

Revisiting William J. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* From a Colonial and Postcolonial Lens

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Abstract—The current paper shows colonialism as a concept and how European countries have created colonies in Australia, Asia, Africa, and America, capturing and overexploiting the colonies' natural resources and dominating the colonies' natives. The new nation discoveries accomplished by Europeans stuck in Shakespeare's mind, naming these discoveries the "New World". Shakespeare's *The Tempest* approaches Prospero's colonial attitude and Caliban's postcolonial standpoint. With that being said, this paper aims to demonstrate that Shakespeare stands in the middle making no approval or disapproval of the European colonization. *The Tempest* by Shakespeare can be reviewed from a colonial and postcolonial lens. Fanon (1991) establishes that violence-based struggle is a component of the decolonization process represented by Caliban. Towards the end of the paper, key related interpretations of India's overexploitation by Great Britain are adopted to make a piece of evidence that one of the deadly sins of European history rests in colonialism.

Index Terms—colonialism, decolonization, post-colonialism, resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism is an act involving the domination of a certain country over other countries, districts, and land properties outside of its official boundaries, alongside turning these lands into new colonies. By and large, the control of smaller territories or regions with less power is taken by wealthy and more powerful countries. In one go, imperialism is used as an alternative expression of colonialism. The early and late span of the 1700s witnessed the rise of establishing more colonies among the most commanding and authoritative countries in Europe, namely: The United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Spain, and the French Republic in other countries in Asia and Africa (Dobson et al., 2001).

Under colonialism, enormous lands are usurped by certain countries to be granted for their citizens to settle in by expelling indigenous people away and imposing a colonial system to safeguard the colonizing incomers from the lands' natives. The usurped lands are used by the colonizers to farm and deplete home-grown resources, i.e. plants, metals, and coal. Another aspect of colonization lies in forcing the natives to work in the new farms and factories, endangering them psychologically, sexually, and even physically (Nimavat, 2019).

Historically, the world demonstrates that quite a lot of territories are colonized and the indigenous tribes are turned into slaves by the Roman and Greeks long ago. As colonialism consists of various types, a group of western countries, specifically the USA, Australia, and Canada have created the so-called secular colonies by enlarging territories. These countries have taken over the great and productive lands of the colonized areas to settle in, imposing various deadly constraints on the indigenous people such as Indians and Maori to move into remote areas (Boehmer, 2005).

The native people, on the other hand, have experienced suffering starting from losing their identities, cultural stand, and natural living. Other examples of suffering experienced by the natives are being spiritually alienated and committing suicide in groups. Of the other natures of colonization is dependency, where multi-power country such as India's British Raj creates an administrative system to rule and dominate the powerless country without setting foot in its territories. Within the colonies with plantation systems such as India, Jamaica, Singapore, and Barbados, the poor countries' lands are illegally appropriated by the colonizers for planting crops, coercing their real owners to be farm laborers. In Jamaica, for example, multi-power countries have founded colonies with trade stations relating to their businesses and industries. In the same vein, the colonizers established police forces and military soldiers for implementing their laws in the colonized territories (Young, 2001).

Among the inhumane measures amid the colonization process taken by the colonizer to impose its control over a country is the incitement of religious, national, and racial hatred and discord among the members of the occupied people by letting go of grudges among them to facilitate the process of controlling them. The colonizer also controls the media and educational curricula to spread his language, making it the official language of the country. Likewise, the colonizer works on exploiting the country's resources, occupying lands, building settlements, spreading secularism, and finally eliminating any seed that calls for the resistance and liberation of the land and people from this colonizer (Nimavat, 2019).

Revisiting colonization from a literary reading, however, puts Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on the table as this play primarily takes aim at giving insight into Caliban's opposition to Prospero's domination and control over language. As portrayed by Césaire (1955), Prospero is an intruder with the agenda of enslaving Caliban, the island's ruler before the

appearance of Prospero. This paper is, however, divided into five main sections apart from the introductory section and structured as follows. Section Two (2) explores the Literature Review. Section Three (3) shows the Conceptual Framework. Section Three (4) examines the Textual Analysis. In Section Five (5), the Conclusion is presented.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Tempest by William Shakespeare, i.e. the Bard of Avon has been differently interpreted by scholars and researchers belonging to various schools of thought and theories, where the play is inundated with social, dramatic, and political issues. From the ecocriticism perspective, Gray (2020) examined *The Tempest* as being concerned with humanity's impact on the Earth System by focusing on the environmental and ecological concerns and drawing attention to central ideas and common themes, as well as offering an eco-critical analysis from a historical perspective, particularly the catastrophic tidal events that took place in south-west England. Viewing the play as a panopticon, Motlagh's (2015) study revealed the various functions of power relations, starting from the characters' bodies and souls and moving toward higher-order functions representing the magical power as well as the mysterious police force. The study has also revealed that there were negotiations between the subversive voices and the rulers by exposing the issue of containment as a personal, social and cultural production rather than a coercive factor. From another angle, Ko (2012) asserts that *The Tempest* lacks the sense of dramatic tension, hence being more poetic in nature. The play involves a prominent concept and spectacular features, moving from colonialism to adapting political conflicts. Nonetheless, the aesthetics of the play give the impression of employing more cinema techniques. In a study conducted by Caroti (2004), he examined Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as science fiction by showing its attraction to modern audiences. He also highlighted the cognitive estrangement theme by translating this cultural theme through the Forbidden Planet. The study's findings revealed that *The Tempest*, as a film, translates Shakespeare's sense of wonder and the conflict between rational self-interpretation and the forces of the irrational in search of truth and understanding of humanity's place in the universe.

Based on a brief literature review of the different interpretations and analyses of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by scholars and researchers, it can be stated that they lend themselves to various explanations to acknowledge that Shakespeare is moderate demonstrating no approval or disapproval of the European colonization in Asia, Africa, and America. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is beyond the shadow of a doubt the greatest playwright once and for all. He is uniquely positioned in world literature. More importantly, Shakespeare is globally accepted and acclaimed as the best playwright in the whole history of English literature. Against the previous literature review, this study serves as a marker of motivation and contribution for readers to make continual efforts to look at *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare from various perception levels (Al-Ghammaz et al., 2022).

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

With the advent of the concept of colonization, colonialism refers to "The maintenance of political, social, economic, and cultural domination over people by a foreign power for an extended period" (Bell, 1991, p. 2). Nothing like annexation, colonialism is a rule by foreigners involving no tangible incorporation into the nation and lifestyle of the dominant people. On the other hand, post-colonialism refers to "A body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries" (Elam, 2020, p. 12).

Meanwhile, even though post-colonialism is snowed under various interventions, details, and shapes, all are incorporated into one fundamental statement, i.e. the world inhabited by us can no longer be understandable without relating it to the colonial rule period and imperialism's long history. To put it in simple English, conceiving the prevailing concepts of "European philosophy," "European literature," and "European history" is no longer possible with the lack of Europe's oppressive powers and colonial confrontations all over the world. In a postcolonial context, it is evident that the colonized world is always shoved into the back standing at the global modernity's ignored center.

Significantly, the amalgamation of the two concepts: colonialism and post-colonialism are inescapable as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is not far from the concept of colonialism and is readable from a colonial and postcolonial lens. The reason behind the choice of this English actor, poet, and playwright is that his drama *The Tempest* details the role played by Shakespeare to balance the manifestation of the colonial and postcolonial angles. What is more, the aim of piecing these two concepts together in use is to demonstrate that Shakespeare has simultaneously spoken of Prospero's colonial attitude and Caliban's postcolonial stance. Shakespeare neither favors colonization nor condemns it. Hence, Bell's concept of colonialism and Elam's concept of postcolonial are drawn, for their scope of definitions is by hook or by crook reflected in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

There has been always much discussion revolving around the issues of imperialism and colonization in political history and world literature. Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest* is by and large considered the drama of the New World. Modern-day thinkers and writers are impressed by America's exploration, The New World. Shakespeare, on one hand, has given the present-day audience a hand to have knowledge of the takeover-colonization process. On the other hand,

the natives who are uncultured and unknowledgeable about European culture, identity, and language, are taken as “Other” by colonizers.

The Tempest’s playwright neither criticizes nor supports the colonial expeditions and processes. Shakespeare, however, equally reveals the two sides of the unbearably colonial effects. In Shakespeare’s time, civilization as a concept is largely defined by people from western perceptions. The worlds raised and discussed in colonial fiction are devoid of the indigenous characters and their lifestyle. On contrary, the same western perceptions give a picture of the colonizers as cultured, dominant, and audacious. As no direct reference is made to colonization or America in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, numerous critics still call *The Tempest* a play with a new world.

In Shakespeare’s play, the role of domineering colonization is represented by Prospero, while the role of the Anglo-American efforts to overpower indigenous language, culture, and legacy is symbolized by Miranda. Shakespeare’s time travel narratives and mentions the influence of the ideas of the new world have strongly moved Shakespeare. Being devoid of any direct references to the so-called new world, the New World is represented by *The Tempest*. Searching into the text of *The Tempest* as the New World opens up several issues pertaining to English ideologies of civilization, civility, and colonization. *The Tempest* dramatizes the act of colonization and conquest investigating the act’s legality. Importantly, *The Tempest* is inundated with various allusions related to colonization and discovery. At first, the island is described as “Subtle, tender and delicate”, adding “The air breathes upon us here most sweetly” (Shakespeare, II, I, 21). Likewise, Gonzalo adds to the description of the island “Here is everything advantageous to life. How lush and lusty the grass looks!” (Shakespeare, II, I, 22). As gleaned from this quotation, the New World’s discovery process impressed the playwright, William Shakespeare, as this is evident in Gonzalo’s tongue detailing the right procedures to govern a new land and establish a deeply rooted civilization. Gonzalo’s description paves the path to apply the island’s Utopian vision under his new sovereignty.

Colonization as a schemed process is constructed on two key drivers, i.e. the colonizer and the colonized. As the role of colonized is represented by Prospero, Caliban characterizes the role of the colonized. The two-character analysis of Prospero and Caliban is of higher significance to familiarizing with *The Tempest*’s colonial views. The process of gaining control over the island and its natives qualifies Prospero to symbolize the Western colonizer. Similar to other colonizers, Prospero labels the natives of the new land as animal-like, inhuman, savage, and uncivilized. In the same context, Prospero stereotypes the local inhabitants, adopting Ariel as a powerless, obedient, and supportive indigenous figure.

In contrast, Caliban is regarded as a resistant, disobedient, and uncontrollable indigenous figure. Precisely speaking, Caliban views himself as a knowledgeable, brainy, and superior man, who is eager for sovereignty, forcing others to admit defeat and act as his slaves by utilizing his magical powers. Scientific equipment, namely: magic and guns are adopted by colonizers so that they can reinforce the colonized nations’ natives. Given the fact that Caliban and Ariel dissimilarly react, they bring about different achievements. Even though Caliban and Ariel work for Prospero, serving Prospero’s intentions but Ariel finally gains freedom from Prospero for his allegiance and devoted service. Prospero says “Then to the elements/be free, and fare thou well” (Shakespeare, V, I, 60).

In the same vein, the traits of rebellion and resistance rest in the character of Caliban. He is an exceptional native of the entire island, being treated as a slave. Therefore, Prospero sees him as an uncivilized and savage figure, calling him “Hag-seed” (Shakespeare, I, II, 20). As a heartless commander, Prospero forces Caliban to implement his various orders and commands. Callously, Prospero at all times punishes Caliban if he disobeys his orders saying, “What I command, I’ll rack thee with old cramps, Fill all the bones with aches, make thee roar”. Using his magical powers, Prospero coerces Caliban to obey and execute his commands. Yet, being a brave rebel, Caliban strikes against Prospero for his unjust treatment and behaviors, calling Prospero a usurper and a ruthless dictator. Caliban says “This Island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother/ which thou takest from me” (Shakespeare, I, II, 15).

Of the various English writers and priests promoting and endorsing the English colonization of the New Land of America to establish their colonies is Richard Hakluyt. Hakluyt and Morley (1880) maintain that the Western discovery of the New Land helps in spreading Christ’s Gospel and richly expanding the British trade. Another important achievement of the Western expeditions lies in yielding the entire services, goods and chattels, and supplies to the British Empire. The pretexts of the act of colonialism created by Hakluyt support the exploitation process of the resources of the natives by representing the Whites’ superiority and sovereignty. Being a colonizer in *The Tempest*, Prospero nicknames himself as the bringer and founding father of civilization to the natives, lacking culture, knowledge, and civility. With that, Caliban is called by Prospero “A freckled whelp hag-born not honoured with/A human shape” (Shakespeare, I, II, 13).

Caliban as a name speaks of cannibal which is the eater of the human flesh repeatedly mentioned in the Elizabethan epoch’s travel narratives. Likewise, Caliban as reviewed by Trinculo symbolizes the various views of the colonizer concerning the natives of the New World. Trinculo asks “What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive?” Trinculo and Stephano over and over again talk about Caliban as a “monster”, “servant Monster” “man-monster”, and “mooncalf”. Prospero assigns Caliban various responsibilities such as doing manual labor, getting wood, alongside tending the fire. In point of fact, Prospero and Miranda adopt Caliban as he represents service, labor, affluence, and as a result, continued existence on the Island. In the same stream, others such as Trinculo favor and view Caliban as a

marketable object capable of earning money, reflecting the profiteering and money-making that represents colonial attitudes.

Using the perceptions of Prospero, Miranda, along with Trinculo, *The Tempest's* playwright outlines the sixteenth century's colonial rhetoric. Prospero and Miranda aim to discipline, civilize, and enlighten Caliban considering it being "The white man's burden" so those other uncivilized natives are appropriately civilized. Prospero and Miranda, however, believe that Caliban's evil nature hinders him from acquiring the European civilization and culture. With that being said, Prospero says "Thou most lying slave, whose stripes may move, not kindness!" (Shakespeare, I, II, 15-16). Caliban is held accountable by Prospero for trying to violate Miranda's honor, intimidating violently punishing, and enslaving Caliban. Against this, Caliban replies 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" (Shakespeare, I, II, 366-368). In the same context, Caliban announces the island's full sovereignty, saying "This island is mine, by Sycorax my mother Which thou takest from me" (Shakespeare, I, II, 396).

Together with his political ambitions on the island, Prospero worries about women's vulnerability in general and the chastity of Miranda in particular. As the rapist-virgin sexual division is a widely prevailing discourse, Prospero is always in a fear of the fact that the virginity of his daughter may be violated by a native rapist, wishing his daughter to marry someone; a civilized lover coming from the western world. Regulating the act of sexuality is associated with the two elements of privilege and power (Qutami, 2022). Concerning the natives, colonizers not only view them as uncivilized but also widely violent and dangerous. On the other hand, *The Tempest* illustrates Caliban's humanization who owns the qualities to be a "noble savage". Along with being able to react to beauty and melody, Caliban is up to learning and acquiring new languages. With the use of rhythmic verse with iambic pentameters, Caliban communicates with others like aristocratic and noble figures. Caliban's traits add feelings of empathy and equality to the drama's audience for colonized natives. The audience, for instance, is sympathetic to the cause of Caliban suffering from humiliation, marginalization, and injustice practiced by Prospero.

Together with demonstrating the colonizer-colonized conflict, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* investigates the colonization's current beliefs and ideologies. Prospero's colonizing attitude is evident in the taking of Sycorax's land by Prospero and his behaviors against the defenseless natives. Caliban's objection to the colonial acts of Prospero gives insight into his opposition to colonial power newly imposed on the island. Having become knowledgeable of Prospero's language, Caliban relies on language as a weapon to confront Prospero's limitless rise. This demonstrates that the natives experience "A post-colonial conflict" against the colonizers so that the colonized can get decolonized in their entire life aspects. Being taken as a violent, ugly, and deformed creature, Caliban is called "A thing of Darkness" by Prospero. This illustrates the attitude of the colonizer towering over the natives as ignorant, marginalized, and uncivilized.

Once setting foot on the island, Prospero names himself as the ultimate ruler whose number one mission is to civilize the inhabitants of the island, initially attempting to instruct and teach Caliban but it is in vain. Civilizing others in new lands is among the well-known colonization-based politics and has not to do with humanistic missions and altruistic messages. From a colonial viewpoint, the drama is realized through the colonizers' eyes. The defiant and disobedient attitude of Caliban can be viewed from a post-colonial standpoint. By way of explanation, the island and its inhabitants and components are fully dominated by Prospero. Abd-Rabbo (2019) maintains that the social distinction and freedom of the inhabitants can only be attainable under the prevailing social and political standards that may lead to the excellence and achievement of the colonized, and thus the characters respond differently to the prevalent social norms and traditions. However, Caliban, being a colonized and disobedient, works hard to hit back, threatening both the ultimate ruler and his wife, Miranda. The attempts made by Caliban to violate Miranda's virginity pose unprecedented threats to civilized society in general and sexual norms in particular. Caliban is regarded as a big and powerful protester, claiming the property of the island saying "I must eat my dinner. This island is mine, by Sycorax, my mother" (Shakespeare, I, II, 15).

Despite the continual refusal of Caliban to learn Prospero's language, Caliban lastly acquires the language to use it as a weapon to curse and fight Prospero, the island's illegal taker. A similar experience and atmosphere occurs in the Far East, where English is introduced as an assistance program to the British sovereignty and rule in India by Macaulay (1832). English, however, is adopted by the English-taught freedom advocates to resist British sovereignty and rule in India. The prevailing ideas and illusions among white men that they work and exert efforts to achieve the prosperity and happiness of the colonized failed in India and other colonized countries. On the pretext to educate and civilize people, the natives' local culture and original identity are torn and destructed by the European colonizers, dominating the colonized at the cultural, educational, and economical levels. What has worsened things to a greater extent is that several educated natives have been transformed into puppets in the white colonizers' hands. Being severely humiliated by the white colonizers, these puppets have done the same by humiliating their brethren. In the same vein, these puppets have harshly treated their communities, showing them as uneducated, backward, and thus inferior.

Using a psychological analysis, Fanon (2008) demonstrates that the colonized individuals and nations are inundated with the colonization's dehumanizing effects. Among the concepts discussed by Fanon is imperialism, and nationalism, alongside the role of language in establishing imperialistic identities among the colonized people. Fanon assumes that the process of expelling the colonizers from any land rests in mutual work and cooperation between the intellectual

revolutionaries and the Lumpenproletariat. Lumpenproletariat is “A newly sociological term that refers to the most degraded and lowest position of the proletariats consisting of oppressed people, beggars, and even criminals” (Hemmerle, 2006, p. 2). Caliban’s role is seen from this viewpoint, as Ariel submissively behaves and obeys Prospero, in the end, Prospero frees him. Similar to an intellectual bourgeois, Ariel still owes a favor to Prospero for granting him freedom though it is the birthright of any individual and not the colonizers’ gift. In contrast, Caliban is violent and rebellious and has the right to cruelly resist and hit back at Prospero.

In the word of Fanon, among the inevitable elements of the decolonization process is violence. Caliban plots to use a log to hit the head of Prospero, a stake to punch him, and a knife to cut his weasand. He tells 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” (Shakespeare, III, II, 139-147).

Importantly, the words cited from Caliban’s speech give a picture of the natives’ inner connection with their surrounding nature. Stephano, for instance, has dreamt of being the island’s lord, while Caliban makes the required tactics to avenge Prospero. On the other hand, Trinculo and Stephano plan to have Caliban sold considering him a profitable object. This attitude mirrors the whites’ financial concerns and selfish commercial in the riches of the colonized land. In the last part, Prospero decides on Ariel’s release thanks to his royal attitude. The future of the stubborn Caliban is still up in the air. Likewise, Prospero leaves his magical powers behind to be responsible for Caliban, saying “This thing of Darkness I acknowledge mine” (Shakespeare, I, I, 330-331). As gleaned from this quotation, several critics consider that Prospero thinks of handing over the island to Caliban to return to Milan in Italy.

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, colonial and post-colonial perspectives are dispassionately addressed far away from any biased. Shakespeare is fascinated by the unique discoveries and domination accomplished by the British and European whites in newly colonized lands on one hand. On the other hand, being a sensitive and talented playwright and poet, Shakespeare has made no endorsement of the colonizers’ cruel attitudes and behaviors toward the submissive natives. *The Tempest*’s playwright’s mixture of modern-day references and gestures to power legitimacy and colonialism is relevant to the twentieth-first century. Given this background, Tharoor’s words cited in his popular book “An era of Darkness” (2016) give an insight into the British colonizers’ exploitation of India and its riches, saying,

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.

V. CONCLUSION

To bring this discussion to an end, colonial and post-colonial readings of *The Tempest* shall be interwoven together. Before Prospero sets foot on the island, the free native Caliban has ruled the entire island, and therefore he is the island’s lone legitimate ruler. Colonization as a process is dramatized in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In other words, Prospero’s initial welcoming attitude and behavior toward Caliban and Prospero’s act of enslaving Caliban after being knowledgeable of the island’s whole secrets parallel the colonizers’ double-edged attitude who befriend the subjugated natives in the name of cooperation, partnership, and business, and then exploit and colonize them bit by bit. During the course of *The Tempest*, Caliban reprimands himself for believing Prospero and providing him with the new land’s secrets. Using the knowledge attained from the relationship with Caliban, Prospero abuses, ill-treats, enslaves and dominates Caliban. By illustrating the colonizer-colonized relationship, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* stands in the middle making no approval or disapproval of the European colonization, making it readable from a colonial and postcolonial lens.

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