

essay

The Tempest as a Postcolonial Text

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

ALTHOUGH *The Tempest* is as direct a response to the question of colonialism -- more specifically, the "dispossession of the aborigine," which was a current topic in England around 1611 -- as anything in Shakespeare, it would be wrong to staple him to the postcolonial production process, especially as it pertains today. For, the postcolonial enterprise is fraught with theories of diverse kind that are still grappling with an acceptable definition of postcoloniality, let alone its other parameters. However, there is an increasing awareness about the ongoing dialectic in a politically decolonized world involving a dominant (colonial) discursive mode and a counter discourse that attempts to formulate and reformulate local identities. This dialectic does not lead to the creation of an alterity, or displacing one set of discourse with another, but a straightening out of the "inverted self-image" of the colonized that the dominant discourse has created. Post-colonialism straddles the crucial ground where the dominant discourse begins its dismantling/inverting exercise, and the ground where a counter-discourse emerges, with new epistemological formulations. The postcolonial is therefore not a break from the colonial, or a terminal point where the ground covered recedes from view, in the sense 'after-colonial,' but is rather a "continuing process of resistance and reconstruction," of reinscription and re-mapping. In this sense, and ironically enough, it seeks to recreate -- as it tries to dismantle -- the Other: colonialism with its myths of knowledge and power, of domination and subordination. Postcolonial literature, according to Elleke Boehmer, "is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonial perspectives." (Boehmer 1995:3) An examination of *The Tempest* from this perspective will reveal its nearness to postcolonial thought -- indeed establish it as a postcolonial text -- without limiting its other fields of operation. This exercise will also avoid the conceptual rigidity that postcolonial theory sometimes willy-nilly displays in its encounter with history.

The operation of a postcolonial text, therefore does not require a completely new knowledge system that is post-freedom: its site can as easily be the narrowest confines of colonial geography, and it can begin from the very moment of colonization. It is one of the paradoxes of postcolonial theorizing that while the idea of transcendence, or at least a break, implied in the prefix 'post,' conjures up images of liberation and restitution, the epistemic hindsight harks back to a syncretic relationship involving the colonizer and the colonized. In the process of domination and subjugation, the one at the receiving end, the subjugated, shifts towards the subjugator, while the subjugator begins to regard the subjugated as a referent -- against whom his own authority is measured, and by a curious transformation, his self-projection. Homi Bhabha characterizes this shifting of grounds and this displacement of identities as aspects of a hybridity whose areas of operation are political, cultural, epistemological and ontological. "Hybridity," he writes, "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power." And when colonial discourse is faced with "hybridity of its objects," Bhabha continues, "the presence of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert." (Bhabha 1994:112)

The Tempest displays enough signs of this postcolonial hybridization to mount a serious challenge to the facile colonialist assumptions underlying Prospero's claim to authority. An obvious example is Caliban whom Prospero attempts to civilize and form in his own image. He aborts the attempt when Caliban proves intractable and intransigent. In the process though, Prospero destroys Caliban's pre-colonial innocence, and his capacity to communicate and produce his own meaning. Like the maimed slave Friday of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1988), Caliban is forced to produce the (lost) meaning in signs that his Master teaches him -- by mimicking him and possibly visualizing him in the Master's place. His attack on Miranda, and his jeering comment "I had peopled else / This isle with Caliban's" (1.2.352-53) is an example of his defiance, as well as his wish for transformation from slave to master. Friday, in *Foe*, is tongueless, forever muted. He can only produce one tune on the flute, dance in a circle and write only one character 'O.' This sharply monochromatic world of Friday is a grim manifestation of the condition of internment and imprison-

ment a colonized subject has to endure; but it also is a reminder that the colonizer himself enters into a prison of his own making -- becomes a victim of his own 'othering' game, so to say -- when he embarks on his colonialist enterprise. And worse still, there is the accompanying fear of displacement and death. Crusoe's world in *Foe* is as circumscribed as Friday's. He has power and knowledge -- but power, he perceives to be constantly under threat, imagined or real, and knowledge is perverted. Prospero has more real grounds to feel threatened however (as Caliban's stated aim is to kill him). This threat Prospero can counter and equalize, with the help of Ariel, but there are other modes of insurrections that Prospero finds difficult to tame. Caliban's violent cursing expropriates the Master's language, which hurts Prospero the most. Half-man, half-beast or fish, half-reformed and half-pagan, Caliban shows what hybridization can do to topple the colonialist's strong foundation.

Prospero himself is not beyond the contamination of transculturation. He is aware that he is safe because of his supernatural power -- his magic -- a metaphor for a superior technology or science, may be; but there are other forms of technology -- indigenous and unpredictable -- that he has to be wary about. If his white magic is benign towards the party from Naples, it is not so for Sycorax and Caliban, or even Ariel. On the island, the conditions under which magic operates are coloured by his fears and concerns, until Sycorax's invisible hand seems to conduct Prospero's wand. And when Prospero talks about Sycorax, even from his position of entrenched superiority, Sycorax does not remain a defeated witch but becomes an ever-present adversary. "His mother was a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, / and deal in her command, without power," (5.1.269-71) he says to Alonso and company. Prospero has no particular reason to bring in Sycorax at this point, but he cannot forget the vague threat she represents. Sycorax remains a force against whom Prospero measures and defines his strength and authority, and his magical power. She is the Other in the Lacanian sense where "Self-identity is constituted within the gaze of another." (Boehmer 1995:21) The fact that Sycorax is absent does not reduce her adversarial status: it is not the actual threat itself, but what Prospero perceives as constituting a threat to his authority that ceaselessly exercises his mind.

Prospero's depiction of Caliban and Sycorax in a continually bad light does not spring from any anthropological

The Tempest raises one important postcolonial issue before the curtain falls. Settlers/invasers always had economic justification for colonization. Exponents of colonialism like David Livingstone had identified commerce as a pioneer of civilization. Others have written about the improvement of land, agriculture, economy, trade, commerce and industry as constituting the larger aims of colonization. Daniel Defoe's Crusoe was an archetypal colonial capitalist and entrepreneur. The postcolonial text would seriously question that attitude.

desire of verisimilitude -- although Talal Asad and others have shown that anthropology does reinforce colonial stereotypes -- but from his anxieties of displacement and dispossession. Shakespeare plays on this anxiety of Prospero with his enactments of power games on the island. There are insurrections, treacherous plots, insubordination and power parody. Even Stephano and Trinculo create their own little power relation where one is the king and the other is the subject. The postcolonial text capitalizes on the power-anxieties and power operations to bring out the contradictions inherent in a colonial system which is replicated in the colony and enforced on the reluctant and resisting subjects.

Prospero's colonialist project traces the same stages of enforcement as there were in the strategies of real invaders / settlers (in the real world). Caliban, in the beginning, is the complicit subject, but soon he starts to show resistance.



Prospero's re-forming of Caliban has a dual purpose of erasing his native knowledge -- civilizing him and re-deeming him from his fallen pagan state -- and fine tuning him as a colonial subject. But in so doing, Prospero is, in Foucauldian terms, disqualifying a "whole set of knowledges... as inadequate to their task." Caliban's epistemic heritage is suddenly "located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity." (Foucault 1980:82) Prospero is successful up to a point -- Caliban does indeed gather scraps of Euro-centric world vision -- but the greatest damage this new knowledge does to him is to destroy his own cultural aesthetics. He begins to see himself with his Master's eyes. There are, in moments of despair, traces of self pity in Caliban -- he is even ready to displace his mother's image with that of Miranda, or consider the drunken Stephano "a brave god," who can control even his mother's god Setebos. But if the colonialist agenda focuses on what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls an epistemic "overhaul" of the colonized in an attempt at subject formation, the postcolonial text shows the gaps, incongruities and contradictions in this agenda. *The Tempest* achieves it through the means that best suited Shakespeare's temperament -- a subtle but pervasive irony. The whole scene involving Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban is an elaborate mimicry that subverts the power-structures Prospero had so painstakingly built -- and his mastery, his technological superiority and his strong taskmastership. Caliban offers the same services to Stephano as he did to Prospero once:

I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck thee berries; I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough... (2.2.160-61)

Only the master now is a drunken villain. Caliban of course doesn't know Stephano's subordinate status -- which explains why the sudden prospect of freedom makes him so ecstatic. But soon he realizes that the two sailors are no match for Prospero or himself. "What a thrice-double ass / Was I, to take this drunkard for a god! / And worship this dull fool!" (5.1.295-96) he says when they are discovered in their true colours. These, incidentally, are the last words Caliban speaks in the play, and considered in the context of his overall experience of bitterness and frustration, the drunkard and the fool could come to epitomize the perpetrators of the whole colonialist project.

The Tempest's postcolonialist projection of the survivability of cultural aesthetics and cultural knowledge of a subject race (despite the Macaulayan mission of civilizing and decontaminating the native vocabulary), however, is most poignantly expressed in a passage that happens to be one of a kind -- the different changes in the MS of the play before the Folio edition notwithstanding. After Caliban tries to allay the fear of Stephano and Trinculo about the noises on the island, he launches into a brief narration of an unearthly dream that torments him. In dreaming, he says

The clouds methought would open, and show riches Ready to drop upon me, that, when I wak'd,

I cried to dream again. (3.2.139-41)

The scene comes at the end of an intense plotting against Prospero by Cal-

iban, and the rowdy scene where Stephano parodies power. The dream scene does not have the elaborate flourish of Prospero's "Our revels are now ended..." or its rhetoric. It is an inwardly opening scene that renders Prospero's epistemic project not only ineffective, but also dubious. Caliban clearly possesses an aesthetic urge (he is qualified to dream of heavenly riches) which defies any pre-conceived value judgement on our part. He and Prospero (also Miranda) are on the same level after this scene, at least so far as their aesthetic experience is concerned.

Caliban's aesthetics reinforces his difference -- his dream description is a moment of his (true) voicing as a subaltern. It is inwardly opening because it reassures him as a free agent, and not merely a bonded slave. The brief passage has similar functions as the cursing passages which destabilize Prospero's own narrative and show the gaps in his elaborately constructed master-myth. The cursing passages help Caliban open outwardly and locate himself in his language. *The Tempest* as a post-colonial text deals adequately with this localizing attempt of not-only Caliban, but Prospero as well, and later, of the 'reformed' king, Prospero's language, when Caliban is not around, serves him well because of his supposed mastery of the process of signification. He had approached Caliban with this mastery, and was able to hold on up to a point. Once Caliban began his counter-narrative, cracks began to appear in Prospero's narrative. When Prospero began his long description in Act 1 Scene II, he displayed poise and control, but Miranda's momentary inattention -- as he perceives -- throws him into a fit of impatience. Prospero's anxiety to be the master of his superior discourse shows in his using the images of 'Schoolmaster' and 'tutor,' but his real challenger is Caliban who suddenly destabilizes his textual-authority. "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse," (1.2.365-66) Caliban tells the daughter and father, throwing the whole process of signification into a quandary.

The Tempest's postcoloniality rests, to a large extent, on its exposing the judicial stereotypes that make justice look blind only in one eye. The invader/settler in his attempt to rule the colony brought his own legal system, but it was applied only to suit his enterprise. *The Tempest* makes much mockery of law and justice, although, on a higher plane, it allows divine justice to operate. There is an intended irony in the much-vaunted forgiving scene that should not escape our notice. Prospero forgives Antonio in a language that is beatifically Christian, but when contrasted with his treatment of Caliban, it appears to be obviously self-serving.

You, brother mine, that entertain'd ambition, Expell'd remorse and nature; who, with Sebastian, --

Would have kill'd your King; I do forgive thee, Unnatural though thou art... (5.1.75-9)

Antonio's list of crimes is horrid -- (attempted) fratricide, homicide, regicide -- although none was committed; but this fact is only remotely extenuating. Notice how Prospero also laments the absence of 'Nature' in Antonio -- a fact he makes a matter of scathing

irony in case of Caliban. Yet he is quick to forgive Antonio. Compare his treatment of Caliban for his offence of insubordination and cursing:

For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,

Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins

Shall, for the vast of night that they may work,

All exercise on thee... (1.2.326-30)

It becomes especially monstrous if one remembers how much Caliban helped Prospero to settle down on the island. If Gonzalo is praised for providing Prospero food and fresh water, that saved his and his daughter's life, reason demands that Caliban be at least treated a bit more kindly; for he had shown them the fresh springs, fertile lands, and so on. The judicial double standard is further exposed when Prospero's mild rebuke to Ariel when he becomes mutinous in Act 1, Scene II is contrasted with the racial slurs he (and Miranda) piles on Caliban when he refuses to do his bidding. In another, relatively less noticed exchanges in the play, Shakespeare wields his double-edged sword to get at the hypocrisy underlying the colonial judicial system. When Alonso orders the drunken sailors to return the garments from where they took them, Sebastian makes a sly comment: "Or stole it rather." (5.1.83) Coming from a man who was plotting to steal the king's crown scarcely three hours ago, the comment sounds unusually hypocritical. But Sebastian is now on the other side of the fence, safe in the company of the king, and forgiven by the restored Prospero. From his position of (regained) authority, Sebastian can reach across the system and deliver his value-judgement. The system now protects him, and covers him up against any charges. *The Tempest* shows the Euro-centric value judgements crumbling in a world where praetorian standards dictate the work a day approach to the affairs of the colony.

The Tempest raises one important postcolonial issue before the curtain falls. Settlers/invasers always had economic justification for colonization. Exponents of colonialism like David Livingstone had identified commerce as a pioneer of civilization. Others have written about the improvement of land, agriculture, economy, trade, commerce and industry as constituting the larger aims of colonization. Daniel Defoe's Crusoe was an archetypal colonial capitalist and entrepreneur. The postcolonial text would seriously question that attitude. However, there would be an ambivalence in its scrutiny of colonial capitalistic venture. While it would support someone like V.I. Lenin

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who said that imperialism/colonialism was the highest stage of capitalism that destroyed native enterprise, the post-colonial text would also examine the self-serving attitudes of the colonizer that hid behind grandiose economic and political theories, and the far reaching changes in a society's cultural and psychological make-up as a result of economic exploitation and interculturalization. Prospero, unlike Crusoe, does not have any capitalistic aspirations -- he is not seen to be doing any farming, fishing, or boat building. His magical power, and his exalted status as the Duke of Milan make him immune from any such venture. However, he keeps exploiting Caliban all the same, engaging him in back-breaking work -- all for his own profit. *The Tempest's* irony is the most poignant when it shows a process that has no visible structure, but that nevertheless enacts all its terms of reference that ensure results. Perhaps the most poignant comment

on the colonialist subterfuge where exploitation is cloaked under a moral authority -- which authority claims to be an enforcer of civilization, no less -- is the Commonwealth of Gonzalo. The Commonwealth would banish 'work' -- the sacrosanct colonial term that ensures its continuity; it would inaugurate a post-capitalistic society where "riches, poverty, / And use of service" (2.2.146-47) will all be absent -- thus removing the basic incentives for exploitation. But for various reasons, Gonzalo's Commonwealth is meant to sound like a pipe dream. Neither the place, nor time is opportune -- Alonso scarcely hears him; he, in fact stops Gonzalo in his track with a curt "Prithee, no more: thou dost talk nothing to me;" (2.1.166) Antonio and Sebastian continually mock him, and the scene quietly tapers off to give way to a more substantive treason scene. Gonzalo never again raises the issue of his utopia in the play. The marginalization of Gonzalo's Commonwealth is meant to suggest the centrality of Prospero's colony -- Gonzalo, after all, is an old man with a soft heart -- not the enterprising man that Prospero or even Antonio or Sebastian can be.

The Tempest, as a postcolonial text, also questions Prospero's Euro-centric historicism by showing how his grievance against a brother and the kin for throwing him out of power is subverted from inside when he, in turn, takes to dispossessing a mother and son. The father-daughter team triumphs over the mother-son team, the mother is driven away, the son imprisoned, yet there is hardly any compunction for the victim. The victim of one tale becomes the victimizer in another, yet, Prospero's history stops at the margin of the second tale. The subaltern Caliban has no voice in the dominant history -- he only inhabits its underside. Shakespeare gives enough material to Caliban to reconstruct his own history, which he does, albeit fitfully and fragmentarily. Prospero's logocentrism upstages the traceless language (of which we have no inkling at all) of Caliban, but in the end, Prospero's logocentrism does little more than subjugate Caliban. For him, this metanarrative has no value. The play at the end leaves him out in the cold, where Prospero's language will do him little good.

The Tempest as a postcolonial text ends with a question mark that unsettles the whole issue of textuality itself. Prospero, glowing in his virtue of forgiveness etc. puts his trust in good governance and in one's capacity to reform -- moral regeneration. There is however, no indication in the play that any one has changed fundamentally. These expectations are Prospero's own as much as they are handed down by tradition. They are inscriptions from social texts that, like his magical books, Prospero has read so well. When he warns Ferdinand against breaking the 'virgin-knot' before the marriage is solemnized, the strictures, although accompanied by a veiled eroticism, are also legacies from social texts. While Ferdinand keeps his promise, and thereby upholds the social text, the other textuality however, is seriously questioned. Neither Antonio, nor Sebastian shows any signs of remorse or change, the king is also cursorily apologetic. *The Tempest* struggles with entrenched (Christian) notions of forgiveness and justice, but it subverts those notions by showing how legal and social justice can develop double standards, and how forgiveness becomes an enforced virtue. Prospero does not forgive Caliban, he is simply consigned to the dark chambers where monsters like him wait out their allotted days on earth. If one aspect of textuality involves inscribing paradigms (symbols, characters, locations) then *The Tempest* makes them quite ambivalent. Similarly, when Prospero leaves Caliban to the pagan, pre-conquest, pre-technological landscape, his colonial enterprise appears in its true colour -- it is nothing more than a personal game -- a game of personal aggrandizement. Ariel, too is left behind; but Ariel has already constructed his own prospects, suiting his own desires. Caliban, however, faces a different prospect -- nothing will be the same for him any more. European knowledge has displaced him from his own moorings, but he has not mastered it adequately to make use of it. Prospero's technology remains out of his reach. He will continue to live in a limbo, even his memory has been contaminated. He will hear the echo of his own last words in the play "what a thrice-double ass/Was I," but nothing will be resolved for him. *The Tempest* seems to raise some ethical questions at the end that probably cannot be answered adequately: What will Caliban do with his freedom now? Is he really free? And, most importantly, what is freedom? The answers to these questions Caliban will have to devise himself. But in what language?