

## **Negotiating Contours of Colonial Violence: Applying Fanon's Studies to Caryl Phillip's *Crossing the River* and Jane Harrison's *Stolen***

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**Abstract:** History is about anything that has taken place in the past. But it is its very pastness which impinges on the consciousness and the present of people who have suffered interminably for varied reasons. For a writer of an oppressed race, the historical representation is impregnable with the subversion of monolithic accounts of history undermining truth. Postcolonial reconstructions of history by native writers provide an authentic version of history. Being written from below, that is, from the point of view of the marginalized / oppressed native, this history involves, to use T.S. Eliot's term, "a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence..." (109). Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* devotes a full chapter to discuss the psychological effects of colonization on people on both parts of the frontier. Though it is the victims of police brutality who remain for the most part at the receiving end, the perpetrators of this violence also become mentally disturbed. The present paper seeks to apply Fanon's psychological studies of the victims of Algerian War to literary works of African and Aboriginal writers to show how literature's depiction of history in imaginative but representative hues manage to bring out the myriad facets of colonization. Caryl Phillips's (b. 1958-) *Crossing the River* (1993) and Jane Harrison's (b. 1960-) *Stolen* (1998) shall be analysed against their varied backdrops, which belong to different cultures, i.e. Africa and Australia respectively, in the light of Fanon's psychological examination of his war-affected patients. By doing so, the paper would unravel as to how race remains an inextricable angle in carrying out the project of colonization in both the cultures and eventually becomes the so-called benchmark for undermining the history of the natives.

**Keywords:** Violence, Mental Disorders, Trauma, Stolen Generations, Fanon.

There has been considerable focus on Africa, the Orient and Australia as an occupied space leading to psychological disorders of the natives. "As contact and negotiations of power

among multiple interests ensued, so flourished tales of alienate and disturbed individuals, both 'white' and black'" (Luangphinit 60). Many agents of colonial empire have themselves suffered a setback or psychological disturbance due to the violence they perpetrated on their victims. Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in his "The Madness of Private Ortheris" (1888) also shows how a colonial British soldier, Stanley Ortheris suffers bouts of insanity due to a long time in war. He wants to leave the army and denounces it as "hell," disgustingly kicking "his ammunition boots" (5). The effects of war and colonization have affected both the communities but it has affected the natives to a greater degree.

Fanon was acutely aware of the effects of colonialism and the therapist-patient relation in French and Algerian society. As an individual he knew the political side of colonialism but as a therapist he wanted his patients to "reintegrate themselves into society. A society that was often diagnosed as exploitative and oppressive" (Gendzier 504). There is a deep relation between psychology and imperialism. Individual psyche somewhere gets affected by the process of colonization as it invariably inflicts psychological and physical wounds on memory and the body. Freud does not view these disorders in isolation as many pro-establishment psycho-analysts have done but views these in relation to the socio-political power structures and in opposition. His role as a socially committed activist and a psychiatrist underlies his concern for the war affected people.

He worked in Blida-Joinville hospital in Algeria on a prestigious position as he did not like his workplace in France. While living in France, he already had some knowledge of Algerian migrants there. Though Fanon was not well conversant with Islamic or Algerian culture, he knew colonialism and its damaging and deleterious impact on the Arab people. He resigned from his position following dissension / disagreement with the French administration in Algeria in 1956. He thereafter joined the Algerian National Liberation Front, FLN. When he moved to Tunisia, he was sent as an ambassador to Ghana by the Tunisian government on behalf of FLN. In *A Dying Colonialism*, he talks about the colonial onslaught on Algerian individual imagination: "It is not the soil that is occupied. It is not the ports or the airdromes. French colonialism has settled itself in the very centre of the Algerian individual and has undertaken sustained work of cleanup, or expulsion of self, or rationally pursued mutilation" (65). The Algerian School of Psychiatry "saw the Algerian as biologically brutish and impulsive, Fanon turned to more social explanations for those instances when the Algerian's behaviour manifested those characteristics" (Wright 27).

Fanon shows his disagreement with the Algerian School of Psychology and opines that “the reality of colonial oppression necessitated a ‘socio-diagnostic ‘or in essence, a sociogenic perspective” (Wright 9). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon rebuts Mannoni’s formulation of “dependency complex of colonized people,” who argued that the inferiority complex of the colonized is pre-colonial. Fanon, on the other hand, argues that colonialism invents such an ‘inferiority complex’ where black the man finds himself inferior as part of a systematic colonial strategy / ideology. He even terms Blacks’ Negritude as a white artefact. It is in the light of this that the following discussion ensues.

Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993) brings to the fore the pain of a father who rues “I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh” (1). The prologue brings to the fore the common history of the African slave trade through the dispersal of a family. The nameless father’s looking towards the sea is akin to the trauma of many such fathers who had to part with their children. His three children Nash, Martha and William find themselves carried off to different locations and speak from different perspectives. Alan McCluskey argues that Caryl Phillips “employs experimental narrative structures that interweave disparate voices from different places and historical periods” (1). Nash Williams, who is instructed by his master Edward Williams for seven years, now becomes morally sound and hence is assigned by his master to civilize the natives in Liberia. Edward considers his instructing nearly three hundred slaves in his mission school in Christianity a great service to the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816. When Nash William is sent to Liberia, he calls it a fine place where “a coloured person can enjoy his liberty . . . for there exists no prejudice of colour and every man is free and equal” (18). He calls it a land of his forefathers and resents ever returning to America. He works endlessly for the Christianisation of the natives. Further, he is distanced more from his biological father as he thinks his lord better “than natural father” (20). The colonial strategy of disrupting the family ties in a more subtle way gets recorded here. He regards his Father better than others as they disown and sell their slaves after purchasing them but that his Father had not deserted him. He calls himself and other servants as “the coloured property” (22) which shows that he had internalised the master’s cultural ways and was gradually moving away from his own natural father and his culture.

The health of Nash on African soil eventually begins to deteriorate. Unable to cope with the harsh climate, his wife and son York succumb to fever. He, however, works relentlessly. In his letters to his master, Nash requests certain things for survival like cloth, an umbrella, a bonnet, flour, pork, potato but feels sad when his letter elicits no positive response from the master. He says how some natives start criticizing him for his moral laxity as they find that a boy born to a native woman resembled Nash. He, however, realizes the fact that “this would appear only natural in that we shared the same ancestry” (34). Though he knows his roots, he does not so far fully identify with the natives. On his subsequent marriage to a native woman and subsequent birth of a male child, he further shows his regard to his owner by baptising his son as Edward so “that he might emulate” his lord. However, he intends it as his last letter to his master as his previous letters have fetched no response.

Edward in turn feels disturbed on not receiving any letter from Nash, his most trusted slave. Since his wife Amelia had concealed the letters as Edward was becoming more occupied with Nash, both were having miscommunication. He now tries to prevail upon the American Colonization Society that he needs to visit Liberia to trace Nash on whom he had invested hugely and that Nash’s disappearance “could signal a humiliating defeat for the Society’s ideals as a whole” (13). On reaching Monrovia, where his former slave Madison lived / lives, he feels abandoned. On other day, Edward heads for a tavern but keeps thinking about Nash’s fate. The thought of having banished many slaves “in this inhospitable and heathen corner of the world” (52) disturbs him. He now realizes: “Perhaps this business of encouraging men to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own is, after all, ill-judged” (52). When next day, he visits an inn where he could find some whites and relate to them his worries, he is asked there about his business by a black of American origin. He feels disturbed as it was for the first time that he had been questioned by someone and asked to wait “like a beggar” (54). He feels further broken when, to his disgrace, the coloured man at the bar reveals that the white members had barred his entry to the club without assigning any reason.

The eventual return of Madison brings no hope but only adds to his misery as he informs that Nash is dead. He feels dejected: “Nash Williams, the boy he had brought from the fields to the house, the boy who won his love, freely give . . . this Nash William was no more” (58). When Madison delivers the last letter of Nash to Edward, written in January 1842, Edward asks Madison to take him to the last settlement where Nash lived but Madison cowers. This letter is actually a realisation and assertion of Nash of his identity and goes on questioning

this whole project of colonization. Having now three native wives and six children, he relates how they are teaching these children in “the African languages” (60) and how he himself is also learning the native language. He calls these as “strange words and sounds” which shows how the native language was quite alien to him due to his instruction in the colonial language. He now learns that Liberia has not corrupted him from a “good Christian” to a heathen but asserts that it is the finest country for the coloured man. He finds the journey back home as spiritually redeeming as Thomas Bonnici observes: “Nash’s spiritual journey to Africa leads him towards the rejection of an alien God and Eurocentric civilization” (146). He opines that this Commonwealth of Liberia has opened his eyes and removed “the garb of ignorance” (62). He also challenges the Christian missionaries and hates to continue with the settlement schools:

This missionary work, this process of persuasion, is futile amongst these people, for they never truly pray to the Christian God, they merely pray to their own gods in Christian guise, for the American God does not even resemble them in that most fundamental of features. (62)

It shows the subversive tendencies of the oppressed to remain stuck to their culture / gods while feigning to obey those of the colonists. This subtle, persuasive conversion to Christianity is attacked by Nash here. He says that it has taken long for his dark mind to absorb this knowledge. He, therefore, disowns his master and chooses to freely “live the life of the African” (62). African writers and critics point out this aspect of Christianity as Paul Adjei observes:

I was personally disturbed and disappointed when I realized that Christianity—a religion I hold dear and devoted myself to since childhood—was complicit in the enslavement, genocide and colonization of my people. It was a personal torture for me to deal with this truth. (79-80)

He also dissuades Edward from coming to Africa but if he happens to visit Africa, he might want Edward to explain “Why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise?” (62). Eventually when Edward insists to be taken to Nash’s house, Madison unwillingly obeys him. His intention in going there is to take Edward’s children to America to make them civilized. However, when he reaches Nash’s place, he retreats back in revulsion. Edward fails to decipher as to “what occurred in the Christian soul of his Nash

Williams to have encouraged him to make peace with a life that surely even these heathens considered contemptible” (69).

Edward now has a feeling that ‘He had been abandoned” (70). Lonely and desperate among the natives, he begins to pray while the natives feel pity for this “strange old white man” whose soul, they think, must have been bewitched by spirits. The master suffers for taxing the credulity of Nash and the latter equally suffers for having been kept ignorant of his roots under a systematic manipulative historical bias. Though slavery affected the Blacks to a great degree but somewhere the slave owners also suffered its pangs. While Edward now realizes the futility and inhumanity etched in slavery, Nash’s awakening makes him an apostle of African culture. The trauma lasts long and both find themselves unable to cope with the situation. While Nash dies, Edward also feels mentally broken and shattered. Edward now “feels guilt and shame well up since, in a way, he realizes that he is responsible for Nash’s ‘demise’” (Pilcher 5). Taking both voices of slavery, of the colonized and the colonizer, Phillips avers that “negative aspects of slavery might affect both colonized people as well as colonizing people” (Bakkenberg 1).

Keeping this in mind, Fanon’s studies become quite relevant as he considers Algeria’s seven years’ war of liberation as a “breeding ground for mental disorders” (181). In his case studies of this war’s victims, he titles one study as Case No. 4 in Series A. In this case, A was a twenty-eight year old man who worked in an anti-FLN brigade where he would torture people for extorting information. One of the civilians had nearly died when being tortured; he would scream endlessly pleading his innocence. A would hear these screams at home and in his dreams. So when A was treated, he found one of his Algerian victims in the same hospital, who fainted at his sight. Similarly, one victim was found in the washroom trying to commit suicide, scared that A had come to take him to the police camp again. Both of them, the perpetrator and the victim—had become victims of war and hence psychotic depression. Nash, the perpetrator who wanted Edward, his slave to work for the so called civilizing mission becomes a victim himself as he feels like an alien amidst the blacks. On the other hand, Nash himself suffers immensely and dies, when unable to cope with the trauma of slavery.

## II

The second part of this paper discusses one of the most inhuman and hotly contested issues of Australia where half-blood Aboriginal children were taken from their parents to assimilate

them in the white system. Jane Harrison, an indigenous Australian writer, brings to the fore the psychological trauma of stolen children through her much celebrated play, *Stolen*. Indigenous plays register a note of protest against white Australia's attempts to mystify the Aboriginal past as Wesley Enoch notes: "Indigenous plays are a way of weaving our perspective into the public story-telling of this nation. So much of the [background] general public knows about indigenous Australia comes from a white perspective, filtered through the white-owned media" (2007, x). The term "stolen generations," refers to all those children who were forcibly removed from their parents under the so called "Protectionist Acts." Aimed to eventually assimilate the Aboriginal children into the white communities, these Acts caused the stolen children immense pain of being uprooted from the warm cocoon of their families. The Aboriginal writers salvage their past from such distortions and denigration and reinvent their history in an authentic way.

*Stolen* records the personal experiences of five young children who are made to become oblivious of their family and cultural roots. The child-mother bond is a universal human emotion and the separation of one from the other often leads to emotional and psychological trauma that haunts both throughout their lives. Jimmy is such a child who is stolen from his parents in infancy. His longing to meet his mother is suppressed by the white authorities' proclamation that his mother is dead. On the other hand, the letter of Jimmy's mother written to her son a long time ago exposes that they were never allowed to meet each other.

The playwright throws light on the assimilation policy which, in essence, ruined the lives of these children. "Euphemistically known as protection, these official policies had a twofold structure of biological segregation and absorption" (Renes 33). The practice not only led to their emotional breakdown and psychological trauma but also made them addicted to alcohol. Jimmy's frustration on being repeatedly told about his mother's death fills his mind with negative thoughts:

Nobody loves me.  
Everybody hates me.  
I think I should go and eat worms.  
Worms that squiggle and squirm . . . (12)

Though away from each other for almost half of their lives, their hopes of a reunion are still alive. However, this reunion, if it ever happens, would be marred by doubts, apprehensions, and tears and so on. The collection of twenty-six birthday presents symbolizes the lapse of

twenty-six years which the mother and her son have spent without each other and the ever renewing pain they undergo. Because of being removed from each other since the son's infancy, they do not even remember each other's birth dates. The prospect of fear and doubt at their imagined meeting finds echoes in the following lines again:

JIMMY. What do I tell her? Good stuff? Or all the bad stuff? . . . God, I hope she's not dirty or something.

JIMMY'S MOTHER. Will he like me?

JIMMY. She might not even like me.

JIMMY'S MOTHER. Will he love me?

JIMMY. Will she feel like my mother . . . ? (30)

Though Jimmy himself suffers for being black, he is conditioned by the white system in such a way that many a time he too harbours the thought of the Aboriginals' inferiority. It is a fallout of such conditioning that makes him imagine his mother being "dirty." Jimmy's mother, in turn, also internalizes the same thoughts where she imagines her son to be like them, that is, the whites. Unable to cope with the dilemma of facing such a situation, she dies.

The play also underscores the fact that continuous abuse and racial discrimination leads to a complete loss of self-esteem. In fact, it results in self-contempt and self-castigating tendencies. Jimmy's humiliation at the hands of the whites turns him hostile against his own self. In a fit of rage and despair he calls himself a 'black dog . . . scum of the earth, filthy black boong' (33). Despondent and desperate, he hangs himself. However, Jimmy's death does not indicate the end of the Aboriginal protest and their movement towards equality. He dies, yet pleads for the struggle which would someday make things better for the natives. The sense of remorse and grief over his mother's death shakes him:

They kept saying she was dead . . . but I could feel her spirit. Mum was alive and I waited and waited for her to come and take me home . . . Brothers, don't give up fighting . . . Don't let them take babies from their mothers' arms. (34)

He urges his people to continue raising their voices of dissent against racism so that future generations may not suffer in the same way as he himself did. The play emphasizes that the colonial Government was not a neutral agency which would accommodate the interests and rights of the Aborigines.

*Stolen*, thus grapples with issues "ranging from serial child theft, sexual abuse, alcoholism, suicide in custody, cultural confusion, mental illness to physical and psychological cruelty"

(Thomson 137). Hence, every character in the play, both as a stolen child and as a grown up individual, protests against the exploitative racial system of governance. By voicing the pain of the stolen children, it strikes hard at pro-assimilation authorities rendering these children traumatized forever. Removal from their families has far reaching consequences for the native children. Though Jimmy takes his own life, he urges his fellow-beings to continue their struggle for racial emancipation. In its corrosive impact, the victims of colonialism, thus “continue to grapple with the emotional complexities of the colonial world” (Bullard 138).

Nash Williams in *Crossing the River* and Jimmy in *Stolen* die. Colonial pedagogical influences drift them away from nativity. The colonial education thus, “is so insidious that even those who claim to have been decolonized occasionally gaze on things with colonized lenses” (Adjei 80). Frantz Fanon, thus, does a great service to the marginalized. His objective behind looking into the mental conditions of war affected people was to relate the symptoms to socio-political conditions and what Homi K. Bhabha says about him is worth quoting: “Remembering him is never an act of introspection and retrospection, but rather a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (120). In a way thus, all the characters discussed above suffer the “psychological damage caused by the breaking down of the family” (Bonnici 133).

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