



**RE-IMAGINING SHAKESPEARE:
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON AIME CESAIRE'S A TEMPEST**

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ABSTRACT

Aime Cesaire's A Tempest interrogates the relevance of Eurocentric sophistications and value systems in the black cultural context. In fact, the black ethics and cultures had either been distorted or misrepresented in the European literatures and history about colonial subjects throughout the ages but the black intellectuals like Aime Cesaire has always challenged to rectify and re-interpret those editions of colonizers-colonized tale. The Eurocentric values, which were taught in the guise of universal knowledge, experienced extensive critique in Cesaire's play. By introducing local relevance in the play, Aime Cesaire has actually defied the colonizer's edition of a colonial story where black indigenous traditions had been marginalized. In this article, I shall examine how The Tempest by Shakespeare, comes across appropriations and rectifications in Cesaire's edition of the play. This article will also interrogate how by re-interpreting a canonical text, Cesaire is actually developing the notion of cultural decolonization.

Introducing European literatures, history and cultures in the school curriculum, the diplomats and administrators in the former European colonies had developed a sense of racial inferiority among the black students of the Caribbean archipelago. In the white colonizers' version, colonial literary masters like Shakespeare became the standard of humanity itself and in a way, European socio-cultural values were taught in the guise of universal knowledge. Therefore, during the mid-20th century, black intellectuals across the globe wrote back to the empire by reworking the European literatures about colonies in a completely different socio-cultural context. By interrogating the legacy of imperialism, the black intellectuals re-interpreted specific cultural texts where the indigenous traditions of black Africa were either distorted or misrepresented. By introducing local relevance in their adaptations of those particular texts, the black writers have actually redefined their cultural position.

Among many other texts which experienced adaptations and rectifications in the black and slave narratives, Shakespearean Tempest occupies a central position. Throughout the last century The Tempest has become the integral source of innumerable black writers' adaptations in the Africa and Caribbean archipelago. The decades between the late fifties and

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the early seventies witnessed the emergence of anti-colonial sentiment among the black intellectuals in the African and Caribbean countries. Most of the African and Caribbean countries achieved independence in the decade of 1960s with many other subsequent black uprisings like the Cuban and the Algerian Revolutions, the Kenyan “Mau Mau” war, the Katanga crisis in the Congo, the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria, the Trinidadian Black Power Movement to name a few. Such a crucial period of revolts and revolutions which were directly the consequences of long period of colonization, motivated the black intellectuals to demystify the myth of colonial legacy. In such context, black writers across Africa and West Indies reinterpreted colonial classics like *The Tempest* as a strategy of cultural decolonization.

George Lamming (*The Pleasure of Exile*), Octave Manoni (*Prospero and Caliban: Psychology of Colonization*), Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Mask*), Aimé Césaire (*A Tempest*), Danial Wilson (*Caliban: The Missing Link*), Philip Mason (*Prospero’s Magic: Some Thoughts on Class and Race*) are some of the writers who discovered the possibilities of multiple interpretations of the Shakespearean *Tempest*. In the critical period of the 1960s, the emergence of the black anti-colonial consciousness paved way for the African and the Caribbean intellectuals to reinvestigate the colonial classics which marginalized racial experiences from Eurocentric perspectives. In a way, the motivations of the black intellectuals had always been to rectify the racial experiences from their native point of view.

As the early modern period in Europe experienced the colonial expansions throughout the newly discovered part of the world, the metaphor of New World and Shipwreck naturally excited the imagination of the contemporary writers. In this context, it should be pointed out that Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was first performed in a time when European colonialism was still in its infancy. “It is generally agreed that he [Shakespeare] knew the ‘Bermuda Pamphlets’, a group of narratives describing the wreck of a ship bound for the recently established colony of Virginia in 1609, and was also familiar with other travel narrative about the New World.” (Thieme, 127-28) In fact, according to the European imagination, that part of the discovered land was considered as the ‘tabula rasa’ where white cultural traditions should be injected in order to sophisticate the so-called barbaric values. Re-imagining Shakespearean *Tempest* in a different socio-linguistic milieu, the black writers actually interrogates the early modern perceptions of race, colour and colonialism. Shakespeare has dramatized the account of colonization in *The Tempest* but the message of text was misrepresented in the teaching of the text among the black pupils who had later to discredit the notion of cultural supremacy through their own version of *The Tempest*.

In different adaptations of Shakespearean *Tempest*, the allegory of colonization, Prospero has usually been represented as the agent of the colonial supremacy while, both Ariel and Caliban generally stand for the colonized Caribbeans. Among the adaptations and re-interpretations of the play, Césaire’s French play *Une Tempête* (*A Tempest*) is a significant example. In the



play, Ariel is projected as a mulatto slave and not a Spirit while Caliban is presented as a black slave. Ariel is comparatively timid and gentle even in his claim of liberty from Prospero because he metaphorically represents the mulatto sensibility. Caliban on the other hand can be looked upon as the aggressive spirit of revolution because in Césaire's play Caliban abuses his master in extremely brutal way which the mulatto slave Ariel could never imagine. In an essay entitled "Timeheri", Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite has explained the implication of the word 'mulatto' in Caribbean cultural context. He argues:

Two main kinds of creolization may be distinguished: a mestizo-creolization: the inter-culturalisation of Amerindian and European (mainly Iberian) and located primarily in the Central and South America, and a mulatto creolization : the inter-culturalisation of Negro-African and European (mainly Western Europe) and located primarily in the West Indies and the slave areas of North American continent.

(Brathwaite, 344)

In a way, Brathwaite's perception regarding the multi-cultural West Indies concentrates on the basic tenets of the plurality of his society and the two significant examples of "inter-culturalisation" are the mulatto and mestizo communities. From this perception, Césaire's play *A Tempest* can be interpreted because though the play has not brought into focus the plurality of his culture and society, it has certainly pointed out the differences of opinions regarding freedom and slavery.

Born and brought up in French colonial Martinique, Césaire experienced classics of the European colonizers in quite a different socio-cultural context. His re-interpretation of Shakespeare is motivated by his urge to re-imagine and rectify the colonizers' edition of the Prospero-Caliban story. Césaire never presents Caliban as a mere subhuman creature against far more superior Prospero, the representative of the Eurocentric values and sophistication in the colonial Martinique. Rather Caliban is projected as a black slave and such alteration itself interrogates the colonizers' versions of the Caribbean representations. Ariel, on the other hand, is rather a mulatto slave and not a supernatural agent of European imagination. Ariel is always the favourite of Prospero because the former executes the orders of the later in the prospect liberty. Another alteration that Césaire's play experiences is the introduction of African god Eshu which the original play does not include. Eshu, a goddess of Yoruba mythological tradition in Nigeria, assumes the typical role of a black goddess with her native African performances in front of the European classical nymphs. Her performances counterbalance the divinity European classical antiquity to glorify the black indigenous culture and tradition. Juno, Ceres and Iris performed the masque in the original play but Césaire's inclusion of African pagan performance in a way is very interesting because the act itself, by violating the smooth order of performance, challenges the colonial authority of Prospero. Thus the Francophone Martinique version of Shakespeare's play has introduced amendments in order for re-examining the European perceptions of the Prospero-Caliban tale.

In the play, Caliban greets Prospero with the Swahili word ‘Uhuru!’ which means freedom. In fact, the play does not merely record the Francophone Caribbean issues as the sole motivation of its performance; rather the play incorporates the sum total of black experiences in the New World. In this context Gregson Davis’s perception must be pointed out:

To be sure the marks of Black Power movement in the continental USA of the 1960s are prominent in the drama in the form of slogans (such as ‘Freedom now’ or ‘Uhuru’); but the action of the play takes place on an island that distinctly recalls Caribbean, and Africa is vividly recalled in Caliban’s appeals to deities such as Sangho or Eshu. In sum the central paradigm of the colonized/colonizer relation, as it constructed in *A Tempest*, embraces the totality of the black experience in the New World.

(Davis, 157)

Thus the play’s message covers the entire black issues across the world, because the play at the same time encapsulates the philosophy of the Negritude movement which is nothing but construction of a black consciousness across the globe.

A. James Arnold, the author of a popular article entitled “Césaire and Shakespeare: Two *Tempest*”, has complained that the contemporary audiences in the USA have looked upon Ariel as Martin Luther King and Caliban as Malcolm X, two great leader of Black Power movement. In fact what implied here is that the play indeed includes the racial issues across the world during the decade of the 1960s that irrespective of their geographical and national identities, the oppressed black have justified their situation with that of enraged Caliban. In fact, Césaire’s play also hints out the debate over the nature of freedom itself. While Caliban represents those militant black heroes like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers who always spoke for the aggressive means of liberation, Ariel stands for the timid black leaders like the Reverend Martin Luther King who always favoured the moderate stance and outlook. From the conversation between Caliban and Prospero, it is clear that the later has challenged the colonial authority and supremacy since the time of his first appearance in the play:

Caliban : Uhuru!

Prospero : What did you say?

Caliban : I said, Uhuru!

Prospero : Mumbling your native language again! I’ve already told you, I don’t like it. You could be polite, at least; a simple “hello” wouldn’t kill you.

Caliban : Oh, I forgot... But make that as froggy, waspish, pustular and dung-filled “hello” as possible

...

Prospero : Gracious as always, you ugly ape! How can anyone be so ugly?

Caliban : You think I’m ugly... well, I don’t think you’re so handsome yourself.

With that big hooked nose, you look just like some old vulture. (Laughing)

An old vulture with a scrawny neck!

(Césaire, 11)

From this above conversation it can be argued that Caliban voices for the oppressed people's anti-colonial sentiment during the 1960s decade. In a way, Caliban, with all his verbal protest against Prospero, stands for the black radicals of the slave revolt. Caliban is never ashamed of his appearance and complexion, rather he rectifies Prospero's vague perception of his superior and sophisticated looks. By refusing to be called 'Caliban' anymore, Caliban here also interrogates the function that colonizers' language plays in the formation of cultural position and identity.

Caliban : ... I'm telling you that from now on I won't answer to the name Caliban.

Prospero : Where did you get that idea?

Caliban : Well, because Caliban isn't my name. It's as simple as that.

Prospero : Oh, I suppose it's mine!

Caliban : It's the name given me by your hatred, and everytime it's spoken it's an insult.

Prospero : My, aren't getting sensitive! All right, suggest something else... I've got to call to call you something. What will it be? Cannibal will suit you, but I'm sure you wouldn't like that, would you? ...

Caliban : Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen. You talk about history... well, that's history, and everyone knows it! Every time you summon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you have stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru! (He exits)

(Césaire, 14-15)

As with the rest of the central protagonists of Césaire's plays like the Rebel in *Et les chiens se taisaient* (*And the Dogs were Silent*), Christophe in *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (*The Tragedy of King Christophe*) to name a few, Caliban continues to challenge and defy the legacy of colonial authority. In Gregson Davis's words:

In Césaire's re-fashioning of the Shakespearean plot, then, the figure of Caliban is no longer a caricature of the savage, noble or ignoble; rather it incarnates the irrepressible will of the colonized to be his own master.

(Davis, 161-162)

Unlike Shakespeare's play, Césaire's *A Tempest* ends with an exciting innovation when at the denouement of the play, instead of returning to his native land in Europe, Prospero makes quite an unexpected decision to stay in 'his' island. This crucial departure from the source text is very significant and the exact reason behind such decision is really a matter of debate. It may be interpreted that Prospero, the representative figure of white colonizers, still desires to continue his civilizing mission in his colony. At the same time, it can also be asserted that Césaire is actually anticipating the post-independent Martinique where irrespective of the racial and colour bias, both the next generation colonized and colonizers should rule for a good governance and administration. Therefore, Prospero towards the end of the play addressed Caliban as "my boy", "mon garçon". The play ends in such a critical junction where a problem has clearly been pointed out and it is the problem of challenge of governing

the free nation where both black and white will live together. Himself a political leader, Césaire anticipated the problem of administration in the future Martinique and the rest of the black independent nations because of the racial bias among the future leaders and administrators.

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