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Exploring The Concept of Hybridity and Mimicry in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a racial dissection of Shakespeare's The Tempest through the lens of postcolonialism. Despite being centuries old, the play has proven active in the postcolonial discussion through the paper's exploration of the postcolonial concepts of hybridity and mimicry. Looking at some of the characters in the text, especially Prospero and Caliban, the paper analyzes the depth of their relationship as that of a colonizer and a colonized making it an appropriate backdrop for a postcolonial reading. Caliban feels like a prisoner in his own island conquered by Prospero who taught him how to speak among other things. He becomes the hybrid imprisoned by the control over his language and thought but he breaks free by making a connection with his culture which Prospero is not familiar with. The paper proves the relevance of Shakespeare in the modern world and reveals that the post-colonial subject, as a hybrid can still be free from ongoing colonial oppression by merging his hybridity and his cultural background to forge a new identity and use mimicry as resistance in colonial context. The paper calls for a revisit of all Shakespearean texts to harvest new meanings under modern context.

Key Words : Hybridity, Mimicry, Postcolonialism , Shakespeare.

Introduction

The continual survival of Shakespeare's works can be justified looking at the number of publications about Shakespeare and for the constant reinterpretation of his plays in theatres and classrooms, as well as adaptations into films due to the fruitful interaction between the texts written centuries ago and the minds and imaginations of those who have gone on performing, reading and watching them. This chain of interaction can both draw meanings from the texts and impose meanings upon them. This literary privilege gives power to critics to counter imperialist assumptions and

contest accepted truths. *The Empire Writes Back* by Australian academics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin was the first major theoretical account of a wide range of post-colonial texts and their relationship to the larger issues of post-colonial culture. According to the authors, their task is narrowed down to two. First is the identification of the range and nature of these post-colonial texts, and then describing the various theories which have emerged so far to account for them. The term post-colonial they further reveal covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of



colonization to the present day. They identify the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka as post-colonial literatures. Four different post-colonial models have been identified by post-colonial writers to distinguish their texts from the rest. They are as follows:

1. National or regional models which emphasizes the distinctive features of the particular national or regional culture.
2. Race-based which emphasizes various national literature of racial inheritance like 'Black Literature'.
3. Comparative models which seek to account for particular linguistic, historical, and cultural features across two or more post-colonial literatures.
4. Wider comparative models, which argue for features such as hybridity and syncreticity.

All their arguments regarding the comparative models encourage works across two or more post-colonial literatures because they claim post-colonialism should only be about the narratives of the colonized. Their advocacy will only support further division and segregation doing exactly what the colonizer has done. Post-colonialism should be about healing, and forgiving as that is the only way we

can move on. However, the trio seem to accept a post colonial identity, one that is unique and quite the same as Bhabha's hybridity which is part of the concern of this research. In their words;

Post-colonial literary theory, then, has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future. The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms. Both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group 'purity', and as the basis on which the post-colonial world can be creatively stabilized. . . . the recent approaches have recognized that the strength of post -colonial theory may well lie in its inherently comparative methodology and the hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world which this implies. This view provides a framework of difference on equal terms within which multi-cultural theories, both within and between societies may continue to be fruitfully explored (35).

This paper attempts to prove that although Shakespeare's *The Tempest*



is centuries old, Bhabha's concepts of hybrid identity as well as mimicry can be identified in the actions and inactions of some of the characters in the play. The play portrays a colonial scenario where Prospero, a European colonizer, exercises control over the inhabitants of the island, including Caliban. Prospero's actions reflect the colonial ideology of dominance and exploitation while Caliban's character represents the colonized subject who is marginalized, oppressed, and seeking liberation, making him a perfect prototype of a hybrid.

Debates over the play's meaning have spanned topics ranging from geographical determinations to identifying various characters as humans, symbols, or monsters.

Reynolds describe the play as 'a colonialist celebration of English expansion, an exhortation on early modern (mis)understandings of racial differences, and an expression of patriarchal power . . .' (197). Audely-Charles opine that the play 'carries further the distinction between the minds possessed by some learned, cultivated people, from the minds of many of those who are occupied by the management and administration of State, and, or, the making of riches, in addition to

the minds of some less educated people. It is an exceptional observation to find in

Shakespeare, and it distinguishes this play from the other Romances to the extent of

The Tempest drawing our attention to the distinction of Nature and of Art (188)'.

Theoretical Framework

Hybridity is a term commonly used in postcolonial theory which describes how new cultures are formed in the contact zone of colonization. The concept is associated with theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who explores how the formation and reformation of new cultures as a result of colonial relations disrupts any notion of a "pure" culture. Bhabha extends his discussion to further reveal the fact that western culture and that of the colonies are at a crossroad, producing a 'hybrid identity'. These set of people are distinctive species that have the privilege of 'conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of culture, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity' (209).

This hybridization process occurs in what Bhabha refers to as the "Third Space" an interstitial site where new cultural identities are continually shaped. As David Huddart summarizes,

Cultures are crafted, sculpted, or narrated objects, like traditions, cultures are invented. . . Bhabha's idea of hybridity suggests that cultures come after the hybridization process, rather than existing before. In colonial relationships, this is



just as true of the colonizer as of the colonized. In the present, this is just as true of the colonizer as of the colonized. In the present, this should remind us that cultures are part of an ongoing process, which for Bhabha suggests that majority liberal cultures in the West must view themselves through the post-colonial perspective (40).

Hybridity defies the concept of the binary between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the culture of the East and the West, a distinction emphasized in Said's *Orientalism*. Instead Bhabha argues that, due to colonization, the colonizer introduces aspects of their culture to the natives (often as part of the civilizing mission of Imperialism) and in turn, the natives introduce parts of their culture to the colonizer. As such, hybridity is productive and makes space for cultural differences rather than advocating for assimilation. The emergence of Creole languages in the Caribbean exemplifies hybridity, blending African, European and indigenous elements to create a unique linguistic identity.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha carries us on a journey around the paradoxical territory of mimicry; what it is, its changing face, ambiguity of meaning... He opens by quoting Jacques Lacan, who likens mimicry to the technique of camouflage that is practiced in

human warfare. This means that mimicry is a curtain of disguise behind which one (in this case a dominant culture) conceals to promote and protect their self-interest.

Bhabha began by indirectly questioning the policies imposed by British colonialists on their colonies as a mimic representation of the British constitution. He quotes Sir Edward Cust speaking of colonial independence that it is a 'mockery' to give an independence to a colony as it wouldn't have been a colony if it is capable of maintaining an independent territory from the inception.

Bhabha states that '...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other; as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (122).

Here, Bhabha presents mimicry as a double-edged sword which also seeks for the clear classification of the 'other' by the dominant culture, creating an 'us versus them' psychology. In this case, mimicry results in the process of othering. He added, "mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, and discipline which appropriate the other as it visualizes power." The excess or slippage produced by mimicry is the idea of "almost the same but not quite."



Bhabha highlights further the divide between mimesis and mimicry as “a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly make imitable”. He discerns mimicry as a repetition rather than representation. What Bhabha has called ‘mimicry’ is ‘not the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification so that, as Fanon observed the black man stops, being an actual person for only the white man can represent his self-esteem (126)’. He clarifies further that ‘Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not Cesaire describes as ‘colonization-thingification’ behind which there stands the essence of *‘presence Africaine* (126)’.

He continued that “the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.” This presents mimicry as a double vision which is a result of what Bhabha earlier described as partial recognition of the colonial object. And this partial recognition represents the process of othering, which involves a partial recognition of the other.

The desire of mimicry as Bhabha puts it, “is not merely that impossibility of the other which repeatedly resists signification,” that Bhabha called the ‘metonymy of presence’. What he refers to as the metonymy of presence are “Those inappropriate signifiers of colonial

discourse—the difference between being English and Anglicized; the identity between stereotypes which, through repetition, also become different; the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional, cultural norms and classification, the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic...(128)’.

Bhabha further opines that the representation of identity and meaning in mimicry is “rearticulated along the axis of metonymy.” Metonymy is a literary technique that uses ‘a part’ of something to represent the ‘whole’ and, vice versa. This opinion of Bhabha conforms to Lacan’s view that:

Mimicry is like a camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or depends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically (p.128).

He further states that, as the ‘metonymy of presence’ thus, mimicry is “indeed such an erratic, eccentric strategy of authority in colonial discourse”. This attests to the fact that:

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of ‘fixation’ of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the ‘authorization’ of colonial representation; a question of authority that goes beyond the



subjects of lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation (129).

Bhabha continues, “this culture...fixed in its colonial status, Fanon suggests, [is] both present and mummified, it testified against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal.” The ambivalence of mimicry (almost but not quite) appeals “that the fetched colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter appeal.” What he called its ‘identity-effects’ “are always crucially split.” Therefore, mimicry under the disguise of camouflage is like the fetish “always a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, and history. For the fetish,” he continues, “mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them.” So also, “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’ that which it disavows.” There is however, Bhabha continues:

a crucial difference between this ‘colonial’ articulation of man and his doubles and that which Foucault describes as ‘thinking the unthought’ which, for nineteenth century Europe, is the ending of man’s alienation by reconciling him with his essence (130).

The colonial discourse which brings out an interditory otherness, as Bhabha puts it, “is precisely the ‘other scene’ of this nineteenth

century Europe desire for an authentic historical consciousness.” The ‘unthought’ to which the ‘colonial man’ is related to, is a process of “classificatory confusion” which Bhabha have described as “the metonymy of substantive chain of ethical and cultural discourse.” This, he continues,

results in ‘splitting’ of colonial discourse so that two attitudes towards external reality persists; one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates ‘reality’ as mimicry (p130).

Such kind of contradictory presentations/definitions of reality and desire that is evident in racist stereotypes, jokes, statements and myths, according to Bhabha, ‘are not caught in the doubtful circle of the return of the repressed. They are the effects of a disavowal that denies the differences of the other but produces in its stead forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of ‘civil discourse’ (p130).

Further establishing the contradictory nature of colonial discourse, Bhabha asserts that colonial authority repeatedly jumps between ‘mimicry’ and ‘menace’. Mimicry, Bhabha reminds us, is “a difference that is almost nothing but not quite,” and ‘menace’ on the other end is “a difference that is almost total but not quite.” And that uncontrollable, repeated figures of narcissism and paranoia can be seen “in that other scene of colonial



power, where history turns to farce and presence to 'a part'." This turning of presence to a part is what Bhabha calls the 'metonymy of presence'.

Bhabha closes the chapter by revealing how hybrid identities find themselves in the 'third space' while trying to mimic in an attempt to 'belong' to other dominant cultures. He cites how the body (the black man) and the book (the Bible) sink into the disappearing depths of 'imitation' in a futile attempt to metonymize presence and 'belong'. In his words, 'black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body. And the holiest of books –the Bible— bearing the standards of the cross and the standard of the empire finds itself strangely dismembered (p131)'.

The "racist gaze" of the undifferentiated whole white body (which represents the white colonialists) reveals their tempting desire for othering. Also, the Bible "bearing both the standard of the cross and the empire..." and find finding itself "strangely dismembered "in the end highlights the difficult possibility of maintaining different/various standards at a time; just like hanging somewhere between life and death, in and out, or black and white. This, in a word, symbolizes how the black man, who tries to be both black and white in attitude, belief, and custom by way of mimicry (or metonymy of presence) finds himself, as the Bible,

in the third space, strangely dismembered and as a subaltern.

Textual Analysis

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* remains one of the most productive sites for postcolonial analysis in early modern drama. Written in the context of England's expanding maritime ambitions in the early seventeenth century, the play stages a dramatic encounter between European political authority and the inhabitants of an unnamed island whose history predates colonial arrival. Through its staging of land seizure, linguistic domination, servitude, resistance and theatrical spectacle, the play anticipates many concerns that later postcolonial theorists articulate: the violence of epistemic control; the construction of the 'Other'; the creation of hybrid identities in the aftermath of imperial intervention.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a thought-provoking and enduring work of literature that is a blend of so many themes which contribute to its richness and complexity. It explores the theme of revenge and forgiveness, particularly through Prospero's journey. His decision to forgive those who forcefully sent him on exile and deprive him of his Dukedom marks a significant turning point in the play. The journey also serves as a metaphor for self-discovery and personal growth seeing how the characters undergo significant transformations, discovering new aspects of themselves and their places in the world. There is also a celebration of



love and redemption as seen in the relationship between Prospero's daughter, Miranda and his enemy's son, Ferdinand which creates a path reconciliation between her father and his enemies. For the purpose of this research, the play will be explored in the context of colonialism as well as cultural exchange.

In *The Tempest*, we have Caliban and Prospero, two characters that display the relationship between the two opposing sides in a colonialist society demonstrating a negotiation of cultural meanings and practices as they navigate their identities and relationships in colonial context. This is evident in the dialogue between the two characters below:

Caliban: this island's mine, by
Sycorax my mother,

Which thou takest from me.
When thou camest first,

Thou strokedst me and
madest much of me, wouldst give
me . . . (1:2,332-334).

Prospero: thou most lying slave,

Whom stripes may move,
not kindness! I have used thee,

Filth as thou art, with human
care . . . (1:2, 345-347).

Caliban's statement reveals he is the native and original inhabitant of the disputed land where as Prospero whom arrived to the island much later denies that and claims he is in fact doing Caliban a favor by associating with him, a 'filth' as he confesses. However, Caliban is not a

fool, and he knows that all the favors he receive from Prospero are not free it's just a bargain and his island is the price. He declares,

Caliban: As I told thee before, I am
subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that

By his cunning hath cheated
me of the island (3:2, 43-44).

On the other hand, a deep reflection will reveal traits of the postcolonial concept of hybrid identity signified by the act of mimicry as evident in the actions of Caliban. Going further, Prospero claims giving Caliban languages showing an evidence of cultural exchange , a privilege Caliban did not deny, thus

Caliban : . . . and teach me how

To name the bigger light,
and how the less,

That burn by day and
night: and then I loved thee (1:2,
364-366).

Prospero: I pitied thee,

Took pains to make thee
speak, taught thee each hour

One thing or the other: when
thou didst not, savage,

Know thine own meaning . . .

The gift of language Caliban receives signifies a control over not just his territory but also his mentality, entire world view and his future making him a prisoner in his own island. Such is the case of the colonized everywhere in the world.



Caliban seen as part of nature can will never be able to break out of Prospero's language because all the culture he can obtain, is as Prospero's intention, must be derived from Prospero's language and mentality as such everything Caliban does will be derivative. His hybrid identity as Bhabha opined has made him a puppet who only mimics what Prospero wants him know and in essence do. Mimicry as Bhabha suggests is metonymy of presence, as such the more Caliban speaks Prospero's language, the more a prisoner he remains. The control of the language extends further beyond just speaking but also thinking and therefore the future for the colonial subject will remain elusive and uncertain unless he regains his physical, mental as well as economic freedom.

On the other hand, seeing Caliban as also a part of culture, an identity different and unfamiliar to Prospero can mean an entirely different scenario from what Prospero expects. Shakespeare created Caliban as a character that despite Prospero's intrusion, can still recall some images and sounds prior to the language Prospero has given him. This means he belongs to a world beyond which the language created for him, he has his own identity one which only he understands. His hybrid identity is forged from the fusion of the language courtesy of his colonialist (Prospero) and his culture, an entirely different worldview that is unique.

Caliban: be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices

That, if I had then waked after long sleep,

Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,

The clouds methought would open and show riches

Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,

I cried to dream again (3:2, 135-143).

Caliban admits to being better off with the riches from the dream world that calls him using the sounds from the thousand instruments and sweet voices that are not from the world Prospero created for him. He feels the urge for freedom and he knows the basis for his oppressors powers need to be destroyed before he can be free. In his declaration, remember/ first to possess his books; for without them/ he's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not/ one spirit to command: they all do hate him/ as rootedly as I. burn but his books. And with the help of the spirits, Prospero is captured and all the inhabitants of the island regain their freedom.



Conclusion

This paper has attempted a dissection of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* through the lens of postcolonialism, especially Homi K Bhabha's contribution in his *The Location of Culture* where he defines hybrid identity signified by mimicry which is the 'metonymy of presence'. Looking at the two characters, Prospero and Caliban, we have seen the depth of their relationship as that of a colonizer and a colonized. Caliban has been imprisoned by the control over his language as well as his thought but he is able to break free in the end with the help of some spirits significantly showing how resistance in colonial context can yield positive result if applied wisely. The research has given us a deeper understanding of the play's complex exploration of global connections, power dynamics as well as cultural exchange in the 21st century.

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