

Psychological Disorientation and Protocols of Textuality: Diagnosing the Narrative Strategies in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River*

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Postcolonial studies today seek to understand the colonial experiences of individuals in a wider horizon of social, political, psychological and cultural operations. The recent critical understanding on the psychological experiences of individuals caught in various colonial moments has contributed new insights into colonial oppression and trauma. Consequently, exploring human psyche trapped under the various oppressive structures of colonialism has been one of the key concerns with today's literary writers. Black British writer Caryl Phillips, in his fictional works, investigates the specific psychological fragmentations and its operational arenas in individuals caught in dehumanizing colonial experiences. Born in St. Kitts in the West Indies in 1958 and brought to England at the age of 12 weeks, Phillips personally encountered the psychological vexations of a migrant. Phillips grew up in Leeds in England and was educated at Oxford University. As a prolific writer, he is credited with ten novels, a number of essays, plays, screenplays, travel books, anthologies, radio and television dramas, and documentaries. As a distinguished writer, he has received numerous prestigious awards. Though known as a Black British writer in literary circles, interestingly he is also variedly labeled as a writer of English literature, Black literature, African-American literature, Caribbean literature, Women's Literature and so on (Eckstein, 2001: 33-34). At present working at Yale University in the US, he explores newer realms of his aesthetic consciousness as well as writes about the twenty-first century 'homeless' migrant.

The thematic concerns of Phillips are the psychological impacts of trauma and pain incurred upon the individual as a result of postcolonial displacement and the ensuing quest for re-union and belonging. Having experienced the anguish of being uprooted and the problems related to identity and belonging in England, his fictional works often attempt to re-imagine and recapture the psychological anguish and distress historically experienced by African descendents and Jews in the similar experiences of migration and diaspora. To render such psychological disruption of his protagonists, Phillips appropriates suitable writing strategies. Form is a matter that concerns him profoundly, and the psychological disruption of his protagonists must be carried over into the general structure of the text. Phillips states, "it seems to me that the real test of a writer's ability is the degree to which that writer applies him or herself to the conundrum of form, to the task of imposing a form upon these

undisciplined stories” (Swift 15). The empathetic relationship that Phillips holds with his psychologically disrupted characters permits him to tell their stories in a fitting manner. In an interview, Phillips affirms his commitment to form: “it hasn’t seemed right to write a novel about people whose lives are fractured and ruptured without trying to reflect some of that fracture and rupture in the narrative” (Schatteman 56). But in writing his novels, Phillips does not anticipate the structurality of the text, rather it moves along with his writing. He says, “I’m never sure; I don’t plot out what the structural framework is going to be exactly. I start off always thinking I’m writing something which has Aristotelian unities, and as I’m writing it begins to move in different ways” (Clingman 108). The present study aims at discovering to what extent the textual strategies employed in two of his significant novels *Higher Ground* (1989) and *Crossing the River* (1993) function as an indication of the fragmented psyche of the protagonists.

Phillips’s engagement with the themes of psychological disruption and disintegration of blacks and Jews begins by retrieving the history that has been obliterated by the dominant European discourse. This forgetfulness about the marginalized compels him to reinstate the individual at the center stage of his historical-fictional world; therefore, the characters matter a lot to him. In an interview he says: “To me individuals are ultimately much more complicated than historical forces or historical events....Those individuals who are washed ashore and find themselves marooned in a very strange place by history are often the people that interest me the most” (Schatteman 55). Phillips starts writing his fiction by encouraging his characters to take centre stage and allows them to live with him for a while until they start speaking. Essentially, for him, at the heart of the novel is the character. Obviously, the position of Phillips as a writer is curiously intriguing in the actual act of writing. He seems to hide behind the characters and let them have their “own” voices. This gesture of placing the voices of his protagonists at the forefront is significant as their voices have been undermined and excluded by history. He notes, “I always think to myself, this character is speaking to me, because she, Joyce, or he Rudy, has actually trusted their story to me. And if I’ve got to that stage, that level of trust, then I’ll start to write” (Clingman, 114). His narrative style has a therapeutic function as it provides an avenue for the muffled voices of psychologically damaged people in history. In an interview with Louise Yelin, he comments when asked about his positions in the novels, “I am not present, the characters are totally in the fore, I’m invisible. I’m able to submit to the drive of the characters in the fictional world...I hide behind the characters and let them have the issues” (Yelin 51). This hiding behind the characters enables Phillips to enter into their consciousness and there he finds new narrative voices. He recollects his earlier interest in the interior narratives or the unconscious of the human mind.

I realized that the novels I was interested in were those which had a very close narrative, a very interior narrative, and a narrative which had deeply to do with the unconscious, and took you very close to the person. So when I started to write, not only was I a bit more familiar with that form, but I think the people I was writing about were the type who would only be able to express themselves properly in that form. (Clingman 115)

Obviously, the technical influence of Faulkner and Conrad are noticeable in Phillips' writings. In an interview he shares,

“the type of writers that I read then and the type of writers that I return to now are, for want of better term, the engineers, people like Faulkner and Marquez, Twain and Conrad....These are not always people I want to read for pleasure, but I read them to try to understand how to move a story, how to get four wheels on narrative and get it moving....Coetzee is probably the last writer of pure fiction who surprised me with how he positions himself as a writer... .” (Rabalais 174-75)

Phillips attempts to draw the significance of the act of diaspora for the individuals who are caught in the dehumanizing structures of slavery and the Holocaust especially in his *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River*. Phillips's *Higher Ground* contains three stories of different individuals who are psychologically fragmented. The novel opens with an epigraph citing a prayer: “Lord, plant my feet on higher ground”, an evocation for a safe haven and sanctuary from the engulfing floodwaters or unfathomable ocean after the disruption. Though each section of the novel suggests this fragmentation, through crisscrossing the different centuries, continents, and characters, they are all unified by this common motif of individual lives shattered by the floodwaters of human cruelty. All the protagonists in the novel are somehow displaced, geographically, institutionally, socially or/and psychologically. The novel also closes on a Jewish liturgical note, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our god, the Lord is one.” Thus, by fitting these two prayers from both black and Jewish traditions respectively at the beginning and at the end, the entire narrative appears to propose a passionate longing for a unification that brings together the scattered and disseminated. “Heartland,” the first section in *Higher Ground*, is a story of a captured African slave who becomes collaborator for the white slave traders. The unnamed protagonist collaborates with a cruel slave trader named Price and helps him purchase an African girl who is the daughter of the headman of a local village. Later on, the protagonist saves this young woman from

abuse and humiliation by trying to possess her. But in an attempt to protect the woman both he and the girl are shackled and shipped off to distant American shores. The second story, "Cargo Rap," is situated in 1960s and tells the story of a young Southern black man Rudy who is condemned to solitary confinement for allegedly attempting to steal forty dollars. "Higher Ground," the last of the novel's three parts, deals with the story of a Polish Jewish refugee Irina/Irene. She was sent to England by her parents at the age of eighteen to escape the Nazi persecution and thus remains haunted by memories of her family, whom she seems to have lost to the Holocaust.

Though *Higher Ground* consists of three clearly separate and distinctively self-contained stories, the subtitle *A Novel in Three Parts* enables the reader to see that all the three stories are interlinked thematically and stylistically. Ledent observes:

Although the three stories are written in completely different styles matching the divergent personalities of the protagonists and their backgrounds, they also echo each other emotionally and linguistically, so that the book taken as a whole resembles an intricate web woven between these three tormented souls who are all 'trying to survive a journey.'
(2005)

All three stories evoke the psychological havoc that colonial conditions have created within the individual. The isolation and fragmentation of their lives are evoked at a structural level by having the characters tell their stories in three separate and fragmented parts. Phillips, by delineating these three stories separately, intends to portray the isolation and loneliness that each one suffers at the hands of slavery and the Holocaust. At the same time, however, he invites the reader to situate the three sections collectively and to discover the parallelism running through the lives of the individual protagonists. According to Ledent, "Though these stories make sense in isolation and seem at first to have little in common, their full meaning emerges when read as parts of a single narrative with a dense web of interconnections" (56). The linear and chronological narrative is neatly replaced by the crisscrossing of multiple spatial and temporal dimensions. Phillips begins his narrative at a time when the slave trade was slowing dying out in the late seventeenth-century on the African West Coast, and he then moves forward to the American South of the 1960s in the second section, back again to the pre- Second World War period to tell the tale of Polish Jewish girl in the third section. Walters observes, "Many of Phillips's novels enact a restless traveling back and forth across the Atlantic and across centuries as he places before us local stories that complicate a global understanding of diaspora" (111).

The psychological distress of the collaborator stems from his isolation from the community he belongs to and the sense of guilt and shame emerging from collaborating with the white slavers. He is both loathed by the British and the African people he betrays and therefore, he suffers from a double sense of alienation and fragmentation. "I am despised by my own for my treachery. This is surely the worst tragedy that can befall a man; but I am a survivor" (Phillips, 1989: 57). The first person narration of the collaborator provides a space for him to expose his psychological disorder in a sincere and authentic manner. His narration falls often within the parameters of confessional mode where his consciousness keeps him awake to tell the distressing story of his betrayal and isolation. Phillips comments: "the confessional mode seems to me to suggest, first of all, a deep necessity to speak, a deep necessity to communicate, which is born of a hurt, a displacement, a sense of exclusion" (Clingman 114). Justifying his choice of first-person narrative, Phillips states, "It was a way of breaking out of what was becoming, to me, the straightjacket of the third person....I am interested in history, in memory, in time, and in the failure of these three things. It seems to me, at this stage anyhow, that the first person gives me an intimate flexibility which I can't find in the third person" (Swift 15-16). The sense of psychological disintegration experienced by the protagonist is amplified by his dwelling in an isolated fort where he passively resigns himself to its deadly atmosphere. "Within the confines of the fort my position is secure, if low and often unbearable. Now I find it difficult to conceive of a life either before or after this place" (Phillips, 1989:19). The gloominess and sense of fatality enveloping this fort is accurately captured by Phillips' narrative style. The collaborator's use of present tense makes the narrative vivid, as if emerging directly from his consciousness, which makes a prism through which one views his tormented psyche. He makes a link between the past and present thereby juxtaposing the physical and psychological experiences of the African slaves and the sufferings of the present generation.

Naming has been another technical approach that heightens the effect of psychological disruption and the overall arresting atmosphere of the story. The protagonist of this section does not bear a name though the first-person narrative imparts an air of authenticity to his psychological suffering. Significantly, non-naming explicates the facelessness of the protagonist among his own folk and the erosion of identity that the protagonist experiences. His sense of being both in the larger part of history and in the discontinuity with history, at the same time, is rendered through his namelessness. "My present has finally fractured; the past has fled over the horizon and out of sight" (Phillips, 1989: 60). He becomes one of the millions of black slaves caught in the forgotten history of Europe. Neither does he reveal his name nor is he called by name by anyone of his people or the white slavers. According to Ledent, "The anonymity of the narrator further typifies the absence of genealogy of the anonymous millions who were deprived of family, language, culture, and name when deported to the New World and whose tragic history is re-enacted in 'Heartland' through the exceptional experience

of one individual” (58). The constant use of ‘I’ in the narrative emphasizes the desire of the protagonist to reassert his lost identity, but the calling of ‘you’ by the white slaver and people of his community distances him both physically and psychologically. Another character that deserves attention here is Price, the white slaver. It is “a name that bespeaks his mercantile approach to relations with the African population” (59). The coldness and depravity of his character is intensified, symbolically, by his name ‘Price’, which resonates with qualities associated with being materialistic and inhuman. Indeed the character Price embodies human cruelty and oppression.

The second section of the novel, “Cargo Rap,” moves forward to the late 1960s from the late seventeenth-century African West Coast to tell the story of a young Southern black man named Rudy. His solitary confinement is due to his attempt to steal forty dollars. While the narrative style in “Heartland” is the first-person, “Cargo Rap” uses the epistolary form. There is a series of letters between January 1967 and August 1968 to various family members, explaining his prison experiences and registering his intellectual and ideological perspectives. What he experiences in prison is both physical and psychological torture. Because of the cruel treatment at prison and animated by his own personal study, Rudy becomes a persuasive and passionate defender of Black Power in the prison. The name “Rudy” immediately echoes ‘rudeness’ or offensiveness. Ledent says that the name “...unmistakably evokes the word ‘rudie’, or rude boy, a neologism of Caribbean origin. ... It is also interesting to note in passing that ‘Rudy’ was the name of one of Malcolm X’s sidekicks when he was a burglar, the young man’s name matching his reputation of petty criminal. (58).

Ledent finds an echo of “Heartland” in “Cargo Rap”. She says that Rudy’s detention bears upon “Heartland” in multiple ways. By concentrating on the existential and physical suffering of one imprisoned individual, it retrospectively casts a more compassionate, if cruder, light on the understated atrocities of the first story (64). Both of them experience physical and psychological pain and distress. Phillips tries to equate the solitary confinement of Rudy with that of the experiences of the holocaust. Rudy is given certain holocaust terminologies to express his psychic pain. “I have tried to persuade the Gestapo Police that I need an eye test, but so far nothing” (Phillips, 1989: 127), “They got me transferred out here to Belsen” (Phillips, 1989: 69), “in Nazi Germany they used to keep the lights on as a form of torture” (Phillips, 1989: 72 [emphasis added]). Rudy’s use of these words unintentionally correlates him with the trauma of the Jewish holocaust. The final letter of Rudy demonstrates the beginning of his mental derangement. In his final hallucinatory letter, the anguish and agony of Rudy’s solitary confinement is re-imagined. His hallucinatory letter enables him to “leap” from the holocaust and participate in the African American history of suffering. Craps observes, “Rudy’s current predicament and the past experience of slavery are linked most memorably

in the deranged letter to his dead mother with which this section ends, which brings prison life and plantation atrocities together in a hallucinatory fusion” (194).

Phillips undertakes to treat the psychological havoc played by the holocaust in the section ‘Higher Ground’ where Irina’s story is dealt with in a cautious, circumlocutory manner. While the first two stories of the collaborator and Rudy are written in the first person and epistolary narrative style, the story of Irene/Irena is told in third-person retrospective narration. Wendy Zierler observes,

Notably, of the three stories in Higher Ground, the title piece about the Jewish refugee is the weakest, insofar as it demonstrates a marked reticence about its very subject. Throughout ‘Higher Ground,’ Phillips shies away from directly depicting the Holocaust, enshrouding Irene’s story in so much hazy description that one never really gets the same sense of her character and realness as one does for the protagonists of the first two parts. (61)

Irene/Irena’s story tells about the shock of living alone in a foreign land without anyone. What is specifically clear in her story is her psychological disintegration and breakdown as a result of being marooned between loneliness and a sense of betrayal. According to Hank Okazaki, “Irene/Irina is caught, in her mental life, between two worlds, and two ages/stages of life: she has been unable, psychologically, to make the transition from the security of her childhood world to the isolated and alienating existence (in London) which she now leads” (44). As a result of this disruption and the impossibility of meeting the two disjointed poles, her life remains psychologically unhinged and divided. Like Rudy’s psychic disposition exposed in his last letter, Irene inhabits a world of imagery and incongruous juxtapositions where everything around her is strangely personified.

The use of memory is one of the outstanding techniques that Phillips uses to capture the psyche of Irene/Irena. Irene’s life is plagued by memories of her past and the sufferings of her family during the Nazi occupation, her failed marriage and miscarriage, and her suicide attempt. The third-person narrative portrays Irina as psychologically unhinged and incessantly haunted by dreams and disturbing memories of the past. These memories and dreams of Irene/Irena pull her back and forth in an imaginative spatio-temporal space because Phillips portrays the story of Irene/Irena in a nonlinear movement. Zierler observes, “Although ‘Higher Ground’ begins several years after the Holocaust, Irene’s past endures and recurs in her present, an emotional state accentuated by Phillips’s technique of nonlinear narration” (60).

Like the previous protagonists of the novel, the collaborator and Rudy, Irena also is confronted by identity related problems. This dilemma of identity construction is explicated through the change of her names. While in Poland she is named Irena, but she is called “Irene” in England. “Irina was not to know but it was now that the Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina-Irene problem would begin, for English people were too lazy to bend their mouths or twist their tongues into unfamiliar shapes” (Phillips, 1989:183). As an effect of their constraints and confinements both the protagonists, Rudy and Irene, find their identity mutated. There is a resemblance in the change of their names as well, as the last letter of their names is altered. For Rudy, his name is changed to Rudi subsequent to his incarceration and Irena’s name is changed to Irene by a society in which she feels fettered by cultural estrangement and loneliness. The slight change in the last letter of their names indicates an expression of the psychological defacement resulting from the fierceness of the American penal system towards Rudy and the resentment of Europe towards strangers and foreigners in the case of Irena. The change of names informs the transition from the previous position of integrity to the present position of fragmentation. Irena’s identity is drastically changed during her metaphorical confinement in England as Rudy’s solitary imprisonment in the high security cell leads to an alteration in his name.

Phillips’s fifth novel *Crossing the River*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993, explores his formal interest in the novel as something that does not necessarily have to fit into a chronological structure. In a sense, it resembles his earlier novels *The Final Passage* and *Higher Ground* and later novels, *The Nature of Blood* in its structural approach. *Crossing the River* encompasses the account of four different moments of slavery and diaspora in African-Americans which spans across 250 years. Gail Low considers *Crossing the River* as a novel that connects the suffering of the past with the survival in the future: “Phillips’s invocation of stories and voices offers a... poetics of performance that looks towards the ways in which suffering and survival can offer new routes to the future” (139). The first narrative “The Pagan Coast” is about Nash Williams, a former slave of Edward Williams. Being repatriated to Africa in 1830s as a Christian missionary, he desperately feels neglected by his former master-father Edward Williams and the American Colonization Society. His dual identity of being both African and American in Liberia, heightened by the present hard living conditions, make Nash feel an outsider in his own ancestors’ land. The second narrative “West” jumps forward to the 1860s to tell the story of Martha Randolph before and after the Civil War (1861-64) and the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865. Martha goes to California to join the black pioneers in the west to begin a new life after the horrible experience of slave-life. Martha’s story informs the psychological pain of constant separations and the severing of relationships as a result of selling and buying of people like goods in a system of slavery. At the end, being abandoned in Colorado Territory on her way to California, she dies. The third narrative “Crossing the River” jumps back to 1752 with the logbook of the British slave trader Captain James

Hamilton, chronicling the accumulation of human beings as goods. It contains both his detached and dispassionate logbook and two passionate letters to his wife. The fourth narrative, "Somewhere in England" deals with Joyce and Travis during World War II. Though the reader expects to find the life of the eighteenth-century Travis, the third child sold into slavery by the mythical African father, the narrative is more about Joyce, a white woman who falls in love with Travis. These four moments in the slave trade are illustrated picturesquely in *Crossing the River*. The main four narratives are framed by a prologue and an epilogue recounted by an eighteenth-century African father who laments his "shameful intercourse" (Phillips, 2003:1). He sells his three children, now called Nash, Martha and Travis, into slavery as "the crops failed" (Phillips, 2003: 1). The novel leaves an impression that all the black people in the diaspora have the same troubled common ancestral roots in Africa (Major 173). The African father and his three children become the archetypal images for Africa and its descendants respectively, and their narratives become the "many-tongued chorus" through which each story evolves. Phillips shares his principal aim in writing *Crossing the River* in an interview. "... I wanted to make a connection between the African world which was left behind and the diasporan world which people had entered once they crossed the water. I wanted to make an affirmative connection, not a connection based upon exploitation or suffering or misery, but a connection based upon a kind of survival" (Davison 93). As mentioned earlier, Phillips's intention is to offer a connection between past, present and the future, thereby transcending the specificity of spatial and temporal limits in the case of the sufferings of people.

From a narrative viewpoint, *Crossing the River* has multiple narrators who tell their own stories as well as the stories of others. Two stories are told by female narrators and the other two by male ones. Not all the narratives follow chronology. While "The Pagan Coast" and "Crossing the River" follow linear time, "West" and "Somewhere in England" oscillate between time and space. The structural design of the novel could be seen as an extension of the central theme of fragmentation and disintegration of kinships and relationships, and consequent psychological breakdown. The novel explicates the disintegration of the family ties and other kinships. The breakup of Nash Williams and Edward Williams, Martha's separation from her family, Captain Hamilton's separation from his wife and his complicit role in the destruction of the lives of Africans, and the separation of English woman Joyce and Travis all become examples of individual lives shattered in a system of slavery. According to Davison, there is a haunting, reiterated Biblical question throughout this novel, namely, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" (95). Spanning about two hundred and fifty years, the novel conveys the crisscrossing of spatial and temporal borders. In the context of the novel, Africa, the father figure and the children do not possess a contemporary existence. "Guilt-ridden due to its complicity, it is cast outside history and time, ossified in the primal moment, birthing the diaspora through this act of betrayal" (Goyal 18). The complicity of the African father in sustaining the slave trade and ensuing

psychological distress is evident in his narrative. The initial shock of the displacement, begins at the moment of “shameful intercourse” (Phillips, 2003: 1), of bartering the African children, “their warm flesh” (Phillips, 2003:1). Phillips makes no excuses and his narratives do not ramble. African father’s voice bespeaks a guilt-laden conscience and the words that he utters are cryptic and short. In a sense, the narrative of the mythical father provides the historical background of the novel as well as important information about the children he has sold out to the slaver.

Three narrators are discernible in “The Pagan Coast”. There is the presence of an invisible narrator who informs the readers about Edward’s thoughts and actions, as well as offering historical background to the particular episode. The second one is a part of Edward’s letter which gives advice to Nash. The third one is Nash or his letters. Through his five letters, Nash informs Edward and also the readers about his life in Africa as well as his relationship with Edward. Gail Low observes that the complex relation between (former) slave and master is the covert subject of all of Nash Williams’ letters and of Edward’s ruminations (134). For Phillips, the use of three narrators allows for multidimensional perspectives on Nash’s story. Four of the five letters sent by Nash have never reached Edward as they have been sabotaged by his wife and obviously, it corresponds to the general structure of the novel that informs the disruption of relationship and communication. It deepens the sense of betrayal and abandonment that prevails in the novel. The personal letters sent to father-master-Edward denotes the attempts of child-slave-Nash to connect to another person and it foregrounds the need for intimacy and closeness in a dependent relationship. But the impossibility of a genuine relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in a colonial condition is highlighted by the intermediary role played by Edward’s wife in sabotaging the letters.

“The Pagan Coast” is written in the third person and the first person narrative. In the third person narrative the slave master, Edward Williams, emerges as its prime focalizer in which the account stands for the sympathetic voice of the slave master. On the other hand, the letters written by Nash, in the first person narrative, exposes the dependency complex of Nash as elaborated by Mannoni (42). However, in the novel, Edward’s voice is silenced except for a brief talk with Madison, a former slave and his silence is painful and rouses an agonized cry from Nash that resembles the Biblical cry Christ makes ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ However, Nash’s denial and silence is closer to the mythical African father who sells his three children to the white slavers.

Martha’s section “West” delineates the effect of slavery on black women. Martha is a runaway slave from Kansas and her journeys are to find her daughter and to look for the warmth and intimacy of relationships. Her pathetic death, “pathetic” because she fails to realize her wishes, also indicates the common destiny of black mothers and wives who finally succumb to the vicious system of slavery.

Her psychological anguish stems from the disruption of her family relationships. Therefore, her journey westward serves two purposes: to join the colored pioneers in the west where she hopes to meet her lost daughter and “prospecting for a new life without having to pay no heed to the white man and his ways” (Phillips, 2003: 73-74).

Martha's life dwells in a territory of fragmentation. This fragmentation, arising out of a severance of family relationships, is repeatedly enacted in her mind and, therefore, the narrative resembles the workings of her mind and does not follow a linear trajectory. Her story is not one that rests on the linearity of time and space but rather persistently disrupts chronology. The narrative moves back and forth unsteadily. The perturbed psychological state of Martha is amplified through fragmented narrative styles. Significantly, the narrative style alternates between a third person narrative, which informs her present situation, and the first-person voice of a younger Martha depicting her past. This narrative mode serves two functions. The idea seems to be that as long as Martha is able to have the coherence and unity of her mental state, she wields control over her voice and she tells her story. But, within the debilitating structure of slavery, she loses her identity, the tenderness of relationships, and finally the serenity of mind and, as a result, a loss of the autonomy of her voice. She remains no more a master of her own voice. Ultimately, she is devoid of voice, relationships and identity. However, the juxtaposing of both the past and present enables the reader to understand and empathize with Martha's story.

For Martha the memory of the auction reminds her of the moments of separation and her endless journeys. Like the mythical father in the prologue, the memory of the tragic event has a significant role in her life and therefore it cannot be forgotten. Though her separation from her own parents is offhandedly mentioned, what concerns her most is her breaking away with her husband and daughter at the auction center. She agonizingly recalls her last night with Lucas. She also remembers the terror and bewilderment of her little daughter at the auction center, and ultimately her powerlessness to comfort her child. These psychic pains are relived in her through the memories. “In many ways, Martha's account of the severing of her kinship ties represents a nodal point in the story that is returned to again and again in her mind. The use of this motif works against the linear trajectory of Martha's life story; the past is as important and vital as the present” (Low 136). Phillips uses memories and dreams to image the disturbed psyche of Martha. For her, family relationships are relived through the memories and dreams that she has. While her memories and dreams serve to reenter into a world of loss and separation, it also serves to have a therapeutic function in her life. The sustenance and energy that she receives from them are immensely contributive to her further journeys. It compels her to go ahead and to believe that somewhere she might meet her lost child. An excessive dwelling upon these traumatizing memories also, unfortunately, makes her delusional. "Martha

sometimes heard voices.... She found herself assaulted by loneliness, and drifting into middle age without a family. Voices from the past. Some she recognized. Some she did not. But nevertheless, she listened" (Phillips 79). Therefore, by using memories and dreams to recall Martha's past, Phillips intends to recreate the psychological trauma that she experiences very vividly. The title of this section, "West", is noteworthy as it highlights the whole atmosphere of the story. West represents both life and death for Martha. She expects to revive relationships and meet her daughter in California at the frontier. Though the West, California, invites her with its promises and expectations, she cannot endure the hardships and difficulties. Hence, the West represents a void in Martha's life; she no longer is able to cope with her situation and all her hopes and dreams scatter away.

The next section "Crossing the River" illustrates the story of slavery from the viewpoint of the white slaver. In the space between Martha's story and Travis's tale, the reader returns to the 1750s with the logbook of the slave ship, 'The Duke of York', another remarkable moment in the slave trade. With its exact dates and figures, Captain James Hamilton's logbook implies the sheer mechanical way in which human sales and captivity were conducted. The dehumanizing act of numbering the slaves tells of the impassionate selling and buying of slaves. While "The Pagan Coast", "West" and the last narrative "Somewhere in England" are arranged chronologically, "Crossing the River" is not placed in the novel in a sequential order with the other narratives. As indicated by the mythical father's narrative, the slaves and (children) are purchased before their stories are told. Accordingly, Hamilton's story should have been at the beginning, but the narrative of "Crossing the River" is positioned subsequent to "The Pagan Coast" and "West" in the novel. Structurally, describing the story of Captain James Hamilton at the middle of the other three stories of Africans is significant. Sometimes one feels that Phillips, by positioning the white slaver as the intermediary in the slave trade, passes on half of the responsibility of slavery to the Africans themselves. This point is emphasized in the complicit role of the African father in the slave trade at the beginning. Phillips does not accuse the white slaver as being solely responsible for the Gold Coast slave trade. He notices that the original sellers are the blacks, though white slavers are seen at various stages of sale. For the whites it is only a business and this detachment and mechanical attitude are rendered in Captain Hamilton's dispassionate diary entries. In one way, Captain Hamilton's narrative is a scathing criticism on the involvement of Africans in the slave trade.

The last section of the novel, "Somewhere in England", tells the story of one of the three children that the mythical father has sold to the slaver. Though this section is expected to tell the life of American G.I Travis stationed in England during the World War II, it also recounts the tale of Joyce, a white woman who falls in love with Travis. In an interview, Phillips acknowledged that while writing the novel he was unable to find a voice for Travis. Nevertheless, Joyce appeared and spoke to

him in a Yorkshire dialect that he was familiar with from his childhood (Jaggi 26). As the other stories are about the children sold out by the African father, one is almost tempted to place the story of Travis along with the stories of Nash and Martha. “The particular brilliance of this story lies in the way it is narrated to show how racial difference is simultaneously invisible to Joyce yet utterly constitutive of her romance; although she initially does not see Travis as a black man, the fact that he is black determines every aspect of their love affair”(Wallace 100). Resembling “West”, this section, “Somewhere in England,” is also voiced by a female character. It is written in the first person narrative and is in the form of a diary entry beginning from June 1937 to 1963, even before the arrival of Travis himself. Joyce is presented as a lonely, psychologically fragmented woman who is bullied by her mother and her husband. Joyce's psychological disruption and disturbance are apparent in her account. The narrative section on Joyce seems to be loosely knitted together, without a care for proper order and arrangement. It is obviously the most fragmented and bewildering narrative of the novel. The entries swing back and forth in time and contain significant events in the life of Joyce. Her frustrated marriage with Len, the romance with Travis, the death of Travis, her new life with Alan and finally Grier's visit to his mother as a grown up boy, all find space in her memoirs. In narrative approach, this section resembles that of Martha's because it oscillates back and forth in time. Not all entries are uniform in length; rather it varies according to her emotional state of mind. The theme of fragmentation recurs in "Somewhere in England" very powerfully. The psychological fragmentation at the thematic level is extended to the structural level of the novel as the whole narrative is in a fragmented and disjointed form.

The novel ends with an epilogue in which the mythical African father who “soiled [his] hands with cold goods in exchange for [his children's] warm flesh” (Phillips, 2003: 1), finds them disseminated in varied spaces and times. The guilt of the African father is complete when he realizes the impossibility of the return of the children. “There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return” (Phillips, 2003: 237). Though there seems to be some kind of optimism and relief in the survival of the descendents, inevitably he suffers psychologically. His choking voice stands out above the choral voices of the dispersed children. He hears the mingled voices of the children with the voice of the white slaver Captain Hamilton that compose a choral invocation of all who have been oppressed throughout the history of slavery. “On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten. A many-tongued chorus continues to swell. And I hope amongst these survivors' voices I might occasionally hear those of my children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. My daughter. Joyce. All. Hurt but determined” (Phillips, 2003: 237). The polyphonic voices heard by the father offer the idea of clamor and confusion pointing to the enduring chaos and pain of the African descendents.

On close examination, one can detect that the narrative strategies in both Phillip's novels *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River* belong to approaches and techniques found in postmodernism. Often postmodern literature is written in a fragmented, surreal style that seems to defy our understanding and serves to distance or estrange us from the narrative and the characters it portrays (Tyson 66). *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River* do not try to make any sense of having any emotional logic of the individual's life. Rather they show the self as constituted by the forces of historical events. The texts plainly expose the impossibility of having a self-contained identity for the oppressed individuals. Therefore, to evoke that type of fragmented identity, a postmodern narrative style that suspects the linearity of space and time is most conducive. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern works challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity. Through narrative, they do tend to fragment or at least to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character (1998: 90). The fragmented structure of Phillip's novels challenges traditional realist narrative conventions of inscribing the individual as coherent and consistent. While talking about the general format of *Crossing the River* Phillips says, "It's a novel which is fragmentary in form and structure, polyphonic in its voices" (Davison 94). As *Higher Ground* follows the same thematic concerns of *Crossing River*, Phillips also uses the same narrative method of fragmentary form and structure in both novels. Thus, one notices that Phillips by casting a suspicion on the coherent and consistent narrative method adheres to the postmodern technique that befits the emotional state of his protagonists.

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