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Caliban and Colonial Resistance: A Post-Colonial Reading of Otherness, Language and Power in Shakespeare's The Tempest

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Abstract:
The present study provides a postcolonial interpretation of William Shakespeare's The Tempest, with particular reference to Caliban as an illustration of loss of land/property, cultural marginalization, and resistance. It suggests that Prospero's control of the island is representative of systems of colonial domination (i.e., land acquisition, forced labor, control through language, "othering" cultures, and creating racialized inferiorities). While Prospero claims to use his power in a benevolent/civilizing manner, Caliban's assertion that the island was previously owned by his mother Sycorax questions the validity of Prospero's power, and demonstrates the violence used to maintain that power. (Hadfield & Carvello, 2024) The article continues to examine how language was used as a tool for colonial control. Caliban's statement that he only learned language so he could curse, illustrates how the colonizer's discourse can be used by the colonized to resist. On the other hand, Caliban's beautiful description of the island challenges the representation of him as either "uncivilized" or "mute." (Sahabuddin Ahamed, 2024) When Caliban is studied in conjunction with Ariel, the article demonstrates that The Tempest depicts various forms of unequal servitude and colonial subordination. Ultimately, the article concludes that although The Tempest does not depict a total view of decolonization, the unresolved issues presented within the play such as land, identity, language, and freedom allowed subsequent post-colonial authors and critics to create Caliban as an icon of anti-colonial resistance (Chapman, 2020).

Keywords: William Shakespeare, The Tempest, Caliban, Postcolonial Criticism, Colonialism, Othering, Language, Resistance, Prospero, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

The Tempest by William Shakespeare is one of the most studied works regarding the themes of power, exile, forgiveness, and politics. While there were other perspectives used to study this work prior to postcolonial criticism; postcolonial criticism has greatly influenced how the work is being analyzed today, especially with regards to the unequal power relations that exist between Prospero and Caliban. Postcolonial criticisms do not look at Caliban as a grotesque, uncivilized, or humorous character; instead, they see him as a dispossessed individual whose body, language, labor, and identity have been controlled by a foreign European force. Postcolonial criticism views the island as a disputed colonial area and Prospero's control as an example of political, cultural, and linguistic dominance.

A post-colonial reading does not imply that Shakespeare used "The Tempest" to reflect on what would become European imperialism; rather, the reading explores the ways in which the play deals with emerging early modern concepts related to exploration, race, otherness, possession, civilization and sovereignty. At the time of writing, Europeans were experiencing new types of contact with previously unknown populations and lands. As such, the island is used as a dramatic space where issues of land control, domination, servitude, and cultural supremacy are investigated. Caliban's statement that the island is his since he received it from his mother Sycorax directly opposes Prospero's assumed authority and illustrates the tenuous nature of colonial claims to land. (Hadfield & Carvello, 2024)

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This paper will argue that Caliban can be viewed as an example of a colonized person whose representation shows us the way the ideology of colonialism works. Prospero takes over the island and controls everything on it, including all of the people living there. He forces his language onto them, he defines Caliban in terms of being "not human," and he imposes his own values upon everyone. On the other hand, Caliban is more than just a passive object of Prospero's dominance. He resists Prospero using several different methods. For instance, he curses Prospero; he remembers when Prospero took away his land; and he opposes Prospero's rule in many other ways. However, while we must recognize the complexity of the colonial relationship shown in The Tempest, we must also be careful not to view The Tempest as simply an anti-colonial allegory. The Tempest is very complicated. It demonstrates both the brutality involved in dominating others and reproduces some of the same beliefs that support colonial hierarchies. (Chapman, 2020)

2.The Island as a Colonised Space

The Tempest's island does not exist as an empty or neutral space. Prior to Prospero's arrival on the island, the island had become associated with both Sycorax and her son Caliban. Caliban asserted that the island was his inheritance, stating "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother / Which thou tak'st from me." Caliban's claim is important to consider in relation to politics. Caliban provides a different version of ownership than Prospero. Prospero claims he is the correct owner of the island; however, Caliban's version of history shows that Prospero is actually a foreign conqueror who took control of the island when he arrived from Europe.

From a post-colonial perspective, this dispute reflects the same logic of colonial occupation. Typically, colonial powers would justify acquiring territory by characterizing the area being occupied as either empty, uncivilized, non-productive, or poorly managed. Similarly, Prospero justifies his control over Caliban by claiming that Caliban lacks the ability to govern himself. Prospero states that he has educated, housed, and civilized Caliban, therefore making Prospero's rule appear to be based on an act of kindness (paternal) rather than an act of political dispossession. This type of justification for controlling others is similar to how European colonial expansion was justified as a "civilizing mission." (Mohammadi, 2021)

Prospero’s authority over the island is based not only on his ability to physically enforce order but also on his ability to control how history is represented. He decides which histories are documented and which are suppressed. According to Prospero’s account of what transpired, Caliban was a disrespectful creature that used Prospero’s generosity to do harm. According to Caliban’s account, Prospero took advantage of Caliban’s innocence and learned about the island’s natural wealth through Caliban before confining Caliban to servitude. These two different versions of events illustrate how the colonial state uses multiple narratives of legitimacy as a means of establishing dominance. The colonizer represents himself as a benevolent figure, while the colonized individual remembers being dispossessed of land, freedom, and cultural autonomy. (“The Tempest” and the Discourse of Colonialism | Sydney Studies in English, n.d.)

The island’s lack of geographical definition contributes to its postcolonial value. Although the island is not clearly associated with any specific physical location, scholars have related it to several regions including the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Caribbean, Africa, and America. As such, the indeterminacy of the island provides a means for the island to serve as a symbolic contact zone – a zone in which European dreams of adventure, conquest, peril, and ownership meet. While the play’s setting reflects early modern arguments regarding the “New World,” it cannot be limited to one colonial experience or ethnic group. Thus, Caliban should not be viewed as an example of a direct representation of a particular population. Instead, Caliban is a flexible representation of how colonial discourse envisions the foreigner, the native, and the presumed uncivilized other. (Hadfield & Carvello, 2024)

3.Caliban and the Colonial Construction of Otherness

One of the central features of Caliban's characterization is how often he is depicted in terms of monstrousness. Other characters describe him as "monster," "thing," "devil," and "hag-seed." These labels deny Caliban complete humanity and establish a clear distinction between the civilized world of Europe and the savage world of those who are not Europeans. In post-colonial criticism, such a process is referred to as "othering." This refers to the creation of an inferior "Other" that allows the colonizer to define himself in relation to the Other as being rational, civilized, moral, and legitimate.

The image of Caliban's "monstrosity" is an expression of politics and ideology rather than a physical characteristic. The way in which Prospero describes Caliban, allows for Prospero's use of force to appear as an appropriate response to the natural condition of Caliban. When Caliban is seen as being naturally savage, irrational, dangerous in terms of sexual behavior, and without any sense of morals, it will be easier for Prospero to justify his treatment of Caliban.

This argument is based on a study of Caliban's negative image and how this image is created through the use of rhetoric and colonialism. Colonialism creates two different categories of people: the civilized and the uncivilized. The uncivilized people are seen as being less civilized than the civilized people, and therefore they need to be taught by the civilized people.

The ambiguity surrounding Caliban's role in the play is essential to understanding what makes him such an interesting character. While Caliban has a voice and suffers, remembers, curses, and wants to be free like any other human being; he is continually treated as though he were not human by those who control him. Therefore, Caliban's humanity threatens the legitimacy of Prospero's rule over the island. If Caliban can make a legitimate claim to the island and understand how he is being exploited, then he will no longer be considered just another animal. It is precisely the suppression of this recognition that creates the violence of colonial discourse.

Caliban has no fixed racial identity. Although Shakespeare did not give him one as we understand race today, he was given physical characteristics that have been traditionally used to create racial stereotypes of blackness, foreignness, cannibalism and savagery. Recent scholars have noted that Caliban represents early modern prejudices against remote people being monstrous or culturally inferior. These prejudices should be seen in the context of the growing contact between Europeans and African, American, and Caribbean populations. (Vaughan & Vaughan, 2021)

While we should be careful about imposing contemporary racial categories on the play; Caliban's identity will always remain ambiguous, as Shakespeare's early modern society was organized along different racial lines than those of today's colonial states. However, the ambiguity of Caliban's identity does not diminish the value of a post-colonial reading of the play. In fact, it provides insight into how colonial ideology creates difference. Caliban is created as an Other through Prospero's language and through the fears and concerns that Prospero projects onto Caliban's body.

4.Prospero as Coloniser

Prospero can be seen as an old man of wisdom, a dispossessed ruler and a father that has chosen to forgive rather than seek revenge. However, a post-colonial reading of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" adds complexity to this view of Prospero. Post-colonial readings focus on how Prospero governs his island. He does so with surveillance; threats; punishment; knowledge; and magic. Prospero controls Caliban's actions; directs Ariel's labor; and defines the social hierarchy of the island. This type of governance reflects what would be considered a colonial government where the central authority lies within the person of the European ruler.

Prospero constantly warns Caliban about what will happen if he does not obey. Prospero tells Caliban he will suffer from cramps, being pinched, receiving physical injuries and being harassed by spirits. The body of Caliban is the main focus of colonial discipline. Instead of obtaining Caliban's compliance through mutual respect or an agreement, Prospero employs fear to force Caliban into obeying. The way these two characters interact shows us that colonial power is maintained not just because of the idea that one group is superior to another, but also because of the direct authority that the colonizers have over the bodies of the colonized. (Ali & Luo, 2016)

The books of Prospero are just as significant to his authority as the other aspects of his power. The books represent knowledge, literacy, magical practices, European scholarship, and the ability to define and categorize the world. When Caliban tells Stephano to take the books and destroy them prior to attacking Prospero, Caliban acknowledges the significance of the books. Caliban's suggestion indicates that the domination of Prospero relies on more than simply individual strength; it relies on systems of knowledge that create distinctions between masters and slaves and civilized and uncivilized people. Caliban recognizes that the authority of the colonizer is supported by intellectual and symbolic resources, as well as by physical force.

Prospero's status as an exile further complicates his colonial role. He was himself dispossessed of his dukedom in Milan by Antonio. Therefore, Prospero is a victim and a perpetrator: he condemns Antonio's betrayal but at the same time reproduces similar practices of domination on the island. The contradiction is central to the play's political complexity. Rather than making Prospero more sympathetic to Caliban's dispossession, Prospero's experience of exile allows him to reproduce a system of mastery in which he acts as the sole ruler. (Huang, 2022)

In colonial history, this irony illustrates an ongoing trend; i.e., when a person or nation has experienced some type of political instability, they often attempt to exert influence over another group of people, in an effort to regain their former position of power. Therefore, Prospero's colonisation of the island can be seen as a way for Prospero to re-establish himself as a sovereign entity after losing Milan. Although Prospero is able to rebuild his identity as a ruler

through the island, his authority remains tenuous since it relies on Caliban and Ariel remaining subordinate to him. Additionally, the potential for Caliban and Ariel to resist Prospero's authority continually undermines the idea that Prospero's power is either inherent or enduring.

5.Language, Education, and Linguistic Colonialism

In The Tempest, language is an extremely powerful tool. Miranda states that she taught Caliban to communicate using language, while Prospero uses the opportunity to teach Caliban to communicate as a way to demonstrate his generosity. This form of teaching can be viewed as an example of a colonial power imposing its own language upon the population being colonized. Although many colonial powers claimed to help those who were colonized through education, they did so at the expense of displacing the local languages, cultures, and ways of knowing of the colonized people.

Caliban's reply to Miranda is probably the most commonly referred to quote in post-colonial interpretations of the play: "You taught me language; and my profit on 't/ Is, I know how to curse." This reply is a refusal of the idea that his education in language was merely a process of civilizing or improving him. Caliban uses the colonizers' language against the colonizers. The curse he utters is not just a demonstration of ungratefulness, but an expression of agency. While Caliban was forced to learn Prospero's language, he turned it into a means of protesting. (Sahabuddin Ahamed, 2024)

The colonial experience of education has a contradictory quality. On the one hand, language can be used to control, categorize, punish, and integrate people who have been colonized. On the other hand, the people being colonized have the ability to use that same language as a means to express themselves, criticize, and resist their oppressors. Although Caliban cannot go back to his pre-colonial state free from Prospero's impact, he is not completely absorbed into Prospero's world either. His use of language reflects the influence of the colonial power; however, he uses the same language to resist that power. This is similar to what Homi Bhabha referred to as "colonial ambivalence." Bhabha explained how colonial authority is never completely safe because the colonised subjects may copy, change, or disrupt the language they were forced to learn. (Ahmed, 2020)

Therefore, Caliban's use of language is politically charged. On the one side, Caliban uses curse words and other forms of anger to express how he feels about Prospero; this could support Prospero's contention that Caliban is uncivilized. However, Caliban also provides detailed accounts of the beauty and sounds of the island. These detailed accounts illustrate a deep awareness of the island. The speech that Caliban makes describing the island as "full of noises" demonstrates that Caliban does not lack imagination or culture. This speech also illustrates that Caliban has a relationship with the island that Prospero cannot completely comprehend because Prospero's relationship with the island is built around owning it and controlling it as opposed to having a sense of belonging with the island.

The distinction is very important. While Prospero uses language to organize, direct, and control, Caliban uses language to evoke the senses, memories, and connections to the land. The differences in how they use language reflect a broader colonial distinction between the administration of knowledge and local knowledge. Prospero wants to create a system for understanding the island and governing it; Caliban sees the island as a living organism which is intimately connected to who he is. Scholars studying colonial language use in the play have also emphasized that Prospero's use of language supports a hierarchical relationship, putting European reason and organization above the "wild" world represented by Caliban. (Dr. Muhammad Ali Khan & Bilal Ahmed, 2025)

6.Resistance and the Limits of Liberation

The primary reason why Caliban has emerged as a significant figure in post-colonial thought is because of his resistance. His refusal to submit to Prospero's authority, his cursing of Prospero, and his assertion that the island belongs to him are each an expression of opposition to the legitimacy of colonial authority. He is neither silent nor completely defeated. Although he may be physically subordinated to Prospero, he continues to remember that the island once belonged to him and that Prospero's authority is unjust.

However, Caliban's resistance is both partial and flawed. At first glance, Caliban's relationship with Stephano and Trinculo seemed to represent a viable option to free himself from Prospero's domination. However, their relationship actually created another form of colonialism. Caliban believes Stephano will liberate him from Prospero, since Stephano provides him with alcohol and says he can provide Caliban with freedom. However, Stephano wants to become the new ruler of the island. Therefore, Caliban's effort to free himself from Prospero might lead to him being

controlled by Stephano. This demonstrates that you cannot achieve true liberation simply by replacing one master with another.

The Stephano-Caliban alliance also shows how fragile colonial power is. Stephano begins thinking about how he will make money off of the island and the people on it. This thought process is similar to Prospero's desire to own the island, proving that the desire to colonize does not come from only wealthy, educated individuals. It can also develop from common, business-oriented, and opportunistic desires. Thus, the idea of colonization within the play does not only manifest through Prospero's use of magic to control everything. Colonization is also manifested through the larger desire to own land and to take advantage of the people living on that land. (Kennedy-Finnerty, 2024)

Caliban's revolt was unsuccessful, however, the unsuccess of Caliban's revolt does not lessen the political significance of his actions. Caliban's rebellion demonstrated the coercive basis of Prospero's authority. Furthermore, Caliban's rebellion indicated that Caliban understood the structural elements supporting Prospero's authority. Caliban's focus upon the destruction of Prospero's books showed that Caliban realized that Prospero's authority came from both cultural authority and from the use of force. While Caliban may not have been able to successfully remove Prospero from power, he did demonstrate the vulnerabilities associated with colonial domination.

The post-colonial interpretation of Caliban is usually seen as a representation of anti-colonial resistance. In addition to being used as a representation of anti-colonial resistance, the use of Caliban by later post-colonial and Caribbean authors can be seen as having the potential to transform him into a representative of cultural survival, political rebellion, and decolonization through self-definition. Lamming's use of Caliban as a hero of anti-colonial resistance and Prospero as a usurper of imperial authority is one example of how Caliban's meaning has been expanded beyond Shakespeare's original play and incorporated into a wider body of literature and thought related to resistance in post-colonial contexts. (Nair, 2010)

7.Caliban, Ariel, and Unequal Forms of Servitude

A comprehensive analysis of colonialism should include consideration of Ariel as well as Caliban. Both Ariel and Caliban are enslaved by Prospero, however, they are in different positions on the island's social structure. Ariel is more compliant with Prospero's requests and has a closer relationship with Prospero's magic power. Additionally, Ariel is repeatedly told that he will eventually be free. On the other hand, Caliban is seen as forever degraded and experiences more physical and verbal violence from Prospero than Ariel.

The division of colonizers/colonized is not simply a matter of black/white. Prospero has different types of relationships with each of his subjects. Ariel is given some form of conditional support because he provides valuable work and seems more inclined to be obedient. Caliban is made into an enemy of Prospero because he rebels against Prospero's rule, believes that the island belongs to him, and does not accept Prospero as having legitimate power over him. The distinction between Ariel and Caliban shows that colonial regimes frequently produce division among their subject populations by granting benefits to those who are cooperative and penalizing those who rebel. (Gurr, 1996)

scholarship warns against being overly focused upon Caliban and Prospero, as such can cause one to lose sight of the racialized and politicized aspects of Ariel's servitude. An example of an intervention that supports this view is that some of the conventional postcolonial interpretations of the play have reduced the play to a colonial allegory where Caliban is the only colonized subject, while losing sight of other forms of racialized antagonism and slavery as seen in Ariel. (Chapman, 2020) This is a useful perspective because it does not allow the play to be interpreted as a colonial allegory.

However, Caliban is still central because his relationship to the island is significantly different from Ariel's. While Ariel has a magical/spiritual relationship with the island, Caliban's claim on the island is genealogical/territorial. He sees the island as part of his mother's inheritance and thus challenges Prospero's right to own the island. Ariel wants to be released from service; Caliban wants to regain a home. These differing desires reflect different ways that they are subjected to colonialism: one is related to labor/freedom, the other is related to dispossession/cultural degradation/territorial loss.

8.The Ambiguities of Postcolonial Interpretation

Although post-colonial criticism has established Caliban as a primary symbol of colonial domination, this type of criticism must also take into account the ambiguity present throughout the play. Several authors believe that it is historically incorrect to view The Tempest as a simple portrayal of English colonialism in the Americas. It is difficult

to determine where the play takes place, and Shakespeare's England was far from developing the colonial empire which would characterize later British imperialism. Therefore, one should avoid viewing Caliban as representing any one indigenous group (American, African, or Caribbean). (Brevik, 2012)

The historical cautionary tales do not negate post-colonial readings. On the contrary, they offer a more sophisticated reading. In other words, The Tempest is not a literal historical document detailing colonial conquest; rather, it is a text that shows us how people thought about their culture when colonial expansion was possible. There are also anxieties in the play regarding foreign countries, unfamiliar people (or bodies), who has power/authority, whether someone is enslaved, and if conquering another country/nation is legitimate. All of these features provide later readers with examples of things that will eventually define imperialistic ideology.

The concluding scene of the play is particularly ambiguous. After renouncing magic, Prospero has forgiven all those who wronged him and is preparing to go back to Milan. However, Caliban was never given a clear release from servitude or restoration of his former home. Although Caliban's recognition of how stupid he had been would appear to suggest he regrets what he did, this could easily represent the way Caliban accepted the judgments of the colonizers. The fact that Prospero left the island does not mean the injustices of the colonization have been resolved. The future of the island is still uncertain, and Caliban's destiny is still unresolved.

The lack of resolution in the ending of The Tempest is an important factor in the longevity of its influence on post-colonial adaptations. For example, Aimé Césaire and other authors who wrote after him used Shakespeare's play to create a more obvious portrayal of Caliban's resistance and to question the authority of Prospero's version of events. Césaire's adaptation, A Tempest, alters the point of view to the perspective of the colonized person and shows the battle between Prospero and Caliban as being more directly related to politics. Adaptations like these show how there are conflicts within Shakespeare's work that can be transformed by future writers into anti-colonial criticism. (Khoury, 2006)

9.Conclusion

A postcolonial reading of The Tempest demonstrates that Caliban is not just an inconsequential monster or comic servant. Caliban is a displaced native whose treatment exemplifies how colonialism works (i.e., through the acquisition of land, the creation of others, the use of language to control others, coerced labor, corporal punishment, and denying individuals their humanity). Prospero relies upon depicting Caliban as inherently less capable than himself; however, Caliban's voice, recollections, and resistance consistently undermine this portrayal.

The conflict between Prospero and Caliban, then, is not merely a personal dispute; rather, it is a struggle over land, history, language and how one defines what constitutes a civilized society. Prospero states that he will educate Caliban, however, his education serves as a form of cultural control. Prospero also asserts that he governs the island, however, his government of the island has its origins in taking away power and forcing compliance. Although Caliban appears to have no power, he continues to possess the ability to point out injustice, curse those who oppress him and recall a time prior to Prospero's dominance. (Mohammadi, 2021)

The Tempest is also not a complete representation of how decolonization can occur. Caliban's rebellion fails, Ariel is only free if Prospero allows him to be, and the end of the play doesn't show whether the island will be returned to the people who were there before. It is precisely these ambiguities that allow postcolonial critics to use the play as a way of demonstrating the violent effects of colonialism on individuals and cultures, as well as the contradictions within colonial ideologies that lead to their instability.

Caliban's continued relevance lies in the fact that he represents more than what is prescribed for him. He is defined by Prospero as a monster, a slave, and a lesser person; however, Caliban represents the struggle against loss of culture, oppression by governments and others, etc. Through Caliban, The Tempest raises questions about power, loss, language, race and how to interpret "freedom."

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