Pitfalls of Caliban’s Resistance: A Study of Shakespeare’s The Tempest from Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

What leads people onto the streets to demand the right of speaking their mother tongue? Conspicuously, it is the desire to construct their own perception and define their identity. As language is power, it works as a potent instrument of cultural control in the hands of the colonizers. It is a system of naming, branding, labeling, marginalizing and subordinating an individual as well as a community. So, when it comes into the possession of the colonized, it turns into a voice of protest- a voice of self-identity. Language purports to give access to the vast intellectual resource of the colonizers. By appropriating it, the colonized can appropriate the whole stem of knowledge of the colonizers and thus, they can bring about transformation of their situation. Caliban asserts in resentment that the benefit of his learning Prospero’s language is that he can now curse him in his language. Also, for liberty he intends to burn Prospero’s books that serve as a source of his hegemony. But if he could have a command of Prospero’s books or discourse, then he might have a chance to develop a counter discourse and challenge Prospero’s authority. Caliban’s resistance against Prospero may be metaphorically interpreted as an attempt for national emergence. But a continuous negotiation and engagement that may be termed, according to Mannoni (1956) as ‘dependence complex’ regarding national and cultural self-definition exist between Caliban and Prospero. It postdates the colonial connection and situates it in a past from which the former colony has now presumably emerged. This paper seeks to make a postcolonial study of The Tempest with a special focus on the shortcomings of Caliban’s resistance against Prospero’s hegemony.

Keywords: Discourse, pitfalls, hegemony, identity, stereotype, transformation

If examined from New-Historicist perspective, then the relation between Prospero and Caliban makes The Tempest a colonial text. But Caliban’s resistance in Prospero’s language has made this text interesting for the post-colonial readership. Bill Ashcroft et al’s book The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature (1989) emphasizes the concept of resistance of the post-colonial generation in the language of the colonizers. Mannoni has diagnosed the problems of the colonizers and branded them as their psychological problems that “stem

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from the conflicts within European civilization itself, and the racialist reactions of the white man towards the black are the product of the elements already present in his psyche” (1956, p, 197). Prospero experiences a problematic past. He has been ousted and banished by his brother Antonio. Eventually, he arrived at the island of Sycorax, ousted her, enslaved her son Caliban and launched to exercise his colonial hegemony. So, it is found that the elements of colonialism are already present in Prospero’s psyche. In this way, he represents typical colonizers who were in many cases ousted or fugitives. In Charles Dickens’ *The Great Expectations* (1861), Magwitch who was a fugitive fled to Australia and at the end dramatically turned into a rich merchant.

Robinson Crusoe after disdaining his parents’ prohibition went to the sea and after a lot of hazards turned into the owner of an island and a man named Friday who was made his slave. Prospero is not an exception. The stimulus that inspires him to project his image of a master and exercise hegemony upon Caliban and Ariel, and captivate Sycorax is his traumatic experience. So, *The Tempest* (2001) is not only a psychological but also a political drama. The seed of politics lies in Prospero’s attitude to teaching Caliban his language and attempting to enslave his psyche, though not successful upto his contentment. Language is distinctively a political phenomenon which “…as a part of human consciousness, is also the practical way in which humans grasp the world around them, make sense of it, interact with each other and contribute towards changing the world. Language is not just ideological because it is a political issue but because it is the stuff of political consciousness” (Holborow, 1999, p. 3-4). Language works both as a political and ideological tool. Its power lies in its potential to transform. Again, its limitation lies in its flexibility to be transformed. When this discursive tool remains in the hands of the colonizers it defines and formulates the natives in the borrowed pattern. But if it is transformed by the natives and used in producing a counter discourse, then it turns into a tool in their hands and they formulate their own identity. The dual roles of language create anxiety placing the colonizers and the colonized in confronting location.

Relation between the colonizers and the colonized is mostly marked by anxiety. For instance, the British were always preoccupied by anxiety lest by living in close contact with the “… strange barbarism, horrid and cruel superstitions the British turned into un-British” (Levine, 2007, p. 107). Levine (2007) further asserts that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marriages between the colonizers and local women were moved to limit (p. 107). Only because of anxiety that the British should turn into un-British, imperial racism worked cruelly. Caliban’s intention to populate the whole island with his children if he gets any chance to rape Miranda, the colonizer’s daughter, is never fulfilled because of Prospero’s anxiety that makes him keep Caliban in a safe distance. On the other hand,
Caliban’s intention of making sexual contact with Miranda is as stated in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), an exposure of suppressed desire to possess a white woman. Prospero’s apprehension about Caliban’s deliberate desire of making sexual assault on Miranda has traumatized him. Sometimes his confidence about his superior status emerging out of his sense that he has taught Caliban language, encourages him to overcome his angst and anxiety but Caliban’s violent reaction causes a trauma on his confidence. On the part of Caliban, language is a tool for him, a tool for conquering or possessing a world because “[A] man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (Fanon, 1967, p. 18). It can aptly and subsequently transform his subjugation into freedom and the realization of this transformation also causes anxiety in Prospero.

Caliban claims that the benefit of the language that Prospero has taught him is that he can now curse him in his language. Actually, language itself is a text and every text is multi-voiced and saturated with the speaker’s belief system. So, Caliban’s language works as a vehicle of his own belief system. Besides, if the text is colonial and even post-colonial then it “manages to extend Bakhtin’s view of dialogue with the discovery that true dialogue can only occur when the difference of the other is recognized” (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 157). A colonial subject questions the assumptions about meaning and its communicability in a social set up conceived of the fusion of culture and consciousness. Caliban is a subject who, in the eyes of Prospero, is devoid of both culture and consciousness. To Prospero Caliban is a ‘threatening other’ (Wells, 2004, p. 279). But he perceives that Caliban was not a real threat. Because he thinks that threat, on the part of Caliban, is physical, not intellectual. Prospero fears lest Caliban should sexually abuse his daughter. Caliban also possesses a latent desire to populate the island with his children. But Prospero skilfully engineers his position as a colonizer well-fortified by his far reaching plan of extending his regime not only in Caliban’s island but also in his own dukedom. At the end of the drama he brings his enemies under his control. Antonio is compelled to submit to him. Alonso becomes repentant for his past role. Prospero also succeeds in marrying Miranda off to Alonso’s son.

Prospero endorses his own rule in this island with his superior virtue and fitness for rules. But Antonio gives out Prospero’s incapacity to rule his dukedom. Prospero proves himself to be an unfit ruler of his dukedom for his aloofness from his responsibility. He confines himself in his library alienating himself from his administrative responsibility and this aloofness justifies Antonio’s take over. The books that were a cause of his depose are now serving as a potent tool to subjugate Caliban. But Caliban fails to understand the evolution in the life of Prospero. To him Prospero is a god and this god has books of magic as Zeus had thunder at his hands. Caliban attempts to vanquish Prospero by craft, force, conspiracy with
Stephano and Trinculo. But he does not endorse to his desire to have an access into the epistemology of Prospero. While Prospero takes resort to knowledge as a tool to exercise power Caliban attempts to take resort to coercion and craft. This fatal weakness compels Caliban to subjugate to Prospero. Caliban ultimately responds to Prospero by declaring his unquestionable surrender to Prospero when the latter directs him to his cell and tells him that he has pardoned him. Caliban asserts:

> Ay, that I will; and I’ll be wise hereafter,
> And seek for grace. What a thrice double ass
> Was I, to take this drunkard for a god,
> And worship this dull fool!

(V, i. 294)

So, Shakespeare shows Caliban’s liberty in enslavement. If we investigate the factor behind Caliban’s enslavement and Prospero’s superiority, then the first thing that comes to our mind is his books of magic that symbolize the colonial discourse. Actually, discourse is to be fight back by a counter-discourse that Caliban fails to develop. Caliban fails to diagnose the source of Prospero’s hubris. Like a typical colonizer Prospero wants a slave like Aerial whose pleasure lies in his master’s contentment. He wants liberty, not through resistance, but through his master’s self-will. He sings; he serves as Prospero wants him to do. For his loyalty he is admired as well as favored by his master. On the other hand, Caliban is always treated as a marginalized object. Thus, a dichotomy between Aerial and Caliban is conspicuous regarding their location in the colonial situations—one is seeking freedom through compromise and the other is through resistance. It can be interpreted as imperial racism which was deliberately practiced in every European colony. In depicting Prospero’s character Shakespeare has a plan. He has endorsed “Prospero’s project to civilize ‘natural man’. Prospero is also a model for the playwright himself, a creative authority at the height of his powers who looks back in the play upon the capacity of creative art to change nature” (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 83). But Prospero’s civilizing mission blatantly contests Rousseau’s view that human society corrupts nature. Before the advent of Prospero Caliban had his own natural system. Prospero relegates him to a ‘savage’ by his civilizing mission. So, in the drama Shakespeare has presented the subject-matter with a special favour to Prospero, the colonizer, not Caliban, the colonized. In this connection, a New-Historicist criticism finds that “The Tempest reflects contemporary colonial activity in Virginia and Ireland, with Prospero’s appropriation of what critics assume to be ‘Caliban’s island’ standing for European of indigenous peoples” (Wells, 2004, p. 186). This colonizing mission was nothing but a capitalizing mission that ensured the Europeans to accumulate wealth and develop their own lands.

At the end of the drama Prospero regains his authority upon the Milanese. Shakespeare very tactfully shifts our concentration from the theme of colonialism to the theme of regeneration of Prospero’s authority in Milan. But the question
arises, what will happen to Caliban? Is he left as a so-called civilized entity to be fit to handle the possession of his island that he has inherited from his mother? What might happen if he is taken to Milan by Prospero with him? If he were taken to Milan with Prospero he might have been transformed into an indentured laborer. It is found in the post-colonial situations of the world.

The proclamation which the colonizers make that they have brought for the colonized civilization and culture, and unless they came with scientific discoveries like train and electricity the latter might have not progressed, is a part of their deliberate politics of justifying the colonial exploitation. First, the colonizers introduced all these scientific inventions to ensure their own interest and fortify their purpose of making capital. Second, if they had not introduced these elements in the colonies, for example, India, even then the natives might have chances to progress. For example, Thailand, Japan and China were not colonized in the past. But they have progressed significantly. In this connection, Tharoor (2016) sounds very relevant while he talks about hypocritical civilizing mission of the British colonizers in India, “This could have happened in India just as it did in several other countries in the Non-colonized world, across Europe and in the handful of Asian countries that were not colonized, notably China, Japan and Thailand” (p. 46). Hence, Prospero’s vanity in teaching Caliban his language can be examined critically. He sounds like Macaulay who in 1835 in the House of Commons of the British Parliament made a proposition to teach the Indians English language with a view to producing mimic men. Prospero has the same mission of making his commands comprehensible to Caliban for his own benefit.

Regarding the issue of self-government, Caliban’s role leaves some scope of pondering over the matter. At the end of the drama Shakespeare does not clarify how Caliban will survive and maintain his island. The image of the island, which is ultimately left, is exotic, where its natives will be conducted by the rules of nature. Another important question that makes the readers ask is- in what language will Caliban speak after the departure of Prospero? Nowhere have we found Caliban speaking his own language, or we are not certain whether he has his own language or not. Caliban has picked up Prospero’s language as a means of resistance. But he has forgotten the other role of language – it is also a key to the treasure trove of transformation. In Black Skin, White Masks (1967) Fanon asserts that when a community takes up the language of the colonizers, it absorbs its culture simultaneously. Besides, language plays the role of a cultural and political discourse. Hence, after taking up the colonizers’ burden of authority how far is it convenient for Caliban to resist the exercise of Prospero’s hegemony? Above all, it is conspicuous that “[C]olonial languages were the vehicles of such a pervasive and intrusive cultural control that it was almost inevitable that many people in post-colonial societies assumed that the language itself was inherently the key to
that control” (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 2-3). Hence, language is a system that challenges the existing system of the society. Prospero has labeled his language as a civilizing tool. But in the name of civilization he has destroyed Caliban’s language, songs, aesthetics and nature.

In this connection, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981) declares, “A system of exploitation also gives rise to those forces which set out to destroy that system and its dire consequences” (p. 103). The system introduced by the colonizers usually creates their own poetry, literature, dances and eliminates those of the natives. It is aggressive, not accommodative; it is pervasive, rather participatory. But due to the exercise of power and hegemony, there emerges a kind of traumatic response on the part of the natives. No amount of explosive can put down this response of the people. Caliban also responds to Prospero’s linguistic hegemony. But throughout the drama he is depicted as an entity devoid of individuality. For creating resistance and fighting back Prospero, he attempts to rely on Stephano and Trinkulo, two clownish characters of The Tempest. It is like, in Gramsci’s term, ‘historical bloc’. Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks (1935) explains how different forces develop an alliance to give an impetus to their strategic goal of power and he defines this process as historical bloc. To be successful in this strategic attempt a nexus must be made between Base and Superstructure. Caliban fails in his attempt at building up this historical bloc because he is more sentimental than intellectual. He, out of fury, tends to burn Prospero’s books of magic. But if he could manage to read the books and keep the intellectual wealth of Prospero in his possession, he could have been successful to some extent to develop a potent counter-discourse to fight back Prospero’s authority. Only resentment and rigor without intelligence or knowledge may lead to armed fight, not to intellectual leadership. But the productive nature of power lies in intellectual and discursive practice of knowledge. Without achieving this ability Caliban has no escape from the gift of Prospero.

Also, language possesses a conspicuous power which goes with dichotomy both uniting and segregating. Language unites on individual with his culture and at the same time, on the part of the colonized, it segregates them from their inherent cultural experiences. Language is a social practice, determined by the context and situation. It works as a determining force that builds up the perception of the individual. So, it works as a tool in the hands of the colonizers to alienate the natives from their inherent experiences. In The Tempest (2001) Caliban considers his ability to curse Prospero in his language as an advantage. But the thing that occurs simultaneously with this advantage is that it segregates him from his own inherent linguistic experiences, determined by his own context and situations. In most of the colonial texts the colonized usually do not speak. If they speak, they speak the language of the colonizers. In Heart of Darkness (1902) the
natives do not speak. Only Marlow, a white narrator, goes on speaking. In *The Tempest* (2001) Caliban speaks, but he speaks in the language of Prospero, the colonizer. True, language is never neutral. Macedo et al. (2003) quote Derrida and asserts, “…everyday language is not innocent or neutral” (p. 27). Language involves lots of presuppositions which are related to metaphysics. Metaphysics refers to the ideology of the subjects and the objects. Ideological nets of the subjects are constituted by the objects or perceptions which are also maintained by the language system, even if language is reduced to “mere communication” (Macedo et al., 2003, p. 27). The subjects are identified by their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and all these factors are determined and defined by their language.

Of course, Caliban is not taught by Prospero how to read his books of magic. He is taught only the vocal form of language, not the written form of it. His alphabet is unfamiliar to Caliban. His unknowability instigates Caliban to wish to burn Prospero’s books. Prospero has very tactfully kept Caliban away from his texts or narratives. So, when Caliban intends to burn Prospero’s books it is quite natural for him to do so as he does not have any access into his discourse. Caliban’s unknowability or inability to be acquainted with Prospero’s discursive hegemony is an outcome of Prospero’s craft and deliberate politics of alienating him from his power structure. Caliban knows only the verbal form of Prospero’s language, not its written form. So, It is not possible for Caliban to develop a counter-discourse with the fatal inability to explore the space between the signifier and the signified.

Besides, language might associate with hegemony. It often works for formation and transformation. It cannot exist ‘in a form of abstract sign’ (Macedo et al., 2003, p. 31-32). Generally speaking, the process of transformation from signifier to signified mostly depends on the speakers’ active participation in the process of producing meanings because it is closely related to their social, political, moral, psychological and ideological location. So, language is never autonomous and it is conspicuously a social and cultural phenomenon. For this reason, it is believed that “…language is identified with its speakers” (Macedo et al., 2003, p. 32). It is also believed that language is culture. So, language can be used as a tool to develop social, political, cultural and economic discrimination in a community. Corruption of a language is synonymous with the corruption of a culture as well as a community. Not in a single place of *The Tempest* (2001) Caliban is depicted as a culturally sensitive or sensible entity. Shakespeare very powerfully projects Caliban as an entity devoid of culture and language. He has learnt only how to curse, “You taught me your language and my profit on’t is I know how to curse” (Shakespeare, 2001, p. 17). According to Ashcroft (2009), this speech is famous but it fails to conceive any possibility of Caliban’s power to transform language (p. 82).
He is an ‘evocative and controversial’ symbol of postcolonial response, though at present colonial language has become a vehicle of counter discourse in the hands of the post-colonial generation.

Prospero prides in teaching Caliban civilization. The term ‘civilization’ is relative and invites debates as it is tinged with dichotomy. Aime Cesaire (2010) has found this term ironical in his book Discourse on Colonialism. At the very outset he declares, “A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization” (Cesaire, 2010, p. 31). The so-called civilization that Prospero has imposed upon Caliban is unaccommodating and intolerant. It has ousted Sycorax and enslaved her son. Caliban comprehends this truth. But he cannot engage his language to resist Prospero’s process of transforming him into a colonial ‘Other’. Shakespeare as a typical European of his time has projected Caliban as one of the West Indians “whose human status has been denied by the Europeans” (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 81). This denial of Caliban’s human status interprets the mythopoesis of the colonial politics of enslavement and subordination.

Thus, Caliban’s resistance to Prospero’s exercise of colonial hegemony is proved futile because of his lack of the power of self-representation in his language. This futility emanates apparently from his incapacity of producing a discourse against linguistic and political domination. But what Caliban has failed to do has been accomplished by the post-colonial writers and the empire is now writing back in its own englishes.

Reference


