

# Black diaspora in literature | essay



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“ Survivors. In their diasporan souls a dream like steel” (Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* ). This paper discusses in what senses post-slavery literature is structured by the idea of a diaspora. The book looks at two main texts, *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips and *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall, using the books *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* by Paul Gilroy and *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, edited by Maria Diedrich as secondary sources. The paper concludes that the diaspora, a key event in black history, is fundamental to many authors in terms of providing a framework on which to discuss issues of importance to the black community, for example, history, memory, cultural identity, cultural heritage, heritage.

As Gilroy argues in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* , “ The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through a desire to transcend both the structures of a nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organising and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in the national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean and Europe” (p. 19). Thus, as Gilroy argues, because of the black diaspora, black academics and black writers and artists have travelled and worked within what he terms a trans-national framework that, itself, precludes anything but only a very superficial association of their country of origin. Thus, as Gilroy argues, black post-slavery literature can *only* be understood in the context of a diaspora, as it is created within the

framework that was created by this diaspora. It is, as argues Gilroy, “ a preoccupation with the striking doubleness that results from this unique position – in an expanded West but not completely of it – is a definitive characteristic of the intellectual history of the Black Atlantic” (p. 58).

Diedrich’s edited volume *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* examines the very specific period covering the forced dispossession of the Middle Passage, and analyses the arts (music, literature, dance etc.) that were created, on the transatlantic journey and on the continents in which the slaves were kept, and in the home continent upon their return. The book aims to represent the cultural conscience of the diaspora, as represented not only in the arts but also in myth and history, as a way of analysing what the diaspora meant for this group of people who were forcefully removed from their culture, and then had to live adrift from their culture. Many of the contributions in Diedrich argues, similarly to Gilroy, that the diapsora was a key event in the development of *black* literature, defining, as it does, a framework for creativity, through analyses of violence, of culture, of trans-national thinking and working. This idea is, again, highlighted in many other literary criticisms <sup>[1]</sup> .

Caryl Phillips book *Crossing the River* takes marginalisation and racism as central themes, using his central characters, Martha and Joyce, to explore these issues: Martha is a black woman dealing with racism in North America before and after slavery’s abolition, and Joyce, the white woman who is marginalised following her falling in love with a black man (Martha’s brother, Travis). We see, in the novel, how Martha was sold by her father, Nash, along with her two brothers, Nash and Travis, in to slavery, how Martha is

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separated from her children, separating her family, as occurred with many other hundreds of thousands of black families, and the novel deals a great deal, from this point on, with memory – her memory of her family, her memory of her loss, her memory of her culture that she has left behind. She grieves not only for these losses, but also for her own loss of dignity, through her placement in to slavery, and for her need to live alone, following abolition, no longer physically enslaved, but emotionally enslaved by her losses and by the fragmented community in which she, and all freed slaves were forced to live. Her story does not end there, and we see the hurt and terrible conditions in which she was forced to live, post-slavery, through Phillips' descriptions of her surroundings, and the murder of her new partner, Chester.

Phillips uses several postmodern techniques to highlight all of the disjointed emotions that Martha feels, such as switching backwards and forwards across time in order to highlight how Martha reacts and feels about events, or the use of many voices in the novel (Martha, Joyce, Nash and others) in order to reiterate the fact that the novel is concerned with many people's history – indeed, a whole generation's history, of those people of a certain race who were forced in to slavery, and who, then, were forced in to submission for many years in a racist North American society. The James Hamilton character, the slave trader, is used by Phillips to introduce the 'dirty' side of slavery; with his orders for disposal of slaves (i. e., murder of slaves) and his colonial presence. Phillips' deconstruction of Hamilton's character, through movements across time, is a way for Phillips to explore

history, as he sees it, as a re-definable present, not an uninterpretable, unchangeable, past.

Thus, Phillips' novel *Crossing the River* looks at issues of slavery, racism, marginalisation using several main characters, all of whom are intertwined and all of whom are bound together by the main focus of the novel – slavery. Slavery is the theme which binds the book together, allowing Phillips to discuss issues such as cultural transpositions and the 'diaspora'. Phillips does not, however, simply recount historical accounts of the lives of his main characters, the characters come alive through his particular sort of storytelling, which is argued by many to have an African slant i. e., it has a circular quality that is present in many African cultures in which storytelling is strong. Phillips also leaves as much *un* told as he tells, whilst giving historical facts surrounding the characters lives, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps and build their own version of the diasporan framework. For example, Nash's freedom and journey to Liberia as a missionary poses many questions for Nash, leaving him, as it does in Africa, but in a foreign land, sometimes feeling more American than African, although as Nash points out, that is ridiculous, he is not American, any more than he is Liberian. This leaves the reader pondering ideas of culture and roots and what effects the diaspora had on the many hundreds of thousands of slaves who were displaced from their homes and forced to work, and then live freely, in a strange country, something which is reinforced, as we have seen by the character of Martha who, as we have seen, feels more for the loss of her daughter to slavery than she does for the loss of her freedom and her displacement. Thus, Phillips succeeds in showing the very human face of

slavery, in terms of personal losses, not just the ‘wider’ academic picture of slavery as an exercise in intellectualising the diaspora in terms of its cultural conscience.

Paule Marshall’s fiction has been described by Denniston (1995) as “an imaginative reconstruction of African history and culture, which connects all people of African descent”. Her book *Praisesong for the Widow*, captures African cultural patterns in contrast with North American materialism, and, as Denniston (1995) argues, through this, Marshall “reclaims African culture for black diasporan peoples”. As such, this type of fiction is not just *African* or *black* – it captures the dynamics of human struggle and so is universal. Many black commentators have denigrated this interpretation of this type of fiction, arguing that these arguments are little more than veiled racism, intended to belittle the worth of the intellectual exercise, i. e., the understanding of African history in terms of the diaspora, by reducing the arguments in these novels to *universal* arguments about reactions to oppression, not, as they are intended to be, arguments about *black* responses to the diaspora.

Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* also, similarly to Caryl Phillips in his *Crossing the River*, discusses the role of memory in the lives of the characters in the book, describing how Avey sees her body as nothing more than a repository of memory, in which physical sensations are nothing more than a way of recording emotional feelings; through this realisation, Avey comes to terms with her displacement from her natural society, and comes to accept her heritage. Through Avey’s slow realisation of her body as a repository for memory, Marshall echoes the disconnection of herself from

her native culture, and thus from herself as a woman born in the Caribbean but sold to slavery in North America. Marshall uses Avey's physical discomforts, which are described in graphic detail in the novel, to echo her disconnection from her culture, her heritage, and her subsequent journey to well-being is representative, for Marshall, of her restoration of her sense of cultural inheritance.

In addition to Marshall's use of Avey's body as a metaphor for displacement and representations of heritage and disposition, in terms of the slave's body being enslaved, but their mind being free to wander, to develop, to grow, Avey's physical journeys also somewhat recreate the journey's her people took as slaves as a way for Marshall to explore the cultural disinheritance of the African people's through the African diaspora <sup>[2]</sup> and the slaves' reconnection with their heritages following their freedom. Avey's memories are representative of African slaves memories, therefore - they were the only free part of them under the regime of slavery, and, for some slaves, whose histories were suppressed and sanitised, their only history was the one that their memory provided. As with Martha in Phillips' novel, memory was, however, often too painful, for example, the memory of her lost daughter, with these 'personal' memories being far more painful than memories of lost culture or memories of 'home'. Avey's constant opposition to recognising her heritage allows Marshall to explore the difficulties faced by ex-slaves when thinking about returning home, or settling in a foreign land under adverse, racist, circumstances. Avey cannot face the idea of acknowledging her heritage, as she is, as she sees it, happy as she is, without knowledge of what happened to her ancestors. Avey has constructed

a life for herself based on an omission of her heritage, as a way of coping with the enormity of what happened to her family, her ancestors; her excessive consumption has blinded her to her heritage. Marshall thus seems to be suggesting, then, that the American way of life, of materialism and of consumerism, has a dulling effect, of smoothing cultural differences, and, indeed, the 'American' way is all-pervasive, a base laziness which calls to people's sloth-like sides, and, through this, infiltrates every society in which it comes in to contact.

As we have seen, therefore, the work of Phillips and Marshall both deal with the idea of slavery, of the diaspora, of the marginalisation felt by freed slaves in a foreign country, of ideas of cultural heritage. Both books, both examples of post-slavery literature, therefore, deal *specifically* with the issue of the diaspora, and what effects this had, and has, on the lives of slaves, and freed slaves, and the descendents of slaves. Phillips is, however, somewhat more concerned with the effect of *loss* on the lives of freed slaves than Marshall, who embodies his ideas within a character who is somewhat immune, for most of the book, to emotions. In terms, therefore, of the senses in which post-slavery literature is structured by the idea of a diaspora, as we have seen, for many authors who are concerned with this issue, through their heritage or for whatever other reason, their literature is framed by the idea of the diaspora: this is the central framework from which all other ideas connected to this hang. The diaspora acts as a backdrop, if you like, against which all other ideas connected to this (for example, heritage, cultural identity etc.) are understood. It is the understanding of all of these other concepts (for example, heritage, cultural identity etc.) which gives thrust to



the work of such authors, and through a search for an understanding of these ideas, it is hoped that the diaspora will be understood, can be come to terms with; much as Avey's illness is characteristic of an emotional need to know of her heritage, the diaspora is, for many authors and black academics, the tool that is used to gain understanding in to black history, both in countries of origin, and in the countries in which slaves were taken, post-slavery.

In terms of the senses in which post-slavery literature is structured by the idea of a diaspora, as we have seen, as Gilroy argues, black post-slavery literature can *only* be understood in the context of a diaspora, as it is created within the framework that was created by this diaspora. It is, as argues Gilroy, " a preoccupation with the striking doubleness that results from this unique position - in an expanded West but not completely of it - is a definitive characteristic of the intellectual history of the Black Atlantic" (p. 58). Thus, for Gilroy, the diaspora is essential, fundamental, to an understanding of black history. As we have seen, Diedrich's edited volume *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* concludes, similarly to Gilroy, that the diaspora was a key event in the development of *black* literature, defining, as it does, a framework for creativity, through analyses of violence, of culture, of trans-national thinking and working.

Thus, the diaspora, a key event in black history, is fundamental to many authors in terms of providing a framework on which to discuss issues of importance to the black community, for example, history, memory, cultural identity, cultural heritage, heritage. As we have seen in this paper, these issues provide literary fuel for many authors, and critics, and two of the most

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representative novels in terms of these issues, *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips and *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall, have been analysed and used to illustrate how black authors use the diaspora in this way, i. e., to discuss issues of importance to the black community, for example, history, memory, cultural identity, cultural heritage, heritage. For many authors, writing about these issues is a way of *dealing* with these issues for themselves *personally* and, as such, such books provide solace for many blacks who live with the diaspora, and its effects, as part of their history.

## References

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### **Footnotes**

[1] See, for example, *Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora: History, Language and Identity*, by Bracks; *The African Imagination: Literature in African and the Black Diaspora* by F. Abiola Irele, and Brent Hayes Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*.

[2] See Rogers (2000) for further exploration of this concept.