

# A Postcolonial Reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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**Abstract**— William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is beyond doubt the greatest dramatist of all time. He occupies a position unique in world literature. His plays earned him an international acclaim and acceptance as the best dramatist in the entire history of English literature. His play, *The Tempest* has been interpreted differently by critics belonging to different schools of thought. "The Post-colonial readings of *The Tempest* were inspired by the decolonization movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America."<sup>1</sup> The paper attempts a postcolonial reading of *The Tempest* by questioning Prospero's ownership of the island and rethinking the role of Caliban.

**Keywords**— Post-colonialism, domination, Prospero, Caliban, island.

"Until the advent of postcolonial criticism, critics frequently read *The Tempest* as an allegory about artistic creation since this was once considered to be Shakespeare's final play, Prospero has been defined as a surrogate playwright, shaping the main action through his magic. His magical powers not only ensures the enslavement of Caliban, but also demands the servitude of a spirit named Ariel to put his magical designs into action. However, this long tradition of privileging Prospero's creative powers as beneficent and god-given began to be overshadowed by the growing stature of Caliban, following the decolonization movements. If, traditionally,

Prospero's 'Art' represented the world of civility and learning in contrast to the 'natural' black magic of Caliban's mother Sycorax, anti-colonial revisions of the play challenged this rather abstract Eurocentric division between art and nature. Instead they began to revise and mobilize the play in defence of Caliban's right to the Island on which he is born prior to Prospero's arrival."<sup>2</sup>

Many writers and critics have attempted to question the traditional interpretation of *The Tempest* as a struggle or contest between good and evil, by writing plays, novels and other works of art. "Aime Cesaire, a black writer and activist, rewrote Shakespeare's play in 1969 in French. *Une Tempete* (Translated into the English "*A Tempest*" in 1985) celebrates Caliban's verbal attacks on Prospero and questions the latter's claim to the Island. This play focuses initially on Caliban's resistance to Prospero's control over language."<sup>3</sup> Cesaire portrays Prospero as an intruder who enslaves Caliban, the ruler of the island before Prospero's arrival. Thus it is an adaptation of *The Tempest* from a postcolonial perspective.

The character of Caliban is the main focus of a postcolonial reading of *The Tempest*.

"Postcolonial theorists do not see him as the 'deformed slave' but as a native of the island over which Prospero has imposed a form of colonial domination. The following speech by Caliban is most quoted by the post-colonial critics:"<sup>4</sup>

"I must eat my dinner.  
This island's mine, Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first  
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me; would'st 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 lov'd thee  
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,  
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile:  
Curs'd 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 only mine own King: and here you sty me

In this hard rock, while'st you keep from me  
The rest o' th' island."

(Shakespeare, Act I, ii, 18)

One of the features of imperialism is that the colonizer describes colonialism as the moral obligation of the colonizer or the superior race which is divinely destined to civilize the brutish and barbarous parts of the world. The colonizers in the play, Prospero and Miranda, express the same attitude towards the colonized. Prospero claims to have initially treated Caliban with kindness as an attempt to humanize or civilize him:

"I have used thee,  
(Filth as thou art) with human care, and lodg'd thee  
In mine own cell, till thou didst't seek to violate  
The honour of my child."  
(Shakespeare, I, ii, 18)

Miranda also justifies their enslavement of Caliban with the assertion that they tried to civilize him but to no avail:

"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 the other: when thou didst not (savage)  
Know thine own meaning; but wouldst gabble, like  
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
With words that made them known: but thy vile race  
(though thou didst learn) had that in't, which good  
Natures  
Could abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
Deservedly confin'd into this rock,  
Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison."  
(Shakespeare, I, ii, 18-19)

"Miranda and Prospero's justifications of their enslavement of the 'savage' Caliban, whose 'vile race' lacks natural goodness, are strongly challenged by postcolonial critics. Unlike generations of earlier readers, postcolonial critics view Prospero and Miranda's relation with

Caliban as an allegory of European colonialism."<sup>3</sup> Language is an important tool for cultural domination used by the colonizer. Prospero does the same:

Caliban: "You taught me language; And my profit on't is, I know how to curse."

(Shakespeare, I, ii, 18)

Though there are many critics who do not agree with postcolonial interpretation of *The Tempest*, postcolonial critics give legitimacy to Caliban's claim to the island and describe Prospero as an intruder. Meredith Anne Skura views the characters in the play as manifestations of human personalities: she views Caliban as evil and Prospero as the exploiter. "Prospero represents domineering colonial planters; Trinculo and Stephano are prototypes of frontier riff raff, and Miranda emblemizes Anglo-American efforts to suppress Indian culture." (Cuesta, 67)

Prospero in this play represents a colonizer who takes control over the inhabitants of the island, Ariel and Caliban. His actions parallel the actions of the British colonizers: he calls the natives uncivilized and savage. Caliban and Ariel represent two different categories of the colonized: Ariel represents those colonized who are submissive and cooperative while as Caliban represents more assertive and resistant natives. Postcolonial critics highlight and condemn

Prospero's suppression and exploitation of Caliban. Commenting on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, Meredith Anne Skura states: "Caliban's childish innocence seems to have been what first attracted Prospero, and now it is Caliban's lawlessness that enrages him." (Skura, 65). His exploitation has been artistically portrayed by Shakespeare in this play:

"Hag-seed, hence:

Fetch us in fuel, and be quick, thou'rt best  
To answer other business: shrug'st thou, malice  
If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly  
What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,  
Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar,  
That beasts shall tremble at thy din."

(Shakespeare, I, ii, 19)

Caliban, who has no powers to fight back, says:

"No, pray thee.  
I must obey, his Art is of such power,  
It would control my dam's god Setebos,  
And make a vassal of him."

(Shakespeare, I, ii, 19)

The dialogue between Prospero and his daughter shows Caliban's forced enslavement and Prospero's deep repugnance that he feels for Caliban:

Prospero: "...Come on,  
We'll visit Caliban, my slave, who never  
Yields us kind answer."  
Miranda: "'Tis a villain sir,  
I do not love to look on."  
Prospero: "But as 'tis  
We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,  
Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices  
That profit us: what hao: slave: Caliban:  
Thou earth, thou: speak...  
Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself  
Upon thy wicked dam; come forth."

(Shakespeare, I, ii, 17)

Caliban's song, at the end of Act II, Scene ii, when he sings drunkenly, throws a remarkable light on the miseries of the colonized (Caliban) at the hands of the colonizer (Prospero). The callousness of Prospero towards his subjects gets manifested through this song:

*"No more dam's I'll make for fish,  
Nor fetch in firing, at requiring,  
Nor scrape trenching, nor wash dish,  
Ban' ban' Cacaliban  
Has a new master, get a new man."*

"Freedom, high-day, high-day freedom, freedom high-day freedom."

(Shakespeare, II, ii, 41-42)

Caliban hates Prospero's illegitimate claim on the island so much that he even hatches a conspiracy to kill Prospero with the help of Stephano and Trinculo:

"As I told thee, 'tis a custom with him,  
I' th' afternoon to sleep: there thou mayst brain him,  
Having first seiz'd his books: or with a log  
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,  
Or cut his wezand 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."

(Shakespeare, III, ii, 48-49)

Caliban, here, represents all the natives who do not want to be prisoners of colonialism. Caliban's statement, "they all do hate him as rootedly as I" implies that all other natives hate Prospero and want freedom from his illegitimate rule/colonization though they do not have the courage to revolt against him.

Stephano: "This will prove a brave kingdom to me,  
 Where I shall have my music for nothing."

Caliban: "When Prospero is destr'y'd."

(Shakespeare, III, ii, 50)

This statement of Caliban can also be used for the postcolonial reading of *The Tempest*. Every colonized person feels rather believes that peace can be restored only after the colonizer is destroyed or after getting freedom.

There are many qualities in Caliban that arouse sympathy from the audiences. Deborah Willis in his book "Shakespeare's *Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism" (1989) explains how Caliban's qualities humanize him:

"As a 'wild man' he is also a composite, possessing qualities of the 'noble savage' as well as the monster. He is capable of learning language, of forming warm attachments; he is sensitive to beauty and music; he speaks- like aristocratic characters in the rhythms of verse, in contrast to the prose of Stephano and Trinculo; he can follow a plan and reason." (Cuesta, 73)

Such qualities underline his humanity. Even when Prospero and Miranda describe him as evil, savage, his other qualities make him equal to other human characters in the play. Moreover, the audiences sympathize for him when he is exploited and ill-treated by Prospero:

Caliban: "For every trifle, they set upon me,  
 Sometimes like apes, that mow and chatter at me,  
 And after bit me: then like hedgesogs, which  
 Lie tumbling in my barefoot way, and mount  
 Their pricks at my football: sometimes am I  
 All wounds with adders, who with cloves tongues  
 Do hiss me into madness."

(Shakespeare, II, ii, 36)

To wrap up the discussion, many things need to be brought together. Prior to Prospero's arrival into the island, Caliban was free and, in fact, ruled the island. Caliban being the native was the legitimate ruler of the island. *The Tempest* dramatized the process of colonization:

Prospero's friendly attitude towards Caliban in the beginning, and Caliban's forced enslavement by Prospero after he gets the knowledge of all the secrets of the island, parallels the attitude of the colonizers who first make friendly relations with the downtrodden natives in the name of business, etc and then gradually colonize and exploit them. Throughout the play, Caliban scolds himself for trusting Prospero and letting him know all the secrets of the land. By using the knowledge that he gained in the company of Caliban, Prospero enslaves Caliban and after making him a slave, he ill-treats him. Thus the play by depicting the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer, attempts to highlight and condemn the existing ideologies of colonization.

G. A. Wikes in his essay "*The Tempest* and the

Discourse of Colonialism" states: "*The Tempest* can readily be seen as a text which is complicit with colonial power. Prospero is the usurping invader, nervous about the legitimacy of his rule, his language lessons seen as an attempt to eradicate his own culture, or to bring it under imperialist control."(Wikes,42)

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