
Colonization and Civilization in Aimé Césaire's *A*

Tempest

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Abstract

This study deals with the concepts of Colonialism and Civilization in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*. The concern of this study is to discuss how postcolonial writers are continually re-writing the Western canonical works as a reaction to the European cultural hegemony. The Western representations of the black are products of specific moments and developments in history and culture. *A Tempest* reflects a certain historical moment in the decolonization process.

A Tempest is analysed to reveal the counter literary strategy used by Aimé Césaire, and to disclose the reasons why re-writing and writing back are considered as vital and inescapable tasks. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which deals with the theme of colonialism as a mode of "discovering," "rescuing," and "civilizing" the colonized, has furthered the work of colonization by stereotyping and the colonized. *A Tempest* is an inversion to understand the action from Caliban's point of view. In this play, Caliban is transformed from the image of the other created by the colonizer into a paradigm for a revolutionary new world identity.

Keywords: colonization, civilization, decolonization, hegemony, otherness

Since the early sixteenth century, a special narrative representing the black people has become a central part of the Western discourse on racial representation. This narrative is revolved around certain concepts that the black are uncivilized savages. To their own rhetorical and political purposes, the Western writers employ this discourse to represent the black whose otherness is always subject to qualification. In this study, I argue how the counter texts, such as Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, with their alternative

interpretations challenge the constitutions upon which these canonical works have been based.

Post-colonial writers try to redefine themselves against the attempts of the colonial writers to describe the colonized people in a way that establishes a difference from the assumed center of the Western culture. Re-writing and writing back represent the textual resistance to the misrepresentations and ideas expressed by the center, providing alternative readings that might appropriate or undermine the original texts. Writing from a post-colonial perspective creates a new perception of colonialism and its effects. Gyna Prakash states that one of the important effects of post-colonial writing is to force a radical “re-thinking and reformulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination” (8). So, post-colonial writers write back to the centre as a response to the colonial legacy.

The idea of the improper European representations of blackness leads Aimé Césaire to address this problem more thoroughly. Césaire develops a black theory that both admits its blackness and responds to the faulty representations of the black by the white Europeans. Césaire’s theory, Negritude, draws from the black history and culture its affirming realities and aesthetic principles. Negritude, as an artistic movement Césaire helps to establish, is the first “diasporic black pride movement” appropriates the word

“nigger,” and transfigures its meaning to re-negotiate notions of race. Césaire rejects the racist discourse and practices of colonialism by instilling a sense of pride in his people. To recover their socio-political condition, the blacks need to understand their situation and to revive their own stories as well as their histories.

Négritude, as a doctrine, asserts the humanity of the black who have their own culture and civilization. The black is not a man in the Whiteman’s eyes, he is a type, as Mazisi Kunene states in his introduction to *Return to My Native Land*: “As a type [the black] can be either a ‘good nigger’, i.e. fulfills the role that the white authority has assigned for him, or else be an incarnation of evil” (8). To force their humanity, the blacks should smash the system and explodes the Whiteman’s racial myths. Mazisi argues that in order to achieve this, the blacks should redefine their reality using their own terms (9); a reality which has its roots in the colonial history. Aimé Césaire sees the salvation in the formation of a new system of human values. To resist hegemony, therefore, means to construct an opposing model and to believe in it.

In *A Tempest* (1967), Césaire questions the racial divisions inflicted by the colonizer; he sets the action in terms of the struggle between a colonizing European master and colonized slaves. The subtitle of the play, “Adaptation for a Black Theatre”, is meant fundamentally to question the world order, where the slave, Caliban, revolts against the oppression of his master, Prospero, and to create a place for self-questioning and reflection. *A Tempest* dramatizes the fundamental beliefs of Négritude; it reflects a certain historical moment in the decolonization process. According to Rob Nixon, Négritude could be defined as “the successful revolt in which Caliban broke out of the prison of Prospero’s language, by converting that language to his own needs of self-expression.” (570)

A Tempest is a re-writing not only creates a powerful commentary on colonialism and its effects on the colonized, but rather it reveals how that image and identity imposed by Prospero on Caliban as an uncivilized savage is turned on him. The hegemonic discourse defines itself through establishing “taxonomy” of civilization, defining the agent of civilization and its subjects, and creating the stereotypes of “civility” and “barbarism” (Henke 45). In *A Tempest*, Caliban or the colonized people positioned as the Other; the object of the colonial aggression. The Europeans assume that progress and light are at the core of their civilization, which negates the irrationalism and primitivism of other cultures. But this “enlightenment” is a form of barbarism, for the Western civilization is just a disguise for their greed, destruction and “the return of irrationality because it allows men to suppose themselves gods.” (During 36)

The European system of values is built on a “racial ideology”; it turns out to be an instrument of exploitation. The Western values are responsible for human destruction that a civilization may adopt and spread. The European humanitarian project is a sham; Cesaire exposes the Whiteman’s folly and the Western abuse of power. The morality and reality are at odds, for the presence of the Europeans in the colonies is characterized by greed, exploitation, and enslavement. Abdul R. JanMohamed says that the colonist justifies his exploitation by creating a notion of Whiteman’s burden, but this notion implies a contradiction: “if [the Whiteman] genuinely pursues his manifest destiny and ‘civilizes’ the native, then he undermines his own position of social privileges . . . then the colonizer can no longer retain his superior status” (5). The colonists, driven by their belief in the inferiority of those savages, show and practice their power over the natives who are disempowered. The Europeans give themselves the right to exploit,

dehumanize, and depersonalize those who are different from them in their “coloration and facial features”. Robert Ross says that “By racism, we mean those systems of thought in which group characteristics of human beings . . . are considered to be fixed by principles of descent and in which, in general, physical attributes (other than of sex) are the main sign by which characteristics are attributed” (qtd. in Firchow 9). According to the European perception of difference between themselves and the racial “Other”, the Europeans reject those groups of human being to be part of their “rational order”. This racism which demands “territorial exclusion”, based on racial superiority, which legitimizes their suppression of other “races”. The white race, by the virtue of its advanced civilization, is deemed superior. The Whiteman evaluates his destructive action in the name of civilization; in *Discourse on Colonialism*, Cesaire states that the “civilization that uses its principles for tricking and deceit is a dying civilization” (DC 31).

Cesaire’s *A Tempest* exposes the encounter between the colonial power and the Other in which the relation between them depends on the structure of power available to the colonialist. The relationship between knowledge and power is a fundamental relationship in the hegemonic drive of post-enlightenment Europe to dominate and civilize the Other. All forms of Western knowledge about the colonized world resulted from a structural relationship of dominance and subjugation, and are thus implied in the colonial project. The colonizer’s discourse justifies colonialism by portraying and presenting the colonized as a perpetually inferior. Caliban’s response to his education is made clear in the following paragraph: “. . . 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 hate that image . . . and it is false!” (AT 62). While Caliban’s curses fail to disturb Prospero’s

position of power and authority, Prospero's lies succeed in falsifying Caliban's attitudes towards the world and his self-understanding. Caliban asserts to Prospero that he will no longer respond to a false identity. He rejects the slave-name given to him by Prospero, and prefers to be called "X" as an assertion to his stolen identity, history, and island: "Call me X. That would be the best. Like a man with- / out a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name / has been stolen. You talk about history . . . well, that's / history, and everyone knows it! Every time you sum- / mon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that / you've stolen everything from me, even my identity!" (AT 20).

In *A Tempest*, Césaire empowers Caliban; he is not that "thing" which is "most brutish gabbling". In fact, Prospero feels threatened by Caliban's voice and emerging agency. Before Caliban's initial appearances Prospero tells Ariel ". . . I'm going to have a few words / with Master Caliban. I've been keeping my eye on him, / and he's getting too emancipated" (AT 16). Prospero's upset is followed by Caliban's utterance; "Uhuru". "Uhuru" disturbs the linguistic control Prospero thinks he has, and he can do little more than dismisses it as Caliban's "savage tongue." A. James Arnold says that "the cry "Uhuru!" has gained a universal currency since it first shook European colonialism in the 1950s. It is a contemporary symbolic import that Césaire strives to achieve" (Arnold 240). Rob Nixon reads Caliban's "Uhuru" in a wider context of Césaire's rebellious representation; "Crucially [Caliban's] first utterance is "Uhuru," the Swahili term for freedom which gained international currency through the struggles for decolonization in the late fifties and sixties" (Nixon 572). Also, Judith Holland Sarneck comments on the importance of Caliban's "Uhuru" by arguing that "it becomes a touchstone that recalls and rekindles the

revolutionary fever felt across much of Africa in the 1960s when the cry for freedom from colonial oppression was heard the world over” (281). Caliban’s shouts of “Uhuru!”, therefore, could not be seen as an isolated cry but rather as a universal call for “solidarity among the dispossessed”.

Colonization as a dehumanizing process and a kind of sickness that affects both the colonizer and the colonized is reflected by the end of *A Tempest*, when Prospero appears as an “aged and weary” old man whose “gesture are stiff are jerky and automatic, his speech weak, toneless, trite” (AT 65), while Caliban is full of energy and still calling for his freedom. In *A Tempest*, it is the colonizer who turns into a “trite” old man, confused, and fragmented. Prospero’s deterioration is symptomatic of the decline of the Western civilization. Prospero informs Caliban that “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!” (AT 65-6). This is what Homi Bhabha calls the ambivalence inherent to the colonial relationship. Bhabha argues that this “ambivalence” relies on a “colonial mimicry” which “is the desire for transformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (*Location of Culture* 122). Steve Almquist argues that Prospero’s inability to distinguish between himself and his slave, Caliban, refers to the inherent slippages of the colonial relationship; so, total colonization is impossible because there will always be gaps in the fundamental construction of that relationship (589). The ambivalence of the colonial mimicry influences both the colonized and the colonizer as long as both are the product of colonization. Prospero’s decision to stay on the island refers to the physical presence of Prospero in Caliban’s future, and more importantly to the ambivalent and lasting nature of their relationship. Cesaire is clearly explicit about his motives for rewriting *The Tempest*:

. . . To me Prospero is the complete totalitarian. I am always surprised when others consider him the wise man who ‘forgives’. What is most obvious, even in Shakespeare’s version, is the man’s absolute will to power. Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest – in other words, a portrait of the ‘enlightened’ European. And I see the whole play in such terms” the ‘civilized’ European world coming face to face for the first time with the world of primitivism and magic. (qtd. in Rob Nixon 571)

In this reading, *The Tempest* is reread and reassessed as a textual prototype of European colonial expansion. Almquist points out that the dual positioning of Shakespeare as both symbol and symptom in the colonial context is significant because European colonialism is motivated, in part, by the idea of a “civilizing mission” through which they would spread the values of benefits of Europe’s superior cultures (590).

A Tempest is an inversion to understand the action from Caliban’s point of view. Césaire transforms Caliban from the image of Other created by the colonizer into a paradigm for a revolutionary New World identity. In spite of Prospero’s superior race, which gives him the right to declare himself the island’s absolute lord, Caliban is presented as outspoken, and confident in his ability to re-possess and rule the island. Caliban believes that he is the rightful heir to the island because his mother Sycorax was its first ruler. He calls upon Shango, the Yoruba warrior Orisha, who is associated with thunder, to help him defeat Prospero and reclaim his inheritance. Césaire also evokes Eshu, the Yoruba “devil god” to heighten the dramatic tension in the play. In his appropriation of *The Tempest*, Césaire makes three major alternations; he represents Ariel as Mulatto slave, Caliban as black slave, and introduces the black god, Eshu, who is both creator and trickster

figure. By evoking an African god, it seems that Césaire wants to challenge Prospero's control or magic, for this god is outside Prospero's realm of knowledge, and by introducing the racial identification of the natives, Césaire tries to create a socio-political realism by giving the play a historical context.

The dialogue between Caliban and Ariel on slavery and freedom reflects their different attitudes, which also reveals something about their relationship to their master. Ariel does not seek to win over his master; he shows an acceptance of his past despite its harshness. He looks forward to a new world, where he peacefully lives with Prospero and Caliban. Césaire's Ariel seeks a union between the oppressed and the colonizer, explaining that ". . . I'm/ not fighting just for *my* freedom, for *our* freedom, but/ for Prospero too, so that Prospero can acquire a von-/ science" (AT 27). Ariel asks for his freedom very early in the play; he believes that Prospero will eventually give them their freedom if they are patient enough to appeal to his conscience. Caliban asserts that freedom is not something one asks for but something one takes; he is frustrated with Ariel's "obedience", accusing him of having "Uncle Tom patience". Césaire stresses the power of language in relation to the power of the colonizer. Caliban is the "subaltern" whose voice can never be heard by Prospero because Prospero refuses to acknowledge his humanity, whereas Ariel, being part -white, Prospero finds him human. Anything is not European is connected with the natural world, and thus is considered inferior. Edouard Glissant argues that "Culture and nature are posed as opposites in Western thought, with culture assuming a position of superiority. . . . Western Man's dream was not only to control nature . . . by culture, but also to make nature a slave of culture" (qtd. in Sanecki 282).

Caliban accuses Prospero of thinking "the earth itself is dead", he comments that "Dead you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it

with the steps of a conqueror.” (18) This seems an obvious critique of colonialism’s exploitation of natural resources for profit; and reveals how the European colonialism has deformed the earth. Caliban characterizes Prospero as “Anti nature”, as a way of contrast, which links Caliban and Sycorax to the natural island. So, nature here is presented against Europe’s reality or culture. In *A Tempest*, Caliban repeatedly links the island with his mother, Sycorax. In Caliban’s reaction to Prospero’s belief that Sycorax is dead, Caliban asserts that she is alive; he calls her “Sycorax. Mother./ Serpant, rain, lightning./ And I see thee everywhere!” (AT 18). Sycorax is united with all the forces associated with the natural world; she is omnipresent. For Caliban, there is no separation between the symbolic mother-earth and his real mother Sycorax; both nurtured him. Sycorax becomes an embodiment of place, which refers to Africa from which Caliban experiences “uprooting”.

When Prospero refuses to leave with the other Europeans, Caliban accuses him of being an “old addict” who will not leave his colony after dependence. Chantal Zabus argues that Cesaire has conceived the Prospero – Caliban relationship in terms of absolute interdependency. This means that Caliban also is dependant and addicted to the Hegelian slave/master relationships. John Dayan notices that at the end of the play, both Prospero and Caliban or, in other words, master and slave are left in a mutual willed confinement. In response to Prospero’s empty cry that he would “defend civilization”, we hear Caliban in the distance with his final call, “Freedom Hi Day” (AT 65). Prospero’s cry shows that his language becomes “impoverished and stereotyped,” which reflects his exhausted racializing discourse. Joan Dayan sees that the “final shout of freedom becomes less than hopeful. He knows that the struggle to sustain an ideal of freedom is far more difficult than its mere proclamation” (qtd. in Almquist 604). *A Tempest*

ends unresolved, leaving the readers with a sense that the struggle for freedom will continue. But could we consider resistance in Césaire's revision as futile and hopeless? Almquist asserts that "A *Tempest* contributes to a discourse which seeks to unsettle the Eurocentric bias implicit in Shakespeare's play to confront the presumed supremacy of Western Cultural values" (Almquist 604)

The lack of restraint distinguished primitive from the civilized man is exposed as a sham. When Caliban is offered a chance to get rid of Prospero and gain his freedom by force, Caliban refuses to do so. In a confrontation that follows a frustrated attempt by Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo to overthrow Prospero, Caliban comes upon Prospero, weapon in hand. Prospero bares his chest and tells his slave "strike! Go on, strike! Strike your master, your benefactor! Don't tell me you're going to spare him!" (AT 55). Caliban tells Prospero to defend himself that he is not a murderer. But why Caliban refuses to seize this opportunity and take revenge; is he too civilized to kill Prospero? Or, in other words, is he incapable of stooping to Prospero's level of barbarity? In their essay, "Evoking Caliban: Césaire's Response to Shakespeare," Robert P. Smith and Robert J. Hudson discuss Caliban's non-violent resolution:

In Césaire's [*A Tempest*], Caliban does not stoop to trying to assassinate Prospero, as those from the "civilized" world seek to do. When his loosely organized revolt fails, he does not beg for pardon, but rather deeply regrets his failure. He confronts Prospero openly and is sarcastically called a dialectician. (396)

Prospero scolds Caliban: "See, you're nothing but an ani/ mal . . . you don't know how to kill" (AT 55). By making violence a civilized feature, Prospero reverses the natural order of things: inhumanity becomes associated with

humans (the colonizer), and humanity with animals (the colonized). So, here, Prospero unintentionally reveals the true nature of the colonizer's true nature and his real mission, which is not to civilize but to exploit and oppress. In this pattern, the colonized appears as morally superior to the colonizer.

Césaire calls his play a “psychodrama” in which a master of ceremonies directs the action; “Come, gentlemen, help yourselves. To each his character, to each character his mask. You, Prosper? Why not? He has reserves of willpower he's not even aware of himself. You want Caliban? Well, that's revealing. Ariel? Fine with me. And what's about Stephano, Trinculo? No takers? Ah, just in time! It takes all kinds to make a world” (*AT* 7). The actors are instructed to enter at random and choose a mask. By calling his play a psychodrama, Césaire seems to reflect Frantz Fanon's statement: “The Whiteman is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness” (*Black Skin White Mask* 9); as if the colonized and the colonizer are perpetually trapped by the masks they wear, and the roles they are cast in.

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الاستعمار والحضارة في مسرحية "عاصفة" للكاتب المسرحي ايمي سيزير
 الباحث:م.د.بسمة حربي مهدي
 المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مفهومي الاستعمار والحضارة في مسرحية "عاصفة" للكاتب المسرحي ايمي سيزير. وتهتم الدراسة بمناقشة كيف ان كتاب دراسات مابعد الاستعمار معنيون وبشكل مستمر باعادة كتابة الاعمال الغربية كرد فعل على الهيمنة الثقافية الاوربية. ان التمثيل الغربي للسود هو نتاج لحظات وتطورات معينة في التاريخ والثقافة. ان مسرحية "عاصفة" تعكس لحظة تاريخية معينة في عملية تصفية وانهاء الاستعمار. وتركز الدراسة على تحليل مسرحية "عاصفة" لاطهار الاستراتيجية المعاكسة المستخدمة من قبل الكاتب ايمي سيزير ولكشف اسباب اعتماد اعادة كتابة الاعمال الغربية كوسيلة حيوية. ان مسرحية شكسبير "العاصفة" والتي تتناول موضوع الاستعمار كوسيلة لاكتشاف وناقذ وثقيف المُستعمر قد عززت الاستعمار عن طريق التمثيل الخاطي للمستعمر. ان مسرحية "عاصفة" هي عكس للاحداث ومن وجهة نظر كاليبان. في هذه المسرحية تم تحويل كاليبان من صورة الاخر التي تم خلقها من قبل المستعمر الى نموذج هوية العالم الجديد الثوري.

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