"He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man." – William Shakespeare (Much Ado about Nothing. Act II Scene 1)

A postcolonial view of *The Tempest* and its Afterlives

Ravi Bhoraskar

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under guidance of
Prof. Sudha Shastri
IIT Bombay

Outline

1. Introduction
   - A brief history of Colonization
   - The Tempest
   - The Afterlives
2. Postcolonial Theory and The Tempest
   - Prospero and Postcolonialism
   - Caliban
   - Counterview
3. Neil Gaiman's The Tempest
   - Preliminaries
   - Themes
   - Universality of Shakespeare
4. Discussion

A brief history of British Colonization

- **1492** Columbus discovered America (mistook it for India)
- **1497** Henry VII commissions John Cabot; First Englishman in America
- **1576 onwards** Early claims of land in the name of queen
- **1607** Colonization of America started, with *Virginia Company* creating colony at Jamestown, Virginia

The Sea Venture incident

The Sea Venture in a heavy Sea in 1609, painting by Christopher Grimes

- *Sea Venture* commissioned in 1609 to deliver supplies to the Jamestown colony
- Set sail on June 20; Ran into storm and sank on July 24
- All 150 passengers land safely ashore, onto a reef in Bermuda
- Stranded for 9 months; built 2 new boats; sailed to Virginia; most saved
- William Strachey wrote accounts, which supposedly inspired The Tempest

The Tempest

See video 'The Tempest in a minute'

The Tempest [6]

- Shakespeare's last play; written in 1610-11
- Based in the Mediterranean, but the island seems more like the *New World*
- Strict observation of the three unities, in contrast to other Shakespeare's plays
- Prospero an image of Shakespeare, with his renunciation of magic depicting Shakespeare's farewell to the stage
- Colonization had just started, hence parallels with the colonial discourse prophetic, rather than descriptive

The Afterlives

1. **Neil Gaiman's The Tempest** [3]
   - **1997** Last book of *The Sandman* series, part of *The Wake*
2. **Charles and Mary Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare** [4]
   - **1807** Written as an abridged version of Shakespeare for children
   - Attempts to be a reproduction, but is an afterlife, due to cultural sensibilities of its times
3. **The Tempest: Graphic Novel** [1]
   - **2009** Retains the original text, but adds pictures

Postcolonial Theory and The Tempest

"Postcolonialism is intellectual discourse that consists of reactions to, and analysis of, the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism." –Harald Fischer-Tine

- The tempest has been viewed through a lens of postcolonial theory
- Prospero, earlier seen as a *benevolent God*, has flaws
  - Seen as patriarchal, colonialist, sexist and racist
  - **Ariel** A companion or familiar. Desires freedom
  - **Caliban** A slave. Often mistreated, and used for menial tasks. Justified due to his attempted rape on Miranda
  - **Miranda** Prospero's daughter. Prospero is protective, often domineering. Finds it hard to let her go

Caliban and the Colonial Discourse 1/2

- Sycorax's son, original inhabitant of the island, at peace with nature; Parallels with Indians
- *"And then I lov'd thee, and show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle .....Cursed be I that did so!.....For I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own King"* (Act 1, Scene 2)
- Seen as savage, uncivilized. [7] Prospero sees the need to *civilize* him; White man's burden

Caliban and the Colonial Discourse 2/2

- Attempted rape of Miranda *"Would't had been done! Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else this isle with Calibans"* (Act 1, Scene 2) Wishes to dominate what he sees are rightfully his own island. Colonizer sees it as a threat to his own dominance, hence subjugates him
- *"You taught me language; And my profit on't is, I know how to curse"* (Act 1, Scene 2); Postcolonial literature often in the colonizer's language, though critical of colonization
- Stephano and Trinculo pour wine down his throat and reduce him to a boot-licking slave; Colonization of the worst kind

More Caliban

Charles Lamb says *"...a strange misshapen thing, far less human in form than an ape.... would have been very kind to him, but the bad nature,.... would not let him learn anything good or useful: therefore he was employed like a slave, to fetch wood, and do the most laborious offices;*

The Tempest: Graphic Novel depicts caliban as a non-human, almost demon-like creature.

Attempt to dehumanize him, so as to not elicit sympathy, and justify Prospero's conduct. Shakespeare is more neutral, and shows Caliban's POV too.

Counterview

Meredith Anne Skura [7] says that the Colonial Discourse in *The Tempest* is unintentional.

- Shakespeare explored exploitation in other plays too; not necessarily in a colonial context
- The timeframe when the play was written does not allow for it
- Sees the characters as manifestations of human personalities
  - *"...this thing of darkness! Acknowledge mine."* (Act 5, Scene 1)

Neil Gaiman's The Tempest

- Neil Gaiman : Comic Books :: Shakespeare : Drama
- Last book of the Sandman series [2] [3], last play by Shakespeare, Gaiman sees himself in Shakespeare, Shakespeare sees himself in Prospero
- Highlights the labours of writing; writing as a chore instead of it being a creative process
- Comments on universality and immortality of Shakespeare

The Graphic Novel vs The Play I

Similarities

- Comics have union of verbal and visual presentation, but lack photgraphic realism, thus leaving much to imagination of the viewer
- In Elizabethan theater too, minimal use of props meant that the user had to imagine the scene and the setting
  - "[c]omics are often compared to film, but I see them as being more like theater, another medium that can't physically show everything and so must rely upon suggestion supported by a few perfectly chosen details"–Mark Zulli [5]

Differences

- **Omnipresent Narrator** Used extensively by Neil Gaiman; not so much by the other Graphic Novel

The Graphic Novel vs The Play II

- **Font and text styles** Gaiman uses different fonts to suggest differnt moods and people
- **Rapid Scene Changes** Possible in a comic book, but not on stage. Gaiman uses it to juxtapose scenes from The Tempest in scenes from Shakespeare's life

The Afterlife

- An afterlife may seek to fill in gaps in the original text
- Might attempt to explain or justify why certain things are the way they are in the original text
- Justification required when the cultural context changes – e.g. in a postcolonial world
- Hob Gadling's (another Sandman character) remorse over slave trade is congruent to Afterlives justifying aspects of the original text

Labours of Writing

- The *Furor Poetica* [2] in contrast to the weary Shakespeare here
- Nagging wife, daughter's marriage
- Shakespeare writes the play as an obligation to Morpheus; Doesn't quite enjoy writing
- Speculation: Was Gaiman bored of the Sandman series by this time? (Not bored of writing; wrote plenty of novels later)
- At the end of the book, Morpheus takes away Shakespeare's writing skill. Was the skill never Shakespeare's own, then?

Shakespeare and Prospero

- Gaiman identifies Prospero as an image of Shakespeare himself
- Both love, and feel protective about their daughters; both find it hard to let her go
- Prospero renounces his magic; Shakespeare ceases writing

Ben Johnson, and reaction to Shakespeare

As Gaiman points out, drama was not treated as high art in Shakespeare's time. Though plays were extremely popular, playwrights were seen as not respectable, and ungodly men. Perhaps a commentary on comic books in the present.

Universality of Shakespeare 1/2

Johnson feels that one needs to experience different kinds of situations in order to write about them. Shakespeare says, *"All one needs to understand people is to be a person"*. Gaiman says that this acute understanding of the pulse of human nature and emotions makes Shakespeare so appealing, even today.

Universality of Shakespeare 2/2

- Did Shakespeare really expect to become immortal, while he lived? According to Gaiman, yes (The Faustian bargain with Morpheus). However, like any other playwright of his time, Shakespeare too was a slave of the quirks of production.

- Is there really a point to analysing Shakespeare to death, when actually there may not be as much meaning or depth as we think?
- Is the immortality of Shakespeare a fluke? How much better was he than his contemporaries?

Conclusions and Discussion

1. Why did Shakespeare decide to strictly follow the 3 unities in this play, when he so easily violated them earlier?
2. Is Shakespeare really great and worthy of this respect 400 years later? Or was it just a fluke?
3. On a related note, is Neil Gaiman's supposed greatness also merely a fluke?
4. Is the colonial discourse in *The Tempest* intentional, or a coincidence?

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