

A Call for Freedom: Aime Césaire's *A Tempest*

APPEL À LA LIBERTÉ – UNE TEMPÊTE D'AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

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Abstract: A postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, African poet Aime Césaire's play *A Tempest* overtly conveys his anti-colonialism, exploring the relationship between Prospero the colonizer and his colonial subjects Caliban and Ariel from the perspective of the colonized. Comparing the characterization and the colonizer/colonized relationship in the two plays, this paper illustrates that Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* is a delivery of his idea of Negritude, a call for freedom and a reflection of the ways to gain the freedom.

Key words: colonizer, colonized, Negritude, freedom

Résumé: Le théâtre du poète africain Aimé Césaire intitulé *Une tempête*, adaptée d'après *La Tempête* de Shakespeare, décrit la relation entre le colonisateur Prospero et les colonisés Caliban et Ariel dans la perspective du colonisé. Il constitue la proclamation de la pensée d'anti-colonialisme de l'auteur. A travers la comparaison de la description des personnages et de la relation colonisateur-colonisé dans les deux théâtres, l'article présent conclut qu'*Une tempête* de Césaire exprime la négritude, l'appel à la liberté et la réflexion sur la voie de liberté.

Mots-Clés: colonisateur, colonisé, négritude, liberté

INTRODUCTION

African poet Aime Césaire's play *A Tempest*, a postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, explores the relationship between Prospero the colonizer and his colonial subjects Caliban and Ariel from the perspective of the colonized. As an African black who received French education, Césaire found that what colonization has taken away from him is not only land, but also his language, culture and identity. This originates the idea of Negritude, the underlying theme of his first published poem *Return to My Native Land*. The concept of Negritude² or black consciousness is used as a rallying point for freedom and liberation, for acceptance and pride of the blacks' racial identity. Since then, Césaire has used his words as weapons to wake the world to the possibilities and opportunities of making true the dream of freedom. While *The Tempest* mirrors the rationale of colonization unconsciously³, Césaire

overtly voices his politic views in *A Tempest*. His conception of Negritude is still the essence of this play. Focusing on the colonizer/colonized relationship, this paper tries to illustrate that in drawing his images of Prospero, Caliban and Ariel, Césaire shows in the play his attitude toward colonization and delivers his idea of Negritude through Caliban and Ariel. Therefore, *A Tempest* is Césaire's call for freedom and his ponderings on feasible ways laying ahead, which are interwoven in Caliban and Ariel's struggle for freedom.

To make the idea clear, it is necessary to start with a closer yet brief look at Césaire's notion of Negritude. The concept represents a historic development in the formulation of African diasporic identity and culture in the twentieth century. The term marks a revalorization of Africa on the part of New World blacks, affirming an overwhelming pride in black heritage and culture. As forefather of Negritude, Césaire first used the term in his 1939 poem *Return to My Native Land* as a reaction to Western colonization (In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire launched eloquent attacks on colonialism, which can also be found in *A Tempest*). The concept of Negritude generates a diverse field of debate and its interpretation and use extend. In his interview by Haitian poet and militant Rene Depestre in 1967, Aime Césaire explained his conception of Negritude: a concrete (as opposite to just an abstract idea of freedom) coming to consciousness of identity, of what the blacks are ---- a race with a history of great value to be proud of. Negritude, according to Césaire, is not only to struggle for a political emancipation but also to "decolonize" the blacks' minds and inner life assimilated by Western civilization, which Europeans take as superior by despising Africa as the barbarian world. Césaire

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² The sources of "Negritude" mainly come from the interview of Césaire by the poet Rene Depestre included in *Discourse on Colonialism*.

³ By "unconsciously" I mean Shakespeare did not intend to be political in his play. In his introduction to *Introduction in Shakespeare's Henriad*, Calderwood took politics in Shakespeare's plays for a means of solving language problems. That is, political affairs are metaphors for art. I think this is also true with *The Tempest*. Kermode also argued that the political interpretations of the themes of *The Tempest* are unnecessary desperate expedients.

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accused the West of the “inferiority complex” of the blacks ---- they were ashamed of themselves in an atmosphere of assimilation (which is the predicament in both the colonized countries and those that have won their independence.). Césaire also believed in a need to call for an “awareness of the solidarity among blacks” to achieve their dream of freedom, or decolonization here. Two years later, *A Tempest* was published.

Using Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a vehicle, Césaire sets his play in the Caribbean where his native land is in (though the play reflects black America). The whole plot and structure are more or less the same as that of *The Tempest*, but Césaire makes his voice of anti-colonization heard through his version of Caliban (a black slave), Ariel (a mulatto slave) and Prospero in the central paradigm of the colonizer / colonized relation.

Colonization exploits not only land but also minds of the colonized, which Césaire thinks should be responsible for the blacks’ inferiority complex. He makes this clear in his characterization of Prospero, the colonizer of Caliban’s island. Unlike Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which Prospero is a virtuous mage with uplifting characteristics that endows him the power to control nature (Kermode, 1976), Césaire’s Prospero presents above all as exploitative usurper of the island and Caliban and Ariel’s self-determination. He takes the island away from Caliban in spite of Caliban’s hospitality and friendliness, as Caliban accuses, “Once you’ve squeezed the juice from the orange, you toss the rind away!” “...you threw me out of your house and made me live in a filthy cave. The ghetto!” (p13). More importantly, by making Caliban his slave, Prospero deprives Caliban of what he is, in Caliban’s words, “you’ve stolen everything from me, even my identity!” (p15). Actually he has never treated Caliban as a human being. While in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban, an offspring of a witch and an incubus and thus hardly a human being, is called “savage”, “slave” and a “vile race”, the names Césaire’s Prospero gives to Caliban are more insulting: “ugly ape”, “a dumb animal, a beast”, “villain” and “nothing but an animal”. This is how Western civilization looks at Africa: “the barbarian world”, which should not be given any dignity. Prospero insults Caliban’s mother (“a ghou!”). He shows no respect to the island (he “is anti-Nature” and “pollutes it”) and the native language (“I don’t like it”). By belittling everything about the colonized people, the colonizer thinks himself as a savior and tries to impose his language and values on them. Prospero enslaves Caliban and Ariel but appears as their benefactor ---- “What would you be without me?” (p12); “Ten times, a hundred times, I’ve tried to save you, above all from yourself.” (p67); “I give you a compliment and you don’t seem pleased?” (p9); “Ingrate! And who freed you from Sycorax, may I ask? ...” (p10). He teaches Caliban his language so that Caliban can understand his orders. He convicts Caliban of rape by putting “those dirty thoughts” (p13) in Caliban’s head that is innocent of

Prospero’s values. Césaire makes this voice heard most clearly through Caliban’s final long speech as an eloquent accusation against colonization:

Prospero... you’re an old hand at deception...
you ended up by imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped ... undercompetent
that’s how you made me see myself!
And I hate that image...and it’s false! (p64)

It is this false image that Césaire wants to “decolonize” and resume his own identity and make it a pride. That is why Césaire transforms Caliban from Shakespeare’s ignorant savage to a colonized native with some black consciousness.

Shakespeare’s Caliban is the ground of the play, as Kermode (1976) would read in *The Tempest*, because of his function to illuminate by contrast the civilized world. Important as he is, to me this Caliban is no more than a foil. However, Césaire’s Caliban accumulates most of the limelight because of his conscious reactions to being conquered and enslaved, in which Césaire’s idea of Negritude is partially embodied. He knows more clearly what Prospero has “stolen” from him ---- his land, his language, his culture and consequently his identity, as is demonstrated previously in his accusation against Prospero. He has an awareness to defend or cling to what belongs to him ---- using his own language as a protest, identifying himself with his own land and culture (“Dead or alive, she was my mother, and I won’t deny her! ... I respect the earth, because I know that it is alive.”) and renouncing the insulting name “Caliban” given by Prospero. More significantly, like Ariel, he has a notion of freedom, and they both are fighting for the freedom in their own way.

Ariel represents the intellectual ----“It’s always like that with you intellectuals!” (p9). Compared with Caliban, his understanding of freedom is at a high level (“I’m not fighting just for my freedom, for our freedom, but for Prospero too.”) but he is somewhat accommodating and idealistic, looking to awaking Prospero’s conscience but lack in strength. His sense of Negritude is in his “inspiring, uplifting dream” of a “wonderful world” (p22-23) in which everyone can live like brothers and everyone is significant in his own way. This is very similar to Césaire’s dream world where nobody, regardless of his race, should be alienated from his human rights. In this respect, Césaire may find more of himself in Ariel (as in Ariel’s mulatto status in the sense that Césaire is a black by birth but is educated in Western culture). Unlike Shakespeare’s Ariel who is obedient to Prospero and seems to care nothing but his own freedom, Ariel in *A Tempest* is less willingly in carrying out Prospero’s missions and he also makes this known to Prospero. He shows sympathy for the victims of Prospero’s tempest. He even reproaches Prospero for his “despotism” in manipulating the group of hungry courtiers ---- “It’s evil to play with their hunger as you do with their anxieties and their hopes,” (p28) he

comments. But Ariel never turns too bitter toward Prospero, hoping Caliban and he could force him "to acknowledge his won injustice and put an end to it." (p22). He sees there is a need for Caliban and him to join up and fight for their freedom, but in some non-violent way since "Prospero is invincible." (p23). But Caliban refuses.

Caliban has no belief in Prospero's conscience: "He is a guy who only feels something when he's wiped someone out." (p23). He rebels Prospero in a much more intense way and constitutes greater threat to Prospero. He seems to know Prospero better than Ariel: "You musn't underestimate him. You musn't overestimate him, either...he's showing his power, but he's doing it mostly to impress us." (p55). Though his freedom is only to break the bond from Prospero (He does not realize that if he gives Stephano the right to the island, he makes himself a slave again.), his resistance is by far more forceful than that of Ariel. In some sense, Caliban is no less dominant than Prospero. Cesaire makes Caliban much more vocal and articulate (There are more than 30 turns between Prospero and Caliban in their first confrontation while in *The Tempest* there are only 10). The language Prospero teaches him is more than a tool to curse. It is also a tool for him to voice his resistance and charge against the colonizer as well as his desire for freedom. Caliban is also more courageous. The "conspiracy" of Shakespeare's Caliban to kill Prospero almost ends before starting, and Caliban's ends his role in the play by calling himself a fool to take a drunkard for a god. On the contrary, in *A Tempest*, having given up Trinculo and Stephano, Caliban is determined to launch the battle alone against Prospero. Though he fails, he makes his long powerful speech sonorous and lingering: "...I know that one day / my bare fist, just that, / will be enough to crush your world!" (p65). And it is a great challenge to Prospero, "I hate you...! For it is you who have made me doubt myself for the first time." (p66). It is Caliban's last speech that changes Prospero's mind to leave to carry on his paradox responsibility for "protecting civilization" "with violence." (p67-68).

Neither of them ends up doing violence. Cesaire's serious meditation on the path ahead may be conceived in the ending of the play. It presents no knock-down victory for both sides, the colonizer and the native

islanders. Prospero ends up with less and less power. "His gestures are jerky and automatic, his speech weak, toneless, trite." Ariel gains his freedom, but not the one in his dream. Caliban simply runs away. Ritz (1999) believed that the conflict between the two sides is a struggle for absolute power. However, here Cesaire may be stressing that colonization benefits neither side and the struggle is for freedom but not triumph over one another. He gives credit to both Caliban and Ariel but he seems discontent with either Caliban's explosive violence ("...you'll see this island, my inheritance, my work, all blown to smithereens...and, I trust, Prospero and me with it.") or Ariel's accommodation. And freedom is hardly possible without the colonizer's consciousness neither. Without giving clear solutions, Cesaire may indicate there are no easy and simple ways and the way to freedom is still long ahead.

However there are significant changes. To some extent Caliban defeats Prospero by running away, declaring his newly found freedom ---- a consciousness in self-determination. The snatches of his song printed in capital letters "FREEDOM HI-DAY, FREEDOM HI-DAY!" demonstrate his triumph. Whereas Shakespeare makes his Caliban disappear almost silently and gives the whole stage to Prospero, in *A Tempest*, Cesaire gives the privilege to Caliban. He is no longer traceless even he does not appear on stage. His voice is heard. The stage of the world belongs to all of different races. It is the word "FREEDOM" that Cesaire wants everyone, the colonized and the colonizer alike, to hear. It is a cry for freedom or decolonization all over the world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *A Tempest*, Aime Cesaire's version *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, is a play embodying his idea of Negritude. Through his characterizations of Prospero, Caliban and Ariel, Cesaire presents his anti-colonial attitude and injects black consciousness into the colonized. And Cesaire's thinking on the possibilities to gain freedom is implied in Caliban and Ariel's struggle for their freedom. *A Tempest*, above all, is a call for consciousness of freedom.

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