COLONIAL DISCOURSE IN SHAKESPEARE’S ‘THE TEMPEST’

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper is an attempt to redress the marginalization of Mediterranean context of The Tempest inspite of relating it to a genre of pastoral romance only as it was traditionally considered. The binary opposition between the European and the “Other” has been represented through the portrayal of Prospero and Caliban. The portrayal of different women in the play also represents the difference between the Orient and the Occident. The linguistic colonialism is reflected in Prospero’s efforts to educate Caliban which recognizes the close relationship between language and empire. Hence the colonisers imposed their culture, and literature on the colonized people through various means with a purpose of fulfilling their needs under the mask of civilizing them.

KEYWORDS: Colonized, Colonizer, Linguistic Colonialism, Orient and Occident, Different Women, Binary Opposition.

INTRODUCTION:

Traditionally The Tempest belongs to a genre of a pastoral romance. Conventional criticism has no difficulty in recognizing the importance of themes of legitimacy and usurpation. The play proceeds to recount or display a series of actual or attempted usurpations of authority, from Antonio’s successful palace revolution against his brother, Prospero and Caliban’s attempted violation of the honour of Prospero’s daughter, Miranda (accounts of which we hear retrospectively) to the conspiracy of Antonio and Sebastian against the life of Alonso and finally Caliban’s insurrection with Stephano and Trinculo against Prospero’s domination of the island. The bare bones of Shakespeare’s plot allow a re-writer to make it illustrate a series of themes, or dwell on particular issues. In the twentieth century critical theories and schools of criticism came one after another in quick succession e.g. Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Semiotics and Post-structuralism, Post-modernism, Orientalism and so on. Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha’s post
colonial criticism gave rise to terms like, ‘marginality’, ‘subaltern’, ‘hybridity’, ‘expatriate’ and ‘colonialism’ etc. The word ‘marginality’ refers to the colonized people in the Asia and Africa during the colonial period, for they were marginalized by the colonizers. In utilizing theory in the field of literary studies, we find that it has made possible far more than it has actually introduced. Broton states, “one particular consequence of reproduction of certain aspects of nineteenth century imperial discourse on the part of both cultural materialist and new historical readings of The Tempest has led to a particularly new perspective. Critics have defined Prospero as the archetypical paternal figure of colonial domination and authority and his treatment of Caliban as a colonized subject, a foundational paradigm in the history of European colonialism ”. With critical and theatrical interest directed elsewhere, little attention is paid in the eighteenth century to the colonial elements in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. The colonial overtones of the play go quite unnoticed. This paper focuses on how Shakespeare represents binary opposition between the European and the “Other” through the relationship between Prospero and Caliban; and how the racial stereotypes are portrayed as it has been propounded by Edward Said. Said’s Orientalism brings out the binary opposition between the West (i.e., Europe) and the East – the Occident and the Orient. Ania Loomba makes a pertinent point when she says,

“Orientalism can be said to inaugurate a new kind of study of colonialism. Said argues that representations of the ‘Orient’ in European literary texts travelogues and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its ‘Others’, a dichotomy that was central to the creation of European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over that lands. Said’s project is to show how ‘knowledge’ about non-Europeans was part of the process of maintaining power over them, thus the status of ‘knowledge’ is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred,” (1999 : 44.5). Moreover, it is worth mentioning the portrayal of different women from both the Orient and the Occident- and the difference between them in The Tempest has also been concentrated on in the present paper.

In the play the whole action is dominated by Prospero. Often, Prospero has been taken as a portrait of a man triumphant. Prospero is the ship-wrecked sailor who reaches port, the exile, who regains his native land, he who from the depths of despair becomes all powerful, the worker who by his science has tamed matter, Caliban, and by his genius the spirit, Ariel. Prospero is the man, the master of nature and the despot of destiny. He is the man-Providence. He is clearly obsessed with controlling those around him. He embodies the colonial power of his day. Older critics give him almost God-like stature and they certainly see his power as benevolent and justifiable.

Besides being a magician, dramatist, patriarch, island sovereign, and the colonial administrator, Prospero is also represented eminently as a scientist, an intellectual, a scholar, and a teacher. Throughout the play Prospero teaches and
controls all the characters. He manipulates, trains and instructs them. In short, he can be considered as a colonizer who comes to exploit in a place entirely different from his own. Numerically speaking Prospero in the alien land belongs to minority group. But minority states has more to do with the distribution of resources and power than with simple numbers. Thus, in the play, the Orientals or the natives of the island, Sycorax, Caliban and Ariel become the minority group though they are numerically larger. This is because they have no power. Prospero is the majority group because he controls all.

For many years, Prospero has been presented as an exemplar of timeless human values. Some critics emphasized the way in which his hard-earned “magical” powers enable him to re-educate the ship-wrecked by forgiving his enemies. With the last few years, however, a number of critics have offered remarkable critiques on the play. Now the play can be seen not simply as an apologue about universal experience but rather a cultural phenomenon that has its origin in effect on historical events, specifically in English colonialism.

As a magician Prospero controls nature; as a prince he conquers the passions that had excluded him from his kingdom and overthrow law, as a scholar he repairs his loss of Eden, as a man he learns to temper his passions. An achievement essential to gain success in any of other activities, Prospero describes his efforts to control his own passion:

Though with their high wrongs, I am struck to th’ quick

Yet with my nobler reason’ gainst my fury

Do I take part

Prospero controls all the happenings on the island. Miranda is a new creature, but Ferdinand must be made new. He is made new by the spell of Ariel’s music, the agent of Prospero.

_Ferdinand:_ Sitting on the bank.

Weeping again the king my father’s wrack.
This music crept by me upon the waters.
Allaying both then fury and my passion.
With its sweet on. There I have followed it.
Or it hath drawn me, rather. But this gone.
No, it begins against.

From the ecstatic music that transforms him, Ferdinand awakes and he and Miranda behold each other. Ariel’s music works upon Ferdinand. But by these different paths, they reach the condition that Gonzalo describes: “all of us found ourselves when no man was his own”. So that when Miranda looks upon them, and cries for joy at the brave new world that has such creatures in it, they are certainly
new creatures that she sees. They have suffered a sea change. It is a sudden pang of this awareness which works in the strange conclusion of the masque which Prospero sets before Ferdinand and Miranda to celebrate their betrothal. Ferdinand, enchanted cries.

Let me live here ever!

So rare a wondered father and a wise

Make this place a paradise.

From this description we can surmise that Prospero is presented as the colonizer who is on the mission of “civilizing the native”. Ferdinand and Miranda consider this new place as a paradise because of Prospero’s efforts. He is depicted as its prime mover; he governs and directs it from the beginning to the end. As the play begins we see that Prospero has made a lesson plan to appropriate to all those who land on the island. The nobles, Alonzo, Sebastian, and Antonio must learn that their crimes against Prospero cannot be forgotten, and they must be made ready to reinstate Prospero in his rightful position as the duke of Milan. Prospero’s re-education of the other characters puts knowledge into the service of his political power. Prospero plans to perpetuate his authority through a marriage between his daughter and Ferdinand. Ferdinand, the future ruler must recognize Prospero’s superior knowledge and look up to him as a teacher. Prospero orchestrates his influence on Ferdinand through Miranda, and Ferdinand’s first words to Miranda invoke a readiness to follow Prospero.

Most sure, the goddess

On whom these airs attend. Vouchsafe my prayer

May know if your remain upon this island,

And that you will some good instruction give.

How I may bear me her

Ferdinand’s respect for prospero’s superior knowledge prepares him for his future son-in-law status. Prospero justifies the trials that he puts Ferdinand through as a means of estimating the true worth of Miranda.

…too light winning

Make the prize light

The efforts to impose the learning of one’s language on others have been the hallmark of the imperial rule for centuries. While the educated in Renaissance Europe had to learn Roman and Latin, the colonized in the new World and
elsewhere had to learn Spanish, French, Portuguese, Dutch and English. In India this type of colonization was imposed by Lord Macaulay. This is termed as “linguistic colonialism”. Englishmen and Europeans, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, took upon themselves the responsibility (The White Man’s Burden) of instructing and civilizing the colonized natives. This thought was prevalent in the later periods as well. Prospero’s intention in educating Caliban prefigured Macaulay’s 1835 Minute on Indian Education where non-European learning was derided and English was championed in order to create a useful class of native Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. Colonial schools and the education system in the consequent centuries taught European languages, culture, and administration to non-European subjects. So, we can see Caliban’s education as a colonial subject is intimately related to fulfilling Prospero’s purposes. Prospero claims:

We can not miss him. He does make our fire,

Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices

That profit us.

English literary education in India, for example, was a way of imparting hidden quasi-Christian religious values to Indians. Thus by educating the natives the major purpose of controlling the natives more effectively was fulfilled under the mask of civilizing them. The relationship between Prospero’s tokens of education and magical power is clearly identified by Caliban:

I am subject to a tyrant.

A sorcerer that by his cunning hath

Cheated me of the island

Caliban recognizes and tells Stephano and Trinculo that writing and books are frequently identified as critical technologies in the establishment of colonial authority. Caliban’s animosity towards education and the book is paradigmatic of the relationship between colonial subject and the colonizing nation. When Caliban plans to revolt he advises Stephano and Trinculo to capture Prospero’s book.

Remember

First posses his book; for without them

He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not

One spirit to command-they all do hate him

As rootedly as I. Burn but his books
He has brave utensils, for he calls them.

Which when he has a house, he’ II deck withal

Whereas Prospero is represented as a prince, a scientist, an educator, a triumphant, an intellectual and a scholar, Caliban is represented as a son of a witch, begotten by a demon. He is represented as a prodigy of cruelty, malice, pride, ignorance, gluttony and lust. Thus a discourse of representation of binary opposition is formed. Said shows that this opposition is crucial to European self–conception: if colonized people are irrational, Europeans are rational: if former are barbaric, sensual and lazy, Europe is civilization itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work; if the Orient is statics, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine.

The main focus on such attention has been, naturally enough, the relationship between prospero and caliban, the colonizer and the colonized, the ruler and the ruled, the white and the black, the aristocrat and the democrat. In the nineteenth century theatre, interpretations of caliban gradually came to reflect broadly colonial and republican themes with caliban appearing as, variously, an underdeveloped native, a red republican a Darwinist missing link, and latterly, to some sensitive critics, an oppressed minority. The play has much to say about food. One would perhaps expect such material concerns in the subplot when Caliban quickly appreciates – presumably he has learnt from his earlier visitors that the way to Stephano’s heart is through his:

I’II show thee the best springs.I’II pluck thee berries.

I’II fish for thee, and get thee wood enough.

Caliban makes it plain

I must eat my dinner

That Prospero’s most powerful weapon is the withholding of food that Caliban is responsible for collecting and preparing. Here the master/slave relationship begins to take on. Propero, by his magic, forces Caliban to work hard so that he can earn a small portion of the food he prepares. The original relationship with Caliban and Prospero, is the relationship of host to guest, of Prospero’s dependence –which had continued-on Caliban’s labour. This relationship reminds us of the relationship between East India Company and the natives of India from the earliest level(host/guest) to resultant one (slave/master). Likewise Prospero uses his power to change host/guest into slave/master.

The Tempest deals systematically with full agenda of colonial and racist doctrines and objectives. Various women are represented in the play. Prospero’s wife is alluded to only once in the play, in Prospero’s reply to Miranda’s question, sir, are you not my father?
Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and
She said thou wast my daughter; and thy father
Was Duke of Milan; and his only heir
And process, no worse issued

Except for this moment, Prospero’s wife is absent from his memory. She is wholly absent from her daughter’s memory. Miranda remembers several women who attended her in childhood but her mother is nowhere in her memory. She is missing as a character, but Prospero presents himself as incorporating the wife, acting both as a father and mother to Miranda. Miranda has been portrayed as a goddess:

Most sure, the goddess
On whom these airs attend.

While Sycorax is represented as something that reduces the nature on the island to the state of wilderness and abomination, Prospero and Miranda attempt to reclaim it. Hence she stands in complete contrast to the white, obedient and chaste Miranda. Hence we can note that all brown or black women are not represented as victims or as desirable or passive. The non-European women also appears in an intractable version as ‘Amazonia’ or deviant femininity. The Amazons are located by early colonial writing in virtually every part of the non–European world, and provide images of insatiable, sexuality and brutality. Thus female volition, desire and agency are literally pushed to the margins of finished world.

Sycorax is Prospero’s other; his repeated comparisons between their different magic and their respective reigns on the island are used by him to claim a superior morality, a greater strength and a greater humanity, and hence legitimize his takeover of the island and its inhabitants. Prospero’s takeover is a transfer from Sycorax’s matriarchy to patriarchy. The restructuring of the colonized economy not only involved the export of raw material to factories in England, but also a redefinition of men’s and women’s work, which economically dislocated women, and calcified patriarchal tendencies in the native culture.

Colonized women were also subjected to untold sexual harassment, rape, enforced marriage and degradation, both under direct slavery and otherwise. Sycorax’s illegitimate pregnancy is compared to Miranda’s chastity and virginity reminding us that the construction of promiscuity of non-European women served to legitimize their sexual abuse and to demarcate them from the white women. Therefore Prospero as a colonialist consolidates his power that is specifically white and male, and constructed Sycorax as a black, wayward and wicked witch in order to legitimize his magical power.
Conclusion: Orientalism which is based on the cultural superiority of the West over the East paved the way for imperialism. In other words, imperialism an upshot of orientalism refers to ‘the authority assumed by a state over another territory-authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military power. It is a term associated in particular with the expansion of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century. Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands’ (Boehmer 1995: 2).

Said argues that the Western attitude towards Orientals is based on ignorance of the Eastern culture and literature. Hence, the colonisers imposed their culture, and literature on the colonized people through various means. Said tries to show that the West was wrong to treat the East as inferior both culturally and intellectually. In his works Said has successfully demonstrated the values of Oriental Culture and brought the marginalised ‘Other’ to the centre stage.

WORKS CITED: