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INTERPRETING CALIBAN FROM POST-COLONIAL POINT OF VIEW: A CRITIQUE OF AIME CESAIRE'S *A TEMPEST*

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ABSTRACT

The eras of colonialism and post-colonialism saw the rapid rise of such kind of literature whose main focus has been the effects of colonialism on the colonized. Whereas many writings were set in the colonial era with the acknowledged theme of the scars of colonialism, some other writings were set in the post-colonial era with a rebellious tone. A play like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) is set in a time when colonialism was not in its zenith; on the other hand Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* (1969) is set in the post-colonial era and interprets colonialism along with Shakespeare's play from a completely different point of view.

As a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Cesaire based the main plot on the former one but Cesaire's Caliban is much bolder one who is determined to be violent to achieve his freedom from the rule of Prospero. It is in the relation between Prospero and Caliban and basically through Caliban's speech that Cesaire expresses his notion of Negritude, the establishment of the fundamental rights of the Blacks. Cesaire's Caliban is more rebellious in his words than his action; nonetheless by the end of the play he is able to sing his freedom song. My writing will reflect on both colonialism and post-colonialism and would be a critique of Caliban from post-colonial point of view as represented in Cesaire's *A Tempest*.

Keywords: Colonialism, Negritude, post-colonialism, freedom.

Introduction

Reinterpretations and re-imagination of literary works is as old a tradition as literature itself and the basic aim of this reinterpretation being to observe the particular work from a different contemporary and societal point of view. Aime Cesaire based his *A Tempest* on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which was written as long back as in 1611. Commenting on the re-writing of Shakespeare's play, Cesaire told in an interview that: "A great work of art such as Shakespeare's play

belongs to all humanity—and, as such, it can undergo as many reinterpretations as do the myths of classical antiquity." (West -Pavlov 44).

As every literature is a product of its own time, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was written merely for the entertainment of the contemporary audience; but Cesaire's is a rebellious one; a rebellion against the European colonization. The fact is that Cesaire himself was one of the founders of the Negritude Movement, a movement which was primarily commenced to assert the native black tradition. Thus

adapting Shakespeare's play in a post-colonial context, he puts forward all his detest against the colonizer. He brings out his post-colonial attitude in his play mainly in the relationship between Prospero and Caliban and gives Caliban the supreme power of articulation to protect himself from the wrath of Prospero's curse. Césaire's Caliban is much more powerful, much more furious than that of Shakespeare's one and in him Césaire provides the Post-colonial writing back attitude.

Césaire and Negritude Movement:

Though by birth he was a French, Césaire always used to consider himself as a member of the Igbo family of Nigeria and was well aware about the psychological and mental effects of the colonialism. By the time he was writing *A Tempest*, many of the famous books on post-colonialism had already been written including *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and Frantz Fanon's two of the most extraordinary works regarding post-colonialism *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). No doubt, he was highly influenced by those books and was determined to make a mark of his own in this field, the result being the Negritude movement. In his own book on Colonialism titled *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), he highly criticizes the inhuman aspects of colonialism and wrote colonization leads to:

"No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the man into a class-room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production." (Page 32).

In his *Return to My Native Land* (1939) also, where he first introduced the term 'Negritude', he wrote highly about the brutality of colonialism. As an adaptation of *The Tempest*, Césaire's plot differs very little from that of Shakespeare, nonetheless, Césaire made two significant changes as far as characters are concerned. He gives Caliban a specific identity of a black slave and Ariel is identified as a mulatto slave instead of a mere airy spirit of the earlier play. Besides, he adds Eshu, a black devil-god of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and thus adds a native spirit in his characters.

Caliban's Voice in the Play:

For colonizer, language and its tactical use had always been a masterstroke in their relationship with the natives. Emphasizing on the role of language in colonization, Bill Ashcroft in his *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2008) wrote:

"...colonization occurs most subtly and comprehensively in language, because language itself is so manifestly connected to power, it seemed natural to see that language somehow embodied the thought process and values of the imperial culture." (Ashcroft 122). Caliban's first utterance in his interaction with Prospero in the play being 'Uhuru', a Swahili word which means liberty. It was Prospero who taught Caliban the language and which Caliban uses in both the plays only to curse Prospero. Prospero's imposition of language on Caliban was that of a master's language; not that a vernacular one which Caliban first uses in the form of 'Uhuru.' This is an attempt from Caliban's side to assert the value and importance of his native language obviously, much to the astonishment of Prospero as he bursts out: "Mumblin' your native language again! I've already told you, I don't like it". (Page 11). It is not that Caliban did not talk back to Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but Césaire gives Caliban a more dominant, more fearless voice in order to gain his liberty. When Prospero describes Caliban as an 'ugly ape', Caliban's reply is a befitting one: "...I don't think you're so handsome yourself...you look just like some old vulture." (Page 11).

From the beginning of the colonization, the Whites had been under the belief that the native Blacks were illiterate, uncivilized and undeveloped and they must be taught by the colonizer. They acted in such a way that as if their teaching would only benefit the natives, would only develop the natives as a civilized one. However, the reality is quite different and a contrastive one: whatever they taught, whatever they did it was for their own

benefits only. Thus, when Prospero is repeatedly complaining to Caliban about how he 'educated, trained' him, Caliban points out the truth brutally: "You didn't teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders." (Page 12).

Colonization is not about possessing a land only; it is about possessing one's mind also. A figure like Prospero is gentle as long as his purpose is not fulfilled; once it is done, the beastly side would come out. In the beginning Prospero's gentle address to Caliban like 'dear Caliban' soon turns out to be a detesting one ("Caliban the animal, Caliban the slave!") once he learned everything about the land from Caliban. So Caliban bursts out: "Once you've squeezed the juice from the orange, you toss the rind away!" (Page 13). When Prospero accused Caliban of trying to rape his daughter Miranda, Caliban in turn puts the blame on Prospero by saying that: "...you're the one that put those dirty thoughts in my head." (Page 13). Whereas in Shakespeare's play Caliban admitted his attempt of raping Miranda and felt guilty, Césaire's Caliban, as a post-colonial figure, accusing the master and setting the example of how to begin a revolution against them.

Violence and physical tortures had always been associated with colonialism. Writing on the prospect of this violence, Edward Said in his famous book *Orientalism* (1978) wrote:

"Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy...and sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one should not trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice." (Said 167).

Caliban is forced by Prospero to live in a filthy cave called 'ghetto' and throughout the play he threatens Caliban of whipping him. Césaire's Prospero differs as much as his Caliban from the earlier play of

Shakespeare; his Prospero is no longer a gentle one, rather he represents the worst side of colonialism.

Colonizer does take everything from the natives; but none is as humiliating as their own identity. Imposing their own cultures and religion is not enough for them; they become content only when they impose a new name upon the natives. Even in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – the earliest of literatures dealing with colonial issues – we find that how Crusoe imposes upon a prisoner the name of Friday. For Caliban, liberty means rejection of everything that is associated with the colonizer, including his name (Caliban) which he believes was given by Prospero in hatred. Instead, Caliban would prefer if Prospero calls him as 'X', means a person without a name or as he says: "a man whose name has been stolen." (Page 15). It is interesting that Caliban would like to have a historical name and no other name is as historical as 'X', which here represents the historical figure of Malcolm X who was associated with the movements like Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism and always fought to assert the rights of the Blacks.

While observing Caliban from post-colonial point of view, it is important to keep focus on the mulatto slave Ariel also; after all as Ariel says they are brothers, 'brothers in sufferings and slavery.' (Page 20). Though both Caliban and Ariel's aim is to get freedom from the clutch of Prospero, their methods of getting it is quite a contrastive one. While Ariel's is a submissive one, Caliban's is a rebellious one. While talking with Caliban, Ariel mentions about Prospero's promise of setting Ariel free but Caliban knows well that for a colonizer like Prospero, a promise is only in words, not in action. Thus he says: "He'll promise you a thousand times and take it back a thousand times." (Page 21). Ariel's non violent approach in getting freedom would certainly remind one about Mahatma Gandhi's 'satyagraha' movement in India's freedom movement against British; as Caliban rightly points out: "That's it, someone strikes you on the right cheek and you offer the left." (Page 22).

Sometimes Ariel appears as a naive character as compared to Caliban, having very little practical knowledge. He is neither in favor of violence nor in submission, rather he prefers a mediated one.

He wants to awake conscience in Prospero and make him realize about his injustice towards them, but Caliban knows that Prospero is an 'old scoundrel' having no conscience. In Ariel's utopian world, Prospero, Caliban and Ariel would build a 'wonderful world' and form a brotherhood among them; but it is only possible in his imagination as Prospero is not a 'collaborating type.' (Page 23). Ariel continuously reminds Caliban that Prospero is 'invincible' and stronger than both of them but Caliban's mental spirit does not allow considering himself weak in front of Prospero: "Weakness always has a thousand means and cowardice is all that keeps us from listing them." (Page 21). For Caliban, freedom is now or never; his victory lies not in his physical power but in his fiery spirit and fearless attitude. He would prefer death instead of facing humiliation from Prospero, as he says: "Better death than humiliation and injustice." (Page 23). Caliban's such kind of indomitable attitude at once reminds the readers of Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

In both Shakespeare's and Césaire's plays, Caliban tries to fight against Prospero in association with Stephano and Trinculo and ironically on both occasions he fails. The mere fact for his defeat is that his mental spirit do not match with his partners; both Stephano and Trinculo are nothing but a clown who neither have physical spirit nor mental. Caliban does realize it but perhaps it is too late; the only thing he can do is to excuse himself: "History won't blame me for not having been able to win my freedom all by myself." (Page 56). It is interesting to notice that when finally Caliban faces Prospero alone and the latter repeatedly urges him to strike, instead of striking Caliban can only says: "Defend yourself! I'm not a murderer." (Page 57). Césaire's message to all his fellow sufferers is clear here: it requires the efforts of a team, a community, a unity to defeat the colonizer; not any single human being.

One would be simply amazed the way Caliban maintains his spirit and goal of achieving freedom throughout the play; this actually shows how much important freedom is for Caliban, for a colonized. Even when Prospero is in 'forgiving mood', Caliban still shows his wrath towards the former and insists that he would throw out Prospero from the island if he gets freedom. His daring speech to the

"white magic", to Caliban like, "I'd spit you out, all your works and pomps" (Page 63) may seem astonishing to a reader but not to Prospero; he is quite accustomed with it. It is noticeable that in the ending part of the play a gentle Prospero is found, even he forms an attachment with Caliban. Living with Caliban for ten years is enough for Prospero to make him fond of Caliban as he says:

"However, in spite of everything I'm fond of you, Caliban. Come, let's make peace. We've lived together for ten years and worked side by side! Ten years count for something, after all! We've ended up by becoming compatriots!" (Page 63).

Any colonial rule – no matter how much powerful it may be – will face its end and that is the exact message Césaire wishes to convey at the ending part of the play. Now Caliban is more ambitious, more ferocious than he was earlier in spite of knowing that Prospero is stronger than him: "You're still stronger than I am/ But I don't give a damn for your power." (Page 64).

Colonizer ruled as much on the lands of the natives as much on their minds; controlling the psychology of the natives was their main weapon. Their constant representations of natives as an uncivilized, illiterate and undeveloped had always made the natives to form a negative image about themselves. As Caliban points out to Prospero:

"And you lied to me so much,
about the world, about myself,
that you ended up by imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words,
undercompetent
that's how you made me see myself!" (Page 64).

The best part of Caliban is that he knows very well that this representation is only an image, rather a false one. He has come to a point of realization that his 'bare fist' is enough to destroy the world of Prospero. His complain to Prospero for not leaving the island is a dubious one: colonizer will not leave their colony themselves; it requires the rebellious figure like Caliban to drive them away.

Conclusion

At the very ending part of the play when everyone has left the island, Prospero indulges in self-musing as if summing up his ten years journey with Caliban. He is now determined to revenge upon Caliban for showing his wrath to Prospero throughout the play, though Prospero always 'tried to save' the former. Thus Prospero utters: "...I will answer your violence with violence!" (Page 67). But everyone is victim of time so is here Prospero; in the stage direction Cesaire describes Prospero as an 'aged and weary' figure as if the playwright is in a hurry to end the colonial rule and his play. Everything is changing in island now including the climate; it is now much colder than it was earlier and is difficult to survive for an aged figure like Prospero in this climate. But he is still determined to 'protect civilization' and speaks out the importance of Caliban in the island: "Well, Caliban, old fellow, it's just us two now, here on the island...only you and me. You and me. You-me...me -you!" (Page 68). Homi Bhabha's concept of difference in forming colonial identity as proposed in his *The Location of Culture* (1994) is applicable here. As a colonizer Prospero cannot form his identity alone, he requires a colonized like Caliban to maintain his identity. It is quite interesting to note that Cesaire does not provide any clear description about Caliban's freedom except his song like "FREEDOM HI - DAY, FREEDOM HI - DAY!" (Page 68). It is only an indication about his freedom, after all Cesaire knew quite well that getting freedom was not an easy process.

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