

Contextualized Teaching-Learning Strategy in the English Literature Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In our studies of English literature, strategies of teaching-learning are most often mere reproductions of hegemonic interpretive frameworks where it is often the norm to assume universality and autonomy to be touchstones for determining the ultimate value of literary texts. This kind of reading of literary texts bear significant merits. But accommodating concerns surrounding the particular cultural location in which a text has emerged, opens up important interpretations of literatures because a text is produced within the dynamics of a diverse set of cultural, political and socio-economic influences that shape the mind of its author. Moreover, readers tend to interpret and understand these texts with reference to the particular cultural categories and registers whereby they make sense of the world. In our pedagogic practices, it is vital to accommodate a critical, contextualized reading of all literary pieces, and especially, the canonical texts that are revered for their timeless qualities. Locating ourselves within a postcolony, perhaps such a reading on our part has the potential to dismantle the politics of dominant narratives that tend to reproduce unequal relations of power even in the academia. In the present paper, while not discarding the inherent universality of the canonical (and other) literary texts, I attempt to emphasize the importance of a contextualized reading of English literatures. I take Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a case study and attempt to offer a viable teaching-learning strategy that may ultimately make our readings of literature more effective, nuanced and meaningful in the context of twenty-first century.

In our studies of Western canonical literatures, we often reproduce Western hegemonic interpretive frameworks whereby we focus on universal themes and human experiences such as love, death and power. While this kind of teaching-learning strategy bears considerable merits, we need to go beyond Western interpretative frameworks to understand the politics of canon formation and to accommodate concerns surrounding the particular cultural location and historical reality whereby a text is produced. This kind of pedagogic endeavour opens up new vistas of interpretations of canonical literatures. It also helps us understand canonical texts in new ways and relate them to our present context. In our pedagogic practices, it is therefore vital to accommodate a critical, context-based reading of all literary works and especially, Western canonical texts that are admired for their timeless qualities. Such reading of canonical texts from our part of the world has the potential to contest the politics of dominant narratives that tend to reproduce unequal power relations even in the academia. In the present paper, while not rejecting the inherent universality of the canonical (and other) literary texts, I emphasize the importance of a contextualized reading of English literatures. For my pedagogic endeavour, I take Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a case study and offer a viable teaching-learning strategy that may finally make our readings of literature, particularly Western canonical works, more effective, nuanced and meaningful in the twenty-first century context.

Shakespeare's plays have primarily been read by various critics over time from dominant Western perspectives – readings that are in tune with Renaissance history and culture. But recent readings have been done through the lens of “newer critical vocabularies”¹ that re-examine Renaissance history and culture as well as their intricate relation with subsequent developments. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin categorize these later trends of reading Shakespeare, for the sake of convenience, as “colonial and postcolonial Shakespeares”². The origins of these readings, according to Jyotsna Singh, can be traced back in the 1980s – a time in Shakespeare Studies that took a “postcolonial

turn” and pointed to a “paradigm shift”³ in traditional understandings that have rendered Shakespearean plays more global and cosmopolitan. As there have been many Shakespeares, so too there are many *Tempests*. Consequently, *The Tempest* has been subjected to a wide array of interpretations in the late twentieth century that include postcolonial, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist and poststructuralist readings. Some of these later readings of the play revolve around the colonial paradigm presented in the text as critics find obvious binaries between the colonizers and the colonized through the characters of Prospero and Caliban. At the same time, the island stands as a symbolic European colony. Apart from these, a number of critics have interpreted the play from an ecocritical perspective. This scholarship is a more recent development that proliferates in “the first decade of the twenty-first century”⁴ because the portrayal of natural environment in the play gains critical attention. Gabriel Egan, for example, draws parallel between the play and the Tudor conquest of Ireland in order to show that in the play, as in Ireland, instances of rapid deforestation can be understood as fundamental to colonialism⁵. Nevertheless, a sustained ecocritical study with relation to colonial ideologies of the play is yet to be achieved as the nature-human relationship portrayed in it remains under-examined.

Among others, major debates regarding *The Tempest* include the problem of the setting; some critics claim that the island is modelled after Virginia, the emergent American colony while others find references to the Mediterranean geography in the text unavoidable, hence perplexing. Jerry Brotton, for example, has claimed that dismissal of the Old World/Mediterranean references in expense for too much focus on the New World/colonization of America tend to create “a historically anachronistic and geographically restrictive view”⁶ of the play. More so, critics have tended to read the text with relation to the Caribbean islands and even the indigenes of eastern England. Particularly interesting is Todd A. Borlik’s persuasive essay “Caliban and the Fen Demons of Lincolnshire” where he relocates critical attention to “the desolate fens of eastern England”⁷ as providing convincing indigenous sources for the text. These attempts have in them a commitment to place the play within its own cultural and historical context. But what is undeniable from these observations is that the play carries profound ambivalence that complicates any interpretation that flattens a complex historical and culturally nuanced reality. Particularly, this mystification regarding the island’s location has rendered it utopian, “irreconcilable with any cartographically acceptable location” that has led Frank W. Brevik to contend that it is at the same time “both an anti-setting and a non-setting, a place that is no place yet every place”⁸. The island, therefore, can be taken as a metaphor for other colonized lands around the globe because it resists specificity of location. However, this is not to say that the nature of the island’s discovery and colonization portrayed in the play stands as the only reality in different ex-colonized lands of the world. My attempt in this paper is to take particularly this colonial paradigm of *The Tempest* and situate it within a South Asian context and beyond in our pedagogical endeavours in the twenty-first century. For practical concerns, I focus exclusively on the human-nature relationship as evinced in the play in a more precise way while simultaneously I attempt to trace the play’s relevance to our present context.

In his book *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*, Gabriel Egan persuasively argues: “[The] recurrent arboreal imagery has a very real point in [*The Tempest*], for Prospero’s main activity since his arrival on the island has been its deforestation”⁹. Power, in the play, lays with Prospero; he can be taken as a metaphor for the oppressor or the colonizer who controls almost all the actions in the play with his magic. Caliban is continuously punished and threatened with punishments and kept as a slave who paradoxically legitimates his rule being “all the subjects”¹⁰ that he has (1.2.341). Prospero makes Caliban fetch wood so relentlessly that he refers to his subjugation as “this wooden slavery” (3.1.62). Not only that, Caliban’s utterances like “torment me/For bringing wood in slowly” (2.2.15–16); “I’ll bring my wood home faster” (2.2.71–2); “I’ll ...get thee wood enough” (2.2.160) indicate the rapidity with which trees are cut down on the island. Maybe Prospero is never clear about his intentions in gathering such a huge bulk of timber. He does not seem to be building any boat for his departure from the island, nor does he need so much wood if they are to be used only for fuel. He might be gathering wood to

make improvements to his “poor cell” (1.2.20). But it is not unlikely that his intention regarding the island has to do with an inner desire to colonize and exploit it. Rapid deforestation has a deep connection with colonial endeavours as many critics have tended to show in the context of contemporary plantations in Ireland being “the closest and best-known colonial endeavour undertaken by the English in Shakespeare’s time”¹¹. Such connections can also be made in the context of other colonies across the globe. Nandini Sree, for example, claims that “it was during the age of European capitalist expansion that the tropical forests of the world were first subjected to exploitation on a global scale”¹². The forests of India in particular, though subjected to limited destruction in pre-colonial times, reached its zenith during the colonial period. It was British colonialism that “caused a watershed in the ecological history of India”¹³.

However, Prospero might just as well be thinking about building a ship to depart from the island as he had never intended to stay there in the first place. Though it is suspect just how much Caliban knows about Prospero’s plans, his words “He has brave utensils, for so he calls them/ Which when he has a house he’ll deck withal” (3.2.97–8) might indicate either building a house on the island or building a ship to leave the island. Whatever the case, shipbuilding is an integral part of colonial enterprises for which a huge amount of wood was needed. In this regard, Sritama Chatterjee writes that “The history of imperialism is a history of ships travelling around the world to plunder, loot, transport, and carry people, non-human animals, and objects”¹⁴. In British India, the Bombay dockyard on the West Coast and Coringa on the East emerged as India’s main shipbuilding centres where the process consumed “an enormous quantum of accessible forests, soon leading to a shortage in timber for shipbuilding”¹⁵. Prospero’s relation to nature, therefore, is exploitative and the island can be taken as being similar to an exploitation colony.

Caliban, on the contrary, is much closer to nature and has a deep connection with the ecology of the island. In this regard, Gabriel Egan argues that “Caliban is described in the Folio list of parts as a ‘saluage’ man (from *silva*, Latin for wood), and his carrying of logs is not only a menial duty but also a mark that the world from which he comes is being destroyed by his settler-master”¹⁶. Moreover, Caliban’s emotionally charged famous lines indicates his closeness with nature: “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,/ Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not...” (3.2.133–41). Though this speech has been traditionally appreciated by critics as one indicating Caliban’s imaginative power and capacity for poetic use of language, it also points to his rich and sensuous apprehension of nature. He is frequently seen as a foil to the airy spirit Ariel and is associated with the element of “earth” by Prospero (1.2.314). All these point to a harmonious/ reciprocal relationship between Caliban and the island’s environment as a whole.

Caliban, therefore, can be taken not only as an “embodiment of suffering humanity”¹⁷ but also as one who represents nature itself, dominated and marginalized in an Anthropocentric world. Prospero claims that Caliban is a born devil “on whose nature/Nurture can never stick” (4.1.188–89). Paradoxically, what has corrupted his primitive innocence and disrupted the symphony between him and the island is this imposition of order, training and control, in a word, of culture. In his collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming draws on the Prospero-Caliban relationship and contends that “Caliban is a child of nature and a slave. These are not synonymous. A child of Nature is an innocence, which is enslaved by a particular way of learning... But a slave is not a child. Nor is a slave in a state of Nature. A slave is a project, a source of energy, organized in order to exploit Nature”¹⁸.

Prospero’s actions are not very different from the colonizing mission that has caused displacements of communities along with environmental disintegration. And to achieve his desired ends – exploitation of nature, he uses Caliban who is threatened and always kept in fear of being hurt by his magic. It is important to understand the nature of Prospero’s magic in this context. Ambiguities regarding the exact nature of his magic only provide clear indications to its openness of interpretation. From one perspective, Prospero’s art is Baconian science, that is “the empirical study of nature leading to the understanding and control of all its forces”¹⁹. This explains tempestuous storm at the very onset of the play. From another perspective, it is sheer illusionism, theatricality or spectacle as has been indicated multiple times in the text. For

example, when Prospero characterises the masque as “some vanity of mine art” (4.1.41). Also, the fact that his magic is referred to as “art” implies that it could mean both magic in the dominant sense of the word but also weave together a heterogeneity of senses including a particular skill, science, human artifice and ingenuity in general. The implication is that Prospero’s power is not natural but the source of it might just well be the natural resources he exploits. He uses his magic to exploit nature by intimidating Caliban but on the other hand, it is this exploitation that sustains and perhaps increases his magical powers. In today’s spectacular and technology-oriented globalized world, modern human artifices with all their dominating and destructive potential stand identical with Prospero’s magic.

It is therefore justified to say that the genesis of environmental hazards and climate disasters that we face today can be traced well back into Shakespeare’s time when massive deforestations started to take place. European colonization throughout the centuries has only exacerbated the situation when it reached its peak. The long-term effect of such exploitative endeavours on environment over time is something that can hardly be felt. Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” is particularly insightful in this context to understand this phenomenon. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon introduces the term “slow violence” by which he means “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed over time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”²⁰. Violence is generally conceived as being immediate, explosive in nature and visibly harmful. Slow violence, on the other hand, is almost invisible because of its postponed effect that germinates in a distant future. In an age of spectacle and instantaneity, it is difficult therefore to apprehend the seeds that are planted for environmental perils and climate crises that could materialise centuries later. The casualties of such violence are both humans and environment and are most likely “not to be seen, not to be counted”²¹. The challenge is one of visibility for those marginalized billions who are heavily dependent on their natural habitats for life-sustenance but who are insignificant, invisible, placed on the borders of humanity.

Caliban, I argue, stands as a symbol for the victims of slow violence – the development refugees, ecological migrants, and what Mike Davis calls “the global residuum”²². By this suggestive image, Davis brings to mind “the remaindered humans, the compacted leavings on whom neoliberalism’s inequities bear down most heavily”²³. Caliban for the most part overpowered by Prospero’s ambition, in keeping with his name for economic prosperity. He is also overshadowed at the very ending when he is left alone in the island that has been changed drastically over the years through its controlled management. Not only does he remain exposed to the imminent dangers environmental degradation but he is also left displaced and alienated from the whole island that was once his home. The same is the case for not only the ecological migrants but also inhabitants who remain in their native lands. Nixon proposes a more radical notion of displacement for these victims, one that “instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable”²⁴. So, Caliban, despite remaining in the island, is not only alienated from himself but also from the very nature with whom he had a deep feeling of intimacy and interconnectedness. That is what makes him say that he will seek for “grace” hereafter (5.1.295). But Prospero’s confession when he says of Caliban, “this thing of darkness I/ acknowledge mine” (5.1.275-76), points to his complicity in the whatever deformity Caliban or the island has been subjected to. This darkness in today’s world is one bred from intersections of neoliberal forces, turbo-capitalism and technology-oriented globalization among others, all of which thrive on spectacular power and the politics of exclusion.

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