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**A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED AND CARYL PHILLIPS'S
*CROSSING THE RIVER***

BY

MARYAM TAJIZADEGAN

Supervised by:

Alireza Anushiravani (Ph. D.)

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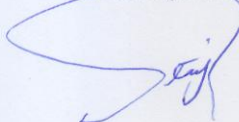
IN THE NAME OF GOD

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EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:

Excellent

A. Anushirani A. ANUSHIRAVANI ASSOCIATE PROF. OF ENGLISH AND
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE (SUPERVISOR)

Scalbt. P. F. POURGIV PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE (ADVISOR)

A. Abjadian A. ABJADIAN PROF. OF ENGLISH LITEARURE (INTERNAL
EXAMINER)

MARCH 2014

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ABSTRACT
A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF
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This thesis is a study of the two novels of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips based on the theories and practices of Postcolonial Criticism. The principle objective of this study is to demonstrate the ability of the black characters of both narratives; in forming an anti-slavery struggle to attain liberty and a new form of “hybrid identity” against the novels’ context-based convoluted, fixed cultural and physical impediments. The significance of the study presides in putting female and male-oriented vantage points next to each other that aims at providing a broader outlook on the issue of slavery prevailing in both narratives. The critical approach of this study is predicated on post-colonialism. The main framework of the study which draws on the notion of re-visiting history works on the basis of post-colonial discourse regarding the nature of power relation between the colonizer and the colonized. The topic of identity formation closely related to the debate of resistance is discussed by such prestigious critics as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall.

Key Words: Postcolonial Criticism, Anti-Slavery Struggle, Resistance and Opposition, Identity Formation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I: Introduction: Framing Morrison's *Beloved* and Phillips's *Crossing the River* with Postcolonial criticism

1.1. Introduction.....	2
1.2. Significance of the Study.....	8
1.3. The Objective of the Study.....	9
1.4. Literature Review.....	10
1.5. Methodology.....	14
1.6. Organization of the Study.....	15

Chapter II: Methodology: Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Literary Criticism

2.1. Introduction.....	18
2.2. Historical Background.....	19
2.3. Resistance and Opposition.....	23
2.3.1. Scholars of Social Death.....	23
2.3.2. Scholars of Survival and Resistance.....	25
2.3.3. The Role of Literature.....	30
2.4. Cultural Identity.....	31

Chapter III: Opposition and struggle.....43

3.1. Survival and Resistance in <i>Beloved</i>	44
3.2. Survival and Resistance in <i>Crossing the River</i>	65

Chapter IV: Cultural Identity in the Black Subjects.....86

4.1. The Emergence of New Black Subjects in *Beloved*87

4.2. The Emergence of New Black Subjects in *Crossing the River*.....110

Chapter V: Conclusion.....131

Works Cited:140

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

**FRAMING MORRIOSN'S *BELLOVED* AND PHILLIPS'S
CROSSING THE RIVER WITH POSTCOLONIAL
CRITICISM**

1.1. Introduction

Re-writing history has fallen into a grip of an obsession among post-colonial writers. The significance of history and the past in post-colonial discussion stems from the fact that history, as Ashcroft puts it in *Post-Colonial Transformation* constitutes an undeniable source for having a “legitimate existence”. However this history solely legitimizes the colonial West not any other nations. This history with its rules of “inclusion and exclusion” is questioned and challenged by post-colonial critics and writers, since it excludes or marginalizes the narratives of any other nation except the colonial Europe (83). Oswald Spengler contends that the Imperial history has “absorbed into [itself] the whole content of History” (32). Consequently the post-colonial writers in search for their history that has been excluded or perverted by the European countries, have turned to the archives of history to recuperate what has been buried and ignored for a very long time.

One grouping of these post-colonial writers who seek to re-visit the past in the search of their history drawn to footnotes by the Master Narrative are writers in the African diasporas-- US Black, Afro-Caribbean and writers from African nations. The intrusion into history for these writers functions to give voice to those who were silenced by the “Imperial center” (Ashcroft *et al.* *The Empire Writes Back* 83). Furthermore as Brathwaite, the West Indian writer; puts forward in *The ZeeMexican Diary*, this “journey into the past ... is at the same time a movement

of possession into present and future” (vi). This retrospection serves the black writers to disclose the hidden truths about their past struggle for survival, their resistance in retaining their culture and retrieving their true identity. The two black writers, Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips, who are the focus of this study have contributed substantially to the current engagement of black writers in their effort to recuperate the true history of the black people.

Beloved (1987) and *Crossing the River* (1993) are two historical novels written by Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips respectively. Toni Morrison is a renowned figure in African-American literature. Her widely-acknowledged status emanates from her densely poetical narratives that have helped “change a restricted, predominantly white and male-centered literary world into a multi-cultural mosaic” (Tally 1). Her literary life-work has won her a plethora of prizes, including 1988 prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction after the publication of *Beloved*. Her main concern for recovering the black history dominates her literary oeuvre. Caryl Phillips’s multi-faceted fictional narratives have secured his position as an eminent black British writer. He is embraced as a celebrated personage by Caribbean writers as well. Having being called the “bard of the African diasporas” (Goyal 6), Phillips has post-colonial fictions entangled with various facets of the ordeal that black diasporas are coerced to encounter since the time of their rupture with their homelands, Africa. Winner of several national Awards for his fiction and non-fiction writings Phillips has received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1994 for *Crossing the River*.

Distinct theoretical and literary mindsets have created points of diversion in Morrison's and Phillips's literary oeuvre. This fact notwithstanding, the striking similarities prevailing among their works with regard to their engagement with the issues such as the trauma of slavery, identity, black subjectivity, dislocation, memory and revision of black history both written and distorted by the historians of the era allow a synchronous critical study of their texts to emerge. Questioning the received versions of historical facts excluding the truth of colonial ideology, the grim actualities of slavery included, sets both writers to search for a kind of non-linear historical narrative that by "replac[ing] a temporal lineality with a spatial plurality" can open up a contingency for the narratives of those silenced voices to be written and listened to. Their narratives like most of the recent post-colonial literature "deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past and construct[ing] a future" (Ashcroft *et al.* *The Empire Writes Back*36). By transmuting time into space these writers spread out the linear timeline of imperial history to create spaces for those who lived in the margins of this history. As Morrison clarifies, this is a

kind of information you can find between the lines of history . . . [those who] fall off the page . . . become people with names . . . the anonymous men and women who speak in conventional histories through their leaders... who have always viewed only as percentages would come alive. (qtd. in Wall 143)

The impulse of this project is best reflected in both fictional narratives of *Beloved* and *Crossing the River*. This study's prime focus follows the strategy of disclosing

the hidden truth surrounding the history of the black diasporas; mostly perverted by the dominant discourse of imperial history through the analytical study of the aforementioned novels.

This study revolves around one of the post-colonial issues regarding the process of the oppression of the black subjects by the white masters. After the revelatory fiction and non-fiction narratives written mostly by the black authors demonstrating the dehumanizing practice of slavery, the “conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth” has been finally imploded (Bhabha 75). Nevertheless the other side of this story needs to be retold as it has remained unattended or forgotten: the alongside constant opposition, resistance and resilient nature of black subjects. As Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, the process of total oppression of the colonized by the oppressor is not a one-way process, given the fact that the oppressed have survived albeit in the most vitriolic circumscription (183). With the emergence of the voluminous researches on the subject of slavery, scholars recently are mostly engaged with the reifying nature of enslavement that the tenacity, struggle and the resolution of black diasporas in retention of their subjectivities are undermined. One of the recent scholars, Orlando Patterson, with his seminal work entitled *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) defines slaves as physically alive but socially dead, belonging to no recognized community. Alienated from their culture and social kinship, slaves are deprived of any honor and “independent social existence” (4, 5).

The definition of slaves as “socially dead” denies the black subjects any form of resistance and struggle for survival under the most corrosive circumstances. The first phase of this study demonstrates how Morrison and Phillips through creating the most powerful black characters confound such definition. By invoking the collective memory of black diasporas imbued with momentous political and social involvement of black people in struggling against the white oppressors, these two writers transform the relegated image of black passivity and present us with various strategies black agents adopt to oppose social death.

The second interrelated phase of this study adopts the most controversial issue of identity as its primary focus. The “loss of identity” as one of the ramifications of “dislocation” and “dispossession” is one issue that has preoccupied the minds of post-colonial writers. Admittedly, the black diasporas have suffered a profound rift of separation from their mother land, Africa, the locus of “essential identity”. In much European thinking, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* contend that “history, ancestry, and the past form a powerful reference point for epistemology” (34). A dearth of no past, history and shared experience of common cultural practices give credit to the dominant ideology of colonialism that accentuates the black individuals with no sense of self. The recovery of this past has embarked the poets of Negritude on bringing to light a collective shared culture by the re-telling this essential past existed before the infamous advent of trans-Atlantic slave Trade.

However, as Stuart Hall clarifies in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” cultural identity is not a fixed essence. It is a matter of “production which is never completes, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation . . . it is a matter of being as well as becoming”. He further stipulates that far from “being fixed in the some essential past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (222, 225). As much critical this fixed essential past is, so does the process of becoming, the process of constructing and being constructed. This post-colonial view of identity as subject to formation and transformation refutes the European discourse of individuality. *Beloved* and *Crossing the River* are both the metonymic narratives of subjectivity-in-process, the story of both being “positioned”, subjected to the rupture and discontinuity the exercise of enslavement entail and of being resurrected out of the ashes of the past. Morrison and Phillips by re-visiting the past elucidate how identities are resilient in essence and subject to change. Their narratives illustrate how black subjects strive to produce new forms of identities both out of the remains of the past and the new culture they are forced to face. As a result not only do their works subvert the European discourse of identity but also their views of considering black individuals without sense of self.

1. 2. The Significance of the Study

Beloved and *Crossing the River* are two historical novels which probe the history of black diasporas against the backdrop of slavery. *Beloved*, set during the period of Reconstruction (1870-90), is an exploration of the effects of the institution of slavery on individuals and its aftermath in a post- emancipated black community. *Crossing the River* is a fiction transcending time and space, covering the history of black diasporas with the time span of 1830 to 1963. In a similar vein, it delineates the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the three generations of black subjects sold to slavery in the opening of the novel. The exigencies of re-visiting history exclusively the history of slavery stems from the fact that without fully acknowledging the unspoken past one cannot find its way into present and future. For black diasporas whose untold, un-narrated and fragmented past is mostly excluded from the dominant discourse of history, this re-visiting past is a source of empowerment which is at the same time both therapeutic and enlightening in making a better future.

Furthermore, this remembering does not serve solely the black individuals. Putting these two novels together, one written by a black British writer and the other by an Afro-American novelist disclose the complicity of both the Great Britain and America in the infamous Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, thus giving us an all encompassing view of this legacy of Britain and America in the exercise of slavery. Coming to terms with this legacy serves the needs of both nations to rectify the injustice of the past. Overall, the analysis of these two novels with slavery as its backdrop which address both black and white individuals to learn from the lessons

of the past is both formative and informative. Critical materials analyzing these two works together with this perspective are scarce.

1. 3. The Objective of the Study

This study with reviewing the history of the past entangling both white and black communities aims to make a contribution to the current debates in slavery study. The main objective of this thesis through the analytical reading of *Beloved* and *Crossing the River* is to illustrate how the black characters by disparate forms of resistance and insurgency struggle to gain freedom, independency and agency against the most oppressive forms of physical and psychological bondage. It seeks to show how the powerful and persistent characters of both novels transform the relegated image of black passivity. Consequently this study attempts to demonstrate the black characters' fight for attaining new forms of identity and subjectivity, the new forms which take its shape in emerging as having both the traces of the new culture they are forcefully entangled with and their own cultural forms and social codes which are kept alive in the common memory of black diasporas.

1. 4. Literature Review

Critical materials analyzing these two works together with this perspective are scarce. However, these two narratives enjoy copious critical receptions separately. The theoretical framework of this study largely invokes the post-colonial critical materials. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (2007) is one of the most prominent works done in this field that serves the need of this study perceptibly. David Huddart's volume entitled *Homi K. Bhabha* (2006) exploring Bhabha's writings is also illuminating. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference* (2003) by Stuart Hall is another source this study makes use of, in clarifying the notion of identity. Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin also provide this study with two voluminous materials on post-colonial theories: *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1997) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1994) are two works mostly referred to in this study. As for the historical and political material "The Future of Slavery: from Cultural Trauma to Ethical Remembrance" by Tracy Walker (2012) together with "social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery" (2009) by Vincent Brown are worthy to mention. They provide a response to the notion of Slavery as "Social Death" by drawing on subjectivities, creative energy and agency of Black diasporas. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (2011) edited by Graham and Ward is a powerful source reviewing the evolution of African American Literature in the socio-political context of each era. Joel Olsen's "Slavery in the United

States” (2010) is another article discussing the problems of race and the response of contemporary America to black community.

With regard to critical materials done on Phillips expounding the historical and political context of the novel, there are two illuminating articles. “‘Amazing Grace’: The Ghost of Newton, Equiano and Barber in Caryl Phillips’s Fiction” (2008) by Valdivieso, provides this study with helpful evidence on history and politics of Britain in the backdrop of slavery. “‘Go West, Old Woman’: The Radical Re-visioning of Slave History in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*” (2007) by Marloula Joannou enhances our understanding of historical and political issues regarding racial discrimination, slavery and its aftershocks. There are also other critical materials which have revealed disparate facets of *Crossing the River*. Among the many, the critical essay named “Transfiguring Aesthetics: Conflation, identity Denial, and Transference in ‘Passing Texts’ of Black Narrative” (2005) written by Ashford discusses the last part of *Crossing the River* in which the story of a black character, Travis, is told through the narrative of a British white lady. This part aroused a good deal of controversies since a black character is actually silenced in a novel in which the primary objective is to give voice to the unvoiced. Ledent Benedict has compiled a book *Caryl Phillip* (2002) which is rife with critical materials on Caryl Phillips’s literary oeuvre. Gail Low is another prominent figure in the critical analysis of Caryl Phillips’s fiction. His article “‘A chorus of Common Memory’: Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillip’s *Cambridge* and