



A Rebel against Colonization A Comparative Study of Césaire's Caliban in *A Tempest* with Shakespeare's Caliban in *the Tempest*

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Abstract

This thesis makes a comparative study of French playwright Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to present the conflicts between two important characters in both plays, Prospero and Caliban. By analyzing the relationship between the two characters, it is easily acknowledged that the relationship between the two characters is that of the colonizer and the colonized, which is the main theme of the two plays. However, the author points out that Césaire's Caliban is different from Shakespeare's Caliban in that Césaire's Caliban incarnates the rebellious image of the colonized people in a more vivid way and proves to be more powerful than Shakespeare's Caliban in their struggle against colonization for liberty, freedom, and equality.

Keywords: Rebel, Colonization, Struggle, Freedom

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is publicly known to have possessed some European biases in the justification of colonization among the colonized countries while Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* is written as a postcolonial response to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and embodies the spirit of rebellion of the oppressed peoples against the European colonization among the colonized American and African countries. What makes Césaire's *A Tempest* a different version of the drama with a different look at it is the strong political message behind the play. Césaire draws out the common issue of colonization and makes it the centerpiece in his play. The conflict, to be more exact, the struggle between colonizers and the colonized is fully displayed and consequent result to the people in colonized countries is thoroughly depicted through two major characters, Prospero and Caliban, of whom the former is the representative of colonizers while the latter the representative of the colonized. The colonizer Prospero is the exploitative usurper of the self-determinism, land, property, dignity, and even identity of the colonized peoples while Caliban is portrayed as the oppressed native and a rebel against colonization fighting vigorously through various means including a rebellion to assert his right to freedom.

For centuries, Shakespearean critics have puzzled over the meaning and importance of this marginal character Caliban who is one of the most interesting of Shakespeare's characters. As is portrayed in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban is either a man or a beast, who is dismissed as a "poisonous slave," "savage," and "hag-seed" by the other characters in the play. Being a minor character with considerably lower status, few lines, and shorter stage presence, Caliban is regarded as genetically (rather than culturally) inferior, inherently incapable of civilized behavior: a feral, sullen, deformed human somewhat like a bearded fish, an untamed, vicious denizen of the natural world, son of the witch Sycorax, and servant of the noble wizard Prospero who views Caliban as "a devil, a born devil on whose nature/ Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains/ Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost..." (Shakespeare, p. 135). Caliban is seen as inferior by the Europeans, though he is seen as capable of goodness, able only poorly to distinguish good masters from evil masters, and apparently must be controlled by threats and punishments from his master Prospero. Caliban has no definite concept of freedom. His desire of freedom does not come from any noble perspectives, but from his hatred of his master he is serving, which makes him a rather pathetic figure and a villain in the play. Contrary to Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*, Césaire's Caliban becomes the major character with almost the same importance as Prospero in the play. In some way, Césaire transforms Caliban from Shakespeare's ignorant savage to a colonized black native whose language and culture have been displaced by Prospero's. Césaire's Caliban is much more vocal and articulate, and his arguments for freedom are much forceful and to the point, revealing his strong indignation about the situation of being conquered and enslaved. Though there is much description of the appearance of Shakespeare's Caliban, nearly no reference is made to the haggard appearance of Césaire's Caliban, suggesting that the only ugliness of Césaire's Caliban's might be the color of his skin. Shakespeare contemplates on Caliban's misbehavior, making Caliban out to be the villain of the play. However, in Césaire's version Caliban is the rebellious character fighting

against the villain Prospero, who is drawn as a slave-driving exploiter, preying on Caliban's weaknesses and using his magic to deprive Caliban of his freedom. Prospero has no patience or sympathy for Caliban, and insults his mother, his island, his native language and his hopes and dreams. Prospero is in a position of power, but it is obvious that he knows that position is tenuous, as Caliban is a threat. Fully acknowledged of the evil perceptions and deeds imposed on him by the colonizer and oppressor, Caliban has a clear understanding of the meaning of freedom and makes it the ultimate goal of his life's struggle with his master Prospero.

From the very beginning of the play, Césaire's Caliban shows his great indignation towards colonization and his great desire for freedom, the main theme that runs through the whole play. It's interesting to note that Césaire's Caliban's first phrase as he enters the play "Uhuru!" is a Swahili word which means liberty and was the watchword for the Mau Mau rebellions in Kenya as early as the 1940s. Caliban's first word becomes more emotive, with implications of the colonial conflict in Africa in the early half of the twentieth century. The word *uhuru* has been exclaimed by Caliban several times when in conversation with Prospero who considers such a word an insult to his white identity. He also sings of *Shango*, who is an African god of thunder. These references to his native culture and language serve much like the work songs of African American slaves in the early years of their nation's existence. These verbal phrases are the ways of his to quietly protest against his master and the slavery. Césaire's Caliban, who has already been "civilized" by Prospero, has become a fighter fighting with the colonizer for his identity and freedom in vocal, tactful and violent ways. He uses colorful phrases and double meanings of words to almost make a mockery of Prospero out of the language he has been taught by Prospero. When Prospero tries to belittle Caliban by calling him an "ugly ape", Caliban retorts forcefully by saying "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, p. 11) In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban is seen as the victim of the language he has been taught, and he only has the ability to represent his powerlessness and express his resentment. "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!" (Shakespeare, p. 39). As to the process of being forced to consume Prospero's language and culture, Césaire's Caliban finds it disgusting and wants to vomit Prospero's "white poison". As to the rape charge against him, Caliban protests against such a charge by saying "you are the one that put those dirty thoughts in my head" (Césaire, p. 13). Caliban is skillful enough to foist it on Prospero himself and refuses to be the scapegoat of illicit sexual urges as "I couldn't care less about your daughter, or about your cave, for that matter" (Césaire, p. 13). Whilst in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban not only shows great lust for Miranda but also admits his attempted rape of Miranda. It's his regret that if his such act has not been stopped instantly, "I had peopled else/This isle with Calibans" (Shakespeare, p. 37). We can see clearly that he is of evil disposition of raw dynastic lust and his ultimate desire is just to people this island.

Caliban's indignation against the oppressor is also displayed in his response to his master calling him Caliban. At one point in *A Tempest*, Caliban contemptuously informs Prospero that he wishes to be called "X", "like a man without a name - or, more precisely, like a man who has had his name stolen" (Césaire, p. 15), as "Every time you summon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you've stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru!" (Césaire, p. 15) His former name was a slave name, and, as so many decided during the civil rights movement, another name was more appropriate. It seems that Caliban is extremely unhappy when his name Caliban is associated with a savage, Cannibal. With such an "X", it's impossible not to specifically identify the character with Malcolm X, or any number of other Black radicals in many countries who assumed the role of revolutionaries.

As compared with Shakespeare's Caliban, Césaire's Caliban is more violent and braver in his struggle for freedom. For example, when Ariel and Caliban argue over what is the best strategy for achieving freedom, Caliban ridicules Ariel for his cowardice and Uncle Tom-ism. The conservative and sensitive Ariel insists that it is only by creating a conscience in Prospero, thus paradoxically including the slave driver in the liberation, that they will achieve their ends. However, Caliban's approach to freedom is through rebellion and considers Ariel's appeal to Prospero's moral conscience a fantasy. He conceives that "Prospero is an old scoundrel who has no conscience" (Césaire, p. 22) and that Ariel's expectation for Prospero to acquire a conscience is just like "ask a stone to grow flowers" (Césaire, p.22). When Ariel says that Prospero has promised him his freedom, Caliban brings Ariel to face the reality: "He'll promise you a thousand times and take it back a thousand times. Anyway, tomorrow doesn't interest me. What I want is (shouting) "freedom now!" (Césaire, p.21). His proclamation is no more than a familiar ring as the slogan of the Black Power movement. With his insight of the impossibility of the colonizer to show mercy to the colonized and to emancipate the oppressed, Caliban is always ready for the fight with the colonizer. He shows great courage and determination to wipe out the colonization despite all the terror and even sacrifice of his own life, as he considers it "better death than humiliation and injustice" (Césaire, p. 23).

Like Shakespeare's Caliban, Césaire's Caliban takes action to win his freedom. Caliban's plot to overthrow Prospero in both Shakespeare's and Césaire's *Tempests* are almost the same as regards their process and result, although there are some differences as far as the purpose is concerned. In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo is used by Shakespeare as a test to see whether they can do evil and get away with it. Caliban is not civilized enough to sense the possibility of liberty. He only knows that his master treats him bad and his hatred to his master

derives from his hatred of doing hard labor. He obviously fears the incomprehensible power of Prospero, and all he can do is to obey and curse. It is only when Stephano and Trinculo appear and ridiculously impoverish specimens of humanity, with their shallow understandings and vulgar greed, is this poor earth-monster Caliban possessed by a sudden fanaticism for liberty. His scheme is also simple: Caliban expects that Stephano kills Prospero, takes Miranda, and becomes the ruler of the island so that he can be his loyal subject. However, in Césaire's *Tempest*, Caliban's plot is clearly meant as an act of winning freedom. But as he starts to carry it out with the hope of joint force from Stephano and Trinculo, two drunkards who make themselves powerless and senseless with the alcohol, he begins to realise he has fallen in with fools, who, in common with many Europeans, have used alcohol to gain influence over the natives. Césaire's Caliban is brought back to reality, as "How could I ever have thought I could create the Revolution with swollen guts and fat faces! Oh well! History won't blame me for not having been able to win my freedom all by myself" (Césaire, p.56). Thus, without any compliance as Shakespeare's Caliban is armed with, he stands up to face Prospero all alone, and, with weapon in hand, he charges towards Prospero. It's funny and somewhat ironical that Caliban is totally at a loss with what to do when he really stands face to face with Prospero. Significantly, Césaire appears to allow Caliban the chance to defeat Prospero, but he refuses to take it. Here, complex psychological reasons are suggested from Caliban's refusal to murder Prospero. It is not clear whether Prospero is genuinely physically defenceless, but in any case he manages to paralyse Caliban's action merely with words. Firstly, he orders Caliban to strike him. This immediately maintains the master-slave relation: Caliban's act of freedom would thus be to obey his master's orders. Second, Prospero refuses to arm himself, placing Caliban not only in the role of slave, but also in that of assassin—he allows Caliban not civilized way out. By denying him the typically Shakespearean duel, he also refuses to treat Caliban as an equal human being. Unlike Prospero, who is content with a sham victory over a powerless and unaware victim, Caliban yearns for a real victory. It seems to me that though Caliban fails in his rebellious act, he wins the respect from Prospero, and his dignity and identity are restored to him, as Prospero no longer treats him as a slave; he is just as stupid as a slave.

It is ironical that, like Shakespeare's Caliban, Césaire's Caliban also fails in his revolt. But Shakespeare's Caliban is rightly humiliated and punished at the end of the play when he gets dunked in horse-urine. He even recognizes that his rebellion was a sin against the law of god and nature and the great chain of being: "I'll be wise hereafter/and seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass/was I to take this drunkard for a god, /And worship this dull fool!" (Shakespeare, p.167). We today may find Caliban's punishment inhumane and unfair, but we must remember that Shakespeare and his contemporaries lived before the rise of our modern democratic glorification of the common man. However, in contrast, Césaire's Caliban has his identity acknowledged by Prospero. After the revolt initiated by Caliban, Prospero as the colonizer becomes weaker in power. Prospero is no longer what he used to be. According to the stage directions, "In semi-darkness Prospero appears, aged and weary. His gestures are jerky and automatic, his speech weak, toneless, trite" (Césaire, p.68). We can easily see Césaire's hint that colonization is on its edge of decline and the colonizers are losing their power over the colonized peoples, as Prospero has to confess to Caliban: "For it is you who have made me doubt myself for the first time" (Césaire, p. 66). This can be viewed as a moral victory for Caliban, the colonized.

So far, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized has drastically changed, though the struggle between them doesn't seem to end, and Caliban's determination of fighting for freedom, to be his own master, remains unchanged. When Prospero asks him what his hope was in his revolt as Caliban shows his regret of the failure, Caliban blurts out: "To get back my island and regain my freedom" (Césaire, p. 63). Here we see the image of a true fighter who shows no fear in face of his enemy. When Prospero decides to return to the civilized world of Europe to enjoy life and asks Caliban what he would do alone on the island, Caliban answers: "First of all, I'd rid of you! I'd spit you out, all your works and pomps! Your white magic!" (Césaire, p. 63) Here again, Caliban's hatred towards white colonizers, their language and culture, and his persistency in his struggle are fully displayed.

As Prospero offers to make peace with him, Caliban refuses to comply and shows his determination by replying "You know very well that I'm not interested in peace. I'm interested in being free! Free, you hear?" (Césaire, p. 63) This is the manifestation of the people in the colonized countries for their desire of freedom, and it is also a declaration of violent actions they may take for the purpose of obtaining freedom. Caliban, the representative of the colonized people, is definitely aware of colonizer's intention and shows his idea of and attitude towards colonization that the colonizer imposes on the colonized all kinds of lies. The colonizer makes the colonized feel unworthy of living. Let's see how Césaire's Caliban shows his dissatisfaction and agitation in the face of his master: "... Prospero, you're a great magician: you're an old hand at deception. And you lied to me so much, about the world, about myself, that you ended up by imposing on me an image of myself: underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent that's how you made me see myself! ... And I know that one day my bare fist, just that, will be enough to crush your world! The old world is crumbling down! ..." (Césaire, p. 65)

This speech, taken as viewpoint, locates angrier Malcolm X, and even of the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King at their most passionate protest. It is, again, the cry of the oppressed for self-determination and freedom; the rejection of the mindset of the slave; and the search to define oneself. It is Caliban's understanding that Prospero has deprived him of

his dignity, or, the colonizer deprived the dignity of the colonized. Caliban charges Prospero with lying to him and holding him inferior. It is a classic example of the colonized rejecting the colonizer. However, as Césaire replays Shakespeare, the end to colonialism was not close at hand, and the struggle between the colonized and colonizers remains unresolved. Caliban is unable to wave goodbye to the oppressors and reclaim his freedom because he and Prospero remain trapped together on the island. In his monologue of the final scene of the play, Prospero shows his dilemma: “Well, Caliban, old fellow, it’s just us two now, here on the island...only you and me. You and me. You-me...me-you!” (Césaire, p. 68) Probably it is also Césaire’s dilemma about the real solution to the colonization, as being affected by a lifetime of political service, by the time when Césaire wrote the play, he became less able to be hopeful about the future prospects of liberation for himself and his people. Perhaps to him struggle against colonization is a difficult, confusing and painful process.

It is necessary to note that Césaire’s Caliban is not perfect in his figuration and we can easily find faults with him and his understanding of the world. But one of Césaire’s ideas is definitely conveyed through Caliban: the rights of man are inalienable and should be granted to all men. By setting up the rebellious image of Caliban, we have somewhat clear perception of Caliban’s basic human rights to life and liberty, to self-government. While Shakespeare’s Caliban is portrayed as completely powerless against Prospero, Césaire’s Caliban shows great courage facing a crucial moment in which destiny appears to be in his hands. After several hundreds years of colonization imposed on some of the American and African countries by the colonizers and justified by Shakespeare in his works, Caliban’s cry for liberty and freedom is still echoing around the world: “In the distance, above the sound of the surf and the chirping of birds, we hear snatches of Caliban’s song: FREEDOM HI-DAY, FREEDOM HI-DAY!” (Césaire, P. 68)

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