

Revisiting Caliban: A Postcolonial Symbol or A Figure of Ambiguity in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Mayuri Saikia

Post Graduate, Dept. of English
University of Delhi

Abstract

The Tempest by William Shakespeare was one of Shakespeare's last major plays. The play is an exquisite blend of magic, music, masque with yoking of tragic and comic elements that makes us categorize the play as a romance. The immediate cultural, economic and social background of the play stands significant in understanding the play at a deeper level. Owing to the vague portrayal of the figure of Caliban in the play, critics of all ages have developed an interest to re-contextualize Caliban within the postcolonial context. It is his character along with the locale of the play that leads to a long trajectory of critical discourse on power politics, dominance, issues of racial tension and identity in the play. The paper attempts to revisit Caliban and examine whether truly he is a postcolonial symbol or more a figure of ambiguity.

Keywords: Caliban, Ambiguity, Postcolonialism, Power Politics, Dependence Syndrome

*The Tempest by William Shakespeare is a romance play which was first performed in 1611 before King James. The age when Shakespeare was writing was a time of great economic, social and cultural upheavals as England was rapidly touching its pinnacle in navigation, exploration and discovery of the New World. The new Renaissance travel writings by explorers especially by Michel de Montaigne's *The Cannibals of Brazil* and William Starchey's *Storms and Strife in Bermuda* etc. further fuelled the news and rumor hungry English literary market from which Shakespeare too drew his inspirations for the play. The plot and locale of the play along with the native Caliban must have been relatable for the Jacobean audience. Ever since its debut the play throughout the ages has continued to invoke sentiments of awe, dazzlement and debate. But it is the character of Caliban that holds our attention even in the twenty first century. The vague portrayal of Caliban has allowed readers and critics alike to interpret and reinterpret him. This stands even more true from the postcolonial lens with its issues of racial identity, fear of miscegenation and equality. The anti-colonial revisiting and revision of the play gained momentum with the rapid decolonization of erstwhile European colonies from mostly the second half of twentieth century in places like Asia, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean Islands where Caliban came to be seen as an emblem of the defiant subject seeking autonomy from his*

colonizers. They validated Caliban's revolt and challenged the Eurocentric gaze of 'Self' and 'the Other'. *The Tempest* became an allegory of European imperialism, colonization and age of discovery. However, Caliban's character becomes increasingly problematic in the play forcing us to wonder whether he was more of an ambiguous figure or can be qualified as a clear postcolonial symbol.

The postcolonial Revision and Response

If we look at the earliest criticisms of Caliban we learn that either he was out rightly dismissed as a minor or savage character not worthy of further commentary like William Davenant, John Dryden, who commented that "he has all the discontents, and malice of a witch, and of a devil," and that "His person is monstrous, and he is the product of unnatural lust; and his language is as hobgoblin as his person; in all things he is distinguished from other mortals." (Norton, 119)

On the other hand, there were critics who saw Caliban as a significant character like Patrick MacDonnell, William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who said that "Caliban is in some respects a noble being:... a man in the sense of the imagination: all the images he uses are drawn from nature, and are highly poetical". (Arden, 89)

The pre-twentieth century European stage mainly identified Caliban as Darwin's missing gap, as a primitive being who is in the process of evolution from beast to human. Thus he was dehumanized. Meanwhile, the play began to be seen as an allegory of colonization of America or possibly Ireland but Shakespeare has made the geography ambiguous so limiting the locale to a specific place wouldn't be the right thing to do. The dawn of twentieth century led to a new postcolonial or anti-colonial consciousness that emerged with the rise of free erstwhile colonies. When "the empire started writing back" a growing empathy for Caliban was observed and authors like Aime Cesaire, Suniti Namjoshi and Lemuel Johnson subverted the play; most notable of them is Aime Cesaire's drama *A Tempest* that highlights the issue of race and provides overt support for Caliban's vocal revolt. (Norton, 321)

Now the question that emerges is in what ways or grounds can the play be qualified as postcolonial? According to postcolonial theorists, certain themes or topics commonly arise or overlap in such works such as the colonizer's first encounter with the natives, a sightseeing tour of the colonizer under the guidance of a native, asserting dominance by threat, use of violence in all forms to subdue natives, the 'othering' of the natives as inferior/lesser human beings, trying to civilize them, justifying the enslavement, a native's feeling of alienation and exile in one's own land and so on and so forth. Indeed all these things can be seen in *The Tempest*. The postcolonial critics have often questioned the history of settlement and ownership of the island in hands of Prospero because it was Sycorax with embryonic Caliban who first came to the island. When Prospero and Miranda first arrived there, it was Caliban who welcomed them and spilled the

secrets of the place for their better survival. They had a relationship of mutual trust and companionship. That is the reason Caliban more than even regret as a slave feels betrayed. Caliban claims his original sovereignty by saying “This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother Which thou tak’st from me.” (Norton, 18) but is denied on the ground that he attempted to ravish Miranda hence is isolated from their domestic space, forced to live in a cave and only fit for their contempt. But if that is the only justification of Prospero to make Caliban a slave then what about his behavior towards Ariel who is also made a slave but treated relatively fair? Why is he a privileged servant promised of freedom and not Caliban? Why is only Caliban and his mother demeaned with exhaustive epithets like “freckled whelp”, “hag-born”, “hag-seed”, “poisonous slave” etc ? Why only Caliban’s physical appearance is treated with abhorrence and disgust? It is evident that the issues run deeper than the surface level and fear of miscegenation, racial superiority, inherent prejudice lurks deep beneath them and they play a greater part in the power struggle and politics.

Prospero may not be a tyrant but his darker traits of personality best manifests in his speeches and treatment to Caliban and his mother. For instance, Prospero questions Sycorax and Caliban’s ethnicity maliciously declaring Caliban was begotten by the devil himself. Miranda too joins in and calls him a “savage”, “most brutish” and “ thy vile race” (Norton,19). The attack on race cannot be overlooked. The father-daughter duo inherently feel superior as a race compared to them. As a matter of fact both Prospero’s and Sycorax’s stories are similar as both of them came to the island in banishment with a child but he fails to feel any pity for her. Moreover, the duke’s role as a colonial historian cannot be trusted as Sycorax died long before he and Miranda came so all that he knows about her is from Ariel but can Ariel be so relied upon? Furthermore, a binary is drawn in the play between Sycorax and Prospero’s magic.

Prospero’s Magic	Sycorax’s Magic
Good/White magic	Evil/Dark magic
Effect ‘harmless’/benign	Effect ‘demonic’/terror
Learning sources credible	Learning sources from witchcraft/sorcery
Lightness/ Whiteness	Darkness

A close reading of the play would also suggest that even Ariel and Caliban are portrayed as the two antithesis extremes of virtue and vice, submissiveness and rebelliousness and of air and earth. Although both are colonial subjects, Caliban is everything that Ariel is not. Even though they are opposites of each other, Prospero’s treatment of Ariel is subject to change. As long as

Ariel remains faithful he will be kind towards him. The shift of Prospero's attitude can be seen when Ariel temporarily revolts which angers Prospero and reminds him of how he earlier saved Ariel from Sycorax's magic. Prospero uses magic as his weapon of colonial domination and subjugation. Interestingly, both critics and readers alike have questioned Prospero's character, authority and his actions and noted that Prospero treats Caliban too severely with excessive vehemence than he deserves and 'Whom stripes may move, not kindness' (Norton,19). When Caliban vows revenge, Prospero threatens him with punishment and says "For this, be sure, tonight thou shalt have cramps,..." (Norton,18). He only cares to maintain his power and authority in the island. Therefore it would be apt to say that George Lamming rightly said that "His imperialism is like an illness...This island belongs to Caliban whom he found there; yet some privilege allows Prospero to assert- and with an authority that is divine- that he lord of the island." (Norton, 164) In truth Prospero wants gratitude and eternal servitude from both Ariel and Caliban which both cannot give. The biggest irony is that his magic can do anything except help him in survival in the island. Prospero hates and fears Caliban's revolt but needs him too much for his own physical survival which 'profit' both father-daughter .

The postcolonial angle gets further strengthened when Prospero and Miranda decide to teach Caliban their language, basic science and astronomy with limited success. They presumed that Caliban was without any language and culture and called his language "gabble". They, as the representation of modern civilization took upon the role of civilizing him but this only leads Caliban to curse on them in their own language. This shows both - that language which signifies knowledge is nothing compared to sweet liberty for Caliban. Without freedom where and how to use power of knowledge? Even with freedom and knowledge would Prospero and Miranda have accepted Caliban as their equal? Or is the bridge between the self and the other too wide to be truly joined ? Second, the limitation of knowledge is explored as even with knowledge, Caliban failed to distinguish the quality of persons like Stephano and Trinculo for who they were. Hence, he rejects knowledge and decides to be rooted to earth.

Caliban's Perspective and his Ambiguity

Caliban as a character has been prejudiced for his physical appearance and possible deformity by majority of European characters and have called him names such as a "strange fish", "plain fish", "half fish", "half monster", "weak", "scurvy", "howling", "ridiculous", "puppy-headed" etc. which signifies that they see him as only quasi human; but as a matter of fact, he is essentially a human being. When Miranda first saw Ferdinand she exclaims that Caliban is the third man she has seen in the island. This act of branding him as a grotesque figure reveals the Eurocentric gaze that constantly reflects and compares Caliban's form as foundationally opposite to their own. This gaze is based on difference and grounded with their inherent sense of superiority. However, Caliban has his own merits. Nobody in the play is as connected to nature as him. He is seen as a

wild child of nature herself who enjoys sweetness of the island and its music. He is imaginative and instinctual. He loves and respects his mother. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume critic Fanny Kemble's opinion that in the chain of being, Caliban occupies the lowest position compared to all other characters; but this cannot be true as Caliban is indeed nobler and more humane than the two Neapolitan usurpers- Antonio and Sebastian ready to commit regicide. They represent the corrupt side of European culture and civilization. Even in despair and in face of thralldom Caliban never loses hope for liberty.

The only possible faults that he has and might have are sin of lust, his too welcoming nature of strangers which gets him into trouble, his habit of taking everyone at their face value, naivety as George Lamming opines "Caliban is the epitome of a pure and uncalculated naivete." (Norton,165)

And at last his fatal flaw that complicates his character and leads to ambiguity is his compromising his goal for freedom for a new master. The play shows the paradox that more than freedom he hates being a slave of Prospero. He is ready to spill his survival secrets, shoe lick them and even worship Stephano if the attempted coup to overthrow Prospero gets successful. This leads us to the final question of dependence syndrome that Caliban shows. Why is it that he is too eager to serve a new master who might be worse than the former one? Does it signify that a native is never fit to self rule his own land? That always a Western grand patriarchal figure like Prospero is needed to be depended on? Even the ending of Caliban remains a mystery. Will he really "seek grace" or shall lead a solitary life in his regained land remains an enigma. But one thing is certain that a master/slave relationship is essentially destructive and affects both the colonizer and the colonized. None remains civilized and innocent in both violence and rebellion. In the end, Shakespeare praises neither Prospero nor Caliban but Ariel as he was the one truly liberated due to his forgiving nature. It would be right to say *The Tempest* does have a strong base for postcolonial criticism but Caliban alone as a character remains ambiguous.

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