

***THE TEMPEST & THE “MIRANDA TRAP” THE POLITICS OF
CONSTRUCTION/CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY***

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Abstract

With the Renaissance historian Joan Kelly one might pertinently ask – “Did women have a Renaissance?” The Renaissance woman can be seen as a construct suited to the anxieties and expectations of the period. Shakespeare’s comic heroines like Rosalind, Portia, Olivia and the like, tend to be generally viewed as “voyagers in pursuit of happiness” but with a maturing of his dramatic vision, Shakespeare delves deeper into the conflation of power and identity formation and this becomes most pronounced in *The Tempest*, which can be read as critiquing the colonial politics. This paper seeks to argue that *The Tempest* “poses a problem for a feminist, and especially a non-western feminist appropriation” (Loomba 148) when Nature and Nurture/Education/Art is viewed beyond idealist terms and seen to explore inter-relationship between characters in a convoluted politics of domination involving race and gender.

Keywords: Colonialism, Race, Gender

The Tempest opens with the sea seeking to mount “th’ welkin’s cheek” (I, ii, 4) that makes the boatswain order the royalty to “keep below” (I, i, 10), and this magically wrought disruption of a civilized political hierarchy is aimed at re-establishing order and legitimate hierarchy. The coup of Duke of Milan’s art is further displayed through the “construction” of a daughter so “perfect and so peerless” as to bring about the union of Milan and Naples by winning Ferdinand as her husband. The play, however, “poses a problem for a feminist, and especially a nonwestern feminist appropriation” (Loomba 148) when Nature and Nurture/Education/Art is viewed beyond idealist terms and seen to involve Prospero-Sycorax, Prospero-Caliban, Prospero-Miranda and Miranda-Caliban in a convoluted politics of domination involving race and gender. The binarisation and allegorisation of Prospero as God

and Caliban as a beast collapses as education becomes implicit in the colonial strategy of domination and Prospero shows a continued obsession with the absent presence of Sycorax.

The Chain of Being & Women

The Elizabethan World Picture, concerned with how the conception of order influenced both the Elizabethans' perception of identity and Renaissance literature is curiously silent about women's position. The Elizabethans believed that creatures are "assigned their precise place in the chain of beings," and men are positioned between angels and beasts (Tillyard 25-26). Within every class, there is a primate, but every class in the chain of beings is allowed to "excel in a single particular" (Tillyard 26). The vertical order of the static self can thus be transformed by a possibility of change, due to the presumption and fact that none of the classes is perfect in every respect. Elizabethan women disappear as if they were unworthy of mention as a distinct class within the chain. John Knox's *First Blast of Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) claimed that "it is more than a monster in nature where a woman shall reign and empire above man" (qtd. in King 158) and this was regarded as a sheer subversion of order. With the Renaissance historian Joan Kelly one might pertinently ask – "Did women have a Renaissance?"

The Renaissance woman can be seen as a construct suited to the anxieties and expectations of the period. The middle and upper-class women were taught to perform household functions, and pursued a regimen stressing needlework, spinning, silence and obedience. The education of Renaissance women was originally stimulated by humanist educational theory and Thomas More, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, formulated his ideas about education and put them into practice in his own household. More did not publish theoretical writings on education but in his Latin epigram on choosing a wife and in his private correspondence with Gonell, one of the tutors he employed for his children, he praised education for providing women with spiritual and moral autonomy. He does not speak of chastity but the Latin epigram describes the female ideal-modest, of restrained demeanor and virtue, neither too talkative nor too silent. The future wife would gain intellectual autonomy through her education and she should use it with wisdom. The Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives' *The Instruction of Christen Women* (Latin, 1523; English 1529) is more like a book of rules for conduct for women and he asserts that learning more securely achieves the socially useful end of preserving woman's chastity. He gave a list of books that young girls should be taught to read, like the gospels, the *Acts of the Apostles* and the epistles of the *New Testament*. Thus education became a site for containing and controlling.

Nature/Nurture Debate

In the island of Sycorax, Prospero assumes the role of a careful teacher for Ariel and Miranda and also Caliban who remembers how, in the manner of theologically oriented primers, he was taught "To name the bigger light, and how the less" (I, ii, 335). Yet, when Ariel informs of Caliban's plan of uprising, it is Prospero who damns the slave by alluding to the Nature/Nurture debate that runs through the play. He feels that Caliban has a nature on which "Nurture can never stick" (IV, i, 189). In his introduction to the Arden edition of *The Tempest*, Kermode observed that the play is concerned with the opposition of Nature and Art which is dramatized through Caliban and Prospero. Caliban is nature without the benefit of nurture, nature divorced from

grace, or the senses of the mind. Art can be defined as man's power over the created world and over himself. Thus, Caliban cannot exercise restraint. His function "is to illuminate by contrast the world of art, nurture, civility" (xxv).

The general contrast between the natural and the artificial society constituted the theme of Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" (1580). The Indians are "even savage, as we call those fruits wilde, which nature of her selfe hath produced: whereas indeed those which our selves have altered by our artificiall devices, and diverted from their common order, we should terme savage" (xxxv). Shakespeare's portrayal of Antonio and Sebastian showed his awareness of the base corruption within the civilized world. Like the shepherd in formal pastoral, Caliban is the natural man against whom the cultivated man can be measured. Simultaneously, there were accounts of treachery, ugliness and brutality in the savages and this sanctions what Kipling later termed as the "White Man's Burden". The Spanish Ambassador, announcing the discoveries of Columbus, on behalf of his sovereigns, at the Papal Court, in 1493, had declared: "Christ has placed under their rule the Furtunate Isles" (xxxvii) and this functions as the justification of the natural assumption of European prince as also evidenced in Prospero's lordship over Caliban's territory.

Gift/Acquisition/Rape

The play was composed when settlement and plantation in Virginia was becoming popular. When Prospero bequeaths his daughter to Ferdinand, his speech becomes embedded in the matrix of commercial contract – "Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition/ Worthily purchased, take my daughter" (IV, i, 13-4) and also agricultural bountifulness. The parallel between rich, virginal land and Miranda's body is drawn as a part of patriarchal politics. The "virgin-knot" therefore becomes crucial as this comes to represent patriarchal control over the female body. Since Miranda's chastity is the "jewel" (III.i.54) in the dower, marriage becomes a ritual to be sanctified. Sukanta Chaudhuri, in *The Infirm Glory*, feels that Prospero's vehement injunction to Ferdinand against breaking Miranda's "virgin-knot" (IV, i, 15) indicates Shakespeare's continuing concern with chastity as an important symbol for the strength of man's moral being.

Caliban does not disown or repent his rape of Miranda and his discourse is in similar lines of procreation – "Thou didst prevent me. I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (I, ii, 350-1). There is an element of "jouissance" or orgasmic pleasure without concern about the outcome in this utterance. Instead of reading it as an expression of Caliban's vile race it is worth reminding ourselves of his self-knowledge – "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (I, ii, 363-4). From the very first moment of summoning him, Prospero had used a similar language loaded with carnality and abuse – "Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself/ upon thy wicked dam" (I, ii, 319-20). Thus, Caliban recasts his master's tools to devise his own implements. Then he attempts to lure Stephano to murder Prospero and gain lordship over the island, he repeats this metaphor of rape with relation to Miranda.

The issue of Caliban attempting to rape Miranda again questions Prospero's role as a tutor and "human care" (I, ii, 346) which he claims to have showered upon both. Miranda's verbal assault on Caliban draws upon his vile race and incapability of possessing good nature and this shows how she is implicated in the colonialist project. She has been taught to be repulsed by Caliban, to believe in his natural inferiority and inherent incapacity for improvement and to concur totally in his confinement. Thus, Loomba aptly remarks that Miranda conforms "to

the dual requirements of femininity within the master-culture: by taking on aspects of white man's burden, the white woman only confirmed her subordination" (155). In his comparative discussion of *Shakuntala* and *Miranda*, Tagore also draws attention to the overwhelming influence of the father that deprives *Miranda* from a natural maturity as happens with *Shakuntala* surrounded by her companions. *Miranda* does not develop any bonding with the nature around her and we never see the island through her perspective.

The reference to Alonso's daughter *Claribel's* marriage with the king of Tunis and also to *Caliban*, show how racial difference became an indicator of corruption in the entire play. *Sebastian* reminds how the king was "kneeled to and importuned otherwise" (II, I, 123) against making such an offering. The contemporary *Pocahontas* myth shows how the racial other can be appropriated. *Pocahontas*, the Native American woman who supposedly enabled the Virginia Colony to succeed, saved John Smith from her father *Powhatan's* plan to murder him and, in 1614, married John Rolfe and was christened as *Rebecka*. She visited England in 1616. She "symbolized the success of the colonial project, and as a result, she was honoured and feted by the English" (Hutner 25). Thus, the incorrigible Wild Man like *Caliban*, denied of his territorial right, would be reduced into a rapist while *Othello* can gain entry only as Barbarian into an alien law.

"Thou must now farther" – Miranda's Education

Miranda provides the ideological legitimization of each of *Prospero's* actions and he uses Art/Nurture/Education to create the epitome of female perfection – "Admired *Miranda!* / Indeed the top of admiration" (III, I, 37-8). *Kate Millett* in *Sexual Politics* (1977) lists eight ways in which patriarchy is both realized and sustained, which include ideology, education, force and class. For twelve years, *Prospero* had been *Miranda's* "schoolmaster" (I, ii, 172) and the island provided the secluded site for implementing the Renaissance ideal of education: "Here in this island ... / Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit/ Than other princesses can, that have more time/ For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful" (I,ii, 170-3). *Miranda* is carefully segregated from any human influence and fathered into perfection. She tells *Prospero* that her chambermaids seem to be but a shadowy part of her "remembrance" (I, ii, 47) and later, she confesses to *Ferdinand* "I do not know/ One of my sex, no woman's face remember –/ Save, from my glass, mine own" (III, I 48-50). Yet, when *Prospero* narrates the inhumanity of *Antonio's* betrayal, *Miranda's* response reveals a mind conditioned by the conventional tendency of associating corruption with women: "I should sin/ To think but nobly of my grandmother./ Good wombs have borne bad sons" (I, ii, 118-120). *Prospero* seems to be satisfied at the response of his ward as he had earlier made the only reference to his dead wife as "a piece of virtue" (I, ii, 57). As a Freudian tutor *Prospero* also seems to have complete control over her mind and knowledge so that she can mould her perception and shape her according to his wishes. This desire for absolute control makes him rebuke *Miranda* in terms of the position that woman would occupy despite attaining education – "My foot my tutor?" (I, ii, 470). In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), *Gilbert and Gubar* had referred to the patriarchal notion that the writer fathers his text much in the same manner as God fathered the world and in patriarchal societies women have been reduced to mere properties or images enclosed in the text penned/ generated by the author. *Miranda* is similarly an actant within *Prospero's* elaborate design.

Prospero's education had two main and diverse purposes: it has schooled Miranda to obedience and been taught not "More to know" (I, ii, 17). However, he never takes his control for granted and is anxious to test and re-affirm her attention and obedience to him. Prospero's narration of the past that he long withheld from his "wench" is punctuated by a strenuous demand to listen with the attentiveness that her education instructed into her. Miranda "must know" (I, ii, 33) and hence the injunction is to "Obey, and be attentive" (37). He admonishes her thrice for not being attentive (lines 77, 87 & 106) and describes her curious question as something he provoked – "My tale provokes that question" (I, 140) thereby denying her any agency. Miranda "canst not chose" (I, 185) and her eloquent defense of Ferdinand despite Prospero's admonition to be silent, becomes a part of the strategy of control since this eloquence is a part of his design.

Magician & the Witch

Prospero's repeated references to the absent presence of the "foul witch Sycorax" (1.204) opens a dark and uncontrollable site of contestation and anxiety where gender and race collide with respect to magic. Prospero refers to the "secret studies" (I, ii, 77) he indulged in along with his pursuit of "liberal arts" and Miranda implores him to ally the storm with this art. Magic was a debated area in the province of knowledge. The Renaissance humanist scholar Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), in his *Orations on the Dignity of Man*, distinguished between two kinds of magic – "one of which depend entirely on the work and authority of demons and hence abhorred. The other: when it is rightly pursued, is nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy" (Hume and Sherman 87). He equates the "*magus*" with the worshipper of the divine" and declares that anyone devoted to the study of heavenly and divine things should approve and embrace the second kind of magic as a higher and more holy philosophy. In Italy in 1600, Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for his occult studies. In *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533), Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) defined natural magic as that when after considering well the powers of all natural and celestial things and having found their pattern by careful inquiry, the magician brings into open the hidden and secret power of Nature. Agrippa's work influenced Dr. John Dee, an Englishman and student of supernatural phenomena. Both Agrippa and Dee describe a kind of magic similar to Prospero's: one that is based on 16th-century science, rationality, and divinity, rather than the occult. When King James I took the throne, Dee found himself under attack for his beliefs. But he was able to defend himself successfully by explaining the divine nature of his profession. The "Epilogue" to *The Tempest* was seen by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch as an apology to James I for dabbling in magic.

Sycorax is Prospero's "other" and in the closing scene, he acknowledges that like Medea, she could "control the moon, make flows and ebbs" (V, I, 270). Thus, Prospero as a white male consolidates power which is specifically white and male and constructs Sycorax as a black, wayward and wicked witch in order to legitimize it. He wants to project himself to uphold his art in the disciplined exercise of virtuous knowledge, a translation of merit into power. While Sycorax, in a fit of "immitigable rage" imprisoned Ariel in a "cloven pine" (I, ii, 77) for twelve years, Prospero claims to control his passion with regard to the shipwrecked traitors: "Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick/ Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury/ Do I take part" (V, i, 25-7).

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Miranda had come to the forefront in women-centered sentimental readings by Victorian women critics as in Anna Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1832), and Mary Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1851). Jameson still idealized in ideologically biased terms, presumed that Miranda must be beautiful and has certain internal and external qualities to be "perfect." However, in most of the recent feminist and post-colonial criticisms, the focus is on body politics. Sycorax and Prospero's wife are both conspicuously absent from the play, yet subtly but not obscurely, they attract more attention from critics than Miranda. Lorie Leininger's essay "The Miranda Trap: Sexism and Racism in Shakespeare's *Tempest*" (1980), Laura Donaldson's "The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading" (1988), and Jessica Slights' "Rape and the Romanticization of Shakespeare's Miranda" (2001) are attempts to re-read Miranda.

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