

Relocating Prospero's Timeless and Ageless Human Values in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611)

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ABSTRACT

The Tempest is considered to be a pastoral romance with the themes of legitimacy and confiscations. This play depicts several forms of confiscations and revolts: Antonio against his brother, Prospero, Antonio and Sebastian against Alonso, and Caliban against Prospero's control over the island. To liberal humanism, Prospero becomes an epitome of timeless human values, forgiveness and benevolence. Unlike this approach, new historicism and cultural materialism read a literary text in the frame of the non-literary text and contexts in which the literary text is written, thereby contesting the timelessness and universality of a literary text. Based on these theoretical assumptions, rather than reading Prospero as the epitome of human values, this paper aims to read how the play supports and reinforces the European empire's identity and naturalizes their roles towards non-Europeans, the natives. This paper is divided into three sections: the first section informs the theoretical framework and the thesis statement of the paper, the second section engages with the text, *The Tempest*, and the third section deals with the observation and conclusion of the paper.

Keywords: *Liberal Humanism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, European Empire, Native, Human Values.*

1. Introduction

According to liberal humanism, good literature transcends the notions and peculiarities of the era it was written in. It considers that good literature does not speak for an era and it is timeless significance. Such literature is of "not for an age, but for all time" said Ben Jonson of Shakespeare. It is "news which stays news" said Ezra Pound (cited in Barry, 2009, p.17). To get meaning in a literary text, it does not need to be placed within a context: socio-political, literary-historical and autobiographical. Following Matthew Arnold's ideas that the honest objective of criticism is "to see the object (text) as in itself it really is", liberal humanism considers that to understand a text, the contexts should be detached from the text. This school of criticism also believes in the universality of unchanging human nature. To them, continuity of human experiences and values in literature is more important than innovation. They also believe the purpose of literature is the propagation of human values (Barry, 2009, p. 18).

However, to new historicism parallel reading of non-literary, such as cultural forms and practices, other forms of writings, and literary texts belonging to the same historical period is significant to comprehend and appreciate a literary text. The term, new historicism, coined by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s, became a popular literary

approach in the following decades. This approach gives equal weightage to both literary and non-literary texts, thereby refusing to privilege the former over the latter. Both of them are encouraged to constantly inform or interrogate each other rather than simply considering of the foreground and historical background of the literary text. They emphasize that a literary text should be read within the frame of a non-literary text. For instance, there is the juxtaposition of plays of the Renaissance period with the historical frame, the colonialist enterprises of the European empires.

New historicism is different from old historicism as the latter approach encouraged a hierarchy between the literary text and non-literary text, historical background. In traditional criticism, a literary text is placed at the centre and the historical background to the text is hardly considered for engaging the text. The setting and the historical background are taken to be unworthy components to the literary text (Barry, 2009, pp.101-102). In the same way, cultural materialism, which became current in 1985 after Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield introduced the term in their edited book, *Political Shakespeare*, contests liberal humanism's claim of the timeless significance of literature. This critical approach suggests that four characteristics should be considered to

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analyze a literary text: “historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis” (Barry, 2009, p.105). In other words, both approaches see contexts and texts are significant and inseparable to understand how a text reflects “real and material conditions of social struggle” (Nayar, 2010, p. 200).

Traditional criticism and liberal humanism primarily consider that *The Tempest* belongs to the genre of pastoral romance and occupies a crucial place in the canon of Shakespeare’s works. Conventional criticism considers legitimacy and usurpations as the play’s themes owing to the play’s depiction of several forms of actual or attempted confiscations and revolts: Antonio against his brother, Prospero, Antonio and Sebastian against Alonso, Caliban against Prospero’s control over the island and his ‘attempted’ violation of the honour of Prospero’s daughter. To the conventional critics, Prospero becomes an exemplar of timeless human values that emphasize his forgiving nature of enemies and the civilizing mission of the natives. However, as mentioned above, new historicism and cultural materialism contest the ageless and timeless universalities of literary text. Based on the theoretical assumptions of these new critical approaches to literary text, this paper aims to problematize Prospero’s timeless human values in *The Tempest*. Rather than considering the characterization of Prospero as having timeless significance that does not confine to an era but to all eras, this paper also examines how the play supports and reinforces the European empire’s identity, maintaining and naturalizing their roles towards non-Europeans, the natives.

2. Textual Engagement

William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* written around 1610-1611 is set on an island. The story revolves around the white patriarch, Prospero. Before coming to the island, he was the rightful Duke of Milan. Antonio, his brother and Alonso, the king of Naples, confiscated him and sent him to exile twelve years ago. With the help of Ariel, a magical spirit, Prospero conjures a storm, the eponymous tempest, to bring his enemies to the island. After having shipwrecked, Alonso, his son Ferdinand, Antonio, and several other nobles reside on the island. As the play progresses, Prospero manipulates events, seeking revenge on those who wronged him and ensuring the union of his daughter Miranda with Ferdinand. The play explores themes of treachery in the palace, the exercise of power, and the importance of forgiveness and transformation through education and learning. *The Tempest* is considered to be one of Shakespeare’s late romances, blending elements of comedy, adventure, exploration and drama. It delves into the complexities of human nature through the characterizations of Caliban and Ariel, who are enslaved by Prospero. The natives seem to be submissive to the mater, Prospero, yet they also have the

potential to disrupt Prospero’s dominance and control over the island. The play ends with the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, showcasing the possibility of a better future. Such a scant summary of the play does little justice to the twists and turns in *The Tempest*, but it is noticeable the magnificent role that Prospero plays in it.

Among several characters and events in the play, this paper primarily focuses on the characterization of Prospero. He is depicted as a magician, teacher, patriarch, controller, master, explorer, colonizer, etc., Traditional readings, for instance, the liberal humanists, present Prospero in *The Tempest* as an epitome of human values. As a magician, he keeps nature and its natural things under his control. Though he has been overthrown, he conquers the passions and emotions to start a new life. He controls and restructures the new place. To the Europeans, he is considered to be the champion of the ‘civilizing mission’. Ferdinand and Miranda consider this new place as a ‘paradise’ because of Prospero’s effort: “Makes this place Paradise” (IV.I.126).

Considering the traditional criticism’s way of reading Prospero as the epitome of human values, Dollimore & Alan (1994) contend that traditional approaches bestow Prospero a god-like status. These approaches even consider his power as benevolent and justifiable. He becomes the master who controls both nature and the people on the island (p.273). As island sovereign administrator, he is shown conquering, controlling and repairing the island with reason and rational efforts: “Yet with my nobler reason’ gainst may fury/Do I take part” (V.I.26-27). After his arrival, the island becomes a place where reason and humanity rule. As a magician, he is shown winning over the other people without a struggle: “My charms I’ll break, their senses I’ll restore/And they shall be themselves” (V.I.31-32). “Themselves” in this context does not mean what the people were before, but what they should be. He expects that the people on the island should be “themselves” on the norms and values formed by him.

Miranda becomes Prospero’s most successful learner on the island. She becomes “herself” not because she reclaims her “self” but because she has been schooled: “..here/Have I, they school/Master, made thee more profit” (I.II.171-172). On the island, due to Prospero’s teachings, she becomes a new “self” so does Ferdinand later on to the extent that they now consider the island as a new heaven under the control of Prospero: “Let me live here ever/So rare a wondered father and a wise/Makes this place Paradise” (IV.I.123-126). These Europeans consider the island a paradise because of Prospero’s efforts. Through a marriage between his daughter Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero exercises his authority and control over the latter. Considering that Ferdinand is the future ruler of the island, he needs both to acknowledge Prospero’s magical power

and accept him as master and teacher, which Ferdinand readily accepts later in the play. Likewise, other characters, Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio, become “themselves” and are educated on the lines of norms made by Prospero.

Apart from shaping and educating them as per his norms, Prospero’s magical activity torments the characters on the island. The spectacular storm in the play’s first scene stirs up Miranda’s emphatic agitation: “Oh! I have suffered/With those that I saw suffer” (I.II.5-6). Prospero assures her that he has control over all and that she should not be worried: “I have with provision in mine art” (I.II.,28). In another scene (III.III), he conjures up a banquet for Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian and their party. Through Ariel, he recalls their crimes against Prospero and then fashions behaviour accordingly: “They now are in my power” (III.III.91). Thus, Prospero shapes the inner lives and behaviour of the characters on the island. Not only does Prospero employ this strategy for the people whom he hates but also for his daughter and the man whom he has chosen to be his daughter’s husband, Ferdinand.

From the above, it is visible that as sovereign controller on the island, Prospero controls, directs, and teaches all people, both the new and old inhabitants. Being a member of a community with shared values and cultures, Prospero’s efforts of re-educating the characters belonging to his race help them reclaim their cultural norms and ethics which might have been ignored due to uncontrolled passions. However, Prospero’s role as a controller or educator to the natives with the hope of ‘civilizing’ the indigenous people of the island, Sycorax, Caliban and Ariel, can be looked at as the colonizer’s effort of colonizing the natives. Discarding their cultural norms and accepting new cultures of the empire will render them homeless in their native place. Taking away their native cultures will amount to losing their identities and lowering self-esteem. In other words, the play shows Prospero exercising power over the natives. Regarding the notions associated with minority and majority, the terms are misleading. In general, the terms minority and majority refer to small and larger respectively. In practice, a minority group can be pretty large, and even more significant than a numerical majority of the population. In terms of the ownership and possession of resources and power, a minority status holds more resources and exercises more power than the simpler numerical majority (Healey, 1998, p. 9). Thus, in the play, the natives of the island, Sycorax, Caliban and Ariel, become the minority group though they are numerically larger than Prospero who is depicted as having control and power both over nature and human beings owing to his ‘knowledge’. The play seems to suggest that the natives should also be educated on lines of the empire’s norms to ensure that they become helpful in the empire.

Prospero’s efforts can be put in the context of early modern England when colonial education became systematic, and standardized schoolbooks were introduced and imposed to transform into a self-consciously identified national people: “And they shall be themselves” (V.I.31-32). European education project was launched between 1560 to 1640, there was a revolution in the English education system. With better funding and systematic methods of learning and teaching processes, the objectives of education became more purposeful than ever before. The Englishmen and the Europeans considered that they were responsible for bearing the ‘the White Man’s Burden, for instructing and educating colonized natives with ‘enlightened’ knowledge of the West (Greenblatt, 1999, pp. 97-122). To Westerners, educating the natives might be considered a mission to make the world a better place to live together.

However, Prospero’s purpose of educating Caliban can be placed in the context of Macaulay’s objective of introducing English education in India in the nineteenth century. Macaulay aimed to train a group of natives to serve the colonial masters in India. In that strategy, he discarded the native knowledge and cultural norms. Macaulay’s *1835 Minutes on Indian Education* states: “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” (cited in Young, 1952). Caliban’s education as a colonial subject can be read as making him, a subject of Prospero and the European subject. Prospero claims: “We cannot miss him. He does make our fire. Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices. That profits us” (I.II.311-13). Prospero’s objective of educating Caliban is primarily to serve the profit of the European empire. Likewise, education in England was open to the common to inculcate human values. In the inaugural function of English studies at King’s College London, Professor F.D. Maurice laid down the basic principle: “to emancipate us” from specific notions and connect us with “what is fixed and enduring” values (cited in Barry, 2009, Ch I, p.16). Considering Shakespeare’s popularity in the colonized country, Prospero can be considered a metaphor for a colonial master who yearns to educate the natives on the lines of the empire’s cultural norms and values.

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment* contends that prisons and educational institutions are significant mediums for centralized and anonymous control. Drawing on examples from both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault argues that power is present and noticeable everywhere. It creates new norms that define what a correct or incorrect form is depending on various factors at different places. At the same, it imposes its norms on society. To him, the state is a kind of laboratory that carries out various forms of experiments to train, form and alter individuals. Considering its desires and aims, the

state formulates disciplinary actions and punishments for its people. It also carries out pedagogical experiments to foster “secluded education by using orphans” (1978, pp. 205-206). Based on Foucault’s concepts, Prospero’s Island can be taken as a laboratory where he conducts experiments to educate, correct and train individuals, Miranda, Ferdinand, Caliban and others.

Nonetheless, the colonial enterprise or education or the Whiteman’s burden mission has contradictory effects. According to Prospero’s perspective, Caliban is a stiff-necked recalcitrant troublemaker who does not appreciate the former’s efforts to educate the latter. Caliban expresses that: “I am subject to a tyrant/A sorcerer that by his cunning hath/ Cheated me of the island” (III.II.41-43). He feels that Prospero’s education has cheated him. Caliban’s animosity towards education is evident from the way he advises Stephano and Trinculo to capture Prospero’s books: “First possess his books; for without them/He’s but a sot, as I am..” (III.II.93-94). Acquiring language and knowledge of the empire does not necessarily alter the native’s nature. Instead of appreciating and accepting the colonial education, Caliban remarks: “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” (I.II.363-65). It implies the vulnerability of the empire’s enterprise when it comes to the natives, as the latter are not at all passive and submissive. It shows that the colonial venture cannot run smoothly as it might seem to suggest. In the process of its delivery, it gets diluted, rendering the hierarchy of the colonial master and the native unstable. Nevertheless, there may be native’s rejection of colonial tutelage as is visible through Caliban’s reaction to Prospero. The impact of colonial educational enterprise cannot be underestimated either.

3. Observation and Conclusion

Liberal humanists’ approach to Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, in this context, as ageless and timeless universalities have been contested from a variety of theoretical positions. Associating Prospero with the epitome of preserving and reinforcing a sort of ‘natural’ order of things curbs the contours of a specific critical approach. Unlimiting the text to a specific discourse encourages it to unlock certain sets of oppositions and voices. Besides the traditional liberal humanist views, the text can be read differently. For instance, to many new critics, Shakespeare becomes a powerful ideological weapon for the Elizabethan colonial enterprise for forging discourse that offers a kind of Prospero/Caliban and man/monster opposition. Shakespeare wrote when European colonial adventures were at their beginning stage. Centuries later, his plays have influenced several cultural forms across the world. It is widely accepted that both the colonial educationalists and administrators used Shakespeare’s text in their empire’s expansion process.

“He became, during the colonial period, the quintessence of Englishness and a measure of humanity itself” (Loomba and Orkin, 1998, p.1). Utilizing new critical theory and approach, new historicism and cultural materialism, have helped in dismantling barriers between the literary and non-literary texts. They have manifested “how history and philosophy could be retrieved from their background status and become part of both the content and the perspective of criticism” (Dollimore & Alan, 1994, p. 2). They have also brought out various issues that were ignored in the past. The colonial elements in *The Tempest* were never considered in the earlier approaches and centuries, even though the play was written during the European colonial expansion. From the textual analysis given above, it is learned that *The Tempest* is concerned with European colonial expansion to other new places and the establishment of colonial and native relations. It also shows the colonial relations of domination and submission, especially concerning race and gender. Rather than expressing timeless human values through the depiction of Prospero, it reflects the prejudices and manipulations of information of a historical period. Caliban feels that Prospero’s knowledge has cheated him; the latter has even taken over the former’s legitimate lands on the island. The colonial adventure ensues the notion of “self” and “other” dichotomy.

The play is not a simple allegory about timeless and ageless human values and experiences but a sort of cultural enterprise that relates to European colonialism. As it is evident in the play, such a colonial cultural phenomenon is, however, contested by Caliban, the native whom the colonial considers to be passive and submissive. Rather than justifying the universalities of human values as claimed by the liberal humanist, the text becomes a site of power relations, a sort of unequal power relation between nations, races, and even ideologies. For instance, the relationship between Prospero and the natives, in particular Caliban, is based on unequal power relations between races, and so is Prospero and Miranda’s relationship based on unequal power between genders. Being a product of a particular historical period, social, economic and political conditions, the play reflects the privileges, prejudices, themes, and motifs of its era. The naturalization of Prospero as an epitome of human values leads to the legitimization of certain values as universal norms, something that has been rigorously contested in recent decades.

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