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## **The Other Side of Caliban: A Humanistic Approach**

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**Abstract:** *The Tempest* occupies a very special place in Shakespeare's oeuvre. The fact that it is Shakespeare's last play adds to the multi-dimensional enquiry that offers unlimited interpretation ranging from allegorical and historical to postcolonial and psychological. As a humanist, Shakespeare ensures poetic justice in Caliban's final release but it is not without sobriety that he would be allowed to inhabit the land. Prospero's final words about Caliban at the close of the play *The Tempest* 'This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine' disintegrates the power structure and hints at the inevitability of the coexistence of the good and the bad at all times. The paper tries to view the character of Caliban in the light of secular humanism as against other popular approaches that obstruct understanding of the larger picture of Caliban who combines in him the renaissance modernity, the classical primordiality and the medieval morality. The final tone is that of permanence of the essential qualities of human nature vis-à-vis the fluidity of the 'insubstantial pageant'.

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The Last Plays of Shakespeare are characterized by a calm built on turbulence, a commentary on the complementarity of tragedy and comedy- the essentialism of life. As Joe Nutt observes, 'There is a potent mixture at work in which folk motifs and the enigmatic world of magic are tinged with an aura of spirituality...to dramatically stimulate emotional responses to perhaps the most fundamental human experience of all, the family, its disruption and its reconciliation' (163). *The Tempest* in particular is an amalgam of several dramatic types- tragedy, comedy, morality and interlude. The genius of Shakespeare wished to practice some classical tenets as well in the span of his shortest play. The play along with its sister plays also espouses the pattern of divine comedy that spells the final statement on human life and manifested through 'its unruly forces, in both humanity and nature...focusing on larger questions about human life and human nature...in a new and exploratory way' (Peck 118). The play pulsates with spectacular pageantry as well. Multiplicity of this kind has invited varied interpretations ranging from medieval allegorical to modern postcolonial. While some critics call it a valedictory play, others find strong Renaissance flavour in it. 'We move in unfamiliar times or regions...the almost vertiginous interactions of reality and illusions, and the related sense of ambiguous transformations, extend from the beginning to the end'(Watts 9-16). Similarly, Bill Ashcroft in his book *The Empire Writes Back* says that 'the effects on the practices of reading by which such texts are canonized, are inevitable products of a changed world in which it is no longer possible to preserve repositories of a fixed and immutable system of values'(191).

Among several critical approaches to *The Tempest*, the colonial and postcolonial have gained favour and fascination in recent times. Prospero's settling down in the island that originally belonged to Caliban and making a slave out of him, resorting to white magic to contain his resistance and using the resources of the island while denying the native of his rights make a colonial reading of the play. Caliban's resentment, his 'writing back' in his tormentor's language, and his attempts at dislocating the master through a conspiracy spells out subversiveness of the subaltern. While for Ashcroft the 'transatlantic imperialism' of the play makes it the 'most important text used to establish a paradigm for postcolonial readings of canonical works', for Greenblatt it is an 'example of the impact of a lettered culture on an unlettered one'. The necessity to control the disorder inherent in savages is seen in Kipling's

famous white man's burden and, as Said points out in 'second order Darwinism that accentuated biological bases of racial inequity and scientific validity of the advanced/backward binarism'( *Orientalism*, 206). Manoni terms this burden as 'Prospero complex' as the 'civilised man is painfully divided between the desire to correct the errors of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in his search for some lost paradise' (Sinfield 274). Ania Loomba raises fundamental questions about the very dynamics of anti-colonial consciousness and revolt, and the 'duplicity' inherent in the generalization based on such a theory (185). Walder stresses the importance of language as feels that it can 'redefine...the role posed upon the colonized by the coloniser's cultural mediation' (43).

The main focus of the above arguments is Caliban who has ever since become the most sought after example of *dialecte* of theories dividing the critics. The figure of Caliban seems to have been inspired by the Renaissance notion of 'pariahs' or 'demonised enemies' whom Woodbridge calls 'bogeymen- feared and monstrous beings concocted from an ounce of reality and a gallon of imagination'(444-457). Whereas Loomba's Caliban has the advantage of liberty and freedom, Spivak has doubts whether Caliban can speak at all! For the subaltern group including Spivak, Caliban is underprivileged and does not have a say in the discourse of power. She argues that in the shadow of 'epistemic violence' the subaltern cannot speak. And if at all he expresses himself, his voice would not be understood by the society. 'With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?'(Nelson 27), she asks. Caliban's character does not buy this argument because he has had the advantage of learning, rather correctly the coloniser's language in his infancy, from his foster father, Prospero. Moreover, his speech is so powerful that it cannot be but heard. His subordination is of a different nature.

Caliban's equation with Prospero is more like a ring leader and a performing animal in a circus that can be whipped if he does not perform, yet who can strip the master of his magic with his own theatrical charm. He is unstoppable, irresistible. He can speak, and speaks not only the language of a savage rebel but has multiple voices. He can speak the language of a poet, philosopher, and guide; of a slave and a fool, and in the bareness of the inimitable speech of the primordial man with range of emotions that make him every inch a human, casting away the singular label of a subaltern or a subverse. Shakespeare's other servants and artisans have their

ancestry in Caliban in terms of their existential predicament. Summers observes, 'Caliban's moral and intellectual stature is clearly seen to be superior to Stephano and Trinculo...he cannot be dismissed as merely evil or stupid (147). Caliban's realization that he was a 'Thrice-double ass...to take this drunkard for a god,/ And worship this dull fool!'(5,1,296-98) is similar to Bottom's recovery from lost senses. At the same time both would like to live in that dream world if given a choice and resist the world of harsh realities not because a Prospero or an Athens beckons them but because they represent very human traits and aspirations.

Contesting the subaltern group's contention out of the play's context, two pertinent examples can be cited in which the subaltern's active but peaceful protest, despite the state's use of brute force led to the fruition of their demand to scrap forcible acquisition of their land. The government was compelled to return the land of the farmers in Singur, West Bengal and in Bhatta Parsaul in Uttar Pradesh. However, naxal armed resistance in many parts of the country has not succeeded in achieving the subaltern's aim for equitable distribution because of its inherent defect of mindless violence and extortion. Moreover, the subaltern has the capacity to 'alter' the language to his profit and relates this profit to his own colonial condition. These are instances of cross-cultural synthesis where the use and profit are inherent in the system, not imposed from outside. The other side of Caliban is a product of such a synthesis that results in an interactive coexistence of the two opposite cultures and in which the acceptance of the survival of the weak with the fittest is more in line with modern sympathies. The suspected threats of such coexistence are present everywhere and perhaps more potently in civilized places like Milan and Naples.

The postcolonial theory brackets Prospero and Caliban in imperialist- subaltern binary opposition. Greenblatt underpins 'parallel modes of power discourse and counter discourse' in the dialogues between Prospero and Caliban and calls it a 'subversive-containment dialectic' (Abrams 187).The verbal exchanges between the master and the slave monster posit Prospero in an unsavory role who misuses and abuses Caliban with supernatural aid:

Prospero: Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself

Upon thy wicked dam...come forth.

To which Caliban spews venom:

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen  
Drop on you both!... And blister you all o'er!

In response to which Prospero threatens him with 'side stitches' and 'pinches as thick as honey comb'(1,ii,319-330). These lines do situate Caliban in a place of subordination but is built upon more on abhorrence of the slave due to his attempted rape (a not so uncommon human instinct in a secular, non-colonial world) than any colonial ambition of Prospero. Caliban protests:

you sty me  
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me  
The rest o' th' island

To which Prospero replies:

... I have used thee  
...with human care, and lodged thee  
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate  
The honour of my child.

Clearly enough, the need to control or enslave Caliban on grounds are more moral than political, something that disengages the play from the colonial shackles and inclines towards a more realistic and non political view of an episodic human drama.

Another significant fact that dissuades a purely postcolonial reading of the text is the chance arrival of Prospero on the island. This island was neither a planned destination nor a nagging intention in Prospero after settling. Instead as admitted by both Prospero and Caliban they shared mutual love and trust (Caliban's ' When thou cam'st first,/ Thou strok'st me...and then I loved thee...'; and Prospero's 'humane care' and 'kindness'). For Prospero Caliban is like foster child who turns into his slave only after that one unpardonable offence and that which transfers the play into the rigid hands of colonial and subversion theorists. The semanticity of the

reproofs used by Prospero, like 'lying slave', 'hag-born', 'hag-seed', 'freckled whelp', 'tortoise', 'devil' do not have the intensity of class strictures. They rather pronounce the domesticity of the master-servant equation, like that between Shylock and Gobbo, than the geo-politics of coloniality or an 'idyllic relationship' (Said, *Culture* 167) between Kipling's Lama and Kim.- the only exception being magic as a sure means of control. Moreover, Prospero's larger purpose is more ethical than political. After employing his art to right the wrong done to him by his deponents he means to go back to his dukedom, leaving the future in the hands of the young generation who incidentally, has no cue about the so-called political discourse ensuing on the island. Miranda's exclamation, 'How many goodly creatures are here!' elicits Prospero's response in "'tis new to thee' is an implicit information that the world is beset with evil in people like Antonio and Sebastian even outside the island. In other words, the island which is made to be the stage of racial and power conflict is actually a place where not political but secular good and evil, virtue and vice are rehearsed once again.

The ambivalence noticed in the play is the result of multi-dimensional nature of the play. Paul Brown in his essay, 'This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine: *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism' calls the play as not simply a reflection of colonialist practices but an intervention in an ambivalent and even contradictory discourse'... (the) narrative (of) which seeks at once to harmonize disjunction, to transcend irreconcilable contradiction and to mystify the political condition which demand colonialist discourse...' (60). Michael Hattaway considers *The Tempest* as one that has 'spoken most loudly- but with two voices- to the twentieth century...' He sees the play's title as 'problematic' and the play itself a 'cultural problem' (119). Kott equates the play to *Hamlet* in the depiction of the 'divergence between the greatness of the human mind on one hand and the ruthlessness of history and frailty of the moral order on the other' (196). The play's multifaceted quality has given rise to divergent opinions. Whereas critics like Nutt finds island a "sanctuary", for Kott it is as much a prison as Denmark'; while Kott calls the play 'tragedy', Summers sees 'comical' in it.

On a wider canvas common human instincts gain prevalence over the compartmentalized theories. Martin Lings finds the transcendent significance of the play in lines 'Rejoice beyond a common joy and set it down with gold'. He says that the 'alchemical transmutations' achieved in the play is the sense 'that only primordial man knows and is his true self, fallen man having lost'

his first nature, beneath the rubble of 'second nature' symbolized by lead...the play as a whole reaches up towards these Greater Mysteries...' (119). In short, the play's humane, real and artistic aspects that lift this otherwise contested play from the darkness of inferno and doubtful purgatory to the pardisaical state or *paradeisos*.

Two important signifiers in the play appearing in lines given to Prospero and Caliban respectively: 'This thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine' and 'I'll be wise hereafter,/ And seek for grace', transfer the play once again from watertight theories and place it in a liberal genre of humanism. Together these statements can take the play to its logical conclusion, if we are looking for one. The discordant notes get harmonized into a musical symphony; yet, we may continue to look for grey, unresolved areas and feel the play's end is not near and complete and that Prospero's 'tempest' has not achieved its desired result -the primal sinner Cain is still free and remains a potent threat to peace. The evil in unrepentant Antonio persists and shall accompany the reconciled and reformed men back to the closed world of the court and, Prospero as vulnerable to evil as in the past without magic. This fact further reduces the gap between two cultures and the power structure in the play looks flimsy as the lines of demarcation fade and doubt, deceit and distrust inherent in such a set up dissolve like the 'insubstantial pageant' to make space for solemnity and grace, in agreement with the play's project 'which was to please'.

Shakespeare's main concern in his plays as aptly put by Murry, has been to 'depict a completeness of humanity...to reveal a new aspect of beauty and a new aspect of truth'. He applies to Shakespeare's plays Keats' idea of the balance of good and evil 'whence the chaos and contradiction of the world can be seen as a harmony, and loved as a harmony'(66) . The reality of everyday world, its fights, filial affection and ingratitude, passionate love, courtship leading to betrothal, rituals and celebrations; not to forget the natural calamities, and joy, sorrow, chance accidents, knowledge, authority and power, separation and reunion- Shakespeare seems to have packed them all in his last play. Themes of ingratitude and deposition, for instance, are as truthfully treated as that of love. Prospero's deposition is similar to King Lear's. While Prospero controls the elements after the loss, Lear is at their mercy. Martin Lings underlines the importance of union of Ferdinand and Miranda by calling it a 'cosmic necessity' and Prospero's lines, 'Fair encounter/ Of two most

rare affections’(3,1,76-77) as a ‘sum up to the play’(121). The ephemeral tale beginning in tempestuous culminates at a shore of reason, but not before pondering aforesaid issues. The play is a microcosm of the larger world, a befitting finish to his dramatic marathon. In Prospero’s forgiveness the coercive ‘fury’ gives way to ‘nobler reason’ – a pointer at Shakespeare’s faith in the unique gift of nature to humankind, so beautifully echoed in Hamlet’s lines, ‘What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties...’Shakespeare believed in the essential dignity of man which alone helps restore the order after a tumultuous phase of transient evil in a goodly world. Similarly, in Caliban’s ‘seek for grace’, Shakespeare reiterates his faith in the possibility of redemption/correction in the lowest of creation. But by not giving any words of repentance to Antonio, he simultaneously hints at the worst potential for evil that the world is infested with.

For a true humanist like Shakespeare mankind is a never ending source of wonder and infinite possibilities, good and ill, and art as a medium to express this belief. Shakespeare saw the working of the dynamics of good and bad through a range of people where ‘human spirit is severely tested and individual’s potential for remorse deeply probed’ (Nutt 147). Shakespeare makes full use of some of these basic truths in his dramatic art and all theories at some point or the other have to take recourse in it.

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