

Colonial and postcolonial perspectives in 'The Tempest'

Dr. Sunita B. Nimavat

Received: February 09, 2019

Accepted: March 23, 2019

ABSTRACT The paper presents the concept of colonialism and how European countries established colonies in Africa, Asia, America and Australia dominating the native people and exploiting the natural resources of the colonies. Shakespeare was impressed by the discovery of the new nation calling it "a new world". In 'The Tempest', Shakespeare deals with colonial attitude of Prospero and postcolonial stance of Caliban. He does not favour colonization nor does he criticize it. The play can be seen from colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Frantz Fanon in his book 'The wretched of the earth' says that violent struggle is the part of the process of decolonization which Caliban represents. At the end of the paper, Shashi Tharoor's views about exploitation of India by the British are presented to display the fact that colonialism was one of the greatest evils of the Western history.

Key Words: Colonialism, colonization, decolonization, dehumanizing effect of colonialism, post-colonialism

Colonialism occurs when a country or a nation dominates other countries, lands or regions outside of its borders by turning this land or regions into colonies. Generally more powerful and rich countries take control of smaller and less powerful regions or territories. Imperialism is often used as the synonym of colonialism.

During 1700s and 1800s more powerful European countries like Britain, France, Spain and Netherlands established colonies in some countries of Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean. Some of the countries used colonialism to usurp lands for their people to live there by forcing the indigenous people to move away and setting up colonial system to protect the settlers from the local people. They also used lands for farming and depleting local resources like trees, coal, metals etc. They also forced the local people to work in that farms and factories exploiting them physically, mentally and even sexually.

The history of the world shows that ancient Greeks and Romans colonized several territories in the past and turned the local tribes into slaves. There are several types of colonialism. Some countries made secular colonies by expanding the territories which include United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina. These countries settled themselves in the best parts of the new region forcing the indigenous people like Maori, Indians etc. to move away. The indigenous people suffered a lot as they lost their cultural identity and the natural way of life. They experienced spiritual alienation and some examples show that they committed suicide collectively. Another type of colonialism was dependency in which a powerful country sets up administration system to dominate and govern the country without settling into the new territories. Examples include the British Raj in India, Dutch East Indies and the Japanese colonial Empire.

With the plantation colonies, the powerful countries used the lands of the poor countries to grow crops and the local people were forced to become labourers on their farms. Barbados, Saint Dominique and Jamaica can be cited as examples of plantation colonies. Some rich countries established their trading post colonies for trading, industries and business. They also set up military and police forces to enforce the laws of the colonizing country. Macau, Malacca, Deshima and Singapore are examples of trading post colonies.

Colonization and imperialism are debated issues in Literature and political history. Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' is generally regarded as the new World drama. The discovery of America, The New World impressed the contemporary writers and thinkers. Shakespeare helped the contemporary audience to understand the process of conquest and colonization. Colonizers took the natives as "other" who were ignorant of European language and culture.

Shakespeare neither supported nor criticized the process of colonization but presented both sides of the colonial impacts. In his time, people usually defined Civilization from Western perspectives. The worlds they presented in colonial fiction were empty of the indigenous characters. They depicted the colonisers as powerful, intelligent, cultured and adventurous. In Shakespeare's 'The Tempest', there is no direct reference to America and colonization. Many critics call 'The Tempest' a new World play with no direct reference to colonialism. However Prospero represents domineering colonizer and Miranda symbolises Anglo American efforts to suppress indigenous culture. Shakespeare was impressed by travel narratives of his time and mentions the impact of New world ideas. 'The Tempest' represents the New World despite the fact that

there are no direct references to the new world. To examine the play as the New World text opens up the issues related to English ideologies of colonization, civility and civilization. The play dramatizes the act of conquest and colonization questioning the rightfulness of the act. There are many allusions in the play related to discovery, exploration and colonization. In 'The Tempest', the island is described as "Subtle, tender and delicate". Adrian says:

"The air breathes upon us here most sweetly." (II. I. 21)

Gonzalo says:

"Here is everything advantageous to life. How lush and lusty the grass looks!" (II.i.22)

It seems Shakespeare was deeply impressed by the discovery of the New World and through the words of Gonzalo, he describes how a land could be governed and a Civilization be established. The words of Gonzalo presents his Utopian vision of the island under his command. In the process of colonization, there are two important players: the colonizer and the colonized. Prospero represents the colonizer and Caliban represents the colonized. The examination of these two characters is a highly important in order to understand colonial perspectives in 'The Tempest'.

Prospero represents Western colonizer as he takes the control over the island and its inhabitants. Like other colonizers, he defines the indigenous people as inhuman, uncivilized and animal-like. He gives stereotyped figures to local inhabitants. He takes Ariel a Cooperative and submissive indigenous person. On the other hand, Caliban represents rebellious, resistant and non Cooperative indigenous person. He considers himself as a superior, knowledgeable and intelligent man. He forces them to surrender and act as his slaves through his magical powers. Colonizers used guns and other scientific equipments like magic to support the local inhabitants of the colonized Nations.

Ariel and Caliban react differently and achieved different results. Both serve Prospero but Ariel is rewarded freedom at the end by Prospero for his loyalty and dedicated service. Prospero says: "then to the elements/be free, and fare thou well" (V.i.60)

Caliban symbolises resistance and rebellion. He is a non-confirming indigenous person who is treated like a Slave. Prospero calls him "hag-seed", inhuman and uncivilized. He behaves like a cruel Boss towards Caliban forcing him to do whatever he commands. He returns him to punish cruelly if he does not obey his orders:

"What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps, Fill all the bones with aches, make thee roar"

Caliban is forced to obey Prospero's commands through his magical powers. However, like a bold rebel, he protests against Prospero for injustice done to him. He calls Prospero a tyrant and usurper. He says:

"This Island's mine, by Sycorax my mother/ which thou takest from me." (I.ii.15)

Richard Hakluyt was an English writer who promoted the English colonization of North America. They favoured the British colonization and establishment of English colonies in the New World. He said that the Western discovery would spread the Gospel of Christ and the British trade would flourish abundantly. The Western voyage would yield all commodities and services to the British Empire. Hakluyt's justification of colonialism promotes exploitation of indigenous resources and peoples by representation of the superiority of the Whites. Prospero as a colonizer claims that he is a bringer of Civilization to the people who are devoid of civility and culture.

Prospero calls Caliban, "a freckled whelp hag-born not honoured with/A human shape." (I.ii.13). The naming of Caliban refers to cannibal, the human flesh eater described in travel narratives of the Elizabethan period. Trinculo's view of Caliban also represents the coloniser's view of the New World natives. He asks: "what have we here, a man or a fish? dead or alive?"

Trinculo repeatedly calls Caliban a "monster". Stephano refers to him as "servant Monster" "man-monster" and "mooncalf". Caliban works for Prospero fetching wood, tending the fire and other manual labour work. Actually, Caliban represents wealth, labour, service and survival for Prospero and Miranda. Trinculo regards Caliban as marketable. He views him as an object that can make him earn money. This reflects colonial attitude of money-making and profiteering.

The geographical location of the island is generally believed to be Mediterranean or Caribbean. Shakespeare presents colonial rhetoric of 16th century through the perception of Prospero, Trinculo and Miranda. Both Prospero and Miranda wanted to educate and civilize Caliban believing it to be "the white man's burden" to civilize indigenous, uncivilized people. However, Prospero and Miranda think that Caliban is unable to learn European culture because of his evil nature. Prospero says. "Thou most lying slave, whose stripes may move, not kindness!" (I.ii. 15-16)

Prospero blames Caliban for attempting to violate the honour of Miranda and threatens to punish him with violence and enslavement. Caliban retorts to Prospero by saying,

“You taught me language; and my profit on it
Is I know how to curse; the red-plague rid you
For learning me your language” (I. ii. 364-65)

Caliban makes his claim to sovereignty over the island by saying,
 “This island is mine, by Sycorax my mother
 Which thou takest from me”

Prospero is concerned about my Miranda’s Chastity and vulnerability of women in general. Sexual division of rapist and Virgin was a common communal discourse and Prospero was worried about the violation of his daughter’s virginity by native rapist. He wanted his daughter to be married to a civilized western lover. Regulating sexuality it is connected with power and privilege. For colonizers, the natives were not only civilized but problematic and wildly violent. However Shakespeare’s “Tempest” depicts humanization of Caliban who possesses the qualities of a “noble savage”.

Caliban is capable of learning language and he is sensitive to music and beauty. He speaks like aristocratic characters in rhythmic verse with iambic pentameter. These qualities create sympathy and sense of equality among the audience for native, colonized people. The audience experiences sympathy for Caliban for injustice and humiliation meted out by Prospero to him.

“The Tempest” depicts not only the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized but questions the existing ideologies of colonization. Prospero’s capture of Sycorax’s land and his treatment of the natives represent his colonizing stance. Caliban’s protest against Prospero depicts his resistance to colonial power. Caliban uses the language taught by Prospero as a weapon to fight against him. This can be interpreted as a post-colonial conflict of the natives with the colonisers to decolonise themselves. Prospero calls Caliban “a thing of Darkness”. He takes Caliban as deformed, violent, ugly and savage. This shows the coloniser’s mind set who looked down upon the people of native land as inferior, uncivilized and ignorant.

Prospero sees himself as a ruler with the project of civilising the native people. He tries to educate Caliban but does not succeed much. Civilizing Mission was not altruistic or humanistic but politics of colonization. In colonial perspective, the play can be seen through the eyes of the colonisers. Caliban’s rebellious attitude can be studied from post-colonial perspectives. Prospero dominates all on the island but Caliban as a colonized wants to strike back. He is disobedient and creates a threat to Prospero and Miranda. He attempts to violate the virginity of Miranda posing threat to the sexual norms of the civilized society. Caliban is not a criminal but strong protester who claims that the island belongs to him. He says:

“I must eat my dinner. This island is mine,
 by Sycorax, my mother.”

Caliban refuses to learn the language taught by Prospero. Even when he learns it, he takes it as a means of cursing Prospero and the weapon of a fighting against him. The same thing had happened in India. Macaulay introduced English in India as a program of helping the British rule in India. However, the English-educated freedom fighters used English to fight against the British rule.

White man had an illusion that they were working for the Welfare of the colonized people. This idea failed in all colonized countries sooner or later. Under the Garb of educating and civilizing, the European colonizers destroyed local culture and destroyed the original identity of the native people. They subjugated them economically, culturally and educationally. Many educated natives became the Puppets in the hands of the White colonizers. They treated their own communities as inferior, uneducated and backward. Though they were humiliated by the white rulers, they humiliated their own brethren.

Frantz Fanon in his famous book “The wretched of the earth” (1961) provided psychological analysis of dehumanizing effects of colonization upon the nation and the individual. He discussed nationalism, imperialism and how language plays the role in establishment of imperialistic identities. Fanon believed that the intellectual revolutionaries should seek the help of the lumpen proletariat to expel the colonisers. The lumpen proletariat refers to the lowest and the most degraded stratum of the proletariats that includes criminals, vagrants and oppressed people. The role of Caliban can be seen from this perspective. Ariel behaves submissively and Prospero gives him freedom at the end. Ariel like an intellectual bourgeois remains indebted to Prospero for giving him freedom which is one’s birth right and not the gift by the colonisers.

On the other hand, Caliban is rebellious and violent who wants to strike back to Prospero with cruelty if required. According to Fanon, violence is an inevitable part of the process of decolonization. The object of

the process is eventual replacement of one group of humans with another and the process is complete only when the transition is total.

Caliban plots to batter Prospero's head with log, paunch him with a stake and cut his weasand with a knife. He says to Stephano:

“Be not afeared, the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not;
Sometimes a thousand tangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming,
The clouds me-thought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I wake
I cries to dream again.” (III. li. 139-47)

The quoted words of Caliban depict the inner connection of indigenous people with nature. Stephano dreams of becoming the Lord of the island and Caliban plans to take revenge on Prospero. Stephano and Trinculo are planning to sell Caliban treating him as a marketable object. This kind of attitude reflects selfish commercial and financial concerns of the whites in the colonized land. At the end, Prospero releases Ariel because of his Royal attitude while Caliban's future remains unresolved. Prospero also abandons his magical powers taking responsibility of Caliban. He says:

“ this thing of Darkness I/ acknowledge mine”

Some critics believe that Prospero would hand over the island to Caliban and he would return to Milan. “The Tempest” deals with colonial and post-colonial perspectives in an unbiased manner. Shakespeare was impressed by new discoveries and the imperial domination achieved by the Britishers and other whites in new colonies. However, as a sensitive poet, he did not endorse cruel attitude of the colonisers towards the natives. Shakespeare's combination of the contemporary, topical references to colonialism and legitimacy of power make relevant in 21st century.

Let us sum up with the words of Shashi Tharoor who describes how the Britishers exploited India in his famous book “An era of Darkness”

“ They(The British) basked in the Indian Sun and yearned for their cold and Fog-ridden homeland; they sent the money they had taken off the perspiring brow of the Indian worker to England; and whatever little they did for India, they ensured India paid for it in excess. And at end of it all, they went home to enjoy their retirements in damp little cottages with Indian names, their alien rest cushioned by generous pensions supplied by Indian taxpayers.”

References:

1. William Shakespeare, “The Tempest” OUP, 1998.
2. Boehmer, Elleke, Colonial and Post-colonial Literature, 2nd ed. OUP, 205 PDF
3. Dibson, Michael and Stanely Wells. eds The Oxford Companion of Literature, OUP 2001 PDF
4. Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks United Kingdom; Pluto Press, 2008 PDF
5. David Malouf, Relative Freedom; The Tempest Sydney: The English Association, 1973.
6. Hakluyt, Richard (1880's) Henry Morley, ed. Voyagers' Tales, Farm the Collection of Richard Hakluyt.
7. Fanon, Frantz, The Wretched of the Earth (1983) Harmondsworth: Penguin
8. Young, Richard.C. (2001) Post-colonialism: A Historical Introduction, London: Blackwell
9. Tharoor, Shashi. An Era of Darkness. Aleph Book Company, 2016