

REIMAGINING PROSPERO AND CALIBAN IN J.M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

Colonial expansion inspired interest and generated writing during the age of the empire. For example, Shakespeare's works offers a wide variety of colonial themes and his *The Tempest* stands out as one of the fine masterpieces in its expression of colonization. In the play, Prospero stands as a picture of the dominant colonial master and Caliban who was the real owner earlier of the island, now declined to the position of a 'slave'. The way in which Prospero interacts with the native, it reveals the complex historical reality of colonization. The play then allegorically reveals how the colonizers captured the land of the natives, how they controlled the native people, their tradition and culture. Similarly, we have another novel *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee which seeks to revisit the colonial power of dominance and resistance from post apartheid situation. It unfolds the dynamics of power relations in South Africa where the white minority are on the verge of extinction. By drawing thematic connection between the two works, the primary objective of the paper is to understand the polemical dynamics of the once existing binaries of colonizer and colonized. The paper also aims to relocate Shakespeare's characters Prospero and Caliban from the play *The Tempest* to the settings of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and thereby speculate each characters existence in the new political scenario of changed power positions.

Keywords: colonizer, colonized, post apartheid, power dynamics

Introduction:

Postcolonialism is a mode of reading, political analysis and cultural resistance/ interventions that deals with the history of colonialism and present neocolonial structures. As Leela Gandhi puts it, Postcolonialism is an "academic task of revisiting, remembering, and, crucially interrogating the colonial past" (*Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 17). It can be looked at as a counter discourse that seeks to understand, negotiate and critique a specific 'historical event'. It always work with the rejection of the master narratives by a replacement of the counter-narratives thereby subverting the Eurocentric values. It re-examines colonial literature, especially concentrating upon the social discourse, between the colonizer and the colonized, that shaped and produced the literature. Therefore, Post-colonial literature can be identified as a literature of resistance, anger, protest and hope.

Colonial expansion inspired interest and generated writing during the age of the empire. For example, Shakespeare's works offers a wide variety of colonial themes and his *The Tempest* stands out as one of the fine masterpieces in its expression of colonization. Though he had written the play during the year 1611, it has been subjected to re-readings juxtaposing the colonial concept of domination and resistance. In the play, Prospero stands as a picture of the dominant colonial master and Caliban who was the real owner earlier of the island, now declined to the position of a 'slave'. The way in which Prospero interacts with the native, it reveals the complex historical reality of colonization. The play then allegorically reveals how the colonizers captured the land of the natives, how they controlled the native people, their tradition and culture. Similarly, we have another novel *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee which seeks to revisit the colonial power of dominance and resistance from post apartheid situation. It unfolds the dynamics of power relations in South Africa where the white minority are on the verge of extinction. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee addresses the former colonizer's feeling of guilt that accompanies the process of decolonization. His novel therefore can be seen as the role-reversal of the master-slave dichotomy as it places power in the hands of the latter. One parallel theme that runs between the two texts- *The Tempest* and *Disgrace*- is its expression of power position and its subversion in colonial and post colonial situations. *The Tempest* exposes the way in which Prospero through the tool of knowledge and magic takes the power of the inhabitant, establishes a new order on the island and makes himself the ruler. When the play reaches its climax, we find Prospero who withdraws himself from all the powerful possessions he had to rule upon the island. This in a way can be interpreted as the beginning of decolonization where Caliban, the true owner, becomes again the rightful owner of the land. In this context, we can bring in the reference to J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace* and make a thematic connection with Shakespeare's *Tempest* where we can perceive the character of David Lurie as an after image of Prospero. In *Disgrace*, it is now Prospero who must seek a voice, who must strive to have his history heard while on the other hand Caliban representing the natives threatens his existence. Keeping these motifs in mind, the primary objective of the paper is to understand the polemical dynamics of the once existing binaries of colonizer and colonized. The paper also aims to relocate Shakespeare's characters Prospero and Caliban from the play *The Tempest* to the settings of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and thereby speculate each characters existence in the new political scenario of changed power positions.

In this paper, both analytical and descriptive method has been adopted to re imagine the characters of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in the settings of Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The analysis has been made on both primary and secondary sources. The text chosen for study serves as the primary source of information while secondary sources are comprised of the edited books and eBooks that have been selected to appropriate in the paper.

Analysis:

Re-writing and re-imagining a traditional European text from a post-colonial position is a powerful method through which one can expose the oppositional relationship between the colonizer and colonized. By doing so, the postcolonial writer can foreground the experiences, the history, culture of the once dominated society and also in turn understand the effects of colonization in shaping and reshaping the colonized people. My reading of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* seeks to look at it as a continuation of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Shakespeare ends his play by freeing the island from the clutches of its dominant ruler Prospero thereby

giving away his source of knowledge, the only power that allowed him to rule over the ignorant natives. While he is leaving, Prospero seems to be aware of the different wrongs he had done to the natives. As he is heard saying “As you from your crimes would be pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free”. (*The Tempest*, pg.77). This ending may call for different interpretations and one such is that what will happen to Prospero if he is never allowed to leave the place. What if his plights are unheard and he has to redefine himself in a new political situation. Here we can interpret J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* as a continuation of Prospero’s attempt to re-assert his lost identity in the form of the protagonist of the novel David Lurie. An analogy can be drawn between the characters in the sense that the play *Tempest* ends with Prospero’s dispossessing the books – the source of all his knowledge- which he used as a weapon to dominate the natives; and this particular ending may seem to serve as the beginning of J.M.Coetzee’s novel where we see that the protagonist, David Lurie, who was once “ a professor of modern languages”(3) directly demoted to the state of being an “adjunct professor of communication”(3). Furthermore, his disgrace with a student much younger to him snapped away the little status of power that he enjoyed as a professor. It almost seems that J.M. Coetzee picks the character of Prospero where Shakespeare left him as we can witness in the epilogue of the play *The Tempest*:

Now my charms are all o’er thrown
And what strength I have’s mine own
Which is most faint. .

(*The Tempest*, 5.1, pg.77)

In the post Apartheid South Africa, Lurie stands as a powerless picture of once ruler i.e. of Prospero, without any effective forms of magic/powers. Thus, Prospero is an old man without magic and then builds himself into a man like Lurie who struggles to fit into the changing scenario of Africa.

As stated earlier, if *Tempest* reveals to its readers the power of the White man/master, then Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, is the re-telling of the White man’s guilt. Though the power equation is reversed in the settings of *Disgrace*, what becomes important is that neither of the group can feel the sense of complete victory over the other. For instance, Caliban/Petrus cannot forget the stigma of violence that the colonizers Lurie/Prospero have inflicted upon them. Similarly, Lurie and Prospero cannot accept the facts that they are now ruled by the once ‘subjugated’ blacks/slaves. Thus, it can be said that neither the colonizers nor the colonized are free from the memories of the past.

In his attempt to keep up the lost power or to dominate Caliban like Prospero did earlier, David Lurie often falls from ‘grace’ to ‘disgrace’. He presents a picture of typical white South African who though accepts the status quo on the surface is nostalgic of the apartheid past. He strongly holds the idea of white supremacy either culturally or racially which is visible in his attitudes and actions towards western literature and the justification of sexuality under it, as well as in his attitudes towards the black. One such instance where he readily describes the blacks in stereotypical way is when despite of knowing the fact that there is no proof of Petrus being involved in the robbery and rape of Lucy, he cannot help but think of Petrus as “ A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country. A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest cunning” (*Disgrace*, pg.117). This is nothing but a stereotypical picture of the natives coming down from the time of colonization as we can witness in the *The Tempest* as well where we can see Caliban plotting and scheming against Prospero.

Through this it is clear that, though David Lurie is living in the new South Africa where the whites are no longer enjoying the privilege of the colonizers in the past, the Prospero in the new scenario seems helpless in the hands of reverse power politics.

If Lurie stands as the picture of Prospero, then the traditional subjugated picture of Caliban finds expression in the different black characters of the novel. The rape of Lucy by a handful of Calibans, are continued in the novel as well as presented it as an integrated and continuous deed which defined them as the natives. Here, we get an insight of Coetzee, as a white intellectual, living in the apartheid who has also seen its transition and therefore must have realized the deeply racialized inferior positions of the blacks. While Shakespeare's Caliban can only make attempt at colonizing the body of Miranda, the Calibans in *Disgrace* are not only able to mark Lucy, but also claim her through the unborn child. Though Lurie is very often heard saying that if it was in the old days he could have taught them a lesson but practically he can do nothing about it.

In the context of the novel, Lucy can be considered as Miranda's mirror image but she seems to be significantly different from Lucy. This stark difference is well established in their reaction to rapes. In reaction to Caliban's futile attempt to rape Miranda, she does not hesitate in referring to him as a "Abhorred slave . . . being capable of all ill" (*The Tempest*, 1.2, pg.19). She refers to him as of a 'vile race' that deserves to be in the prison. But in the Post Apartheid era, Lucy accepts the sexual violation done to her by the Calibans in a way to undo the wrongs of the father. Unlike Miranda, she now realizes that to resume on her land, she needs the help of the community whose land it originally was. Despite Lurie's insistence that she press charges against her attackers, she refuses and offers the following explanation:

What if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it too. They seem to me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (*Disgrace*, 158)

She decides to pay for the sins of her father. When Lucy understands that her individual existence depends upon these communal alliances she also empowers the many Calibans present in the new South Africa. Lucy's refusal to report her rape reflects the fact that she knows what it is when it comes to represent herself as a rape victim in the Post Apartheid South Africa. If she decides to press charges, the gendered dimension of the rape will immediately be dominated by a racially motivated reading and bring back the social hierarchies that have historically been produced precisely through the link between rape and the construction of race: the re-installation of the black peril myth.

Petrus –one of the several Calibans like figure in the novel- evolves from being Lucy's 'dog man' to her protector on the land. He plays the act of reclaiming history as he is slowly seen rising to the position from which he can order or dictate terms and also offer to take in the white woman under his protection. He seems to negate the apparent need displayed by Shakespeare's Caliban to destroy Prospero's books to be at par with him. Instead, Petrus is confident enough in the new situation to display his wealth and his family and to express no compulsion to compete with Lurie on the intellectual or cultural terms. But what is important to note that in a way to pursue the path of success, he seemed to have chosen the path of disgrace.

Another aspect that the colonizers undertook in the mission of their colonization is to educate them through language. In the play we see that Caliban, the "deformed and savage"

slave was taught in course of civilizing him the language of the masters. He learns the language and thereby uses it as a rhetorical tool cursing his white masters. He says :

You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language. (*The Tempest*, 19)

Interestingly, the relationship between Petrus and Lurie also mark a failure of the coloniser's language. Petrus does not completely reject Lurie's language but he speaks it only in the need of communication. They have switched to speaking in their own tongues and this is why Lurie, the language teacher, cannot understand the conversation that took place between Petrus and Pollux. In course of time, Lurie also realizes that the English language is no longer fit to record or to tell the history of either of the communities. This problem of language is something inherently present in the postcolonial situation. The colonized think that it is an inappropriate language to communicate because it is the language of the colonizers. He expresses his doubts in the words of Lurie who says that he would not mind listening to Petrus's story one day. But he is at the same time convinced that English is an unfit medium for the expression of the truth of South Africa. The power of articulatedness have long thickened and lost their articulation like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud. The language has stiffened. (*Disgrace*, 117). The only solution that the teacher of language seems to suggest is that one should start from the beginning, from the basics. However, his suggestion of how one should start from alphabets, the small words and then to large words seems to fracture the confidence of Prospero in terms of words.

Conclusion:

From the above analysis it can be seen that William Shakespeare's play appropriates the tool of colonization and at the same time forwards a picture of resistance to subjugation. The dual presence of –dominance and resistance- not only dictates the instability of the colonial venture but also leaves a scope to bring the text in a new cultural setting. J.M. Coetzee through his *Disgrace*, seems to validate this view of Shakespeare by reversing the position of “self” and the “other”. This acquaints us with the idea that “self” can manifest its presence stronger only with respect to its “other”. Here we can make out that both “self” and “other” are two decentered subject positions and subjected to perpetual slippage. Thus it can be concluded that J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace* reengages the energies that Shakespeare deployed in *The Tempest* to different time and different ideological set up to contribute to the act of reconstituting the western text to critique the power structures.

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