

The Tempest: Legacy of Colonialism re-visited in the Power-struggle

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Abstract—*The Tempest* is one of "the last plays" of William Shakespeare. At the end of *The Tempest*, the play conveys a message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and serenity. However, the question remains: Is the play really serene? The basic objective of this article is to show that behind the facade of serenity, there is an incessant power-struggle within the structure of the play, which is almost Darwinian in nature. Prospero, the Duke of Milan, is banished from his dukedom by his brother, Antonio, and seeks refuge on an unknown island. Here, he defeats and kills Sycorax, the owner of the island, and takes possession of the island. He then enslaves Caliban, Sycorax's son, and Ariel, a good spirit to serve him. On the island, Prospero acts as a Colonizer, and the inhabitants of the island are the colonized people. Towards the end of the play, Prospero decides to return to Milan, but there is a hint that the legacy of Colonialism remains in the island because power and power-struggle are eternal in nature.

Index Terms—last plays, serenity, power, power-struggle, Colonizer and Colonized.

William Shakespeare is probably the greatest dramatist in the world. His plays are broadly divided into three categories: Tragedy, Comedy, and Historical plays. *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are recognised as "the last plays" of Shakespeare because it was written at the fag end of his glorious dramatic career. These three Shakespearean plays are characterized by the quality of serenity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Edward Albert pertinently gives characteristics of the last plays of Shakespeare: "A mellowed maturity is the chief feature of this group, which contains *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. The creative touch of the dramatist, making living men out of figment, is abundantly in view; the style is notable and serenely adequate; and with the ease of the master, the author thoroughly subdues the metre to his will. No more fitting conclusion - rich, ample and graciously dignified - could be found to round off

the work of our greatest literary genius than these plays of reconciliation and forgiveness "(101).

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare's last plays. At the end of *The Tempest*, the play gives the message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and serenity. However, the question remains: Is the play really serene? The purpose of this article is to show that behind the facade of serenity, there is an incessant power-struggle within the structure of the play, which is almost Darwinian in nature. Darwin's theory of 'struggle for existence' and 'survival of the fittest' came foremost to our mind. In fact, apart from the History and Roman plays of Shakespeare, the word 'power' is used more frequently in *The Tempest* than in any other plays of Shakespeare. The display of power and the intense power-struggle to gain supremacy over others are an integral part of the structure of this play. Without power, the ownership of a property is not valid. That is why Prospero, the Duke of Milan, cannot stamp his authority over the people of Milan. Instead of taking the burden of administration, Prospero always confines himself to his study room and engages in reading different kinds of books, including magic and black art.

Meanwhile, his brother Antonio takes possession of the dukedom of Prospero illegally. Consequently, he reigns over the hierarchy and power structure associated with the dukedom. At last, Prospero is banished from his dukedom along with his three-year-old daughter Miranda by Antonio. Antonio hopes that this move will land Prospero in difficulty and he and his daughter will die sooner or later. Prospero, however, with the generosity of Gonzalo and with the aid of fortune, finds shelter on an island which was possessed by the witch Sycorax. Prospero then defeats and kills Sycorax and takes possession of the island. He enslaves Sycorax's son, Caliban, and Ariel, a good spirit who is previously imprisoned by Sycorax. Prospero's possession of the island is a

precise instance of colonial aggression. Colonialism is a vital issue during Shakespeare's time. The discovery of new land and control over this land by explorers of different countries is basically known as 'Colonialism'. It stirs Shakespeare's imagination so much so that he has incorporated this element into his poems and plays. Referred to as 'White Men's burden', Colonization is a means of conquering new lands and it imposes the colonizer's culture on the native people of the acquired land. Prospero's forcible possession of Sycorax's island and his behaviour towards the natives of this unknown island have prompted many Postcolonial critics to interpret this play as having elements of Colonialism. In this context, it is worthwhile to quote Elleke Boehmer: "To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization - the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire" (3).

The Tempest, as stated earlier, has been interpreted as a drama on Colonialism primarily because Prospero forcibly invades and occupies Sycorax's island, subdues her and thrusts his own culture to the people of this land. Hence, one can easily classify Prospero as a representative of European Colonizers who usurped the land of native people of Africa, America, and elsewhere and enslaved them. Prospero's name sounds identical to 'prosperity', and he becomes truly prosperous in the unknown island as he has total control over the natural resources there. Prospero forcibly displaces Sycorax and treats her like a beast. Taking full advantage of gullible and innocent nature of Caliban, Sycorax's son, he has even acquired the secrets of natural resources scattered around the island from him. After fulfilling his basic objective, Prospero enslaves Caliban and ridicules him as a thing of darkness. In the play, Caliban is dehumanized and the process of dehumanization of Caliban by Prospero is manifest in the description of Caliban as 'deformed', 'drunkard', 'devil worshipping', 'evil smiling', 'savage', 'treacherous', 'violent' etc. It is also evident from the text that even Shakespeare is biased towards Caliban. This is a valid reason why the name Caliban sounds like 'cannibal', that is, the man-eater. This is also

indicative of the Colonizer's attitude of looking down upon the Colonized people. As Shakespeare was born and brought up in England and the British empire colonized the whole world, he cannot escape from the culture and characteristics of a Colonizer. In his subconscious mind, Shakespeare had all the traits of a Colonizer who is born to dominate others while the Colonized people are born to be dominated. That is why Shakespeare used words like 'light', 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' to refer to describe the dominant class to which he belongs to and he employed terms like 'darkness', 'elemental' and 'ignorance' to describe the dominated, Colonized people. The binary pairs mentioned above shows how Prospero in his role as a Colonizer creates negative images about the defeated, Colonized men and women. Prospero considers himself as a ruler carrying out the project of civilization mission. The way light dispels darkness and knowledge dispels ignorance, Prospero as a Colonizer tries to educate and civilize Caliban but without much success. The civilizing mission is always accompanied by the politics of domination over the Colonized people. In this context, power-politics plays a vital role. For this reason, throughout the matrix of the play, the word 'usurpation' is of supreme importance. As Antonio usurped Prospero's Dukedom, Prospero also usurped everything on the island by pushing the native rulers to the margin. Elleke Boehmer rightly observes: "Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands"(2).

The power politics of domination and usurpation, however, are not always peaceful in nature. Ariel and Caliban, original inhabitants of the island, have no knowledge of any other areas than this island, but they are forced to give service to Prospero, an outsider. Ariel is treated here by Prospero as a servant whereas Caliban is treated in his own island like a slave even though the island originally and legally belonged to his mother, Sycorax. It is nothing but the divide and rule policy adopted by the colonizer, Prospero, so that Ariel and Caliban cannot protest against the exploitation of Prospero jointly. Prospero, the Colonial master, even imposes his language and value system on the natives of the island. But along with the exploitation and imposition

of a value system by the Colonizer, there are instances of anti-colonial resistance in this play. That is why Caliban resists each and every attempt made by Prospero to civilize Caliban. Even though Prospero takes infinite pains to teach Caliban his language, Caliban used this language to curse and threaten Prospero: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For teaching me your language" (Vaughan 176). Though Caliban learns the language of Prospero, yet he is not fond of the language and it remains 'your language'(Prospero). Through his acquired language, Caliban not only expresses his animosity towards Prospero, but also makes a bold and courageous declaration that the island belongs to him: "I must eat my dinner. / This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me" (Vaughan 173). Caliban even attempts to outrage the modesty of Prospero's only daughter, Miranda and it is a real threat directed against the safety of the Colonizer by the Colonized. It is not only Caliban alone who protests against the misrule of Prospero. Ariel, a meek and loyal servant of Prospero, after doing great service to him, wants freedom from this bandage in lieu of his service. But Prospero, without showing any kind of gratitude to Ariel, rebukes him and threatens him with dire consequences for his justified demand for liberation. This anti-colonial protest and resistance shows that if there is torture in the name of power from the Colonizer, there will be resistance from the Colonized. Like the protest and resistance of Caliban and Ariel, it is seen and found in world's history that protest and resistance against colonial power has begun with the birth of Colonialism itself. But the problem lies elsewhere. The Colonized people often failed to see the scheme and machinations of the Colonizers. After suffering in the hands of one Colonizer they believe that the other Colonizers are good and reliable and this leads to their continuous bondage since each and every Colonizer have the same agenda: to exploit the natural resources of the Colonized land and to keep the people under servitude. That is why in *The Tempest*, it is seen that after his bitter experience with Prospero, Caliban later on shows the same hospitality towards Stephano that he in the past showed to Prospero. Why Caliban declares himself 'free' when he is still under the servitude of Stephano is questionable. Perhaps he has the illusion to see

himself free from Prospero's rule to be cheated again by another master. There is a subtle suggestion in the play that Caliban will experience the same kind of slavery from one master to another over time.

The Tempest ends with Prospero's decision to return to his homeland and to emancipate the native people of the unknown island whom he enslaves to serve his own interest. But this apparently kind decision is not taken without any reason. By means of the marriage of his daughter, Miranda, to Ferdinand, a very powerful Prince of Naples, Prospero hopes to return and regain his dukedom of Milan and also hopes to be politically more powerful in Europe. Hence, to possess and rule a small, unknown island surrounded by seas is neither feasible nor profitable for him. In fact, *The Tempest* shows a fierce, competitive world in which human beings are governed by high ambition and irresistible lust for power, and there is no place for compassion, love, sympathy, and fellow-feeling. That is why when Ariel, who is known for his unflinching loyalty to Prospero, as mentioned earlier, wants freedom from servitude, Prospero warns him of dire consequences. This shows clearly that Prospero is as cruel as his brother, Antonio. In reality, Prospero, with the aid of his tact, intelligence and knowledge, gets back everything that he had lost owing to his reluctance to take the responsibility and at the same time enjoying power and the fruit of other people's labour. Besides, any interest in magic and black art was still at that time treated with great suspicion in Europe. But in the unknown and unnamed island, there is a totally different way of living from the world that Prospero has left behind. In the supernatural backdrop of the island, the magic and black art are very effective tools of containing inhabitants like Sycorax, Caliban, and Ariel. With the aid of his 'powerful' magic, Prospero frees Ariel from the clutches of Sycorax and enslaves Caliban by means of incessant torture. Thus, the island remains a place where magic is something compelling. Magic is on the island a governing force, instead of being a work which is a punishable offence. R. W. Desai rightly points out: "... the play suggests a recurring pattern of possession and dispossession based upon superior forms of power, whether military, naval, economic or, as in the case of Prospero, achieved through his study of 'the liberal arts'"(11).

In conclusion, one can easily imagine from the play *The Tempest* that though the island is free from the

colonial rule after the return of Prospero to Milan, yet the legacy of Colonialism remains firmly rooted in the island, and there is a strong suggestion that the island will again be possessed by the colonial ruler in the future.

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