

Post-Colonial Reading: The Tempest by William Shakespeare

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Abstract

The main objective of this writing is to enable the writers to follow the academic discipline that analyze, explains and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism. This is also to make the readers aware of the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of native people. It studies the effect of colonialism and juxtaposes post colonialism as a disciplinary and an inter-disciplinary methodology among societies. The post-colonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people and also looks at themes such as racism and colonialism. Post-colonialism examines the social and political power relationships that sustain colonialism and neo-colonialism, including the social, political and cultural narratives surrounding the colonizer and the colonized. Post-colonial readings interrogate the processes, values and results of colonialism. We can learn about this through reading the texts produced by the colonizers. The post-colonial writings such as “Heart of Darkness” and “The Tempest” shock us with their depiction of race, gender and ethnicity which are out of step with our current ways of thinking. William Shakespeare's last play, “The Tempest” can be interpreted in post-colonial perspective. The plot is based in an island and the description of it seems more significant as it pertains to colonies, which had been colonized at the time when the play was written. The drama revolves around how the colonizers captured the land of the natives and how they controlled the native people (especially Caliban), their tradition and culture.

Introduction

The term “post colonialism” widely refers to the representation of race, ethnicity, culture and human identity in the modern era, mostly after many colonized countries got their independence. It describes many interactions between “colonizer” and “colonized”. Majority of the world was under the control of European countries. It is the literature and art produced in the countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Senegal and Australia after their independence, which are called as Post-colonial Literature. The most famous post-colonial writers are Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Derek Walcott, J M Coetzee, Jamaica Kincaid, Isabelle Allende, etc. Most of their literary works are representing inter relations between the colonizer and the colonized, such as “Things Fall Apart (1958), “Midnight Children (1981) etc. When we come to the topic of post-colonial reading, William Shakespeare's “The Tempest” takes a major position. The post-colonial reading of “The Tempest” was inspired by the decolonization movements of the 1960's and 1970's in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. Here, I tried to describe how these readings challenge more traditional interpretations of the play, questioning Prospero's ownership of the island and rethinking of the role of Caliban.

Spread of Post-colonialism

After the World War II, Britain lost most of its former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific, South-East Asia and the far East including Persian gulf. In the 17th century, Britain had gained control over many parts of North America, Canada and Caribbean Islands along with slaves from Africa and market development in India. Nevertheless, Britain viewed its imperialist expansion as a moral responsibility and exerted greater control over the countries like India, Africa and China. Many colonized countries such as India, Pakistan, Ireland, Kenya, Nigeria

and so on started writing a type of literature reflecting and representing their own experiences while and after colonization.

Frantz Fanon used his personal experiences in his book “Black Skin, White Mask” (1952) to show the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer in terms of psychology in observing emotional damage to both colonized and colonizer. Said's “Orientalism” critiques western representation of the East, as irrational, anti-western, primitive and dishonest. According to Said, Orientalism is an ideology born of the colonizer's desire to know their subjects to control them in a better manner. Another post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak, whose writing focused on the intersections of gender, ethnicity within post-colonial subject, is being viewed as a post-colonial critic.

Post-Colonial Authors

Some of the most prominent authors of post-colonial literatures are Chinua Achebe, J.M.Coetzee, Frantz Fanon, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Gayatri Chakravathy, etc. Though all these writers had different lands, nationalities and social background they could all create their own distinction in producing wonderful works of literature of which many would certainly come under the label Post-colonial literature. Chinua Achebe of Nigeria with his first novel, “Things Fall Apart” (1958) writes about the tensions between the people and the values of the native Igbo community and the Christian colonizers. J. M. Coetzee, as a white writer living in South Africa, developed vigorous anti-imperialist attitudes for the apartheid. In most of his novels he represented his own alienation from his fellow Africans. Another notable writer in Post-colonial literature, Frantz Fanon was interested in the emotional effects of colonization and racism on blacks. His most known work “The Wretched of the Earth” published in 1961 became a leading critic of colonial power and influenced aggressive revolution.

There are some notable female writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak who have contributed in a greater extent. Kincaid wrote about women's experiences with other women in addition to the effects of patriarchy and colonialism on women's own image. Gayatri Spivak gave numerous interviews on her critical opinions about post-colonial literature.

The central ideas in Post-colonial Literature

Post-colonial has many common motifs and themes like cultural dominance and racism, quest for identity, racial discrimination, inequality, and hybridity along with some peculiar presentation styles. Most of the post-colonial writers reflected and demonstrated many thematic concepts which are quite connected with both “colonizer” and colonized” while Europeans continually accentuated on racial discrimination for their superiority over colonized. It was most evident in South Africa when the apartheid was incorporated in national laws. The writes Nadine Gordimer and Coetzee in their fictions showed how apartheid destroyed South Africa in many ways as emotionally, morally and economically. In the post-colonial context, language played a critical role in the control and subjugation of colonized people. Colonizers often imposed their language upon their subjects in order to control them. So most post-colonial writers address the issues in many ways by mixing the local language with imposed language, the result of which is a hybrid one that underscores the broken nature of the colonized mind.

Post-Colonial Reading of “The Tempest”

In 1611, when William Shakespeare wrote the play “The Tempest”, colonization was a recent concept in Britain. Even though colonization was a budding concept during the time of Shakespeare, critical interpretation of his play reveals a more complex discourse of colonialism which seems to be prophetic of the post-colonial era. This states the unique writing style of Shakespeare. The Tempest is considered to be the last play of Shakespeare which is written in 1610-11. This play can be interpreted

in post-colonial perspectives. The plot is based in an island and the description of it seems more significant of colonies, which were being colonized during the time, the play was written. This play reveals how the colonizers captured the land of the natives and how they controlled the native people, their traditions and culture.

The protagonist of the play Prospero is the Duke of Milan. He was exiled to an unknown island along with his daughter Miranda. Being isolated in the middle of the sea he reached an unknown island which happens to be the property of the native called Caliban. On reaching the island Prospero befriends Caliban. Prospero uses all types of crafty process to know about the details of the island. After knowing all the information of the island Prospero uses his knowledge and power to capture the island and then enslaves Caliban. This act of Prospero is similar to the situation of colonial history. Thus “The Tempest” Can be classified as the most notable earlier works illustrating the fundamental aspects of colonialism.

Prospero is the most powerful protagonist of the play. Prospero's character, actions, reasoning and the way he deals with the inhabitants reflects the attitude of the colonizer. According to the critics, Prospero reflects the character of a colonizer. His magical powers not only ensures the enslavement of Caliban, but also demands the servitude of a spirit named Ariel to put his magical designs into action. Prospero is an intruder who enslaves Caliban, the ruler of the island before Prospero's arrival. He takes the power of the inhabitants, establishes new order in the island and makes himself the ruler of it. When seen through the lens of post-colonialism, Caliban represents the colonized native who is betrayed by the colonial ruler. Post-colonial theorists do not see him as the deformed slave but as a native of the island over which Prospero has imposed a form of colonial domination. Thus he is identified as being the representative of the colonized 'other', who is subjected to the imposed role of his subjugators. The play gains the interest of the critics as it interprets the exact way in which colonizers treated the native people. Prospero gives freedom to Ariel for the service it had rendered to him, but not to Caliban because of his rebellious nature. He treats Caliban as a slave and forces him to do whatever he commands. Whenever Caliban refuses to obey his words, he is punished physically by the spirits. Thus Caliban is forced to obey Prospero for the fear of punishment.

The following passage states that Prospero's address to Caliban resembles the colonizers attitude of civilizing the natives:

I pitied thee, Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
With words that made them known. (1.ii.17)

The typical attitude of the colonizers is to civilize the natives. Similarly, Prospero displays how his presence on the island is valuable for Caliban which indicates the attitude and supremacy of the colonist over the natives. The colonizer considers the native as uncivilized savages and slaves. Prospero views Caliban as lesser being than himself. He firmly believes that Caliban's existence is bound to serve his order and not to retaliate. He expects Caliban to be grateful to him for educating him and making him learn the superior language.

One of the features of imperialism is that the colonizer describes colonialism as the moral obligation of the colonizer or the superior race which is divinely destined to civilize the brutish and barbarous parts of the world. The colonizers in the play, Prospero and Miranda, express the same attitude towards the colonized that is, Caliban in the text. Miranda also justifies their enslavement of Caliban with the assertion that they tried to civilize him but to no avail.

Caliban's behavior towards Miranda leads Prospero to imprison and punish him physically. This makes Caliban feel oppressed and exploited in his own land. Then he tries to get some kind of opportunity to regain his island but unfortunately he couldn't be successful to escape the supreme control of Prospero's knowledge and magical power. Caliban continues scolding himself for trusting Prospero and letting him know all the secrets of the land. He grumbles all the time for being a slave in his own land

Caliban's song at the end of Act II, scene II, where he sings drunkenly, throws a remarkable light on the miseries of the colonized (Caliban) at the hands of the colonizer (Prospero). Later Caliban hastens Prospero's illegitimate claim on the island so much that he even hatches a conspiracy to kill Prospero with the help of Stephano and Trinculo, but fails in his deed. Caliban represents all the natives who do not want to be a prisoner of colonialism. Caliban's statement, "They all do hate him as rootedly as I", implies that all other natives hate Prospero and want freedom from his illegitimate rule/colonization though they do not have the courage to revolt against him. The following statement of Caliban – "When Prospero is destory'd", can also be used for the post-colonial reading of "The Tempest". Every colonized person feels rather believes that peace can be restored only after the colonizer is destroyed or after getting freedom from bondage.

The play ends with Prospero deciding to return to his country along with his daughter. He leaves the island, frees his slaves and enables Caliban to be the inhabitant of the island. At last, Caliban gets the freedom and the right to claim his island. He gets the freedom to be himself in his native place. This incident reflects the period when the colonizers returned to their country after Britain gave freedom to its colonies. Yet the impact of the colonizers and colonialism remains in the lives of natives.

Conclusion

To wrap up the discussion, many things need to be brought together. Prospero's friendly attitude towards Caliban in the beginning and Caliban's forced enslavement by Prospero after he gets the knowledge of all the secrets of the island parallels the attitude of the colonizers who first make friendly relations with the down trodden natives in the name of business and then gradually colonize and exploit them. Throughout the play, Caliban scolds himself for trusting Prospero and letting him know all the secrets of the land. By using the knowledge that he gained in the company of Caliban, Prospero enslaves Caliban and makes him a slave. He ill-treats him. Prospero represents a colonizer who takes control over the inhabitants of the island, Ariel and Caliban. His actions parallel the actions of the British colonizers. He calls the natives uncivilized and savage. Caliban and Ariel represent the two different categories of the colonized. Ariel represents those colonized who are submissive and cooperative while Caliban represents more assertive and resistant natives. Thus the play, by depicting the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer, attempts to highlight and condemn the existing ideologies of colonization. It is the play which dramatizes the process of colonization and deals with the relationship of the settler and the native. Throughout the text, Shakespeare states the colonial perspective and the perspective of the colonized as represented by Prospero and Caliban.

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