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VOL.6 / NO.1-2/SPRING, AUTUMN 2016

The Tempest - The Republican Underbelly

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Abstract: Tempests are nature's phenomena that breach the regular despite being natural. Playing on the polemic contained within tempests that characterizes the praxis of the unnatural/ abnormal within the natural/ universal, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a nuanced expose on colonialism's mercantile and military agenda towards hegemonic aggrandizement under the banner of a civilizing mission. This paper explores the ways in which Prospero gains and maintains control over an island where violence remains in the well-camouflaged antechambers of power. We gradually discover how the island has a Foucauldian vigilante where wisdom is just short of social asphyxiation.

Key Words: dialectic, hegemony, ethnic, subterfuge, Reconquista, *socium*, *othering*, strategy

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William Shakespeare is a persistent enigma that fascinates and conflates admirers and critics. Today the biggest challenge is to comprehend the cultural conflux in which Shakespeare

became a possibility. One of Shakespeare's plays which draws us into this complex vortex is *The Tempest* which defies the logic of proportionate interpretation for it never ceases to be a parable to intellectual, and subsequently socio-ethnic-cultural, dialectic. Written in 1610, the play foregrounds the politics of imperialism to expose its dubious mission of glorifying the homeland by purporting to civilize the globe at large; a mission which resulted in reducing the native by *strategically* undermining his natural rights. The play's title is our first clue to its intent to polarize and polemize. Shakespeare deliberately titled his play 'The Tempest' and not 'Tempest' since he clearly intended it to be a foil to and contiguous to the concurrent British/ European imperialism in the New World. Tempests are typical tropical weather conditions notorious for their unpredictability and inclemency. In logical corollary, the play's action begins on sea – the imperial amphitheatre where Europe was locked in escalating naval warfare to gain maximal advantage from the New World. The sea in the play's itinerary is consistently undulating despite being a ubiquitous catalyst to change, and chance and staged encounters. The drama's locale is particularised and specific, vis a vis the central action that alternates with flashback scenes which take us into the immediate and the not-so-immediate pasts. Interestingly, the central action remains *suo moto* on an island whose contours are defined by an extant Europe which comes across as a vague nodal coordinate – an obscure point of origin, and a cultural sounding board to which return is precarious howsoever tempting or promising. Every setting is tailor-made to the characters – an effulgent panorama which quibs the audience into becoming co-participants in interpreting the play's unitary action in a world of change.

The play opens on a wide expanse of storm tossed seas where "Every man for himself and God for everyone" becomes an intuitive spiritual parabola. The passage of more than five centuries since the play was written and staged in no way diminishes the pertinence of this chaotic opening scene which parodies the contemporary imperialist enterprise. At the onset of the seventeenth century, imperialism was not monarch-centric since an entire industry with its investors, workforce and agents became increasingly involved to such an extent that the monarch became an axiomatic conduit, a formal approval stamp. A republican zeal was underway where the masses appeared to have a greater stake, and a higher participation and say in the state's affairs. In reality however, imperialist undertakings with vested pecuniary interest, working

under a specious zealous nationalist cover, complicit with the crown's desire for an aggressive world empire, took the centre stage. Needless deaths overseas were overlooked, even condoned by the stakeholders, to further the imperialist project. In 1606, the Virginia Company of London was given exclusive rights to settle Virginia, now in the erstwhile United States, as a colony. Despite initial success, the British colonialists faced shipwreck and starvation between 1609 and 1610. The commoners and the lesser nobles who constituted the company's core workforce and were its funding agents had major misgiving towards the government which was seen as bungling and mismanaging the nation's political integration and pan-imperial aspirations. The rude conversation between the lords and the ship hands at the play's inception vivifies the nation's outrage at this unscrupulous political expedience. The Neapolitan courtier, Gonzalo's rejoinder to the ship hands to be polite gets a caustic tongue-in-the-cheek reply: "You are a counsellor; if you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present. We will not hand a rope more". This sets the rebel tone of the play where authority remains confrontational and contentious at its best. The scene at the sea closes with the lords debating over whether they ought to "all sink with the king" or "take leave of him" with a desire to be back in the homeland, the "long heath, brown furze". The contemporary audience would have collectively hollered at this point since everyday life had become an unremitting ordeal in the wake of rising prices, neglect of agriculture and the universal impoverishment of the commoners. The name Gonzalo would have reinforced the idea of encounter and belligerence since the famous/ infamous Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordova had helped Spain emerge as a powerful contender to England, and also in achieving *Reconquista* in the Iberian Peninsula through subterfuge and war.

Culminating with ruffled lords caught on turbulent surf, the first scene gives way to claustrophobic space. We are transported onto an island where the play's entire action takes place henceforth. This isle parodies European social smugness and its political thrift; Shakespeare intelligently critiques the existing state of affairs but escapes censure and reprimand by topographically relocating the *socium*. The island is governed by Prospero, an ousted Duke from Milan, who claims to have authored the storm at sea. Here exists an intriguing labyrinth where power seems to be in perpetual flux and abeyance – a *banana republic* where conditional rewards define the contours and quality of life. The opening speech on the island gives an insider's eye witness account of the travails of the crew on the stormy sea. Prospero's daughter,

Miranda has lived all her life on this land, sequestered and over-protected under her father's unletting vigilance tuned-in to her intuition. She tells her father:

The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch,
But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O...
I saw... a brave new vessel...
Dash'd all to pieces

and asks him the “reason/ For raising this sea-storm” – to which he gives a wry bemused answer: “by my prescience”. Their conversation laced with reminiscences ends with Miranda being lulled to a deep hypnotic sleep. This scene must have had an astounding impact on the contemporaneous audience for witchcraft, occult and sorcery, along with sea voyages and shipwrecks fascinated everyone – the commoners and the aristocrats, the groundlings and the erudite. The threshold years of the seventeenth century reverberated with sensational discoveries and insights of the *Age of New Science*, and incredulous stories of adventures and marvellous sightings during voyages to the New World, i.e. the Americas and subsequent settlements there. It is with deliberated dramatic ploy that only after Miranda is induced into a trance Prospero summons his faithful servant-sprite, Ariel who tells him that the ship and its endangered crew were secure and safe “in the deep nook” of the “Bermoothes” which cues us to the action's locale.

Shakespeare's island covers a vast topos –a conglomerate of islands on the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean. One can reassemble the whereabouts of the island(s) and the nearby locations across which the play's action extends. It appears that when we meet the island dwellers they are in Venezuela where storms at Lake Maracaibo as described by Miranda are a regular natural phenomena. These storms known as *catatumbo lightning* have been described by the celebrated Spanish poet, Lope de Vega in his epic poem ‘La Dragontea’ (1597) based on the exploits of Francis Drake, a buccaneer and pirate who was Shakespeare's contemporary and had

been knighted by Queen Elizabeth. Miranda's description of the rain as "stinking pitch" makes absolute sense since what she witnessed was lightning characterized by a formation of clouds that form large fluorescent electric arcs two to ten kilometres high and a discharge of ozone which has a characteristic pungent smell.¹ We need to keep in mind that places and geographical distances were factually approximate and the Bard was using his poetic licence. *Bermoothes* or the Bermuda islands were discovered in 1609 by the British Virginia Company under the Admiralship of Sir George Somers following a close escape from a potential shipwreck. We discern a political parley here. Venezuela had been colonised by the Spanish where the natives were by and large massacred. Shakespeare escapes the crown's censure by delighting the audience with Britain's much accoladed colonial expedition to settle the New World which resulted in a colony that helped Britain gain a strong foothold in the Western Hemisphere.

It is very pertinent that Prospero tells his daughter about his exclusive engrossment in "secret studies" - occult and astronomical sciences. The contemporary age was the Age of New Science; it is not accidental that Prospero talks of "good fortune", "zenith" and "most auspicious star" which ingeniously re-create April, the zodiac of birth. Pouring over astronomical charts, Prospero was able to chart the course of the seas. The hurricane season on the Atlantic belt across Central America is between June and November. With persistence and diligence, aided by Ariel, Prospero kept a keen Foucauldian watch on the seas for anticipated movements by his countrymen. As such, he has a ready action plan, which is to intervene and interject his authority on the unwary seafarers. Between the shipwreck and Ariel's appearance one can see an enormous volume of hard labour; Ariel's reports:

All but mariners/
Plunged in the foaming brine and quit the vessel", "In troops I
have dispersed them 'bout the isle" "Safely in harbour/
Is the king's ship; in the
deep nook... Bermoothes" and "the rest o' the fleet... are upon the Mediterranean
flote"

and confirms that it is "Past the mid-season" which suggests that he was assiduously working throughout the season of tempests, seeing to the safety of the people aboard the ship, and to the ship's setting asail for its home turf. As had been bid by Prospero, Ariel had returned only when

the hurricane season had subsided. This is historically relevant since significant expeditions to the Western Hemisphere had been undertaken by Spain, France and Britain during the sixteenth century which exploited the land, its resources and the native Indian population. All these expeditions left for their home country between June and November.

The Tempest hinterland microcosms a political shift where dynamics of power and subservience, and violation and service continually intersect, cross over, and are difficult to define and demarcate. Prospero is the self-avowed governor and the governance of this land which he claims to have accidentally discovered while adrift on the sea with his daughter. His word is the law of the land, drawing validity from his self. In flashback, he recounts his travails where he professes to have heroically pitted himself against earlier settlers, and by wise expedience established himself in a much coveted hegemonic status that has since caused resentment and acrimony among the surviving progeny – a bitterness which is not allowed to spill over because of Prospero’s self-proclaimed foresight and sagacity. The play’s action dichotomises the manifest and the latent. Ariel, and Caliban, whom we soon meet, are the two previous inhabitants of the island. Prospero appears to be indulgent to his daughter and benevolent towards Ariel. But we realize by and by that this kindness is conditional, even calculated. Ariel has been acquiescent to Prospero for years with only a promise of eventual freedom conditional to immaculate servility – a longed for promise that continues to remain on the fringes even to the end of the play. Apparently Ariel is metonymic for the brutalized, even indentured Native American population which was the mainstay of the *encomienda* – an *ad hoc* legal system that granted the Natives’ trusteeship rights to the colonisers in exchange of hard labour among other things and services. It drew its authority from the Spanish crown. It was adapted by the British and the French colonisers. The fifteenth century Spanish conquistador, Alonso de Ojeda gained a foothold in Venezuela, a region that continued to witness acute decimation of the Natives and its earlier immigrants from the neighbouring Caribbean region. The colonisers ingeniously gained acceptance by conniving with the chieftains who already had a feudal system in place. Prospero asserts a moral entitlement over Ariel and his services since he had liberated Ariel from servitude of the worst kind. Ariel is perpetually made to feel guilty by Prospero who needlessly goads him and belittles his labour:

Thou dost, and think'st it much to tread the ooze
Of the salt deep,
To run upon the sharp wind of the north,
To do me business in the veins o' the earth
When it is baked with frost.

Prospero has mercantile instincts and Ariel is his underdog. One can conjecture that Ariel was navigating the seas and oceans, as well as mining in North America at Prospero's behest.² The "episteme of violence of imperialism" creates "a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the coloniser".³

Ariel feels obligated to Prospero since Prospero had freed him from abject slavery and imprisonment to a witch from Algiers, Sycorax. A fascinating socio-political and economic trajectory unravels. Sycorax has a glum past. She is described as a "blue-eyed hag" "hither brought with child" and "left by the sailors". The name, Sycorax has an extremely interesting taxonomy, which coupled with the various descriptors of her life defy simplistic readings of her position and place in the play's kaleidoscopic hierarchy. Perhaps, it was Shakespeare's tacit artistic stratagem to escape a partisan slant/ slur. Sycorax is a moon worshipper which suggests that she is either a Moor (of mixed ancestry), who were moon worshippers and had been brought by the Europeans as slaves to the New World, or she was a Native American who also were moon worshippers, and had a very fine community vigilante to keep outsiders at bay and maintain a cohesive community.⁴ The name Sycorax is an anagram and a derivative. The term *cacique* was used by the Spanish for the leaders (chieftains) of the indigenous groups in the Western Hemisphere territories colonised by them; the Andean Incas were referred to by the honorific, *Kuraka*.⁵ It is interesting how the sound 'k' replaces 's' in *cacique* while 'rax' replaces 'raka' in *Kuraka* to create the enigmatic name, Sycorax. It is pertinent that these communities were matrilineal. Among them, they had an hierarchy where the land owning tribes had members from other tribes working under them. It is probable that Ariel represents the lesser tribes who were landless and were in servitude to the feudal tribes. He had to lumber timber, confined mercilessly "into a cloven pine" to "vent... groans/ As fast as mill-wheels strike".

Prospero speaks derogatorily of Sycorax's child whom he derisively calls *litter* – “A freckled whelp hag-born - not honour'd with/ A human shape”. This child is named Caliban, an exemplum of righteous xenonymy in action – unapologetic semantic misappropriation/ distortion of the significant other. Two drunken ignoramus characters of the play, Trinculo and Stephano describe Caliban as “A most scurvy monster” “A strange fish!” “Legged like a man and his fins like arms!” “brave monster!” Shakespeare makes an intelligent diachronic reference here. Conquista across the Western Hemisphere resulted in concomitant problems of insanitation and epidemics among the Indians who died because of plague and scurvy. Caliban's description fits the Kalina/ Caribs from the Caribbean islands who were average in height and mainly a fishing community. Caliban piteously complains to Prospero: “you sty me/ In this hard rock... you do keep from me/ The rest o' the island.” Caliban is a deliberate play on Caribbean. Some of the most poignant and poetic lines come from Caliban which suggests that Shakespeare intended Caliban to typify the colonial harassment of the Natives. We later gather from Caliban's agitated conversation with his drunken tormentors, Trinculo and Stephano, that he lives in open inclement harsh stormy weather on a terrain which is like a “desert” according to Adrian one of the shipwrecked lords from Naples. Trinculo is aghast that “Here's neither bush nor shrub, to bear off any weather at all, and... storm... i' the wind”. Caliban claims to be an expert in catching marmosets and sighting jays, and *scamels*. The first two are native to the Americas while *scamels* – a portmanteau of sea and camel suggests mountain beavers – native to North America. Caliban also talks of clustering filberts, sweet berries found here. One can hazard a guess that Caliban is forced to live in the Mexican plateau where “wolves howl”, “hedgehogs...Lie tumbling” and “adders... Do hiss”. Prospero controls the island with subtle violence. Caliban initially “loved” Prospero who he says “strokedst me and madest much of me”. He happily “showed” Prospero “all the qualities o' the isle, /The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile” only to be stripped of freedom because he had dared to be intimate with Prospero's daughter, Miranda. Caliban is technically, even ethically, right in his assertion that the island belonged to his mother and by implication was now his, had been forcibly wrested by Prospero through guile and conniving subterfuge. The isle is a lawless banana republic where “might is right” and power is up for grabs. It microcosms

the European colonial play in the New World where Spain, France and England were increasingly involved in ugly makeshift manoeuvres to gain maximal economic and geographic dividends; humans were used as livestock to further the colonial agenda. Ania Loomba traces the imperialist taxis which strategically represented the Native Americans as “a violent and rebellious people”.⁶ Therefore, though Caliban and Miranda are settlers’ children, one is malnourished, impoverished, and autistic and deformed while the other traces the taxis is privileged, over protected and pampered. This divestment of rights had a parallel in British politics at home where land in Ulster in Ireland was increasingly confiscated by the British and the Scots to create plantations under the pretext of a “civilizing enterprise”.

The third act sees Ariel’s appearance as a harpy at Prospero’s behest to frighten his treacherous brother Antonio and the other nobles who conspired against him. Harpy eagles are mainly found in Central America, which impounds Ariel’s hassled obedience to his master as an indictment of colonisation as violation and *othering*. The play ends on a note of rickety reconciliation for the aftermath of the tempest looms. When Miranda sees the ship wrecked, she exclaims:

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world/
That has such people in’t!

One cannot but overlook Shakespeare’s reason for naming a European child brought up in the New World as Miranda. The name serves a dual purpose: many Spanish settlers in the New World had the cognomen, Miranda; alternatively in Latin *mirandus* means, ‘she who must be admired’ and a ‘watchtower’ or a ‘vantage point’. Miranda’s betrothal to Ferdinand who is the next heir to the Dukedom in Naples validates the dichotomy of a colonial benefactor – the New World is his who has hegemony because of birth and lineage. While Caliban gains freedom stripped of friends and alienated on a lonely island, we are promised hope of new beginnings by Prospero who asks for the audience’s indulgence to set asail across seas with Ariel’s help. Ariel is promised liberty once Prospero and the ship’s crew reach home. The play ends on a note of irony that reiterates the central paradox of the play where we perpetuate in the eye of *The Tempest* – the journey back home is a promise – a journey that does not commence within the arch of the play.

Endnotes:

1. In 1545, Potosi, in the foothills of Cerro Rico in Bolivia, was founded as a mining town since it was rich in silver ore. Potosi is one of the highest cities in the world where temperatures plummet to minus zero. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>)
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>
3. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of Vanishing Present* (Calcutta: Seagul Books Pvt. Ltd., 1999) p. 127.
4. Across the Andes, the Native Incas created regional guardians (kurakas) to simultaneously protecting the norms and interests of the local people. Regional loyalty, was enforced by threat of military mobilization. (<https://historyshadow.wordpress.com/tag/kuraka/>)
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sycorax>
6. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 87.