voices as an attempt to unveil the different layers of a historical tragedy that shrouds the past and still haunts the present and the future of hundreds of generations.

Slavery is a main theme in Phillip’s *Crossing the River*. It is considered as the origin of African diaspora in Europe and the US. Slavery, as a system, existed since the beginning of time. Ancient Egypt enslaved the Jews; the Greeks and the Romans enslaved captives from their colonies in Africa, Asia, and Europe. This means that, in ancient times, it was not limited to a particular race. It was the outcome of wars as loots where the number and the racial variety of slaves signified the dominance of a certain super power over the rest of the world. In the same context, Ashcroft et al, in their *Postcolonial key concepts* (2007), state that “although the institution of slavery has existed since classical times and has occurred in many forms in different societies, it was of particular significance in the formation of many post-colonial societies in Africa and the Caribbean” (p. 194-195). In other word, black slavery, which is limited to a particular race, is a peculiar case since it diverted the course of African and Caribbean history and shaped, and still shaping, millions of lives through five centuries. The European transatlantic slave trade started in the 16th century marking the beginning of four centuries era of African diaspora. The deportation of black slaves across the Atlantic is known in history as the Middle Passage which was:

So called because it formed the central section of the euphemistically termed, triangular trade, whereby goods were bought from Europe to exchange for people at factories [on the African coast; then]... [o]n arrival in the Americas, slaves were sold and products such as indigo and sugar were transported back to Europe.... (p. 195)

The triangular trade stands for the Atlantic commercial line that linked the three continents, Europe, Africa, and America. This trade was based on two main exchanges. The first took place in Africa with trading goods, like farming utensils, weapons, cloths, drinks, etc. brought from Europe on board slave ships, for captured slaves. The second, in the Americas, was based on selling the slaves in auctions for the highest bidder in exchange for sugar, cotton, tobacco, and other precious agricultural products.

Ashcroft et al distinguish between the early forms of slavery and the European modern model. The early forms allowed some slaves considerable freedom and chance for social mobility that offered a potential integration in the metropolitan society. However, the European model of institutionalised slavery was established in the economic system as an important indispensable component that constituted the prime source of labour force. They assert that, “The European institutionalization of commercial slavery in the late sixteenth century offered colonizing powers a seemingly endless source of plantation labour, exploited by an ideology of absolute possession in which Africans became objects of European exchange.” ( p. 195)

In addition to the economic side, slavery “was the logical extension... of the desire to construct Europe’s cultures as “civilized” in contrast to the native, the cannibal, and the savage.” (p. 195). At that time, the European conception of slavery transgressed the commercial significance to bear other cultural connotations that later would create the Manichean binaries of centre/periphery, white/black, civilised/primitive, civilisation/darkness, superior/inferior, and many other conflicting concepts that attributed all what is good to the white race as opposed to evil to the black race. Consequently, this binarism extended geographically to create a new world map that divided the world according to Eurocentric prejudices. Phillips (2006) captures this division through his character Edward, the 19th century slave owner:

He [Edward] spread before himself a map of the unknown world, and stared at the inelegant shape of Africa, which stood like a dark, immovable shadow between his own beloved America and the exotic spectacle of India and the countries and islands of the Orient. (P.13)

This assumptive world map reflects the imperialistic racial, separatist, and condescending perception of the rest of the world (the periphery) in contrast with the West (the centre). This map has been dominating the literary scene for centuries as it established a discursive dominance of the colonial literary texts that were devoted to sustain the white metropolitan supremacy by exclusively voicing the “civilised” and marginalizing the “savage” “other”. It also reveals the depth of the cultural damage caused by such assumptions that divided people and places according to cultural differences and power relations of colonizer/colonized.

This twist that characterized the notion of modern slavery created what Ashcroft et al describe as “ the peculiarly destructive modern form of commercial, chattel slavery in which all rights and all human values were set aside and from which only a few could ever hope to achieve full manumission (legal freedom).” (p.196)

Aware of the outcomes of this destructive modern form of slavery, and himself suffering from the intergenerational trauma caused by it, Phillips traces back the history of slavery from its origins. In his *Crossing the River*, he travels back to the heydays of slave trade in the mid-18th century. Then, he carries on his journey in the 19th century during the creation of Liberia, and then the Reconstruction Era in the wake of the American Civil War. This timeline that covers almost two centuries of the most important eras in the history of slavery provides a thorough investigation of a multilayered past that needs to be told by a variety of voices focusing, primarily, on the silenced and oppressed who has been yoked to the margin of mainstream history and literature for centuries. These voices represent the cultures of the three shores of the first triangular trade: Europe, Africa, and America. Such multi-coloured tissue of narratives reveals the author’s belief that the consequences of slavery affect both blacks and whites.

The novel’s amalgamation of voices allows it to be categorised as polyphonic *par excellence*. Di Maio, in her *Diasporan Voices in Caryl Phillips’s Crossing the River* (2000), argues that, “*Crossing the River* remains essentially an African polyphonic novel, because even white voices are structurally incorporated in the oral tale of the ancestral African father” (p. 369)

Lodge (1960), defines the polyphonic novel as coined by the acclaimed Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin as, “a variety of conflicting ideological positions..... given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice.” (p. 86). In other word, a polyphonic novel is one which integrates an amalgamation of voices that belong, and so represent, various conflicting ideologies, backgrounds, and even cultures within the same structure that enables them to contradict, and at the same time, dialogue freely and unconditionally away from authoritative dominance or guidance.

According to Bakhtin, the novel is, by definition, not monopolized by one linear dominant voice. In his *Dialogic Imagination* (1981), he defines a novel as:

A diversity of social speech types ..... and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized....[hence, it] orchestrates all its themes the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions (pp. 262-263).

Interestingly, in her *Introducing Bakhtin*, Sue Vice (1997) reads Bakhtin’s polyphony as related to the “characters and narrators [who] are known by their voices, rather than any other features, within the text and it is the way in which these voices are arranged that determines whether or not a work is polyphonic.” (p. 03) She then argues that Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky as:

His central example [in which] character and narrator exist on the same plane the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal right to speak [results in proving that] the polyphonic novel is a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central. (p. 03)

Phillips comprehends the need for democracy to reach a wholesome understanding of a painful past eclipsed by a biased British mainstream historiography; a past, in his own words, “that has stained British society but which has only been scratched at” (Jaggi, 2008, p. 27). He manages to create an equation between memory and history as he craftily weaves his fictitious plot inside historical events.

*Crossing the River* opens with the narrative of an anonymous African father who is forced by nature to sell his three kids. His lamentation, “A desperate foolishness, the crops failed, I sold my children” (Phillips, 2006, p.1) resounds as a diasporic hymn all along the novel. The genesis of a human tragedy echoes in these three lines to initiate centuries of misery, loss, pain, and deep trauma. The father’s narrative is interrupted by James Hamilton’s voice, the slave trader who is the protagonist of the third segment of the novel. Both narrators tell the story of the “shameful intercourse” that diverts the destiny of three helpless kids. The lamenting father symbolizes Africa that mourns its children as it watches them swallowed by the vast ocean towards a dark destination of slavery and diaspora. They are deported to be sold and bought like cattle or merchandise. The

scene depicts the deracination of three helpless children who would carry the intergenerational trauma as scars that cut deep inside the psyches of African descendants. Nash, Martha, and Travis are the victims who are dispersed in the world through history.

In the prologue, Hamilton’s voice, in italics, intermingles with the mournful father’s. He recounts:

... Returned across the bar with the yawl, and prayed a while in the factory chapel.....Stood beneath the white-washed of the factor, waiting for the yawl to return and carry me back to the bar.....Approached by a white fellow.....Bought 2 strong man-boys and a proud girl.... Why? I believe my trade for this voyage has reached its conclusion (Phillips, 2006, p. 01)

Though told by a white character who is supposed, according to mainstream literature, to symbolise truth, rationality, and authority, this narrative alone is incomplete. It provides only half of what happens, since not all the parts of the “shameful intercourse” participate in the narrative as they participate in the action. Plainly, Phillips challenges the mainstream discourse monopoly by not only voicing the long silenced character, but also making him fill in the gaps left by the white character’s narrative.

In the same passage, if we read the African father’s version, alone, we will have the other half; the one that represents the powerless father who is consumed by regret and sense of guilt:

Desperate foolishness. The Crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths, until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with crabs and gulls....I watched as they huddled together and stared up at the fort, above which flew a foreign flag.... In the distance stood the ship into whose keep I would soon condemn them. The man and his company were waiting to once again cross the bar. We watched a while. And then approached... Three children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims in all directions to meet the sea.... I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. A shameful intercourse. I could feel their eyes upon me wondering.... I turned and journeyed back along the same weary paths.... soon after the chorus of common memory began to haunt me (Phillips, 2006, p. 01)

Like Hamilton’s narrative, the African father’s sounds incomplete as it tells only one side of the event. Being the helpless does not justify a one sided narrative and the suppression of the other one. Phillips interweaves both voices in one narrative to reach a whole presentation. When their voices intermingle, the presentation of the event is more coherent and credible. If we take the whole narrative with intertwined voices, we will notice that the scene of “the shameful intercourse” is constructed in a way similar to piecing a puzzle:

I watched as they huddled together and stared up at the fort, above which flew a foreign flag. *Stood beneath the white-washed of the factor, waiting for the yawl to return and carry me back to the bar.* In the distance stood the ship into whose keep I would soon condemn them. The man and his company were waiting to once again cross the bar. We watched a

while. And then approached. *Approached by a white fellow*. Three children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims in all directions to meet the sea. *Bought 2 strong man-boys and a proud girl*. I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. A shameful intercourse. I could feel their eyes upon me wondering. *Why?* I turned and journeyed back along the same weary paths. *I believe my trade for this voyage r has reached its conclusion*. And soon after the chorus of common memory began to haunt me. (Phillips, 2006, p. 01)

The father and the trader are two human beings; one is a seller the other is a buyer. The father is the oppressed who sells his children to survive. The trader, the buyer, is the white man who has been the subject of a brain washing process established by the colonial system. Both the broken-hearted father and the coldblooded trader who compose the narrative of the “shameful intercourse” are “wondering. *Why?*” This question is where their dilemmas intersect. The African father is plagued by guilt because he feels his compliance. His helplessness does not spare him the agony of culpability. Hamilton who performs a prayer before taking part in a human tragedy shares, as it is shown in the third segment of the novel, his father’s belief “that it was folly to try and yoke together these opposites [slavery and the Christian faith] in one breast” (p. 119). He reaches this conclusion in spite of the colonial efforts “to rationalize such an indefensible commercial exploitation and oppression, on a mass scale, of millions of humans.” (Ashcroft et al, 2007, 195). British imperialism strived, by all means, to justify slave trade under what is called in the novel “the commercial detachment” (Phillips, 2006, p. 119). This pretext means casting away any human emotions of sympathy and compassion while dealing with helpless human lives as any other material goods. It succeeds in developing a twisted logic but fails to achieve a psychological balance between this logic and the Christian faith that preaches:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16-17 New King James Version)

It also teaches, in the Golden Rule, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12). Any sensible man like Hamilton or his father would grasp this contradiction and end up like the former secretly wondering “why” while showing belief in “commercial detachment” (Phillips, 2006, p.119). , or like the later cultivating “ a passionate hatred.... towards the poor creatures in his care” (Phillips, 2006, p.119). Both father and son suffer from a psychological fracture.

Hamilton and the African father have their reasons to wonder “why?” This does not make the victim less oppressed, or the victimizer less oppressing. It only presents things as they are in their full proportioned picture for understanding that “why” that has been haunting both blacks and whites for centuries. The poor three human merchandises Nash, Martha, and Travis, “huddled together” under “the foreign flag”, are the voices that tell their stories as the heirs of the slave trade legacy that shapes their past, present, and future. They are the three diasporans who represent many

facets of black diaspora that is believed to be the legitimate offspring of slavery and the illegitimate heir of the European imperial culture.

Phillips interweaves the voices of the African father and James Hamilton because he argues that “we should think not of separate black and white accounts of the past, but of a connected – yet fragmentary – narrative of slavery which interlaces all these histories.” (Ward, 2011, p. 47). Telling the story from different perspectives is what makes the novel polyphonic. This structural polyphony has what Di Maio (2000) describes as a “redemptive function” (p. 370). She argues that relying on storytelling, which is “not only an individual act, but also, and indeed especially, a collective one,” is closely linked to “the survival of the community [that] is relative to the plurality of its voices”. (p. 370)

The survival of black diaspora inheritors relies on healing the wounds of the past. The evils of the transatlantic slave trade, the middle passage, plantation life, and diaspora have been breeding an intergenerational trauma that has since been carving the black individual and community in the US and Britain. According to Phillips, “one shouldn’t feel a guilt for one’s history, and one shouldn’t feel ashamed of one’s history, one should just take responsibility for it.” (qtd in Ledent, 2002, p. 108) Therefore, assuming responsibility to revise, reread, and understand history with an open view that encompasses all voices is one way towards healing this intergenerational trauma.

### Conclusion

Caryl Phillips views slavery as a historical tragedy that was not “just black people, it was white people too. It was [also] their history” (Jaggi, 2008, p. 26). He describes it as a “myriad of stories” (p. 27) where white and black lives intersect. The author’s revisionist historical novel does not alter events, divert the course of history, or provide a panacea for five centuries old intergenerational trauma. It is rather a story of a multiplicity of stories that aims, through storytelling, at opening the deep wounds in order to face the pain and shame of the past. Hence, listening to all voices is crucial to achieve understanding that is the first step towards healing. This article shows, through analysing the preface of Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* 1993, that the novel’s polyphony is key for reconciliation as it involves various narratives regardless of roles of victim or victimizer in the tragic past.

### About the Authors:

**Brahimi Sarra** received her first bachelor's degree in communication studies in 2007 from the University of Badji Mokhtar Annaba, Algeria, then, her bachelor's and master degrees in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Civilisation from the same university in 2012, and 2014 respectively. Now, she is a third year doctorate student in Anglo-Saxon literature, Badji Mokhtar University, after she passed the 2015 national doctorate context held in Annaba as head of the list. She is currently a high school teacher in Saint Augustine Secondary School in Annaba, Algeria.

**Prof. Maoui Hocine:** Department of English, Faculty of Letters, Social and Human Sciences, University of Badji Mokhtar Annaba, Algeria

**References:**

- Ashcroft, B. Griffiths, G., Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. M., & Holquist, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Di Maio, A. (2000). Diasporan Voices in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*. In H. Wylie and B. Lindfors. *Multiculturalism & Hybridity in African Literatures* (pp 367-399). Asmara: Africa World Press.
- Jaggi, M. (2008). *Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi*. *Wasafiri*, 10(20), 25-29.
- Ledent, B. (2002). *Caryl Phillips*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Lodge, D. (1990). *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge.
- Phillips, C. (2006). *Crossing the River*. London: Vintage.
- Vice, S. (1997). *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ward, A. (2011). *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D’Aguiar*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.