

Elusive Dream of a European African Tribe in Caryl Phillips Travelogue *the European Tribe*

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ABSTRACT

Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* throws interesting light on the dilemma inherent in difference in culture, race and national identity. Caryl Phillips chronicles a journey through modern day Europe, his quest guided by a moral compass rather than a map. Seeking personal definition within the parameters of growing up black in Europe, he discovers that the natural loneliness and confusion inherent in long journey collide with the bigotry of the "European Tribe"- a Global community of whites caught in an unyielding, Eurocentric history. Racism was revealed to him in sundry way. Phillips saw deep strain of racial prejudice throughout the cultural fabric of Europe, some of which are not easily discernible to the casual traveller. Phillips' 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 measures to residual effects of European colonialism particularly insofar as people of colour are concerned. Phillips is quiet explicit in his view that blacks who live in the midst of white society are often riddled with the identity, anxiety and feel like a transplanted tree that failed to take root in a foreign soil.

KEYWORDS: Racism, Rootlessness, Identity, Europe, travel

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Caryl Phillips was born in 1958 in a rum shop owned by his mother's family in the British colony of St. Kitts. He was brought to Britain at the 'portable age' of four months. The feeling of rejection and cultural isolation that he often experiences in Britain spurs him to travel through Europe in 1984 to 85 in order to clarify his own identity as a black man on a predominantly white continent. He chronicles a journey through modern day Europe, his quest guided by a moral compass rather than a map. His object to show the 'other Europe' the suppressed and marginalised minorities instead of the celebrated buildings and traditions, he shaped his subsequent Travelogue, *THE EUROPEAN TRIBE* (1987)

This paper will focus on the elusive dream of an African tribe of becoming firmly rooted in European society to become a European tribe. Caryl Phillips seeking personal definition within the parameters of growing up black in Europe, his quest discovers that natural loneliness and confusion inherent in long journeys collide with the bigotry of the 'European tribe'- a global community of whites caught up in any unyielding Eurocentric history. The European tribe presents Phillips travels in Eastern Europe with a great opportunity with also a new challenge to talk about oppression and post colonial condition in cold war in Europe. Phillips illustrates the scenes and characters he encounters, in places like poverty stricken Casablanca, Rasy Costa del Sol, and peaceful province, where he muses with writer James Baldwin over dinner about the state of the human spirit. He explores Venice through Shakespearean outcast Othello and views Amsterdam through the eyes of the young Anne Frank. He sympathises with a "colonised Poland" and "the eastern European" as oppressed people, while being confronted with an inconvenient part of his identity, namely his role as a privileged westerner who enjoys more freedom than the white majorities who enjoys freedom. Explaining the great controversy his travelogue has caused, Phillips asserts:

It deals with Europe from a point of view from which Europe has never had to deal with itself. It deals with Europe from the point of view of somebody who has had the benefit (or however anyone wants to put it) of a European education. I grew up in Europe; I was schooled in Europe. I didn't buy the hype. I see what I see. I've seen what Europe is. I've seen what Europe can be. I have visited Auschwitz and Dachau. If you want to talk about tribal warfare in Africa, checkout Northern Ireland. You want to talk about imperialist double-speak, check out Gibraltar (Bell, 589)

The European Tribe interestingly different from many travelogues that focus on touristy and humorous aspects, and it is as much a book about the condition of its author as it is about Europe. The travelling subject

has always been an important component of travelogues, especially since the middle of the 18th century, and many travel narratives reflect the issues of the traveller in the visited places and people. In this Phillips can be seen as a contemporary representative of a long tradition in travel writing and *The European Tribe* as a form of coming-of-age narrative, in which the places Caryl Phillips visits and describes mainly as a foil for his personal quest of identity

Phillips' solution, which gives Dubois an English twist, was to explore each side of his divided Afro-British self by examining the European as a Pan-Africanist-anthropologist in sight, treating the French, British, Soviets and Spanish as a single white-tribe determined to keep people of colour, the far flung African Diaspora, down. (Los Angeles Time)

For example, Eastern is a rough and unsettling region in Phillips' book, and in such situations the author is confronted with a new constellation, namely that his origin as a seemingly lucky westerner overrules his ethnic origins of being Black. However, this reduction to being a westerner doesn't seem to be enjoyable either.

On the one hand, Phillips feels rather surprised and awkward when being confronted with his privileges as a Western European, Privileges that he has apparently not considered as such until he has come to Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the grouping with a predominantly white and seemingly colonialist system goes really against his self-image, and one can feel Phillips' unease in this episode. (Lampadius, 179)

Phillips is keenly aware of the precariousness of being black in a white society. He did not embark on his odyssey with a proverbial chip on his shoulder looking for subtle and blatant forms of racial bigotry. He did not have to. Racism was revealed to him in sundry ways. Highly symbolic of these is Caryl Phillips' visits to Auschwitz a place that embodies an inexplicable dehumanization: "The size of the figures was beyond comprehension. At least the Atlantic slave trade had some vestige of logic, however unpalatable. Auschwitz transcended the imagination" (TET, 97). The interlocking of Black and Jewish fate is intertwined focussing on the suffering of the Jewish and the black people through European oppression into a partly shared history and identifying *The European Tribe*. Phillips saw deep strains of racial prejudice throughout the culture fabric of Europe, some of which are not easily discernible to the casual traveller. He did not find elaborate patterns of statutory racial restriction, 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 positions and undermines their self-respect and personal worth. The most natural consequence of these conditions of those Blacks in Europe is systematically denied access to economic opportunities and social amenities, and characteristically lingers on the figures of the European society.

Phillips' quest to resolve the conundrum of his rootlessness, in being both black and British, is explained 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 in so far as people of colour are concerned. Phillips is quite explicit in his view that blacks who live in the midst of a white society are often riddled with identity anxieties and feel "like a Transplanted tree that failed to take root in foreign soil." There is a sense of social and cultural alienation. They suffer from national and racial disorientation. They believe that they do not belong; yet, their mere presence suggests that they do belong. They seek to understand the forces that American blacks identify with his imagery. The delusion of the dream of Caryl Phillips as a European African tribe travelling across Europe is well said in his Foreword to a new edition of *The European Tribe* in 1992. -

Caryl Phillips returns to the negative image of the tribe when he talks about the changes in Europe since his visit in the mid 1980s. Phillips recognizes the changes Eastern Europe has already undergone in the early 1990s- changes that would have made his travels through Europe easier, but it does not give him much reason for hope because he sees the dissolution of the cold war blocs as a new challenge that could lead to even more racism and violence.

In any case, Phillips sees the apparent necessity of the negative other to confirm such narrow-minded travel identity or as he declares "[I]n order to affirm who you are as a people you must also create a class of people who are not you. Who are outsiders? Who can never be you? Who is less than you?" (Phillips, 1999 Xii).

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