

Breaking the Code: Understanding the Racial Terminology in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Vikas Chandani

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya

William Shakespeare was not only the greatest dramatist in the history of English Literature but also a man of several identities. It was only in his later plays that readers realised that Shakespeare had started realising his worth in the world of playwrights. It is often referred that the character Prospero from this play is an incarnation of the Bard himself. If observed so, this is very evident of how proud and autocratic Shakespeare might have felt. Keeping in mind that this was the high time for colonisation and it was rooting itself in the English history, Prospero might also signify the power of English autocracy and ascendancy. Prospero is the master of two slaves in the play. This play reads a shamming delineation of those two characters in particular which might support the argument that Prospero represents the English power, i.e. Ariel and Caliban. It is often so reckoned that Caliban was a *lusus naturae*, Ariel was a poor nymph who was trapped inside a tree and the island was a strange place marooned from all life. The questions like, What was Caliban actually? Was Ariel real? If yes, then what was it? Where is that island? What's its name?, are avoided.

The word Caliban is taken from a Spanish term *Caniba* which means "human that eats human flesh", and is often related to a habit of Caribs who,

according to the legend in southern Lesser Antilles displaced all the Igneri men by killing and eating them and taking their wives as theirs around 1492 when Columbus reached the Caribbean islands. This reference is ingeminated by Joseph Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness*:

Their headman, a young, broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. 'Aha!' I said, just for good fellowship's sake. 'Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—'catch 'im. Give 'im to us.' 'To you, eh?' I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat 'im!' he said curtly, and, leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude. (Conrad, 47)

Certainly Caliban wasn't an anthropophagus since we haven't traced out any indication of Caliban attempting to kill/eat anyone. His assault on Miranda is rather an attempt to seduce her and yield to his race:

CALIBAN: *O ho, O ho! would't had been done!*

*Thou didst prevent me; I had
peopled else
This isle with Calibans. (29)*

And we further are notified that Caliban consumes food that of humans:

CALIBAN: *I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my
mother,
Which thou takest from me. When
thou camest first, Thou strokedst me
and madest much of me, wouldst
give me
Water with berries in't... (28)*

Apart from this we have a peculiar design that Caliban is described in. Trinculo, for instance, describes him "Legged like a man and his fins like arms!" (Shakespeare, 66), but there are peculiarities far deeper than this to know about Caliban. Mainly, Caliban was someone from Argiers as Prospero and Ariel describe his mother to be an "old-hag" from Argiers:

PROSPERO: *Thou liest, malignant thing!
Hast thou forgot
The foul witch Sycorax, who with
age and envy
Was grown into a hoop? hast thou
forgot her?*

ARIEL: *No, sir.*

PROSPERO: *Thou hast. Where was she
born? speak; tell me.*

ARIEL: *Sir, in Argier. (23)*

And looking back into history which might refer to the 1590's of modern Algeria (new name for Argiers), the Ottoman empire had lately left the western islands of Argiers and the central state was following the 'Harem' system for sultans which thus gave women a lowly stature in the society. The women who were influential or who rebelled against

the sultan were sent away from the state to deserted islands. Perhaps, Shakespeare derived this idea and implied it on the coming of Sycorax, thus making Caliban belong to Ottoman Empire. Caliban does belong to Ottoman Empire actually because the brutal Turkish Empire forced Black (Native) Muslims to serve the Sultan. Further, it is told that Sycorax worshipped 'Setebos', which was then a devil God of the people of Patagonia, another of the settlements of Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the description of Caliban having arms like fins is justified because people of Patagonia have relatively smaller arms than the English.

Ariel, on the other hand is a character which is less prone to insult and disgrace. It is significant to understand that Ariel is a voluntary slave of Prospero. It does not bow down to Prospero because Prospero can harm it but because he freed it from an eternal trap. Ariel thus serves Prospero on will and this is why it is called a servant, unlike Caliban who is referred to as a slave. Statistically, Shakespeare used the word 'slave' eight times in the entire work and used it six times to refer to Caliban. While he uses the word 'servant' six times and four times for Ariel. Interesting part is that Shakespeare uses the word 'monster' forty-six times in the play and refers to Caliban forty-five times. This is strange to see such an obsession on the part of Shakespeare. Ariel was an iconic figure, his being caged into a "cloven pine" is an indication of the racial limitation of the most powerful and creative mass of people. However, Shakespeare places Ariel no higher than on the feet of Prospero all the while. Prospero keeps on scolding and reminding Ariel of its discovery and deliverance by Prospero:

PROSPERO: *Dull thing, I say so; he, that
Caliban*

Whom now I keep in service. Thou
 best know'st
 What torment I did find thee in; thy
 groans
 Did make wolves howl and
 penetrate the breasts
 Of ever angry bears: it was a
 torment
 To lay upon the damn'd, which
 Sycorax
 Could not again undo: it was mine
 art,
 When I arrived and heard thee,
 that made gape
 The pine and let thee out.

ARIEL: *I thank thee, master.*

PROSPERO: *If thou more murmur'st, I will
 rend an oak
 And peg thee in his knotty entrails
 till
 Thou hast howl'd away twelve
 winters.*

ARIEL: *Pardon, master;
 I will be correspondent to command
 And do my spiriting gently.*

PROSPERO: *Do so, and after two days
 I will discharge thee. (25)*

Besides this, Ariel tends to be more alike the adapting forces of the East which abided by and acquired the Western manners during colonial domination. Ariel becomes a helping hand to Prospero in keeping Caliban under control, at times scaring him and other times getting him injured. Ariel works nonetheless perfectly and follows every order in the most efficient way possible, perhaps Shakespeare was positing an epitome of perfect service for the spectators of the play from the lower society. It is observed many times that Ariel is queried about the perfection of its work:

PROSPERO: *Hast thou, spirit,*

*Perform'd to point the tempest that
 I bade thee?*

ARIEL: *To every article.
 I boarded the king's ship; now on
 the beak,
 Now in the waist, the deck, in every
 cabin,
 I flamed amazement: sometime I'd
 divide,
 And burn in many places; on the
 topmast,
 The yards and bowsprit, would I
 flame distinctly,
 Then meet and join. Jove's
 lightnings, the precursors
 O' the dreadful thunder-claps, more
 momentary
 And sight-outrunning were not; the
 fire and cracks
 Of sulphurous roaring the most
 mighty Neptune
 Seem to besiege and make his bold
 waves tremble,
 Yea, his dread trident shake.*

PROSPERO: *Thou shalt be free
 As mountain winds: but then exactly
 do
 All points of my command.*

ARIEL: *To the syllable. (39)*

PROSPERO: *Thou and thy meaner fellows
 your last service
 Did worthily perform; and I must
 use you
 In such another trick. Go bring the
 rabble,
 O'er whom I give thee power, here to
 this place:
 Incite them to quick motion; for I
 must
 Bestow upon the eyes of this young
 couple
 Some vanity of mine art: it is my
 promise,
 And they expect it from me.*

ARIEL: *Presently?*

PROSPERO: *Ay, with a twink.*

ARIEL: *Before you can say 'come' and 'go,'
 And breathe twice and cry 'so, so,'
 Each one, tripping on his toe,*

Will be here with mop and mow.

Do you love me, master? no? (103)

The island represented by Shakespeare was perhaps imagined to have been somewhere near the Mediterranean as the play suggests (Ariel: ...And are upon the Mediterranean flote, Bound sadly home for Naples). The island is treated as a dwelling of the most ferine people. The land is exploited and plundered of its resources violently. The isle is to be of its real possessor Caliban, but is usurped by Prospero using force. The following quotation makes it clear:

CALIBAN: *I must eat my dinner.*

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,

Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,

Thou strok'dst me and madest much of me, wouldst give

Me... (28)

The belonging of the island is a question of concern as the place itself is counted as hell like, 'most desolate' and 'poor'

WORKS CITED

Conrad, Joseph, and D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke. *Heart of Darkness*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1995. Print.

Shakespeare, William, and David Hamilton Horne. *The Tempest*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1955. Print.

Wisker, Gina. *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Literature*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Vale, David, Stephen Mullaney, and Leo Hartas. *The Cambridge Dictionary*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.

advertising that the place itself had no grandness of its own. While the Eastern countries consider the fact that:

"land has always been an essential ingredient in the determination of identity. Location, geography and land ownership contribute to fundamentally to people's sense of belonging... they provide fundamental sense of wholeness of existence, of which all creatures and people belong, the mythical element known as 'The Dreaming'" (Whisker, 47)

The Tempest has been one of the most interpreted texts by Shakespeare, it stands on the border where colonial literature, racism, textual interpretation and deconstruction meet. It is a play not merely to be enacted but to be lived with. Shakespeare was clearly thinking of giving some motive to this play other than just as a masque for a wedding.