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Navigating Identities: Hybridity in Crossing the River

Zukhra Dadaeva

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Supervisor: Iulian Cananau
Examiner: Fredrik Svensson

Abstract

This essay examines Nash Williams' struggle with identity and belonging in the novel *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips, focusing on the themes of hybridity, colonialism, and psychological dissonance. Using postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework, I explore how Nash's dual identity reflects the broader tensions of a colonized subject navigating both African and Western cultures. His intellectual and emotional journey as a former slave, missionary, and member of the African diaspora highlights the complexities of reconciling his past with his present. Nash's letters to his former master reveal his struggle to assert his identity, as cultural and emotional fractures continue to hinder his efforts. The essay shows how these experiences of displacement and alienation illuminate the impact that colonialism has on personal identity and belonging, which ultimately leaves Nash in an unresolved state of hybridity.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, hybridity, identity, ideology

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1. Introduction

The legacy of colonialism extends far beyond political and economic structures. It profoundly impacts individual identity formation and cultural consciousness. Postcolonial theory manages to not only examine how colonial systems reshape societies, but also what they do to an individual on a psychological level by creating complex dynamics of hybridity, belonging, and alienation. These psychological struggles manage to manifest themselves particularly strongly in literature that portrays characters trying to navigate between colonial and indigenous worldviews. It is especially interesting when these characters embody the perspectives of both the colonized and the colonizers. Caryl Phillips' novel *Crossing the River* dives deep into these themes. This exploration happens particularly through the character of Nash Williams in the first chapter of the novel, namely "The Pagan Coast." His story, set in the 19th century in Liberia, is the focus of this essay. Nash's perspective, told through letters to his former enslaver Edward Williams, serves as a powerful example for examining postcolonial concepts of hybrid identity. As a formerly enslaved person who becomes a Christian missionary in Africa, he occupies a unique position that reflects the complexities of identity formation during colonial eras. Through his perspective in his letters, he goes from an enthusiastic missionary believing in western ideology to a man grappling with his displacement. This shows how colonial education and cultural programming succeed in creating significant psychological tensions. This story delves into the emotional and cultural struggles of a man caught between two worlds. Through his letters, the novel reveals how colonialism succeeds in severing personal identity, leaving Nash torn between aspects of his African roots and the Western values he was raised with. This exploration highlights the profound alienation and inner conflict that comes from living a life shaped by two opposing histories.

The aim of this study is to analyze Nash Williams' letters in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* to explore themes of identity and hybridity through postcolonial theory. The analysis examines passages from Nash's letters to uncover the psychological and cultural conflicts that arise as he attempts to reconcile his past and present selves.

Postcolonial literary theory provides tools to understand how colonial histories shape identity and power dynamics. Key concepts including hybridity and cultural alienation guide the analysis of Nash's identity as influenced by his African heritage and imposed Western ideologies. It also examines Nash's relationship with Edward, his former enslaver, highlighting the power dynamics that influence Nash's self-perception.

The analysis considers Nash as a fictional construct in a postcolonial novel, shaped by theoretical concepts previously mentioned, rather than strictly by historical forces within his narrative world. To further elaborate, whilst Nash exists within a colonial setting, postcolonial theory provides valuable tools for understanding his psychological and cultural struggles. This allows for an examination of how Phillips uses Nash's story to explore broader themes of cultural alienation and hybrid identity. The theoretical framework helps illuminate how colonial structures impact individual consciousness. Nash's letters demonstrate key concepts from postcolonial theory—such as mimicry, hybridity, and unhomeliness—making this framework particularly appropriate for analyzing his experiences. This study focuses primarily on Nash's experiences within the world of his narrative, exploring his interactions with other characters, his self-perception, and his dual cultural heritage. Additionally, it considers how Nash's character functions as part of the novel's broader exploration of identity and hybridity. By combining postcolonial theory with a close reading of Nash's letters, this study offers a complex understanding of Nash's character within the themes of *Crossing the River*.

Additionally, the analysis will draw on relevant research, literary works, and theoretical texts that are related to postcolonial studies to support the presented arguments. These sources, listed in the bibliography, will provide contextual and theoretical depth, which will ensure a comprehensive exploration of the topic. The relevant theoretical framework will be presented in the following section.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Foundational theories

A very valuable skill that critical theory helps develop is the ability to identify connections that might not have been noticed previously. For instance, this skill allows readers to recognize connections between their personal psychological conflicts and the way they interpret a text. It also helps them understand how their internalized belief systems—shaped by factors such as culture, social norms, and ideology—affect what they consider aesthetically pleasing in literature. Postcolonial criticism, in particular, happens to excel at revealing how deeply interconnected all aspects of our experience are, whether they are psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, or aesthetic. Postcolonial criticism demonstrates how inseparable these categories are in shaping our understanding of the world around us, as well as ourselves. This perspective is an encouragement to consider identity through the lens of cultural differences, emphasizing how factors like race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender identity, religion, and cultural practices can come together to define both how we understand ourselves and how we perceive others (Tyson 631). The wide-reaching nature of postcolonial criticism is evident in the variety of literature which it examines. Postcolonial theory defines formerly colonized peoples as any group subjected to political, economic, cultural, or psychological domination by another group (Tyson 631). Postcolonialism as a

theoretical framework aims to understand how colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies operate on political, economic, cultural, and psychological levels. For instance, much of postcolonial criticism in particular examines literature to uncover the ideological forces that have encouraged the colonized peoples to internalize the values which their colonizers possess, whilst also exploring the resistance of the colonized against their own oppressors. This is, of course, a struggle that dates back to the origins of colonialism itself. It is also worth noting that colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies might surface in various literary texts. This implies that a work does not have to be explicitly labeled as postcolonial to be analyzed through a postcolonial lens. This theoretical approach allows itself to be applied to a wide range of literature. (Tyson 633).

This colonialist ideology was rooted in the colonizer's assumptions of their own superiority. They then contrasted it with the supposed inferiority of the people whose lands they stole and occupied. The western culture was considered the only truly civilized and sophisticated way of life by the colonizers. Postcolonial critics describe this as metropolitan (Tyson 635). In contrast, the colonized peoples were considered savage, undeveloped, and backward. The colonizers equated their advanced technology with cultural superiority, and proceeded to dismiss and even erase the religions, customs, languages, and social systems of the populations they dominated. Within this hierarchical structure, the colonizers positioned themselves at the center of power, whilst the colonized were pushed to the margins and assigned much lower positions. Whilst the colonizers deemed themselves to be representatives of the ideal "self," meaning the standard of what it means to be a human, the colonized were perceived as "other," meaning fundamentally different and inherently inferior. So much so that they were often considered less than fully human (Tyson 635). Throughout history, humans have often defined themselves by contrasting with those they see as different from them

or foreign. This process is known as “othering” and creates a stark divide between the in-group (us) and those who are considered outsiders (them). This is reflected in the European colonization of the Americas, where colonizers used their Christian identity to justify claiming lands as empty, despite the presence of active Indigenous communities. However, there was no possibility for the colonizers to view them as equals. Although these communities were physically present and interacted with the Europeans through slavery or missionary efforts, they were essentially invisible in the colonial mindset because of their statuses as non-Christians. This pattern of separating people into “civilized” and “savage” categories proved effective in enabling colonial expansions. It was all justified by providing a moral framework that allowed them to rationalize their actions. This mindset continued to influence relationships and power dynamics (Tyson 635).

Colonial education was a sophisticated tool of cultural dominance. It was designed to maintain control by reshaping how colonized people perceived themselves and their colonizers. The cultural values had systematically been imbedded into the students’ minds. This strategy was undeniably effective as it worked at a psychological level, resulting in generations of people internalizing the notion of western superiority. This internalized belief manifested in what some scholars seem to term “colonial subjects.” Colonial subjects are individuals who have absorbed the colonial hierarchy, so much so that resistance is deemed unthinkable (Tyson 638). Many went on to adopt the colonizers’ mannerisms, speech patterns, and customs. This reflected a deeper transformation where individuals genuinely believed that their native culture was inferior to the western ways. When this occurs, the “colonization of consciousness” happens (Tyson 639). This is where colonial values and perspectives become so embedded in an individual’s worldview that they proceed to shape their complete understanding of reality. The effects of this cultural engineering through education were

long-lasting and profound, as they created complex layers of identity that postcolonial societies still seem to grapple with in the current day and age (Tyson 638-639). The experience of living between cultures often results in profound psychological tension. This state of existing between two worlds often leaves individuals feeling fundamentally out of place. Scholars like Homi K. Bhabha call this condition "unhomeliness" (Bhabha 13), which implies a state more complex than simple homelessness. The sense of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than both, can leave individuals feeling trapped in a psychological limbo. This state arises from trauma of cultural displacement. There is a deep disconnect where an individual feels out of place even within their own home because they are not at home within themselves. In this context, a cultural identity crisis can be so extreme and sincere that it transforms this individual into a psychological refugee. This psychological refugee can then proceed to tragically struggle to reconcile conflicting cultural worlds (Tyson 639).

In *Beginning Theory*, Barry makes mention of Yeats, an Irish postcolonial writer and a member of Ireland's Protestant ruling class, and how he embodies a dual identity as both a colonizer and colonized. This recognition of complex and overlapping identities is one of the key strengths of the postcolonial perspective. For comparison, Barry also makes mention of the Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe, as he faced criticism for this type of duality. Achebe happened to be questioned about his authenticity and how he could authentically identify with African villagers when his university education and position as a broadcaster aligned him with the so-called "civilized" values taught to the Africans by the Europeans. These assumptions impose rigid binaries on identity. Postcolonial criticism, by contrast, emphasizes the hybrid, fluid, and sometimes unstable nature of identity. The focus on hybridity is a defining characteristic of the postcolonial approach (Barry 197).

In *Beginning Postcolonialism* (23), McLeod uses the Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon's anecdote to offer a poignant example of how colonial discourse operates by shaping perceptions and relationships among colonized peoples. McLeod explains that Selvon recounts an incident from his childhood in San Fernando, Trinidad, where an Indian fisherman named Sammy, who was often ridiculed for his partial paralysis, brought along a white assistant. As a child, Selvon found it infuriating. He was enraged by the sight of a white man serving an Indian fisherman. This challenged the colonial hierarchy he had internalized, which dictated that white people were superior and should occupy positions of authority. Selvon admitted his feeling of sympathy and dismay for the white assistant, which was a sentiment he never extended to Sammy. This was most likely because of the belief system he had unconsciously absorbed. This moment exemplifies how colonialism operates not only through political domination but also through the internalization of racial hierarchies by colonized individuals. This underscores the profound impact of colonial discourse, which normalizes power imbalances and shapes individual identities, even in everyday interactions. This reflection can be crucial in understanding the psychological dimensions of colonialism and how it perpetuates systems of inequality through ingrained expectations of race and power.

Colonialism is sustained not only through physical domination but also by persuading both the colonized and colonizers alike to internalize the ideological framework. This process can be described as colonizing the mind. This process involves embedding colonial logic so deeply that individuals accept it and proceed to perpetuate the values, assumptions, and hierarchical worldviews imposed by the colonizers. When constructing identities, for the colonized it means internalizing their perceived inferiority, similarly as described in Selvon's anecdote about his childhood discomfort with an Indian man employing a white assistant. The internalization of these ideas

fractures identities, placing the colonized in a constant state of negotiation between imposed values and their indigenous cultural heritage. Individuals who feel that they are stuck in between different worlds of nations and cultures experience the sense of not fully belonging to either, and are frequently subjected to negative external definitions. For these individuals, this lack of secure belonging can represent a deeply personal struggle. They find themselves caught in an ambiguous position. This type of experience signals the need to rethink the traditional concepts of belonging somewhere. Migratory experiences challenge this fixed idea of home, which forces individuals to navigate a more fluid relationship to a place and belonging (McLeod 145).

The influential theorist Homi K. Bhabha has explored the experiences of migrants and diasporic communities who exist between nations and cultures. He argues that living in these border spaces requires a new way of thinking. This means embracing the contradictions and complexities of borders, which act as both barriers and connections. This offers an opportunity to rethink traditional ideas about history, identity, and community. Bhabha uses the term “beyond” to describe the transitional space of the border. The term “beyond” does not happen to be about abandoning the past or moving toward a fixed nature, rather it is a space where opposites like past and present, inclusion and exclusion, and inside and outside interact and overlap. This is an in between space which is often described as “liminal,” “hybrid,” or “interstitial,” which highlights its fluid and ever-changing nature (McLeod 146-147).

This idea creates room for newer and more complex ways of understanding and representing identity. For Bhabha, the imaginative act of crossing borders is just as important as doing so physically. It might open opportunities to challenge rigid categories and develop perspectives that previously have been unheard of on identity and the world (McLeod 147). He introduces the idea of “imaginative border-crossings” to challenge traditional ways of thinking about identity, which strictly relies on rigid

categories like native and foreigner, master and slave, or home and unhomely. The argument is that these fixed definitions are outdated and oversimplified. Rather, he proposes a new approach to identity, which he calls “art of the present” (McLeod 147). The point of this new approach is to emphasize movement, flexibility, and crossing boundaries, rather than holding on to these static notions of belonging. Bhabha feels that the notion of a single, unchanging identity is questionable and rejects such notions. In his opinion, identity is something shaped by interactions and discourse, which ultimately makes it adaptable and constantly evolving. Borders are not simply just lines that divide, but they are spaces where identities can be transformed as well. They provide opportunities for people to create narratives and redefine who they are. Ultimately, Bhabha’s perspective shows that identities can be dynamic and ever-changing. This idea opens up new possibilities for people to understand personal and collective belonging in an interconnected world (McLeod 147).

Bhabha’s ideas explain that an individual’s sense of self, or subjectivity, is shaped through a process of hybridity. In other words, identity is neither fixed nor pure but is rather formed from a mix of different cultural influences, locations, and experiences. It seems that hybrid identities are in constant states of shifting and evolving, which implies that they are unpredictable. Instead of relying on rigid concepts of home and belonging, hybrid identities embrace change and imperfection. This particular way of thinking can be meaningful for diasporic communities, as it proves a framework of understanding identity beyond narrow ideas of rootedness or cultural purity (McLeod 148). Traditional ideas about identity and history can be shaken up by borders that can be physical, cultural, or conceptual. Something that was hidden or forgotten can suddenly appear, which can evoke an odd feeling that simultaneously feels both familiar and strange—an odd and uncomfortable feeling, but necessary as it exposes how incomplete and flawed rigid systems of thinking are. Something that was

hidden or forgotten can mean stories and histories that have been left out or erased. This resurfacing might be uncomfortable because it challenges the aforementioned simple categories of e.g. native and foreigner, which causes one to see the complexity of the concept of identity. Literature about migrants, refugees, and colonized people plays an important role in revealing hidden truths and challenges the dominant versions of history. This type of literature shows that cultures are significantly more complex and diverse than they seem. Some of these differences can be difficult to explain or fully understand as they do not seem to fit into the traditional idea of what identity is (McLeod 148). Similarly to how Bhabha uses the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison as an example of a novel with hidden truths and untold stories that are left out of official narratives (McLeod 148), Nash's story in *Crossing the River* gives voice to these hidden histories and forces readers to confront legacies of slavery and the ongoing effects of hybridity. More on Nash and his story that reflects this will be discussed in the analysis section of this essay.

Bhabha states that colonialism often speaks in ways that are more contradictory than outright deceitful. What he means by this is that colonialism claims to have authority based on history and a civilizing mission. However, colonialism manages to frequently undermine itself with irony, mimicry, and repetition. What is represented as grand and noble often ends up seeming more like a mockery of itself. Mimicry plays a significant role in exposing these contradictions. When the colonized adopt the language, behaviours, and customs of the colonizers, but only partially, they become, as Bhabha puts it, "almost the same, but not quite" (123). This partial imitation creates ambivalence and exposes colonial fragility in three ways. First, it reveals the contradiction of wanting the colonized to become "civilized," whilst also needing them to remain different enough to justify continued domination. Second, mimicry reveals that colonial power is never fully stable, as it depends on maintaining an ambiguous

relationship with the colonized. Whilst the colonizers seek to impose their language and cultural norms, the colonized adopt them in ways that are never entirely under colonial control. Because mimicry is "almost the same, but not quite," it manages to create uncertainty rather than reinforcing authority. This "slippage," as Bhabha argues, produces a sense of "menace," as colonial power becomes unsettled by the very imitation it tries to enforce (123). Third, each act of mimicry that is not quite perfect draws attention to the artificial nature of colonial distinctions. The colonizer's repeated insistence on difference betrays an underlying anxiety, which suggests that colonizer's sense of superiority may not be as natural or justified as claimed. Therefore, mimicry becomes both a means of control and a source of instability, which highlights how colonial power relies on contradictions that it cannot fully resolve (Bhabha 122-123). Many individuals attempted to mimic their colonizers, and this reflected a desire to gain acceptance within the colonizing culture and a sense of shame towards their own culture, which was perceived inferior due to the colonial programming. In some cases, however, it is worth noting that mimicry was employed for the sake of survival. It was a strategy to avoid senseless abuse (Tyson 638-639).

Double consciousness and unhomeliness continue to affect postcolonial nations. There exist many significant challenges faced by formerly colonized people; one of them is rejecting the colonialist ideology that defined them as inferior and eventually reclaiming their precolonial heritage (Tyson 639-640). To reclaim a precolonial past is not a process that is straightforward, as much of that history has been lost over generations of colonial rule. Postcolonial theorists emphasize that cultures evolve over time, even without colonization. No culture happens to remain static or frozen in history. An exchange of culture and its influence illustrates that identity in a postcolonial context is not a simple return to a precolonial state, but it is rather a dynamic and evolving hybrid of precolonial and colonial elements. This blending is, as

understood, referred to as hybridity. Many postcolonial theorists believe that rather than viewing it as a conflict between two opposing cultures, one should see hybridity as a creative and positive force. In a world that is interconnected and culturally blended, hybridity reflects the complex and layered identities of the postcolonial people. This blended cultural heritage is to be acknowledged as a rich and unavoidable result of history, that which is multiple and sometimes contradictory (Tyson 640-641). The need to rediscover and affirm their precolonial civilizations arises from the systematic denial of their cultural heritage. For many postcolonial individuals, reclaiming their culture is essential for resisting the dominance of western culture and for restoring their national image. From a nativist perspective, there is a desire to reconnect with their cultural identity, countering the devaluation inflicted by colonialist ideologies (Tyson 641). Hybridity as a concept might offer a way to navigate the complexities of postcolonial identities. However, it remains challenging for those who feel "unhomed." These debates continue to reflect the diverse experiences and struggles of people involved, specifically formerly colonized people (Tyson 643).

2.2 Previous Studies

Abid Larbi Labidi writes in his study on how *Crossing the River* portrays the severe identity crises endured by African slaves under the institution of slavery, which spanned three centuries. By closely examining the text, Labidi investigates how the Africans' forced separation from their homelands has led to a disconnection from essential facets of identity, which includes home, family, memory, belonging, and cultural roots. Labidi also highlights how these fractures in identity were not limited to those who directly experienced the Middle passage, but they were also passed down to their descendants, which managed to shape the diasporic realities of the black community that exist today.

Labidi explores the historical and psychological connections between the loss of home and the exile, as well as the spatial instability felt by their descendants. Additionally, his study examines how Caryl Phillips reflects these fragmented identities through techniques of narration, including his use of experimental structures, spatial perspective, blending of genres, and shifts in temporal fragmentation. His study states that the novel successfully and vividly portrays the ongoing consequences of displacement and identity loss within the black diaspora through the aforementioned techniques.

Caryl Phillips's works consistently center on the legacy of slavery and its erasure from Eurocentric historical narratives. This commitment stems from a belief in the importance of remembering, which is a responsibility that Phillips sees as critical for both personal and collective identity restoration (Labidi 132). Labidi writes that Phillips, as a descendant of slaves, feels strongly about the erasure of slavery's history from Eurocentric narratives. Phillips compares the transatlantic slave trade to the Holocaust in the sense that he believes the slave trade to have been significantly more minimized or forgotten in Eurocentric narratives (132). This study mentions how Phillips critiques the way Western narratives romanticize the European civilization while ignoring the brutal realities of slavery. His novel reflects this critique by tracing the damaged lives of the three siblings, Nash, Martha, and Travis, who were formerly enslaved and whose identities were shaped by the trauma of displacement (133).

Labidi discusses how the novel highlights the impossibility of ever fully reclaiming what was lost. This was symbolized by Nash's disappearance in Africa after being sent back by his owners. His vanishing is considered a metaphor for the permanent severing of roots and the impossibility of returning to a pre-slavery state of belonging (135). The idea of home is elusive as Nash crosses spaces that unfortunately offer no true sense of permanence. Nash's disappearance in Africa is a symbol of the tragic and final severing of ties to the homeland. The rupture experienced by Nash and

his siblings transcend their individual stories and resonates with a broader experience (135). Through Labidi's study, further understanding of how *Crossing the River* explores fragmented identities of African slaves, and their descendants, was retained. Specifically, the concepts of disconnection from home, family, roots, and belonging were valuable for analyzing Nash's character. The emphasis on the historical and psychological consequences of displacement helped frame the identity struggles seen in Nash's character. However, one limitation that is worth mentioning is the lack of exploration of how the characters actively attempt to reconstruct their identities.

Gail Low's study of Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* brings attention to how these novels engage with the legacy of slavery and its impact on modernity. Her study is relevant to the analysis as it deepens the understanding of how Phillips addresses the impact of slavery, which is central to exploring hybridity and identity in the novel. Low argues in her study that slavery is not a premodern phenomenon isolated in history, but that it rather is intricately tied to the foundations of modernity (123). Low, in particular, explores how slavery, imperialism, and racism were central to the development of the modern state and its concepts. Low believes that Phillips creatively addresses these themes, showing that the history of slavery remains deeply relevant in understanding modern cultural and racial dynamics. Low addresses how Phillips manages to portray the emotional and generational impact of slavery in *Crossing the River* (123). The novel is structured around multiple voices from different time periods, and every narrative is important as each narrative reflects the themes of longing and separation, whether the separation is between families, lovers, or entire communities due to the trauma of slavery (132). These voices are linked through their shared experiences of loss, as well as through their yearning to reconnect across time and space. Phillips emphasizes how these emotional threads bind together people from different generations, which shows that while the past is marked by painful separation,

there is also hope for redemption, connection, and healing. Low also makes mention of the importance of historical memory in Phillips's work. She argues that remembering history is not just an act of reflection, but also a way of reclaiming what was lost, which offers a chance for restoration in the future (130). In *Crossing the River*, the past actively shapes the present and the future, instead of it simply staying behind. Phillips's characters in the novel strive to transform their painful histories into new possibilities for the sake of surviving and connecting, and they do this by revisiting their own traumas and disconnections which were caused by slavery (136, 139).

To conclude this, Low asserts that Phillips's portrayal of slavery's legacy is not just simply about remembering past suffering, but rather about creating new paths for understanding and connection. Through themes of memory, loss, love, and survival, *Crossing the River* offers a vision of how historical trauma can create new forms of belonging that transcend racial boundaries. This suggests that the lessons of the past might help build intentional kinship bonds despite historical fractures. Low's study clarified how the novel addresses the emotional and generational impact of slavery. Low's focus on memory and reclaiming what was lost is undoubtedly important, but it would not be pointless to assume that Phillips goes beyond simply just remembering. It could be argued that Phillips also portrays a deeper level of agency in these characters' struggles. The characters in the novel do not just reflect on their past, but rather actively attempt to reshape their futures and identities.

3. Analysis

In *Crossing the River*, set in the 19th century, Nash Williams takes a journey to Liberia as a missionary. During his time in Africa, he sends letters to his former owner, Edward

Williams, whom he calls “Father.” Through his letters to Edward, the chapter reveals the complexities of navigating the challenges of belonging in a land that is both a historical homeland and an alien terrain. Nash’s attempt to reconcile his Christian beliefs and Western education with the realities of Liberian life highlights the psychological and cultural fractures and reflects larger themes of identity and hybridity. The first aspect to be analyzed in this story is the relationship between Nash and Edward. There is much to explore in regard to these two characters’ intricate relationship. However, this analysis solely focuses on a dynamic emblematic of the complexities of colonialism, slavery, and identity. As previously mentioned, Nash’s time in Africa is marked by significant emotional turmoil. In one passage from his letters, he expresses a sense of gratitude for his upbringing, but his expression might also reveal the internal conflict he faces between his Christian identity and his disconnection from his roots. The passage goes as follows:

> I praise His holy name that I was fortunate enough to be born in a Christian country, amongst Christian parents and friends, and that you were kind enough to take me, a foolish child, from my parents and bring me up in your own dwelling as something more akin to son than servant. (Philips 32)

This particular quote reveals layers of irony, emotional conflict, and a struggle for self-definition in the aftermath of his life as a slave. When Nash praises being “fortunate enough to be born in a Christian country,” his gratitude may reflect the internalization of colonial values which assumingly have shaped his worldview. In his perspective, Western Culture and Christianity represent forms of salvation. This view is particularly interesting, given that these systems are inextricably tied to the very system of slavery that oppressed him and others like him. Moreover, his reference to Edward as “Father” and referring to himself as something “more akin to son than servant” highlights his hybrid identity and reflects his complex social position. It is, in a sense, almost ironic.

By being a slave, he occupied a space that was not truly familial; rather, he was an individual who existed between the role of a servant and a slave. This duality—his ambiguous status as neither a true son nor merely a servant—reflects the contradictions of his identity. Whilst he internalizes the colonizer's values and perceives himself as spiritually connected to Edward, his actual position remains subordinate. This can be traced back to the previously discussed concept of mimicry by Homi K. Bhabha, where the colonized subject internalizes and mimics the colonizer's values whilst simultaneously remaining unequal to the colonizer. Nash's perception of himself as a spiritual son and a former servant underscores this fragmented identity which was shaped by the contradictions of his upbringing.

His expression of gratitude for being "taken" from his parents as a "foolish child" is thought-provoking and could potentially be considered ironic. However, it is also possible that Nash genuinely believes in the value of this experience. This could align with the postcolonial notion of internalizing the oppressor's values and ideals, where the colonized subject comes to accept and even feel grateful for the system that subjugated them. When analyzed, it seems that Nash's description of being "taken" from his parents as a "foolish child" could be seen as a euphemism that obscures the violence of forced removal and enslavement. By framing this event as a necessary intervention rather than an act of oppression, Nash's words soften the reality of his own displacement. The sentiment that Nash expresses to his "Father" might likely be a result of internalized colonial ideology. This raises the question of whether irony exists in his statement at all, or if it is something that is projected through a postcolonial lens. Therefore, from a postcolonial perspective, his gratitude might be seen as a symptom of how colonial ideology has shaped his worldview, which makes it possible for him to express gratitude for the very system that subjugates him. In this way, the irony might only be perceived through a postcolonial reading, which contrasts his internalized

beliefs with the underlying violence of the situation. The inherited Westernized perspective, which is evident in his religious beliefs and his dedication to spreading the religion, alienates him from the indigenous Liberians he has a goal to convert. Therefore, his "fortunate" Christian upbringing, as he calls it, becomes most likely a source of estrangement, which consequently renders him an outsider both in Africa and in the world he left behind.

From another perspective, Nash's hybridity aligns with the postcolonial notions of displacement and exile. Liberia becomes a site of alienation rather than belonging. His struggle to assert his identity within this Western framework, which he strongly believes in, whilst navigating the realities of African life, mirrors the experiences of many diasporic people. His Western education and Christian ideology make him an agent of colonialism, even though he continues to be excluded from its core structure. This tension between gratitude and irony, as well as identity and displacement, reflects Phillips's examination of hybridity and the lasting impact of historical suffering. Nash is caught between two worlds and belongs fully to neither.

In a different passage, Nash expresses to Edward his frustration over being accused of justifying his "native style of living." The passage goes as follows:

> Only last week I chanced to go into Monrovia in order that I might visit with old friends, both white and black. But not only could I not discern any news, it would appear that my present domestic arrangements have caused some offense to those who would hold on to America as a beacon of civilization, and an example of all that is to be admired. Are we not in Africa? This is what I constantly asked of the blacks. But it appeared they felt I merely sought to justify my native style of living. I counter-rallied and made it plain that I have nothing to justify, for amongst the emigrants I am indisputably the proudest holder of my race, but I soon found myself effectively shunned

> by my fellow Americans, many of whom privately mock African civilization whilst outwardly aping the fashion and posture of persons returned home. I realized that it would be beneficial for my health were I to cease conversation, withdraw, and return for ever to the safety of my Saint Paul's River settlement. (Phillips 57,58)

Nash's expressed frustration over being accused of justifying his native style of living reveals a deep conflict about his identity. This accusation might suggest that other people perceive his attempt to embrace or connect with his African heritage as something that is just performative or superficial. This perception undermines his efforts to claim a sense of belonging, which understandably would cause a sense of frustration within an individual who struggles to belong in the first place. Nash's annoyance provoked by this claim is evident in his strong rebuttal, where he proudly asserts himself as the proudest holder of his race. This defensive attitude can also hint at the emotional toll of constantly having to justify one's identity. This is a struggle familiar to individuals who feel that their identities are continuously scrutinized and shaped by external pressures and societal standards.

This situation parallels the example provided by Peter Barry about Chinua Achebe and his experience with criticism. Achebe was accused of being inauthentic due to his Western education and professional life in Lagos. The critique he received was that his proximity to "European civilization" distanced him from the African villagers he sought to represent. Both Nash and Achebe seem to occupy a fraught space of dual identity. However, it is worth noting that their challenges differ in important ways. In Nash's case, the justifying happens to his old friends who remain deeply invested in colonial ideals. He is rejected because they consider his turn toward African identity as a betrayal of his "civilized" status. In Achebe's case, the skepticism he faced was by postcolonial intellectuals and the African community. Nonetheless, the key connection

here is that both Achebe and Nash find themselves in positions where their identities are externally scrutinized and challenged. Their identities are questioned due to their perceived distance or proximity to African culture although the received skepticism comes from different sources and is framed in different ways. Both are caught in a tension between cultural worlds. The core issue here is the external judgement of identity. Both face rejection based on external definitions of what it means to belong to a particular cultural group. In both cases, identity is not purely a personal matter, but it is rather shaped, challenged, and constrained by external and societal expectations. It becomes difficult to define oneself independently of these external definitions. Both Achebe and Nash exist in hybrid cultural spaces. Their identities are neither fully African nor fully Western. Achebe's experience showcases how postcolonial individuals continue to struggle with the lingering effects of colonialism in defining identity. Nash's experience is an example that highlights how rigid colonial structures are, and how they succeed in dictating identity and belonging, leaving no room for fluidity. His experience highlights the rigid colonial expectations that made hybridity such a burdening experience. Although Nash's situation is colonial and Achebe's is postcolonial, the broader issue of identity being questioned by external sources ties them together. By making this comparison, the intention is not to suggest that their struggles are identical, but rather to highlight how both face challenges in defining their identities, albeit in different historical contexts. Nevertheless, the problem of identity negotiation is a recurring theme across different historical contexts. By contrasting Nash's experience with Achebe's, it becomes clear that the challenges these individuals face are not isolated but are rather part of a larger pattern of marginalization which comes with misunderstandings. This shows that hybridity, although sometimes celebrated as something of creativity and potential, is also an area consisting of profound conflict and vulnerability.

Nash's background as a missionary makes his situation more interesting and complex. His upbringing and education make him a representative of European influence, no matter his attempts to reclaim his African identity. This duality positions Nash in a space that is liminal. As mentioned, his identity is neither fully African nor fully Western. He fails to satisfy the expectations of these communities, which highlights the impossibility of fully resolving the hybridity. Furthermore, Nash's experience reflects a broader critique of the colonial system's impact on identity. His upbringing, which was shaped by Western ideology, imposes a framework that succeeds in undermining his attempt to connect with his historical cultural roots. Nash's situation reveals the psychological and cultural fractures inflicted by colonialism, where identity, unfortunately enough, becomes a battleground for power and belonging. Now, it is yet again crucial to remember that Nash's story is not set in a postcolonial setting itself; however, as previously explained, this analysis considers Nash as a fictional construct in a postcolonial novel, shaped by these theoretical concepts. Phillips's depiction of Nash becomes a lens through which one can explore the broader implications of hybridity. In the end, Nash's withdrawal to his settlement represents more than just a retreat. It reflects the painful acknowledgment of the impossibility of completely fitting into either cultural world. When analyzed, his retreat could be interpreted as more than just a simple surrender. Rather, his retreat could underscore the psychological strain and tension of trying to belong in worlds that attempt to impose conflicting values. Understandably, it would take a personal toll on him.

In a different passage, Nash's disillusionment with America's false promises, the entanglement of slavery with political and economic interests, and his own struggle with belonging, is successfully encapsulated. He begins by criticizing American hypocrisy, highlighting how the nation continues to exploit black people whilst simultaneously

claiming to uphold freedom. The latter part of this passage shifts from his political observations to his own emotional turmoil. The passage goes as follows:

> The rains are still with us, and the sky continues to open its heart and shed tears upon all the known earth. Master, you took me into your house as a young boy and instructed me in the ways of civilized man. Under your tutelage, I acquired whatever rude skills I now possess in the art of reading and writing, and more besides. Why have you forsaken me? There are many things I cannot discuss with my native wife, for it would be improper for her to share with me the memories of what I was before. I am to her what she found here in Africa. If this is to be goodbye, then let it be with love and respect in equal portion. I must close these hasty lines by saying I remain your affectionate son. (Phillips 36)

In this passage, Nash is reluctant to share his past with his wife. This suggests that there is a significant cultural distance between them. To claim that it would be "improper" to share his past experiences with her, and his memories of who he was before Liberia, implies that there are possible social and moral boundaries that make his past unsuitable for discussion. This could very well mean that Nash perceives a stark contrast between the values and experiences that shaped him during his time in America and the cultural expectations of his current life in Libera. By describing his former self as something his wife simply "cannot share" with him, he is reinforcing the idea that his identity is split. His past seems to not only be distant but also inaccessible. To state that he is to her what she found in Africa, he is further emphasizing his detachment from his former self. His wife only perceives him through one lens, which is the one of his current self in Libera. She only sees the Nash that exists in Liberia, the man she met and married, not the one who is shaped by colonial education and slavery. This might suggest that Nash's identity is being defined by external sources, rather than it being self-determined. He

must simply conform to how others perceive him by suppressing aspects of himself—aspects that do not align with these external perceptions.

His silence about his own sense of self is not merely a personal decision but can be considered a reflection of the expectations placed upon him. This silence about his past suggests an internal conflict. Perhaps this internal conflict is that of fear, specifically a fear that acknowledging his past will somehow deepen his sense of not belonging. It is possible that he also worries that his Western experiences significantly enough set him apart from his wife in ways that cannot be bridged. By choosing to keep silent about his past, he attempts to maintain harmony in his present life although it might cause stress, as doing so means he is isolating himself emotionally. His silence also reinforces the idea that his past could be something that must remain hidden, rather than it being an integral part of his identity. Nash feels that his former self and his current self cannot simply co-exist and rejects the thought of reconciling his different experiences. This might suggest that he has not yet found a way to fully belong despite him physically being in Africa. The inability to share about his life might also suggest that he does not perceive his identity as continuous. What this means is that Nash seems to see a clear break between his past and present selves, rather than seeing them as part of a unified identity. This passage, when analyzed, clearly illustrates the struggles of a hybrid identity. This is clear considering Nash's existence in an in-between space, where he neither fully belongs to the Western world nor the African world. His Western experiences and Christian beliefs make him different from the native Liberians, yet his race as well as his status as a former enslaved person prevent him from fully being part of the white world. This, understandably, causes alienation from both cultures. This struggle reflects a broader experience where displaced individuals try their best to navigate multiple cultural influences but unsurprisingly find it difficult to integrate them into a coherent sense of self.

Now, the question of whether Nash eventually succeeded in reclaiming his identity is interesting. This study concludes that Nash failed to do so. Barry makes mention of how the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon argues that the first step for the colonized people to find their own identity is to reclaim their past (Barry 195). It would not be unwise to suggest that Nash was unable to reclaim his past in the way Fanon describes, as his past is inseparably tied to a Western colonial framework. If the first step is to reclaim the past, meaning that one must reconnect with precolonial heritage rather than the identity imposed upon by colonial rule, it would be difficult for Nash as his past is not rooted in an African cultural history. Rather, it is shaped by his enslavement, his Western education, and his relationship with Edward. The past available to his was not in an ancestral African land. His memories are not of Africa, but of America, where he was molded by Edward's teachings and Christian beliefs. Therefore, instead of reclaiming a precolonial past, he is left with a past that reinforces his hybridity. Nash seems to still be searching for a stable sense of self before his passing. If he is still tied to the past, then he remains mentally and emotionally distant from the land he currently inhabits.

Nonetheless, this struggle could be emblematic of the larger themes in Phillips's novel, where the diasporic characters grapple with the conflict between their colonial pasts and their longing to reconnect with the African heritage. Nash's story is an important part of this broader exploration. The novel as a whole centers on this complex process of reclamation. Nash's personal struggles reflect the emotional and psychological challenges faced by many individuals of the Black diaspora. Phillips, in his novel, explores the difficulties of reconciling one's identity after slavery has altered cultural roots. Nash's personal conflict becomes a lens through which Phillips explores the larger narrative of diasporic Black individuals attempting to rebuild a fragmented sense of identity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* explores the intricate dynamics of hybridity and identity through the character of Nash Williams. Through Nash's character, psychological and cultural fractures produced by colonialism are revealed. His journey from being an enslaved boy to a Christian missionary in Liberia is emblematic of the postcolonial struggle to navigate between Western colonial and African indigenous worldviews. This analysis utilized the theoretical framework of hybridity to examine Nash's identity formation. His internalization of Western values, existing because of his education and religious beliefs, aligns with the notion of the colonized subject who imitates the colonizer whilst fundamentally remaining alienated from the colonizer's identity. Nash's references to his former enslaver, Edward, as "Father" and his sense of duty to spread Christianity highlights the complex relationship he has with colonial ideologies.

Nash's identity is further shaped by the trauma of slavery. This trauma continuously undermines his attempts to reconcile his past with his present. The tension between the Westernized and the African part of him positions him in a liminal space, which reflects the broader experience of displacement and alienation. The concept of mimicry plays an important role here as Nash's education and beliefs, although intended to "civilize" him, result in a fractured identity. He feels he cannot be accepted fully by the African community nor the white Western. The tension of navigating conflicting cultural expectations reveals an emotional toll. This illustrates the burden of hybridity, where colonial structures impose rigid definitions of identity.

Finally, Nash's emotional turmoil, particularly his reluctance to share his former self with his wife, proves the profound disconnection he feels between his former identity that existed in America and his present self that exists in Liberia. He chooses to

keep silent about his past, and this is not merely a personal decision, but also a reflection of the external and cultural expectations and boundaries that make him feel that he is meant to suppress parts of himself. Nash's failure to reclaim his identity illustrates the lasting impact of colonial history. Instead of successfully reconnecting with an African heritage, Nash remains captured by the colonial framework that shaped his identity. Through Nash's letters, Caryl Phillips offers a meaningful critique of the colonial legacy and reveals how hybridity perpetuates alienation and psychological fragmentation in colonial contexts.

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