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Research Article



Revisiting Caliban: A Postcolonial Scrutiny of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses William Shakespeare's last play *The Tempest* from the perspective of postcolonial criticism. It reimagines and revisits individual agency and humanity of the character Caliban who is being demonized, dehumanized and enslaved by the colonial intruder, Prospero in his Eurocentric view of the Orient. By interrogating the dominant position of Prospero as a colonizer and the subordinated position of Caliban as a colonized Other, the paper unfolds the nature of the hegemonic discourse i.e. the colonizer's language by which Caliban constructs his identity and act of resistance by suppressing his former self and his native language. By questioning the traditional Christian humanistic approach to the play as an allegory of creative power that brings reconciliation and forgiveness, postcolonial scholarship

views the play as an allegory of European colonization and the imposition of Eurocentric ideology on the non-Europeans. Far from making a mere division between the elevated and noble side of nature and the brutish side of nature, the play is more concerned with colonial power, Eurocentric construction of savagery and colonized Other, and the function of a dominant culture in the representation of everything in terms of binary opposition-Western and non-Western world and superior and inferior. The postcolonial critical approaches of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are used in the paper. Finally, the paper using the close textual analysis attempts to draw attention to the dynamics of uneven cultural representations and power relations devised by the dominant Eurocentric discourses in terms of place, race, culture, identity and language. It explores the Eurocentric epistemologies that legitimize the imperial conquest and domination of distant territories and their native peoples and ignore their socio-cultural values from a single perspective by portraying them in a negative and stereotypical way.

Keywords: Subjugation, Power, Orientalism, Caliban, Eurocentrism, Language, Postcolonialism, Socio-cultural, Hegemony discourse

“A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. . . . : Mastery of language affords remarkable power”
—(Fanon 9)

William Shakespeare’s last play *The Tempest* (1611) is a postcolonial critique of European travel, colonial and commercial expansion and racial difference, manifested in the character of Duke Prospero. For Postcolonial studies, there has often been an attempt to recommend a shift in reader’s sympathy from the dominant to the subversive character exemplified by – from the European colonizer Prospero to the earthy and brutish Caliban, who represents the native peoples of the New World (South America), who were oppressed, dehumanized, exploited and enslaved by the process of European colonization. The play owes to the sources: Sir George Somers’ voyage and shipwreck off the Bermudas in 1609 and Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals” (translated by Florio in 1603), which helped form Shakespeare’s conception of Caliban. In postcolonial criticism, reader’s sympathy and identification with Prospero essential to traditional literary criticism is averted because of the colonial order of Prospero and the derogation of the natives like Caliban and Ariel. Caliban’s name is an anagram for ‘cannibal.’ Aime Cesaire’s 1969 play *Une Tempete* (translated into English as *A Tempest*) is a response to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* from a postcolonial perspective. In the context of decolonization in Africa and Latin America, Cesaire’s play celebrates Caliban’s ant-colonial resistance to Prospero’s control and domination over the island which originally belongs to Sycorax, the mother of Caliban. Similarly, Roberto Fernandez Retamar in his work *Caliban and Other Essays* rewrites Caliban as a metaphor, or an icon of Caribbean and Latin American cultural condition or reality. By dismissing the claim of Jose Enrique Rodo who thought Ariel as the symbol of their culture and history for having Ariel’s intellectual which is comparable to the European intellectual, Retamar takes both Ariel and Caliban to be the symbols of the Latin American

culture and history. He destroys the privileged and binarized view of them as he views them from the postcolonial perspective:

To assume our condition as Caliban implies rethinking our history from the *other* side, from the viewpoint of the *other* protagonist. The *other* protagonist of *The Tempest* . . . is not of course Ariel, but, rather, Prospero. There is no real Ariel-Caliban polarity: both are slaves in the hands of Prospero, the foreign magician. But Caliban is rude and unconquerable master of the island, while Ariel, a creature of the air, although also a child of the isle, is the intellectual . . . (Retamar 16; original emphasis)

Postcolonial critique of *The Tempest* concerns the serious issues of colonial power, rule, order, identity, cultural representation, savagery, and inequality because of ethno-cultural difference between Europeans and aboriginal peoples. It disrupts the Eurocentric discursive attitude that portrays native peoples as brute, barbaric, evil, and savage. Postcolonial approach in the text is to re-explore, re-write and challenge dominant identities and positions of the colonized peoples, inverting implicit or explicit racism and asserting their agency and humanity from their perspectives which are often culturally, socially, politically, and economically oppressed, overlooked and erased, and destabilizing the 'Manichean' binary oppositions between master/slave, colonizer/colonized, and the West and the East.

Generally postcolonial theory eschews traditional approach that views magus Prospero as a symbol of civil harmony, benevolent, civil justice, proper governance, colonial, social, and political power and order, and dynastic succession. In the contexts of colonialism and imperialism, Prospero is a patriarch, white European settler, racist, oppressive colonialist, and colonial authority, using his magic to control and dominate native peoples in the name of Christian values on the remote island. Though apparently, he is a victim of the European colonial greed and power, in the form of his wicked brother, Antonio who expels him from his rightful dutchy, he later becomes a colonizer in his own way by using his magic power. His magic acts as a mask to represent his power, order, colonial possession, and absolutism. It stands as a symbol of power that is likely to reveal his colonial legitimacy to oppress the native peoples, to rule and control them under the guise of Western values-education and Enlightenment, as if it is a proper right to do so in the context of the legitimacy of colonization of the non-Western world.

One of the critical attitudes of postcolonial criticism is to investigate the unequal or polarized power relations exemplified by the relationship between Prospero, the master and Caliban, the slave. Postcolonial criticism explores how an aboriginal inhabitant, Caliban is represented as a subaltern, colonized and racial other, and is being subjected to European colonial authority, colonial oppression, colonial dispossession, inequality, discrimination, limited agency, and colonial culture. For postcolonial readership, traditional representation of Caliban is problematic as he is rendered as a native slave, brute, barbarian, earthy, nature, non-human, and abject in contrast to Europeans' being of master, civilized, noble, modern, ration, superior, and full human. The prime issue in the text is a socio-cultural construction of Caliban who is being represented as native Other, low class, bestial, and subaltern, emphasizing miscegenation, European prejudice, and Orientalist belief. In his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said stated that "Orientalism" is "a Western style for dominating,

restructuring, and having an authority over the Orient” from a dominant Eurocentric perspective that sees everything in term of binary opposition (3).

Prospero’s magic is a powerful symbol of the consolidation of colonial power on the lonely island hidden at the heart of Europeans. There is a stark difference between Europeans and native peoples exemplified by Prospero and Caliban. Caliban is obsessed with Prospero’s colonial authority because of his power though magic. His anti-colonial resistance and challenge to colonial authority are due to his dissatisfaction with colonial activities represented by Prospero. Traditional criticism associates Caliban with negative and earthy environment. In postcolonial study, his rebellion is seen as a threat to Prospero’s authority, socio-political order and economic prosperity. Despite being the owner of the island, Caliban is assigned the tasks of plucking berries, bringing water and wood, catching fish and planting vegetables. His counterpart Ariel is, like Puck, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, an airy spirit who sings and works for his master Prospero. Their toils help Prospero to be a colonial master to show his colonial domination and set up a colonial system on the island.

There is a shift in regard to the character of Prospero from his Renaissance mage image endowed with wisdom and virtue to oppressive settler. Postcolonial perspective gives substance to Caliban’s character and reveal Prospero’s imperial intentions not only to dominate and control native peoples but also to consolidate his socio-cultural and economic stability depending on the island. According to Said, “the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of the deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). Caliban’s limited agency is revealed by his subservient role. His brutal and vicious side of nature is mainly a cultural construct that is based in the popular European colonial discourse that stigmatizes Third World native peoples as inferior, primitive, cannibalistic, and brutish in contrast to the superior, moral, modern, intellectual, and civilized Europeans, emphasizing the legitimacy of European colonization and domination. According to this Manichaeic binary, a native like Caliban can never be good, noble, and virtuous but evil and low breed. Far from being elevated and civilized, in the colonial mindset, it seems that Caliban’s only task is to serve his colonial master whom he despises and dares to counter in many ways.

Both Caliban and Ariel are reduced to the role of a slave by Prospero’s magic, revealing a master-slave relation. The defeated and barbarous subjects are made subordinate or subservient in order to install order and stability in society. They are compelled to obey their victorious master so that they could have rights, citizenships and recognition of their humanity from their master. It seems that only through their enslavement and hard labour, they can achieve their freedom and form self-esteem, self-expression and recognition. As G.W.F. Hegel stated that the master keeps his “independent existence” as slave-owner and achieve his self-consciousness by controlling the “negative nature of existence” that is of the slave who works hard to recover his or her identity and humanity (182). Prospero does the same thing to maintain his status as a master and continue his gaining of the profit from the hard work of his slaves who works for him to be acknowledged by their master as a complete human being and to correct their jungle nature through their acceptance of the language and manner of the colonizer. There is the process of institutionalization of slavery through the importation of the

ideology of subordination and marginalization of human subjects when they are regarded as inferior or uncivilized, as exemplified by Prospero's owning of Caliban and Ariel as slaves and property who he exploits and dehumanizes. This clearly exhibits the issues of power, bondage, othering, suffering, suppression, colonization and prejudice. Though Caliban and Ariel are being kept submissive and compelled to be obedient to Prospero, they are not without their constant resistance. The constant effects of domination and mental torture to the colonized peoples render and dehumanize them more. However, Caliban's struggle for freedom, hatred for his master, violation of colonial laws and attempt to take revenge are the indicatives of his anti-colonial stance, self-awareness, self-esteem and deconstructive of his status as Other.

The impact of colonization of distant territories and their populations on the Europeans is so apparent and immense that it helps them maintain their privileged socio-cultural status, political and economic stability. These goals are mainly achieved by the legitimacy of colonization and exploitation of native peoples and natural resources of Third World in the name of establishing Enlightenment ideals and Christian education. As Said properly said that "the Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture" (2). This is highly exemplified by Prospero's subjugation and exploitation of native peoples especially his dispossession of Caliban upon which his socially privileged status, economic stability and cultural superiority and political authority depend. To establish himself as a master and to derive economic profit from the island, he has not injured or killed Caliban as Caliban is a part of his economic goal and works as a slave that is useful to him. As Prospero says, "We cannot miss him. He does make our fire,/Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices/That profit us" (Shakespeare I.ii. 314-16).

Caliban resists the passive and subordinate role assigned to him to follow his colonial master. He shows his unwillingness to be identified as slave, primitive savage, and otherness, to be subjected to colonial violence and dehumanization. Prospero's language identifies Caliban as a colonized Other as he addresses him "savage," "brutish" and liar. Prospero's activities seem to embody hegemonic European values which are likely functional through the processes of Christian missionary activities aimed at installing in the native peoples and through the colonial and imperial expansion into the non-European world. His establishment of colonialist social structure on the island echoes the early seventeenth century European society.

In the text, the issue of "colonial mimicry" is presented with the inclusion of native voice of Caliban and Ariel who are endowed with the gift of European colonizer's language. Despite being the victims of dehumanization, dispossession, enslavement, and oppression of colonial legacy, they are firm resolute to be free, assertive, self-reliant, and independent to counter their colonial master illustrated by Caliban's curses upon Prospero. As Homi K. Bhabha in his influential book *The Location of Culture* (1994) remarked that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86).

Caliban's revolutionary speeches reveal Prospero's colonial power and rule that are being implemented through the legitimacy of the conquest of the remote island owned by his mother Sycorax and of oppression, domination, and exploitation of its native peoples like Ariel and Caliban who are compelled to serve their master, Prospero and to convert to Prospero's

colonial culture and education. The colonizer's language Caliban speaks and rises up. He claims to be the legitimate owner of the island as a first inhabitant with his mother, Sycorax. He unveils how Prospero asks Ariel to disclose the birthplace of Sycorax, which is Algiers from where she has arrived on the island (supposed to be Bermudas) and gives birth to "Caliban, her son," suggestive of his African origin (Shakespeare I.ii. 286). Before the arrival of Prospero, Sycorax was the original native inhabitant on the island, and with her magic she used to control Ariel. She later appeared as a counterforce to Prospero to continue her practice of native African culture. Caliban reprimands Prospero for being a colonizer and calls his motives into questions. He responds to his master's injustice and hypocrisy that how he has been dispossessed of his inheritance. His self-assertive words seriously critique the legacy of colonial power and domination when it gains the dehumanizing legacy that constructs a racially colonized Other and it needs power and social order to rule and control colonized peoples. As Caliban expresses his anger and regret for losing his freedom, his humanity, and his island due to the presence and domination of Prospero:

I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'dst me and mad'st much of me, wouldst
give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less,
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and
fertile,
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own kin; and here you
sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island. (Shakespeare I.ii.333-46)

Prospero's language is charged with racism as he has erased Caliban's real name and identity by telling him an "abhorred slave" (Shakespeare I. ii. 354). It seems that to civilize Caliban through the European language is a "white man's burden" (to borrow Rudyard Kipling's term) and is an attempt to colonize his mind. For Prospero, it is privilege to take pride in colonial culture and sustain colonial order by inflicting negative self-image on the colonized subject:

PROSPERO: Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,

Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
 A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
 With words that made them known. But thy vile
 race,
 Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good
 natures
 Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
 Deservedly confined into this rock,
 Who hadst deserved more than a prison.
 CALIBAN: You taught me language, and my profit on't
 Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
 For learning me your language! (Shakespeare I. ii. 354-67)

In the above-quoted passages, Caliban becomes an abject and his island an oppressed material upon which Europeans project their colonial desire. The island of Sycorax acts as a mirror, in which Europeans image/reflect their desires, predetermined prejudices, racial differences, and horrors. Prospero addresses Caliban as a savage and reminds him of his brutish nature when his existence was meaningless until he has taught him the language for which his “gabble” has a meaning. For Caliban, the gift from his master is the language by which he knows “how to curse.” He protests that Prospero has given him language only in exchange when he serves him as a servant. Being the subject of oppression and racial inequality, Caliban is compelled to speak the language of his master which devalues his former black identity. Consequently, Caliban loses his own self-consciousness because he has been forced to accept the new colonial culture and recreate his new psychic identity in the colonizers’ image. The gift of his master’s language imprisons him and defines his self-identity but he cannot do it himself. Such activity is seen as the beginning of the successful implementation of colonialism in a distant foreign land and the cause of inferiority complex in the minds of the colonized peoples. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses the impacts of the use of the colonizer’s language on the native colonized peoples:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes white as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon 9)

One of the common aspects of colonialism is the willingness of European colonizers to take the native inhabitants seriously when they learn the language and culture of their colonial masters. Prospero seems to be boastful to be master and does not expect protest from native peoples but silence. In this context, Caliban is rendered as a subaltern who has no identity other than in the image of colonizer. He cannot express anything other than in the colonizer’s language. He has been enslaved by the colonizer and is constrained by the dominant colonialist discourse. It has erased his African heritage and offers him an enforced identity with master’s culture. But it does not work due to “colonial mimicry” that natives like Caliban acquires that

could subvert colonial order. It is possible to resist dominant discourse by the use of the colonizer's language which makes him the subject of silence, oppression and inequality. Moreover, civil harmony and unity are achieved mostly at the expense of Caliban as he is forced to serve his master.

It is not difficult to discern Caliban's protest and anger as he is unwilling to be subjected to the social authority of his oppressive colonial master Prospero. It is because of the language of his oppressor that he has learned and can resist him through it. He knows more how to curse and how to take advantage of his master's weaknesses. From Caliban's language, it is clear that he has been a victim of dominant social order modelled on European colonialism. In this regard, he is not a threat to that order but a subject to it. As a mimic man, Caliban can assume the same power and undermine the difference between master and slave and the West's essentialist assumption about his primitive and brutish nature. He is aware of his master's secret knowledge upon which his master's colonial power and order rest. Bhabha pointed out that "the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88).

In a farcical subplot of the play, Caliban with the aid of Trinculo and Stephano attempts to overthrow Prospero by robbing his magic books. Caliban comes to recognize that Prospero is no better than him without his magic books which are the guardian signs of his colonial power and authority:

CALIBAN: Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him
I' th' afternoon to sleep. There thou mayst
brain him,
Having first seized his books; or with a log
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,
Or cut his weasand with thy knife. Remember
First to possess his books, for without them
He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command. They all do hate him
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books. (Shakespeare III.ii. 87-95)

In the course of the play, both Caliban and Ariel attempt to be free from their master, Prospero. While Caliban's does it through rebellion and curse, Ariel does it through appeal intellectually. At the end of the play, Prospero releases Caliban and Ariel from their services. Prospero returns the island to Caliban and forgives his misdeeds to burn his book and to kill him. Before doing that Prospero shows how Caliban makes a plot to rob and kill him suggested by his speech: "this-demi devil—/For he's a bastard one—had plotted with them/To take my life. Two of these fellows you/Must know and own. This thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine" (V.i. 275-89). He admits the evil qualities of Caliban in such a way that Caliban's existence as a colonized other is essential to his identity as a colonizer. To him to conquer the remote island and civilize its native peoples like Caliban are the causes of his burden as he does them accordingly.

To sum up, postcolonial critique of *The Tempest* dismantles the colonial stereotypes about the New World and its native people, history and culture. It reclaims and reimagines

Caliban as an image of self-assertion, anti-colonial protest and self-esteem—full of agency, dignity and humanity. The play is far from Christian humanistic approach which emphasizes education, high breed, innocence and nobility that improve human nature, because such nature and social status are fulfilled at the cost of the colonized peoples who are demonized and dehumanized through the processes of European colonization and racism associated with power, greed, wealth and profit. Having accurately reflected the phenomena of the world in a more objective way, from the perspective of the periphery, the postcolonial representation interrogates the legitimacy of colonial rule, colonial education and domination that are hoisted on the colonized peoples like Ariel and Caliban.

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