

The Tempest and Julie Taymor's America

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Abstract

Samuel Johnson in "Preface to Shakespeare" universalizes *Shakespeare* by making him as a part of a literary genre which is embedded within the fabric of the contemporary which is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. This transformative character of the bard triggers from intertextuality which invites different perspective on adaptations. This metamorphosis of the bard through the art of modern technology brings out a space of exploration with which Diana Henderson calls "a collective commitment to the principle of contestation of meaning". (Diana E, ed. *Alternative Shakespeare* 3, 2) Therefore the attempt of this paper is to explore the transformative character of the bard by examining Julie Taymore's adaptation of "The tempest". It is the objective of the paper to show how Taymore's adaptation responds to the cultural, social and political domain of American society by addressing race, gender and class anxieties. The paper also brings out the imperial policy of the nation and questions patriarchal power and authority. It also addresses Miranda's speech of "Brave New World" and how it alludes to the American dream.

Keywords: intertextuality, adaptation, colonial project, race, gender, patriarchy, visual realism, Faustian,

Julie Taymor's "The Tempest" (2010) appropriates Shakespeare to the cultural domain of contemporary America. By rewriting the bard, the movie addresses the anxieties of race, gender and class in American modern society. It is set in Hawaii and shows the colonial ambition of the nation in the island. Through this engagement with the colonial project, it highlights the discourse of the "Other" which is mainly reflected through the portrayal of Caliban and Ariel. The director gives the role of Caliban to a Black artist and it centers on his dethronement from an Island through the use of black magic by his master. He is the only black character in the movie and his color reflects the deep rooted racism in the US. Therefore, it successfully deals with the social, cultural and political realities of its time. It however maintains a major shift from Shakespeare by giving the role of Prospero to a female character (as Prospera). By using this gender reversal, it questions the issues of patriarchal authority and power. The movie also retains

the happy ending of the play by referring to Miranda's brave new world speech thereby making allusions to the American dream which also restore every character to their respective status and freedom.

The movie opens with Miranda holding a miniature of an island made of clay on her hands. It is however splashed by the raindrops and melts slowly under the storm created by Prospera's magic. The storm from Prospera's wrath hurls Antonio and his crew members in to the sea, on their way back to Milan after attending his daughter's marriage in Naples. Touched by the suffering of the crew members, Miranda rushes to her mother and asks for forgiveness. It then shows Prospera explaining to her daughter, the reasons for their exile in the island in the form of a montage¹. It historicizes the death and dethroning of her husband along with their exile. It also shows her practice of magic and science which is destroyed after her husband's death. Realizing her love for magic and science, Gonzalo packs some of her books in secret to accompany her in the exile. The movie then shows Prospera taking control of the island with the help of her magic. She finally fulfills her wishes with the aid of her spirit Ariel and the movie closes with a happy ending in her mansion.

The storm scene in the movie is an exercise of visual realism. Shakespeare's shipwreck, fear and the panic of the crew members are portrayed with special effects of lighting, sound and movement of the camera. The onstage shipwreck therefore attains a reality with the modern filmic techniques. The portrayal of the shipwreck is one of the most difficult tasks in theatres. But it becomes more manageable with technology and other filmic techniques. Therefore these filmic techniques are more advantageous in portraying a visual reality, a verisimilitude of the shipwreck which is not possible in a theatre. This use of technology gives a new perspective in understanding Shakespeare. Through these advantages, Taymor's camera shows us Prospera controlling the storm with her staff holding horizontally on air screaming with vengeance. The focus of the camera reflects both the raging fire and the engulfing flames of the ship which is accompanied by the aural tumult. The computer generated techniques therefore produces a better view of the play's shipwreck and offers a closer truth to reality.

"The wronged Duke of Milan"² in the play is the wronged Duchess of Milan in the film. Helen Mirren's role as Prospera and this gender reversal invites multiple criticisms of the movie. According to Jonathan Bate, the diversion of Prospera from Prospero and the story invented on her husband's death does not suit the textual poetics. For him "[e]ven people who know the original text well will struggle to pick out exactly which lines are the invented ones"³. A reviewer for *New Yorker* observes that "the switch of Prospero to Prospera (a role taken by Helen Mirren) does the play no violence"⁴. Taymor's creativity, her attempt at making it new and her understanding of the text however compromise in the movie⁵. It maintains her distance from Shakespeare and at

the same time keeps the bard's plot and the characters at the centre. It is her attempt to make Shakespeare relevant in her own contemporary world by imposing her own values and understanding of the text. Therefore this gender reversal is more of political in nature. In an interview Julie Taymor comments that the wronged Duke of Milan "had her whole life taken away from her because she was a woman. Prospera, a woman scorned, wants to save her daughter from the same fate"⁶. It therefore portrays Prospera more in terms of a protective and loving mother while Prospero is obsessed with his books of magic and science. He is thrown down from his dukedom because of his negligence and his obsession with books of magic and the corruption within the court. She on the other hand is the inheritor of her death husband's title and it is her legitimate right to be the duchess of Milan. Her exile therefore results from her status as a woman who has no protection from the patriarchal authority and power within the court of Milan.

However this gender reversal doesn't provide feminist criticism of the movie. The director undercuts the feminist reading by portraying Prospera along with patriarchal characteristics which empowers her to fight for her own rights. Moreover, she is highly educated, studies science and magic and is a Faustian figure that derives power from her study. However, she doesn't sell her soul to the devil. She is also a caring mother who uses her power to regain back her authority. Also her appearance doesn't compromise with the idea of feminine beauty and love. From the opening scene she is not shown as a gentle mother but a ferocious sorceress whose vengeance and hatred consumes her inner soul. In this opening scene she stands over a rocky headland and screams a demonic clamor that makes her resembles to the fury of the storm. She holds a staff overhead and drives the storm which digitally alters her to a demonic sorceress. Her black cloak is made with white glittering and resembles the wings of an enormous bird. The focus of the camera in this scene is made on her scream, her red eyes and mouth which show a crazed expression of cruelty, suffering and pain.

Prospera, therefore offers a new perspective on her art of magic in exile. With its power, she achieves a new status as the ruler of the island. She rules it with the manipulation of the natives. The island becomes an ideal place of escape from patriarchy and at the same time it is a place of regeneration. She achieves her authority in the island only to learn the art of restoring herself as the duchess of Milan at the end. According to Andrew James Hartley Prospera experiences "an escape from patriarchy" only to engage in "a study of oppression," as she is forced "to sympathize with the oppressed while being powerless (for the bulk of the play) to escape her own tyranny"⁷. Her exile resembles that of the witch Sycorax who was accused of witchcraft and therefore exile in the same island. She also restores life to the half human half fairy Ariel who was confined within a people tree because of Sycorax's curse. Therefore the Island is a place for the oppressed. And Prospera encounter this story of oppression while she herself is powerless. She therefore sympathizes with the natives of the island. She teaches Caliban the human language and liberates Ariel from his confinement. In this role of a liberator

she almost resembles her parallel Prospero -the quintessential European patriarchal and imperial figure who controls the island of the text with his civilizing mission.

Sycorax and Prospera share similar stories of oppression and their resemblances are stressed in the movie more than in the text. They belong to the same sex and they are exiled because of the same accusation of being witches. The montage clearly shows how the jealous brother (Antonio) of her husband grabs her power and authority by charging her as a witch. Taymor describes these resemblances of Sycorax and Prospera in her introduction to the Screenplay of "The Tempest", "The identification and accusation of Prospera as a witch begins in the Milan flashback The battle, however, between white and black magic begins in our story on the island, with the enslavement of Caliban. It is brought into sharp focus as Prospera spews her disdain for the "foul witch, Sycorax," the mother of Caliban and torturer of Ariel. At the top of the story, Prospera does not yet recognize or acknowledge her own dark side, but as the play progresses Prospera and Sycorax become mirrors to one another in their malignant and abusive use of the black arts.⁸ Miranda (Felicity Jones) is exiled with her mother as a child. She grows up in the island without a father. Julie Taymor strictly follows Shakespeare in portraying her character. Her heroine is therefore an innocent and virtuous virgin who is untouched by the oppressive patriarchal world. She is built upon every element of womanhood. Her beauty and tenderness completes her whole external and internal. She is the child of nature and the island as an idealised place of restoration and regeneration, contributes in shaping her. Like the island untouched by the patriarchal social codes, power and authority, corruption and degradation of the court, Miranda is free from the world of the hypocrite aristocrats. Caliban is the only male she knows in the island. Her affinity with the island is clearly shown by Taymor when she shows Miranda holding a model of the island on her hand at the opening part of the movie. The angle of the camera is directly focused on the clay island and it zooms out slowly showing Miranda holding it on her hand. It then focuses on both figures and they are shown together from the same angle. Like the island that refurbishes lost relationships, Miranda also acts as an agent in bringing a stable relationship in the royal family. Her anticipated marriage with Ferdinand promises the restoration of Prospera as the rightful duchess of Milan and her son in law as her successor to the throne. Therefore Miranda takes the centre stage in bringing happy ending of the movie.

However, Miranda is the daughter of the aristocratic patriarchal family and she is the only heir to the throne. Grew up with a matriarch mother she represents the other half of her mother. Prospera's restoration to the throne of Milan is another prospect of Miranda getting into the family line of aristocracy as the future duchess of Milan. Also she acts according to the will of her mother and she speaks her mother's language. Her innocence and purity almost gives her a selfless voice in the movie and in the text both. According to Laura Donaldson "Miranda-the Anglo-European daughter-offers us a feminine trope of colonialism, for her textual and psychological selflessness in The Tempest exposes the particular oppression of women under the rule of their biological

and cultural Fathers" ⁹. Taymor's Miranda and her selflessness reflect this trait of colonialism in the movie. Her mother equates her body with a virgin island that's needs to be explored and conquered. Her beauty allures the eyes of the viewers and she is the rich and the fertile island. Her mother controls her choice and she speaks according to it. Her "O brave new world that has such people in't" brings a new perspective to the happy ending in the movie. It is her first exposure to the other people in the island and her exclamation brings a new hope to her world. This hope can be referred to the American dream. She feels beauty in seeing other people and for her it is the formation of a new society.¹⁰ As untouched by the hypocrisy and corruption of the other world, the foundation of her new society is laid on innocence and purity and it is the American Dream.

Cliban (Djimon Hounsou) lives in a cave and he was the sole owner of the island before Prospera conquered it. He is the son of Sycorax the witch and Prospera is his white master. In the movie he appears from a rocky slope of the Island and bears a look of vengeance and hatred on his master. It also bears a terrifying horror because of his enslavement and torture. He is accused of dishonoring Miranda's sexuality and is treated as a threat to them. His body is covered with dried mud and half of his face is painted with a crescent shape white mud. This crescent shape painting hints at his mixed race identity, his mother being a white witch imbibed certain characters from her. Therefore his skin color, proximity to nature, rustic life, physical demeanor and menacing presence caused people to treat him as the "Other." His character portrayal can be seen in its importance in the contemporary social, political and cultural scenario of Julie Taymor's America. According to Kevin A Quarmby, "Hounsou's Caliban might appear a socially and culturally significant figure in this twenty-first century production, with Taymor responding to prevailing post-colonial attitudes to race and slavery, but her choice of actor mirrors almost identically her 1980s stage casting"¹¹In her introduction to the screenplay Julie taymor comments that "In casting an African in this role, one automatically brings to the forefront the obvious themes of colonialization and usurpation that clearly were part of Shakespeare's worldview, derived from stories culled from explorations to Africa and the New World"¹². Taymor's setting of the movie is in Lanai, the volcanic Island of Hawaii and she shifted the social and cultural domain of racism and slavery to the island. By casting Caliban as an outcast and tortured Other, she makes him cross the geographical boundary from Hawaii to the post colonial US society.

The master slave relationship between Prospera and Caliban historicizes the colonial occupation of US in Hawaii. The US missionaries in the early 1920s and 30s in the island started proselytizing the natives. This process of conversion is a threat to the local religion and beliefs. The social, cultural and political discourse of the island started falling at the mercy of the civilizing mission of the US missionaries. According to Willaim Huthingson, "Americans felt "special obligations toward foreign missions" 'obligations that were linked to the ideas of manifest destiny, biblical commands to

preach all over the world, and “a fitful concern about the Indians. And he also further states that this mission “dispatch[ed] some two thousand missionaries over a sixty-year period.”¹³ The foreign mission school which was established in 1955 at Cornwall is one of the evidences to show the increasing occupation of proselytizing the natives of the island. The school trained local people to proselytize their own people. Therefore the increasing number of missionaries in the island signifies the expansion of US colonialist policy. The missionaries under this expansionist policy eroded the social, cultural and political identities of the natives. Under this policy they recognized the foreign cultures as the Other and marginalized them. They are enslaved within the assimilationist discourse of the US foreign policy. Julie Taymor’s movie response to this expansionist policy of US in the Island. Prospera considers Caliban as the other- the uncivilised and the wild that needs to be preach to and civilized. Therefore she taught him the language of the common man and tries to civilize him. This language however erodes his primitive identity. Her civilizing mission usurps his status from the rightful owner of the island and he is enslaved within her social codes and the violation of these social codes means a grave punishment from her magic. This is Caliban’s reaction against the language learned from his master

You taught me language and my profit on it is, I know how to curse
 The red plague rid you for learning me your language ¹⁴

Caliban’s character can be referred back to the slavery system in the Hawaiian Island. The inability of the local people to supply the required workers for the plantation led to the import of cheap labor from Africa and other Asian countries. This import of labor dates back to the beginning of 1852. Poor and hungry, they were desperate for work and promised for a better work and decent salary in the plantation fields. However, they were exploited in the process and forced to stay there in the island as slaves. Caliban eats taro, a local food, which resembles sweet potato in the island. Julie Taymor interprets it as “hairy root” in her introduction to the screenplay of “The Tempest”. This is grown from corm plant and Caliban eats the starched filled portion of the root which is grown underground. This is an important plant in the cultivation and consumption of the local inhabitants of Hawaii. However due to its widespread availability and its character to decay quickly it is less attractive to the upper classes. Therefore it remains mainly for the poor and hungry. Caliban eats this taro uncooked as it is shown in the opening part of the movie. This root is considered to be toxic when eaten raw. It has prickly spikes and it needs to be boiled and cooked properly. His style of consuming it directly shows him as one of the chief labors from the slavery system of the early Hawaii Island ¹⁵

Caliban’s enslavement can be interpreted in terms of the deep rooted racism in contemporary US society. Unlike Ariel, his skin color is black and it determines his identity. Both Caliban and Ariel ¹⁶ are enslaved but their relationship with the matriarch master is different. Ariel is white and he is a subservient slave. He performs every task for his master

without any hesitation. However Caliban has a violent nature. His relationship with his master is built on hatred and vengeance. Therefore the deep rooted racial tensions in US can be seen from the relationship of Caliban and his master. Unlike Ariel, he never asks for freedom from his master. When he meets Stephano and Trinculo, he assumes them as his new master and promised to show rich and fertile resources of the island. He also plots the murder of his master

Why as I told thee, tis a custom with her in the late afternoon to sleep
 there thou mayst brain her

.....
 or paunch her with a stake
 or cut her wezand with thy knife
 but remember first to posses her books
 for without them she is but a sot as I am
 nor hath one spirit to command not
 they do all hate her rootedly as I
 Burn her books.¹⁷

Therefore Caliban never thinks of gaining his freedom back; instead he is more concerned of a new master and a better life from it. He is an ambiguous figure, a colonial subject who never demands freedom but quite rebellious. He never thinks of murdering Prospera for attaining his freedom before he meets Stephano and Trinculo. His physical power and demeanor surpasses that of Trinculo and Stephano but he has given the task to them. He himself plans the murder and he knows her better them (Stephano and Trinculo). He knows how to steal her book and without these books she is not his master. However his exposure to the corrupted world of Trinculo and Stephano might have induced him to this plot of murdering his master. But Julie Taymor doesn't portray him as an individual colonial subject but a savage who needs to be controlled and civilize. The happy ending of the movie restores him to his freedom. Taymor's camera at the closing part of the movie shows him climbing the staircase of Prospera's mansion and opens the door which leads to the wild island. In this scene he looks back at his master and headed towards the door. The camera focuses on his facial expression and their eyes contact and an emotional bonding is created. He doesn't have the look of vengeance and horror at this juncture but shows himself as an emotional Caliban who looks at his master for the last time in his life. However, as Prospera refers to him as the thing of darkness, his character in the movie still remains a mystery.

Taymor's portrayal of Ariel (Ben Wishaw) is one of the most interesting aspects of this movie. Although *The Tempest* is all about Prospera and her restoration to the throne of Milan, the movie's actions are performed by Ariel. It is therefore Areil's movie. He controls the sequel of the actions and the progression of the plot. From the shipwreck scene, the giant sea monster Areil starts appearing and his breath control the movement of the ship. The camera captures both the movement of Areil and the ship together and it is controlled by electromagnetic flames which are

released from his arms and mouth. Therefore the shipwreck is portrayed with the use of computer generated cinematic images of Ariel which is overlaid with the real sea images. This use of cinematic technology shows the direct involvement of Ariel in the shipwreck scene. Therefore he is Prospera's right arm and he converts her thoughts into actions. Shakespeare's "delicate spirit" is a huge sea monster which converts every thoughts of Prospera with the precision of a machine. Another character of Ariel is his grotesque and gross metamorphosis. He changes his appearances according to the demands of the time and he flies in the air with the wink of an eye. Ariel is also a singing monster. As he sings, he sends the electromagnetic waves and captures his prey. He brings Ferdinand with these electromagnetic waves from the shipwreck to Prospera's chamber.

"Where should this music be?" Ferdinand observes "I th' air, or th' earth?"

This music crept by me upon the waters . . . Thence I have followed it / Or is hath drawn me, rather¹⁸

This transmission of the electromagnetic signals binds all the characters of the movie together at the end. The movements of the corrupted duke of Milan and his other compatriots of Naples are controlled and recorded by Ariel's signals. Lured by his music, they are brought for the final reconciliation. Unlike Caliban, his relationship with Prospera is not rebellious. Also he is a white spirit and he demands freedom. He is bound to his master's control because she saves him from the witch Sycorax whose curse traps him within the confines of a tree. His song "Merrily, merrily, shall I live now"¹⁹ finally frees himself from his master. It fulfills his wish of being a free spirit and attains his authority and power in the Island.

Julie Taymor therefore adapts Shakespeare to the social, political and cultural realities of America. With the use of filmic technology, Taymor depicts a new perspective on Shakespeare's play and addresses issues such as colonialism, racism and gender anxieties in 21st century America. While adapting the play, Taymor distances herself from the bard by maintaining cuts and additions thereby making it new. Yet she also keeps Shakespeare at the centre of her work and examines the cultural transposition involved in making a new American Shakespeare in the movie.

Notes

1. Montage is a visual imagery which is created to bring back a series of events from the past, to the present and used in the form of flashback images to indicate the passage of time. It is a technique of cinematography introduced by Sergie Eisenstein
2. From the *The Tempest*, connotation to Prospero..
3. Lehmann, Courtney. "Turn off the Dark": A Tale of Two Shakespeares in Julie Taymor's *Tempest*. *Shakespeare bulletin* 32.1(March, 2014) 45 -64.
4. Bate, Jonathan. Foreword: "Enter Ariel, Invisible." *The Tempest, adapted from the play by William Shakespeare*. New York: Abrams, 2010. P,10.

5. Taymor's invented flashback story, her technique of adaptation is to portray a verisimilitude of the events in the play
6. Lehmann, Courtney. "Turn off the Dark": A Tale of Two Shakespeares in Julie Taymor's *Tempest*. *Shakespeare bulletin* 32.1(March, 2014) 45 -64.
7. Hartley, Andrew James. "Prospera's Brave New World: Cross-Cast Oppression and the Four-fold Player in the Georgia Shakespeare Festival's *Tempest*." p. 134
8. Taymor, Julie. *The Tempest*. Screenplay. By Taymor. New York: Abrams, 2010. p,10
9. Donaldson, Laura E. "The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading." *Diacritics* 18.3 (1988):65-77.
10. Miranda's hope for a new society is based on innocence and purity. She is not exposed to the outside world and her island is her life resembling purity, the virgin land. American dream echoes this purity and simplicity, equality, fraternity and love. However, she doesn't recognize that her hope is legible only for the island not for the world outside.
- 11; Kevin, A quamberly "Behind the scenes, Penn and amp; Teller, Taymor and The *Tempest* Divide Shakespeare's Globe, London". *Shakespeare Bulletin* 29.3 (Fall 2011),383
12. Taymor, Julie. *The Tempest*. Screenplay. By Taymor. New York: Abrams, 2010. p,10
13. Noenoe K. Silva, ed. *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism*. 2004 Duke university press p, 31.
14. Lines of Caliban from Taymor's *The Tempest* 2010.
15. Caliban eats taro which is available widely in the island and it is the food for the cheap labourers. He eats it uncooked.
16. Ariel's enslavement comes in the form of his due service to Prospera's role in saving him from the curse of the witch Sycorax.
17. Caliban's plot to murder his master in Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* 2010.
18. Ferdinand speaks these lines in Taymor's "The *Tempest*". The song of Ariel enchanted Ferdinand.
19. This is sung by Ariel at the closing part of the movie.

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