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RESEARCH ARTICLE





QUEST FOR BLACK IDENTITY IN THE EUROPEAN TRIBE

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ABSTRACT

Travel narratives convey the information about the world. There are different motifs of a travel. A pilgrim travels for devotional and religious purpose. A sailor wants to explore new places of this world. Merchants travel for the purpose of economics. History of Europe, Africa and America show that colonization, emigration, transatlantic trade was the main reasons for traveling. The main motif of earliest travel literature was to capture the pleasure of journey. Now travel writing has acquired high degree of literary merit because here traveler expresses his personal feelings and experience about the journey. The main motif of travel at present time is to explore the historical facts and identity. Black British writers have tried to explore the black history by their travelogues. Caryl Phillips is a black British writer born in the Caribbean island of St Kitts, brought up in Britain and now living in the United States. As a son of immigrant parents Phillips feels culturally alien among white tribes of Europe. He wants to explore his identity so first he visits his birth place the Caribbean island and then tries to explore European continent. The European Tribe is a travel account based on Phillips's personal experiences during this journey. He illustrates the scenes and characters he encounters. He tries to explore relationship between black people and the dominant white world. Despite this journey his quest for belongingness is not answered. This paper tries to explore Caryl Phillips black identity with special reference to his travelogue The European Tribe.

Keywords: travel, migrants, home, identity, black.

The first time one is called a "nigger" or told to "go back to where you come from", one's identity is traduced and a great violence is done to one's sense of self.

-(Phillips, "Necessary Journeys")

The topics of culture, race, identity and nationality have touched the conscience of many literary writers, especially black writers. Caryl Phillips is one of those black writers who had to grapple with such issues among white tribes of Europe. The present paper explores the themes of racism, identity, black subjectivity, non-belongingness and migration as described by Caryl Phillips in his travelogue *The*

European Tribe. It is a book of essays that records Phillips's experiences of a nine month trip through Europe.

Phillips's journey is an attempt to solve the question of what it means to be an exile and minority in Europe. He assumes the position of a skeptic outsider who is not seeking sights or museums. In this way the motif behind Phillips's travel is different from pleasure seeking travelers. Travel has a specific importance for him throughout his life. When he was only twelve weeks old his parents moved from the Caribbean island of St. Kitts to the North of England. Since his childhood, Phillips



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has been trying to find his own identity as a black man on a predominantly white continent. Phillips is not allured by the large buildings and traditions of Europe but he has presented the different Europe where minorities are suppressed and marginalized.

Phillips travels to America and Western Europe with side trip to Poland, Russia and Ireland. He deftly illustrates the scenes and characters he encounters during this journey. In an interview with Rosalind Bell, Phillips explains that when he travelled around in Europe, he took a lot of notes and determined then that one day he would write a book about travelling around in Europe as a black person. He tells that, "So many weird things happened to me as I was travelling around in Europe in 1980. I knew that there was a great travel book in this" (Bell 589).

Phillips was born in St. Paul's, a village on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts, in West Indies in 1958. At the age of twelve weeks, Phillips left the Caribbean in the arms of his mother and grew up in Leeds, England and later in Birmingham, in white working-class neighborhoods. As a first generation migrant Phillips talks about the experiences related to displacement in many of his works. Human displacement associated with the experiences of black Diaspora in both England and America is dominant theme of his writings. One of the largest diasporas of the past as well as of the present is African Diaspora. It began during the period of Atlantic Slave Trade. It led to the uprooting and resettlement of large number of African people from their home. The darkest chapter of African Diasporic history is related to the exploitation of blacks. The historical freedom movements and civil rights movements brought equal rights for the black community. But in spite of the equal law, black migrants encountered racial problems prevailing in the white dominated society. Secondly problems occurred because they had settled at a place that varied in culture, tradition, language and other factors from their homeland. So it became difficult for them to assimilate in the new culture. They remained confused between two different cultures. On the one hand they tried to adjust in their new settlement and on the other hand they felt a craving for their roots. This rootlessness can be seen in the writings of present generation of black British writers. As a son of immigrants, Phillips also encountered many identity problems. Diasporic identity has critically influenced his life and writing. His writings show a strong sense of nostalgia for his homeland. During the beginning of his writing career Phillips completely ignored the term 'home' as the very notion of home was ironical in his context. Phillips's situation is very well explored by the definition of home given by Krystian Ramlogan:

Home is where your navel string is buried. I interpret this to mean your home has a part of you that you leave behind no matter where you travel. You can't take it with you. The navel string represents birth; the beginning of your existence. (Ramlogan)

This definition brings an ironical situation for Caryl Phillips. According to it Phillips's home is Caribbean where he was born. But he left the place as an infant and was brought up in England. According to the Wikipedia:

Home is a word that a person identifies with a place they live, spend much of their time, or feel generally comfortable with. It is highly individual, and personal, and is arrived at in different ways. It can be; the place of your birth, where you grew up, or maybe your first apartment, or house. (qtd. in Ramlogan)

According to this definition Phillips's home is Britain where he spent most of his lifetime. In The European Tribe Phillips presents a picture of himself as he is seeking the answer to this question. It brings an inner conflict and this situation heightens his feeling of homelessness. At Queen's College Phillips meets some students belonging to Africa as Patrick from Uganda, Oseg from Nigeria and so on. They were doing research on different subjects. Phillips "envied them" because "they had a home to which they could return" (4). Phillips here tries to express the pain of those immigrants who has no place to go back to. This vacuum of non-belonging, alienation and homelessness is felt by the immigrants in Europe because they are now separated from the place and culture of their origin. This type of experience is common for migrants as Robertson and other writers describe this fact in the book



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Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement:

When migrants cross a boundary there is hostility and welcome. Migrants (and I am one) are included and excluded in different ways. Whilst some boundary walls are breaking down, others are being made even stronger to keep out the migrant, the refugee and the exile. (Robertson et al.95)

In order to get rid of uneasy feeling of non-belongingness and search for a home Phillips decides to travel back to his birth place, Caribbean. Before reaching Casablanca Phillips thought that he would meet a dazzling place but the reality appears to him is completely opposite. At the very outset of his journey he complains of the heat and dusty atmosphere of the place. Phillips views the place on racial ground and says that the city is "a melting pot of blacks, Arabs and whites" (10). During his trip he is accompanied by a nineteen years old African boy Kareem. As they reach at Muhammad V airport Kareem greets him by saying "Welcome to Africa". It is really shocking to Phillips because it increases the sense of non-belongingness in him.

After his trip to the Caribbean Phillips realizes that he could not find the home he hoped for. He feels that he belongs to Europe as he writes in the introduction of the book, "I would have to explore the European Academy that had shaped my mind. A large part of finding out who I was, and what I was doing here, would inevitably mean having to understand the Europeans" (9). In order to explore his identity Phillips now decides to travel to European countries. He enters the European continent through Gibraltar, at the south-western periphery of Europe. Moving from Casablanca to Gibraltar he reveals a deeply felt bitterness toward Britain. At the airport, when he overhears some people talking in English. It depresses him and he complains, "England always begins too soon" (19). Phillips abhorrence towards Britain is rooted in his and his parents' encounter with racism in British society. His parents were part of a great migration of black Caribbean forces which began in 1948 and lasted until 1962. British government needed skilled workers to reconstruct war devastation, so they promoted Caribbean migration. These immigrants planned to begin a new life in Britain with many hopes and aspirations for their children. But their settlement was not easy due to discrimination present in British society. At every step they had to suffer this discrimination. Tsunehiko Kato observes:

The antipathy and hostility among British people toward the Caribbean immigrants rose to the extent that they had to often hear the rebuke 'Go back to the Jungle' or had to suffer 'unprovoked physical attacks'. Phillips defines such prejudice as 'a most primitive form of racism,' which is 'rooted in a physical distaste for black people.' (Kato 123)

Blacks in Europe are still denied equal opportunity in the society. But there is a difference between first generation migrants and their children. Phillips was brought up among white tribes of Europe. His racial encounters as a minority child have created a perception of his black identity. Now he is able to compare his situation with his parents' situation as black among British society. This difference between Phillips and his parents is described in his book *A New World Order*:

By the 1970s their children's generation, my generation, was still being subjected to the same prejudices which had belighted their arrival, but we are not our parents. You might say we lacked their good manners and their ability to turn the other check. Where as they could sustain themselves with the dream of one day 'going home, we were already at home. We have nowhere else to go and we needed to tell British society this. (242)

As Phillips has grown among white working-class, he frequently feels about his identity and rootlessness. Identity is an important self concept through which an individual defines himself. When asked about the role of race and identity in his stories Phillips retorted, "Questions of identity have always played a large part in my thinking and writing; and, of course, race is a key component of identity. Certainly for me, and certainly in Britain" (qtd in Reynolds).

Blacks are the inextricable part of Europe and this fact has to be realized by Europeans. Black



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writers have used their writings as a weapon to answer about their identity. Writing also becomes the main tool for Phillips in expressing national identities. According to Yeates:

Writing, for Phillips, plays a crucial role in shaping national identities, and for highlighting the necessity for cultures to adapt and to accommodate the evolution of populations that occurs through migration. Concerns about identity and belonging in the contemporary world seem inextricably linked for Phillips to issues of writing. (59)

In the introductory chapter of The European Tribe he recounts some incidents related to his black identity. In New York he felt that his excitement was coupled with fear. Here many humiliating experiences realized him that blacks are no more respected in the white dominating society. He was questioned by police in Detroit and Chicago as he writes, "Their reasoning seems as spurious now as it did then. All their questions centered on the simple fact that I was black and in the wrong street at the wrong time."(6) In Salt Lake City Phillips went to supermarket. He picked up a carton of orange juice and came to checkout counter but again felt the same humiliating behavior. The man at the counter served the woman in front of Phillips and then he proceeded to serve the woman behind him. Phillips writes about this situation, "Being a little slow, I thought it was a genuine mistake. 'Excuse me', I re-proffered the carton but he continued to serve the woman behind me. The reality of my situation fell quietly upon me" (6). Phillips left the supermarket and came to the Greyhound bus station. Here again he had a bitter experience. A hunch-shouldered man who was standing behind Phillips leant forward to address the man in front Phillips, whom he had never met before. He said to other person, "Lot of niggers on the streets today.'.. 'In my day, if we saw too many niggers in the streets we'd shoot 'em". All these incidents hurt Phillips black identity and finally he declares, "The absurd ritual of it all had finally reduced me to hysteria" (6).

Although the discrimination between white and black was removed by the law but Phillips finds

that racial discrimination is still prevailing in the European society and it undermines the self respect of black people. In his school Phillips faced a strange incident when his English teacher Mr. Thompson tried to demonstrate his knowledge by explaining the origin of their sir names. About Phillips he claimed that he must be from Wales. The whole class laughed at this declaration. Phillips felt humiliated and stared back to them. Phillips recalls this incident and expresses his real sentiment:

The truth was I had no idea where I was from as I had been told that I was born in the Caribbean but came from England. I could not participate in a joke which made my identity a source of humor. Even those I considered my friends were laughing. If the teaching of English literature can feed a sense of identity then I, like many of my black contemporaries in Britain, was starving. (2)

Phillips himself is confused about his national identity as he says, "As a first-generation migrant, I came to Britain at the portable age of twelve weeks; I grew up riddled with the cultural confusions of being black and British" (2). He throws light on the difference of race, culture and national identity. The author himself experiences the racial discrimination and he is keenly aware of the fact that he is a black in white dominated society.

Phillips describes the racial environment of the place where he was brought up. Black kids were not sent to play. Killing and burning places were the frequent news for them. Not only the residential areas but schools where Phillips went to get his education were also not free from these prejudices. As he writes, "My educational environment, in mainly white dominated middle-class schools, only served to depress me further" (3). Phillips is educated in Britain but still he is not able to become the part of it as he confesses this fact:

Despite my education I found myself then, and still now, unable to engage with a Eurocentric and selfish history. Black people have always been present in Europe that has chosen either not to see us, or to judge us as an insignificant minority, or as a temporary, but dismissible, mistake. (129)



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Talking about his personal experience as a black person in Britain Phillips writes, "While I was still a student, somebody wrote 'Go home, nigger' on the college notice board next to my name. It must have been there for the greater part of the day before I saw it, but not a single student, tutor, nor the college porter erased the insult"(125). When Phillips went to a new swimming pool near his house in London, he was insulted as he writes, "A new swimming pool opened nearby my home in London. On the first day I went there I heard a small girl's voice cry, 'Mummy, that man's dirtying the water.' What conversations and home environment had produced that statement? On hearing her mother's answer I could guess. 'Be quiet, Shelley. He's just a darkie" (126). Black people of Europe want to know about their roots.

During this journey to European continent, Phillips comes to France by train. As he disembarks, his sight catches a sign written in French language on the wall of a house. 'L' Invasion negre' (56). It means the black invasion. Phillips first thinks that it does not refer to him but suddenly become very sad to see such a greeting at his first arrival at the place. "A slow persistent drizzle cast a mournful aspect over both the sky and my mood" (56). Phillips further visits the city of Munich and witnesses grand building and monuments but after eighteen hours he wants to escape because the look of the German people is very strange. They look at Phillips as he "had just committed an awful crime, or was about to cannibalize a small child. I began to stare back and conduct imaginary argument, 'my skin was not burned in Europe" (83).

At Oslo's Fornebu airport, the custom officer at the airport asks many questions from Phillips. He again feels humiliated because other passengers at the airport are free from such kind of interrogation. Phillips is asked many question such as, "How much money did I have? Where was I going to stay? Did I have a return ticket? Had I been to Norway before? Was I here on business?" (100). Further he is asked to stand at one side. He is enraged as he writes, "my body barely able to contain my rage. I stood to one side and watched as she dealt with each passenger in turn. There were no questions asked of them" (100). All the

passengers leave the airport but Phillips is thoroughly searched and then taken to Chief's office. Phillips writes that, "In a way, I came to Norway to test my own sense of negritude" (102). Lindsey rightly observes about Phillips's experiences:

Racism was revealed to him in sundry ways. Phillips saw deep strains of racial prejudice throughout the culture fabric of Europe, some of which are not easily discernable to the casual traveler. He did not find an elaborate pattern of statutory racial restrictions, such as South Africa's apartheid or America's outlawed Jim Crow system. But he did find an institutionalized system of discrimination that keeps Blacks in marginal position and undermines their self-respect and personal worth. (113)

Phillips travels to Spain and he views the harbor of Algeciras. Spain is a very beautiful country. The different places where Phillips visits are Tarifa, Andalucía, Cadiz, Marbella, Estapona, Torremolinos and Malaga. All these places are known for their physical beauty but it is not for the sake of physical beauty of these places that Phillips visits here. The beauty of these places is of little interest to him because he tries to explore the black history of the place. He entitles this chapter A Pagan Spain. This title has been taken from Richard Wright's book Pagan Spain. Wright also traveled to Spain because he was inspired by Gertrude Stein. But here he encountered his racial and cultural identity. Wright's book, Pagan Spain shows a powerful connection between American south and Spain. Wright was brought up and settled his career as a writer in the American South, a white supremacist society. Phillips also settled his career as a writer in America. He finds that Shakespeare and Milton are irrelevant in his cultural context. Here he realizes that it is possible for him to settle his career as a writer.

After reading Richard Wright, Phillips wants to search his black subjectivity. The chapter related to Phillips's Norway journey is entitled as 'In a Falling Snow'. This title is also taken from Richard Wright's poem *In a Falling Snow*. Phillips himself has written the novel of the same name. Phillips begins the chapter with some lines from the poem. These

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lines reveal the predicament of a boy who yearns for white skin. It is a strange example of racism.

"In the falling snow
A laughing boy holds out his palms
Until they are white." (1-3)

Phillips has constantly explained the experiences of African Diaspora in his works. Phillips does not prefer the label of black writer. In the preface of his play *The Shelter*, he writes, "In Africa I was not black. In Africa I was a writer. In Europe I am black. In Europe I am a black writer. If the missionaries wish to play the game along these lines then I do not wish to be an honorary white".

Phillips has presented hybridity in more specific way in this travelogue. A hybrid is a mixture of two different things. It is a biological term that refers to the mixture of two separate plant species or animal species. But in present time the term is used in wider sense. It is used to show hybrid culture or multiculturalism, where different cultures are mixed. Phillips himself feels like a "transplanted tree" in the white dominated society that is not capable of taking its roots in foreign soil. He suffers social alienation as Lydia Lindsey writes about Caryl Phillips in *Journal of Black Studies* that:

Phillip's quest to resolve the conundrum of his rootlessness, in being both Black and British, is expressed in the sentiment that Europe offers no green pastures for black people who yearn to become firmly rooted. This is traceable in large measure to the residual effects of European colonialism, particularly insofar as people of color are concerned. (113)

History has also played an important role in Phillips's writings. He has used history as a tool to express the racism in more effective way. The black history presents a striking opposition with the narrow-mindedness of white race of Europe. Venice is the European city that is related to Othello and Shylock. Both represent the brutal behavior of Europeans towards Negroes. When Phillips visits to Venice, he sees one other black man there. He tries to understand the predicament of that black person in this white dominated society. He thinks that, "Sixteenth-century Venetian society both enslaved the black and ridiculed the Jew. This black

'extravagant and wheeling stranger' must have lived on a knife's edge" (45). It reminds him of Shakespeare's Othello and Shylock. Othello is alone in Venetian society as, "there is no evidence of Othello having any black friend, eating any African foods, speaking any language other than theirs." He was completely dependent on Venetian society. But he could not achieve the equality in the Venetian society and "died a European death—suicide" (51).

Another most important character from Shakespeare's play that attracted Phillips's attention from the view point of race is Shylock, a Jew. This chapter is entitled as "In the ghetto". Ghetto is the part of a city occupied by people of a particular race. Here this reference is for Jews. Phillips recalls the history of Venice when Jews first arrived there in 1373. "Jews were forced to wear a special hat, they were not allowed to move in and out of the ghetto after dark, and its iron gates were guarded by Christians" (52). Phillips does not admire The Merchant of Venice because the play is anti-Semitic. Phillips remembers the words of his philosophy professor, who told him, "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you" (54).

Europe still bears the same attitude for the Jews. They are "still Europe's nigger" (53). Phillips has got his education in Europe. The history of Jews is the part of European education. Racism is taught at schools through Jewish minority. As a student Phillips is hostile towards the country because,"the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism and for that reason, I naturally identified with them" (54). Phillips goes to Belleville district of Paris. "Here Jew and Arab exist side by side aware of a common enemy" (63).

Phillips arrives at Amsterdam, a city which began to fascinate him at the age of fifteen. It is an attractive city with its architecture. But Phillips fascination is not due to its aesthetic beauty as he writes, "It was not just the aesthetic delights of the city that attracted me. There was a deeper, more troubling aspect to my fascination which related directly to the Jew" (66). Phillips visits Anne Frank's house that is situated in the old part of Amsterdam. The story of Anne shows the oppression of Jews at



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the hands of white. "Anne wrote her diary, depicting her inner fears about the occupation, her future life, her jewishness, and her burgeoning sexuality" (68). Anne Frank did not survive the concentration camps to which she was sent after her little group was discovered. When Anne's father returned from the war he got the diary and published it. Phillips again wants to go Anne Frank's house but he finds it closed. He comes back to his hotel and picks up Anne's diary and reads:

We, the most oppressed, the unhappiest, perhaps the most pitiful of all peoples in the whole world. I hope one thing only, and that is that this hatred of the Jews will be a passing thing, that the Dutch will show what they are after all, and that they will never falter and lose their sense of right. For anti-Semitism is unjust! (71)

Watching a television program 'the World at War Series' Phillips notices that the look of Jews is just like other white people. He is shocked to see that white people are hurting the Jew. He is doubtful about his own position in Europe. He feels himself in danger and thinks, "if white people could do that to white people, then what the hell would they do to me?" (67). Efraim Sicher and Linda Weinhouse write about this kind of a postcolonial condition of the Black:

For both the Negro and the Jew, the "white mask" is a screen for an identity that is mimicked and therefore recognized as fake. The postcolonial figure of the "Jew," then, would be a metaphor for the problematics of passing and for the complexities of color and race in social masks. In this analogy, however, the Black is humanized through brotherhood with another victim of racialization, but does not become a "Jew." Caryl Phillips wants above all to understand his identity as a Black man in England. (122) After traveling for a year Phillips comes

back to England and tries to find out his roots. Phillips writes a quotation from Simone Weil which shows his craving for the home. "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (119). During this journey Phillips has encountered the problems of racism,

rootlessness, black identity and nationality among different tribes of Europe. He also became the victim of this racism but he has not given any solution to tackle with these problems. He writes in an article:

Being neither a politician nor a social scientist, I have no suggestions as to how to combat tribalism, or the resultant racism that continues to stain Europe. There are, however, people of all colours and nationalities, of many religious and political persuasions, who are attempting to wrestle Europe's face around so that she might at least be forced to stare in the mirror. I wrote *The European Tribe* as a contribution to this process. (Phillips, "Revisiting The European Tribe"7)

Phillips has visited many European countries and has come back in Britain. Now he has a critical insight through which he can compare Britain with rest of Europe. He finds, "Britain did not seem that different from the rest of Europe, and I was surprised that I had imagined it would. It appeared to me now, even more so than before my departure, indivisible from the rest of Europe and exclusive in its attitude toward me" (119).

Phillips has tried to create a binary world between the black and the white. He has used the power of words to create the geopolitical images prevalent in European society. He made a radio documentary for BBC entitled as Black Personalities in British Sport. He interviewed many sport stars in order to look in to the identity formation in Britain that is termed as 'Black British'. Visibility in the field of sports and music was brought by African-Americans. Phillips gives the reference of musician Soul II Soul and footballer Ian Wright who did a great deal to show the reality of Black British identity. They helped in the fusion of race and nationality. They present a connection between the race and nationality.

After the publication of this book Phillips again thought about the possibility of visiting Europe. The previous visit was a very isolated period of Phillips's life. But the revisiting will be different from his previous visit because today technology has been changed. Now mobile phones and internet are



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available to get in touch with anybody. But Phillips is not much concerned about these technological changes. According to him the major change would be "visibility." Despite this Phillips does not want to revisit *The European Tribe* as he mentions the reason:

No return journey. I can't go back. I spend enough time in Europe to know that, despite the evidence of increased visibility of non-white people and our increased participation in European life during the past thirty years, precious little has changed for a person who looks like me. ...I continue to travel extensively across this land that I feel both of and not of, but I sometimes wonder if it is an exercise in futility to worry over the health of a continent which seems so sadly wedded to the ugly conceits of racism. (Phillips, "Revisiting The European Tribe" 7)

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