The Myth of the Superior Cultural Model in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

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**Abstract:** For over a century and particularly in the past twenty years, one of the most popular approaches to *The Tempest* has been the influence of colonialism and its representation in Shakespeare’s last play with a special focus on the portrayal of Caliban. Since the peak of postcolonial approaches to Shakespeare’s work in the decade between 1980s and 1990s, *The Tempest* has been read as a drama of colonial expansion and a play about the subordination of the narratives of the world. Colonialism, exploitation, language, resistance, alienation, the suppression of indigenous culture, the imposition of superior cultural model and the struggle for freedom are some of the themes that postcolonial Tempest deals with. Shakespeare’s play has become most closely associated with colonial discourse and with the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, providing the paradigm for the colonial master/colonized subject interaction and delineating the boundary between “civilization” and “savagery”. It was in this play more than any other work that Shakespeare confronted the European encounter with the new world. Scholars have variously interpreted the play as a Christian or political allegory, a study of European colonialism in the new world. Caliban’s figure is frequently evoked as a symbol of resistance to colonial regimes represented by Prospero. The latter is discussed as a model of superior culture bringing the myth of civilization to the ‘uncivilized’ Caliban supposed to learn refinement from his master Prospero. The play sparks an outcry on the theme of colonialism highlighting Caliban’s challenge to his master’s hegemony and discloses his mischievous intent. In this respect, *The Tempest* must be read in terms of cultural confrontation as we come across a troubled relationship between master and slave, which encourages a talk of hostile exchange between two different cultures: that of the native islander and the civilizing colonizer.

**Keywords:** Myth, hegemony, resistance, power, (post)colonialism, culture, exploitation.

I. Introduction

“A salvage and deformed slave”; with these words, William Shakespeare describes the figure of Caliban in the dramatis personae of his play *The Tempest*. For almost four centuries, literary critics have sought to answer the question of how Shakespeare meant his character Caliban to be. Is Caliban to be considered as a monster representing humanity’s “savage” side including all its vices, instincts, tendencies, and therefore stirring the reader’s disgust? Or has he rather to be regarded as the victim of the imperial tyrant, personified in the character of Prospero? The reception history of the play has proven that Shakespeare’s presentation of the character, especially Caliban, opened up a large scope for various, often contradicting interpretations of the “slave”, shrouded in the classic ambiguity that is unique to Shakespeare’s work and, thus, allows for multiple interpretations. Though Shakespeare wrote the play in the early 1660s, *The Tempest* was reexamined in the post-colonial era and critics began to see the play in a new light. Looking through the eyes of the character Caliban, anti-imperialists took a sympathetic view of the character. In what follows, I will turn an analytic eye on *The Tempest* as a postcolonial work accentuating the role of Prospero as a superior cultural model to his slave Caliban by examining the master/colonized subject interaction and by exploring certain binaries like: ignorant vs cultivated, civilized vs savage, enlightened vs backward. Elements of the discourse of colonialism will be recognized in this analysis.

*The Tempest*, DaphenePatai states in *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, functions as: “an essential metaphor that echoes through the field of postcolonial studies providing a rich language for an anticolonial
reading of canonical literary work”. Post-colonial reevaluations of traditional canonical works have led to various interpretations and intertextual rewritings of The Tempest. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Shakespeare’s play was considered as the primary text on which post-colonial criticism first took root. Post-colonial theorists and literary critics re-examine the play historically and show how the play is a reflection of the race, class, and gender struggle in early seventeenth century England. Indeed, The Tempest offers a critique of what was to become the English project of colonialism as the English asserted England’s presence around the world. “It was in The Tempest more than any other work that Shakespeare confronted the European encounter with the new world. This was an era”, Takaki writes: “when the English were encountering ‘other’ peoples and delineating the boundary between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’”. Scholars have variously interpreted the play as a Christian or political allegory, a study of European colonialism in the new world. Thomas Cartelli notes the construction of the relationship: “The Tempest supplies a pedigreed precedent for a politics of imperial domination premised on the objectified intractability of the native element”. Shakespeare’s play is a complex staging of the struggle between the “cannibal” and the “oppressor”. Since the nationalist struggles of the mid-twentieth century, “revisionary histories of colonialism […] frequently evoke the figure of Caliban as a symbol of resistance to colonial regimes” represented by Prospero. With the character Caliban whose name calls back to memory cannibal, Shakespeare may be offering in-depth discussion into the morality of colonialism. Different views are discussed with examples of Prospero’s colonial enslavement of Caliban and Caliban’s resentment of this.

Europeans felt they had a moral obligation behind their burgeoning imperialism. To their mind, they were bringing civilization to the uncivilized. Their mission was to convert the heathens to Christianity and to spread the word of God and culture to the backwards. This is because the colonizer believes that the natives are born, naturally, “savages” and that they need to be civilized. The natives have no other choices but to succumb to the orders and new ways of life of the colonizer. Much of colonization rested on the notion that the inhabitants of the “far away” lands were not human and, therefore, deserve the respect of the so-called “civilized”. In almost all cases of colonialism, the norms, beliefs, and cultural values of the larger power are forced upon all. Shakespeare’s play, The Tempest, displays the colonizers Prospero and Miranda being stranded in an enchanting island along with its sole native Caliban. A new world is being explored and the native inhabitant Caliban is represented as an uneducated savage being uncivilized and supposed to learn refinement from his master Prospero. When reading The Tempest, a connection to colonialism becomes obvious. As a matter of fact, the play sparks an outcry on the theme of colonialism highlighting Caliban’s challenge to his master’s power and discloses the mischievous intent of Prospero’s mind over other characters in the play. The so called New World, Caliban has frequently become the quintessential figure of resistance and struggle for political and cultural decolonization. The play highlights postcolonial investigation through the character of Caliban, seen not as a deformed slave, but as a native of the island over whom Prospero has imposed a form of colonial hegemony. Shakespeare’s play is impregnated with colonial discourse which is made clear ever since the beginning of the play with Prospero holding grip on the deserted island. Prospero has been able to take hold of the spot because of some special powers. The latter allows him to place himself as the supreme master of the local inhabitants. He uses Caliban and Ariel for his own purposes by dint of a mixture of threats of force and the promise of freedom some day. In taking charge of a place which is not his and in exerting his European authority over the strange non-European creatures, Prospero has turned into an epitome for European colonial power with which England was growing, increasingly, familiar during Shakespeare’s lifetime. In one of the confrontations with the landowner Prospero, Caliban responds with curses and gives his view of their interaction:

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’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

5 Ibid., P. 78.
And showed 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 mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, while you do keep from me
The rest O’th’island (1.2.332-346).

Caliban in Shakespeare’s representation of natural instinct collides with society. In fact Caliban’s attempted rape of Prospero’s daughter is a good example of how he acts according to the impulse without the control of civilization. This image enhances his character by fulfilling in his own flesh, the opposition and seemingly impossible compromise between nature and society. Caliban is, in a sense, a living breathing paradox. He cannot be tamed but he shows characteristics of a tamed being just as he shows the promise to be tamed. However, Caliban seems to revert back to his instincts and natural intelligence. Prospero, according to Kermode, is by contrast a figure of civilized man, rightly establishing and maintaining order on the island and in the small community of himself, Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban. Thus, Prospero is most equipped to be the ruler by promoting his civil qualities in the island by controlling Caliban’s passions, and this is a proof of civility and grace. Prospero’s moral authority rests on a complete inability to see the natives as fully mind set, which automatically labels those differences from Europeans as ugly, uncivilized, and threatening “others”. These native peoples were regarded as inferior and heathen savages, a commodity to be enslaved and controlled. Shakespeare places Caliban squarely in this image Europeans held of the inhabitants of the New World; what was viewed in this era as a celebration of the myth of European superiority, accomplishment, and civilization. Caliban serves to represent the other in a rising colonial discourse. Caliban is introduced from Prospero’s Eurocentric perspective as a salvage and deformed slave (I.3.311), antithetical to spirit. The sheer naming of “Caliban” reminds us of “Cannibals” and suggests a savage being that lacks any human education.

The relationship between Prospero and Caliban is obviously the master-servant relation. Caliban represents the native population of a country newly discovered by the white explorers and which is colonized by them. When Prospero arrived, Caliban educated him on all of the intricacies and secrets of the island. Prospero does not see the intelligence in this. He thanks Caliban by enslaving him and teaching him “civilized” ways as his “central” task […] is always to civilize the savages, to cultivate, or make them proper in whatever form they take”. Brown offers the idea that the inhabitant island of civility offered not only the opportunity for the expansion of civility, but the undoing of it as well freedom of being and temptation. Brown says the narrative of the play is also related to questions of power. The tempestuous storm was produced by Shakespeare to show Prospero’s mastery over the island. Prospero demonstrates his control over his listeners as he narrates establishing himself as father and educator of Miranda, rescuer of Ariel, colonizer of Caliban, and corrector of aristocrats. Caliban emphasizes that without possession of the book Prospero will be as I am”. For Caliban, the book is not the vehicle to knowledge but the tool of the magician that makes possible the performance of authority. Books are utensils, magical instruments of power, and they are also, in themselves, the legitimization of the right to authority. At stake in the struggle between Caliban and Prospero, is the ownership of books, the technology of power/magic and the implements of educational practice. Therefore, it is difficult to know quite where to draw the line between enslavement and education, the colonization of the body and the enlightenment of the mind. When Caliban suggests burning Prospero’s books, he aims at destroying the core of Prospero’s power to subjugate him. If we think of Caliban’s motive to burn books as an act that leads to freedom, then the burning of books somehow becomes an extreme gesture of liberation. Caliban’s impulse for burning books stands in contrast to Prospero’s declaration, “I’ll drown my book” (V.1.57). Unlike drowning, metaphorically seen as giving up on magic, burning is a more radical, and a more literal way of eradicating knowledge and symbolically, the subject that produced it. Prospero, in the play, is portrayed as a colonizer who exploits the innocence of his subjects to his own advantage. Prospero uses his power over Caliban in a malicious, vengeful manner. He influences Caliban by intimidating him with threats of bodily discomforts.

The English colonists’ use of religion and superior technology appearing as magic to manipulate the natives is analogous to Prospero’s use of magic obtained from books to subdue and render use fully obedient Caliban. The latter dramatically emphasizes the extent of this power by explaining why he does not simply run away.

I must obey.

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9 Ibid., P. 218.
His art is of such pow’r
  It would control my dam’s god, Setebos,
And make a vassal of him (I.2.372-74)

Another feature of empowerment which is important in establishing the relationship between Caliban and Prospero is the expression of power in the mimic relationship through language. References to Englishmen and Europeans as having responsibility for instructing colonized natives were common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as in later periods. The ability to impose the learning of one’s language onto others had been the hallmark of imperial rule for centuries. Language has been considered as a subtle tool of hegemony. It gradually shapes the thought on a sub-conscious level. The European colonizers assumed that the natives lacked any culture or formal language. It was the Europeans who brought them gifts of the western language and culture. It is because, essentially, language has a power to fix thoughts and beings. It roots a nation to a past. Language contains elements of culture, human interaction, environment working of the human brain and identity. People are marked by the language that they speak. The colonizer recognized this significance. Therefore, he could have power not necessarily through physical control but mental control as well. Language could change the colonized countries into mimic people who just copy the colonizer’s values, culture, beliefs, and identity. In Shakespeare’s The Tempest, binarism emerged as a lack of moral sense or good/evil and savage/civilized, supreme/lowly. Prospero introduced himself as a man who is civilized and moral whereas Caliban is a native who is described as a barber devoid of any morality. Education was exercised through language. Therefore, Prospero introduced himself as a compassionate “schoolmaster” who had a burden to teach Caliban his language. Under Prospero’s education, Caliban loses his identity. He loses his freedom and changes into a slave that Prospero dares even to insult. In his discussion of the play, Greenblatt calls this process “linguistic colonialism” and turns his argument on the question of the degree to which the likeness or difference of the native are recognized by the colonizer. Through language, the greatest tool of domination ever, Caliban was “invented” in the European discourse. He learned “how/To name the bigger light, […]” (I.2.333), we could even say that he learned of his existence too. Or more, he began to exist since the imposed discourse is that of ethnocentrism.

In the play, there is no reference to the language of Caliban, as though he did not exist before the encounter with civilization. Thus Caliban becomes this very other that has to be invented in order to be understood and possessed by the domineering discourse that is by history. The differences in English for Prospero and Caliban are vast: for Caliban English means being silenced into assent when he is with Prospero. While for Prospero, it means recovering lost property and title in a society in which social identity is inseparable from property and ownership. His language lessons are seen as an attempt to eradicate Caliban’s culture and to bring it under imperialist control. Undoubtedly, Caliban’s treatment by Prospero and Miranda should not be separated from the larger English discourse on education, Yet Caliban is not only Prospero’s and Miranda’s student and servant as island native, he is also their colonial subject. “Abhorred slave,” Miranda shouts at him:

    Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
    One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
    Know thine own meaning, but woudst’ gabble like
    A thing most brutish… (I.2.402-407)

Miranda dismisses Caliban’s native language as unintelligible “gabling/something most brutish” revealing her assumption that English is the only language (I.2.356). Facing a reality of impetuous colonizers, marginalized people have adopted European language whether voluntarily or not as a means to open new channels of communication. Although the use of European languages places the viability of native cultures at stake, the paradox in Caliban’s case is that he must speak Prospero’s language in order to destabilize his power. Caliban’s ability to speak allows him close proximity to power despite his status as a slave. The language which Prospero and Caliban share is a discourse which arises out of their physical colonial relationship. The Tempest does more, however, than simply stage the suppression of the subaltern. It also imagines colonial subjects speaking back to Europeans who would seek to reeducate them. At some point, then, the native turns the colonizer’s language against him and adopts Caliban’s stance: “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! (I.2.362-4). Postcolonial writers have turned repeatedly to The Tempest to “curse” Western imperialism in its own language. An imperialism that runs counter the longstanding human values like equality between all the peoples.

The Tempest examines the complex interlocking of discourses emerging from different early modern histories of contact with Africa, and the Americas, and provides understanding of the relationship of text, the past, and present. However, the play, basically, brings to light the dramatic personae of Caliban as a key symbol of the
struggle against colonialism itself. Even Caliban’s awareness of Prospero’s presence does not inhibit his rebellious actions. Though he has learned to know that Prospero’s tortures are awaiting him, he is undaunted: “His spirits hear me, / And yet I must curse” (II.1.4-5). Hence post-colonial critics view Prospero as a usurper who has deprived Caliban of his rights on his native land. Caliban is viewed in a more sympathetic light and in his plight, he articulates the sufferings of all natives under colonial oppression. Roberto Fernandez Retamar maintains that Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* can be “read” as:

The script for resistance to colonialism: I know no other metaphor more expressive of our cultural situation of our reality […] what is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban? 10

References


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