

## Subaltern Voice in Shakespeare: A Study in The Tempest

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### ABSTRACT:

The term “subaltern” is an allusion to the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1973), an Italian Marxist. It means a person or group of persons belonging to an inferior rank and station, may be for race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. In 1980s, there arose a group named Subaltern Studies Group (SSG). It was influenced by the scholarship of Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha. They tried to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. They focused on the subalterns or the non-elites as agents of social and political change. This paper in its present form is the result of a study on Shakespeare and the subaltern where an analysis will be made on some of the works of Shakespeare and his treatment of the marginalized section of the society in them with a special reference to the subaltern characters in *The Tempest*. This paper uses Gramsci’s conception of hegemony where it is “a condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force” but also through consensual submission of the very people who were dominated (Litowitz 2000,p.518). According to Gramsci there are two levels of hegemony. “These two levels correspond on one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ or command exercised through the state and the ‘juridical’ government” (Gramsci 1971,p.12). In *The Tempest* one can find a reflection of England’s colonial expansion. The play has been undoubtedly interpreted as a play about colonialism. It is simply for Prospero’s coming to Sycorax’s island, subduing her, ruling and imposing his own culture on the natives. Prospero tries to civilize and educate Caliban but with the accompaniment of politics of dominization over the colonized.

**KEY WORDS :** Subaltern, Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist, Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), Eric Stokes, Ranajit Guha, Shakespeare, Marginalised.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The term subaltern refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, may be for race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. It is the social group who is socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. It is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Antonio Gramsci, which identified the social groups who are excluded from a society’s established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society. In Post-colonial theory, the term Subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. But Gayatri Spivak advised against a too broad application of the term. The subalterns are peoples who have been silenced in the administration of the colonial states they constitute. Gayatri Spivak in an essay titled, “Can the subaltern Speak?” wrote: The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (p.308) She put emphasis on the pitiable condition of women who are not only oppressed by patriarchy but also by colonialism. The most famous name among all Subaltern Historians is unquestionably Ranajit Guha. The most powerful example of subaltern historical scholarship is his *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India* where he offers a fascinating account of the peasants’ insurgent consciousness, rumours, mystic visions, religiosity and bonds of community.

Shakespeare’s plays often resurface with female characters which tell us not only his view of women but also their status in Shakespeare’s time. These characters are of a bawdy woman like the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Audrey in *As You Like It*; the tragic innocent woman like Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, or Ophelia in *Hamlet*; the scheming *Femme Fatal* like

lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* or King Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*; the witty woman like Katherine in *The Taming of The Shrew*; the married woman who dresses as men like Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*; women falsely accused of Adultery like Desdemona in *Othello* and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. They have been bound to rules and conventions of the Patriarchal Elizabethan era. In his comedies the world of women is safe where she is happy and comes to full flowering. Shakespeare has created every shade of womanhood, from Miranda's simplicity and innocence to Cleopatra's eternal courtesan. His women are extremely individualized even when they resemble the particular one. Coming to the tragic heroines, they are pathetic, helpless and are always eclipsed by the towering personality of the hero. Except Cleopatra, everyone from Ophelia to Desdemona and Cordelia are all helpless and pathetic. Shakespeare's women are very practical, lively and resourceful. They take the stage in the grip of their hand. One can find the simplicity in thought, frankness and eloquency in discourse in the characters of Rosalind, Portia and Viola. Shakespeare's heroines are uplifted by love and they are self-sacrificing, passionate, virtuous and chaste.

## **II. Objectives And Methodology**

The objective of the paper is to make an analysis of the subaltern characters in Shakespeare with a special emphasis on the characters in *The Tempest*. The methodology used here is analytical and help of secondary sources of information has been taken like journals, articles, books etc.

## **III. DISCUSSION**

Helen Zimmern, in the preface to the English translation of Louis Lewe's Study *The Women of Shakespeare*, argued in 1895 that "of Shakespeare's dramatis personae, his women are perhaps the most attractive, and also, in a sense, his most original creations, so different are they, as a whole, from the ideals of the feminine type prevalent in the literature of his day." In Shakespeare's plays female characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events. Women in Elizabethan period were considered as the weaker sex and they represented virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy and patience. Women in that period were the housewives and mothers. But within this deprived, tight and organized schedule, they have been represented in their most diverse ways by the Bard. In Shakespeare's time women had less freedom than their male counterparts. Women who were born high are presented in his plays as mere possessions only who would have been passed from father to the husbands. They are socially bound and restricted within a framework in such a way that they are unable to move or see the world around them without servants or maids. They are always under the strict guidance of their men.

Women in Shakespeare's plays who are socially low are shown as sexually aware. Women are never totally free in the plays of Shakespeare for they are always in the possession of either the husbands or the fathers. Some are even owned by their employers. Shakespeare suspected women in power and are thus portrayed having a questionable moral. Here one can take the case of Gertrude and Lady Macbeth where the former is shown marrying her husband and the latter is shown as a lady who compels her husband into murder and both of them meet their fate as a penalty for their own act. No doubt, Shakespeare gave enough space to his female protagonists still his plays do not address the role of women royalty. In both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare implicitly states the danger of women being in power. The real political issues of the Elizabethan era were dramatized through the portrayal of the character of Hamlet's mother, Gertrude and also through Lady Macbeth's passionate and uncontrolled ambition for power. Gender anxieties are reflected and the chaos created as such from this kind of anxiety is revealed. Female leadership is thus questioned by Shakespeare. Desire for stability clearly demonstrates itself in both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. In *Macbeth*, a suggestion of Kingship and power leads Lady Macbeth to convince and instigate her husband to commit a crime by murdering the King and crowning himself. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude the mother of Hamlet marries Claudius, the uncle and the murderer of his father. Their union throws the power of the crown in dispute between Hamlet, the King's son and Claudius, now husband of the Queen. In both these plays, women and their actions lead to instability in the state and a break of peace occurs as a result. Each drama reflects social anxieties from female rule. Lady Macbeth's disruption emerges from her ambition and this ambition is made high by her gender. After reading *Macbeth*'s revelation of the witches' predictions, she thinks that only her insistence will lead Macbeth to acquire the position of a King. Lady Macbeth is exemplified as a negative anode of female ambition and power. In Lady

Macbeth the feminine desires for power were seen unnatural:

Come you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

of direst cruelty!

Here one can find the tension, the political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world. Shakespeare defeminizes Lady Macbeth to give her ambitions credibility. He takes Lady Macbeth and her oddity so far as to reverse the gender roles of Macbeth. Weakness, as always is associated with the female but here, Lady Macbeth assumes Macbeth's bloody obligation and vice-versa. The female cannot, although, survive in a world of men and thus Lady Macbeth's strength deteriorates and she falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking. She puts forward that none can call their power to account but she is mistaken by the power of her own conscience. Her act of suicide indicates a personal trial and conviction. The irony underlies in the death of Lady Macbeth where the political structure is normalized with a return of male rule. Shakespeare reflects the culture of Elizabethan era through lady Macbeth's tragic fall from her ambition leading to power. On the one hand, Lady Macbeth is portraiture of the unnatural and ambiguous aspects of female political power and gender; hamlet, on the other hand, brings forward the issues of sovereignty and sexuality which again was very much prominent within the Elizabethan world. Unlike Elizabeth, Hamlet's Gertrude, chose a new King for Denmark. By marrying Claudius the absolute power was also shifted to him by the Queen. The fate of the state and particularly of Gertrude depended upon her new husband. Claudius murdered his own brother and so he can never be the right heir to the throne. He married Gertrude not for the reason that he loved her but for the selfish motive of acquiring the throne. The woman was only a source and not the means. She was used as a tool and thus a distrust of males is shown who achieve power through marriage to the female monarch. Thus Hamlet pronounces his uncle as a person who intends to harm others through sexual manipulations:

A murderer and a villain;  
A slave that is not the twentieth part the tithe  
of your precedent lord; a vice of Kings;  
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,  
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,  
And put it in his pocket.

Hamlet condemns his mother and declares her characterless. For she married his uncle within less than a month of his father's demise. Hamlet accused his mother and generalized: "Frailty, thy name is woman." In both Hamlet and Macbeth, some points reflect the Elizabethan desire for a stable male monarch. A society full of disorderliness is presented before the readers where the cause of this disorderliness is nothing but female ambition or exploitation. In both the plays the female power exists and they suffer a lot too which again tries to show that women, however, cannot overcome the patriarchal system. Within these two plays one can view the potential conflicts arising from female power. But both the plays end with the diminution of female sovereign authority and Shakespeare's political resolution is represented by the females' destruction and the state's return to normalcy and patriarchal framework. If we take into account Shakespeare's comedies we can find that the female characters are undoubtedly strong and intelligent. They are sometimes shown as superior to men who are just to the contrary of his tragic heroines and in contrary to that of the Elizabethan society women. May be this is why he uses disguises through which his female characters speak freely and discards the force imposed upon them by their men. Character traits like adaptability, intelligence, strong will-power, self-awareness can be found in Rosalind of *As You Like It*, Viola of *Twelfth Night*, Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing* and Katherine of *The Taming of The Shrew*. In Elizabethan society women were compelled to do whatever best suited men and were never allowed control of their own consequences.

They were overall adaptable to their situation. Here one can take the examples of Rosalind and Viola who changed their identities to become men in order to get protection. Beatrice and Katherine were not confident enough for they were more direct and witty in their discourse. These women showed their intelligence through their discourse. Rosalind trains Orlando to be a better husband while she is disguised as a man in the forest and Orlando believes him. Viola parallels Rosalind and expresses her ideas of love to Orsino who likes him. Beatrice and Katherine on the other hand argue with men, attack them, and use their wit in order to equal their intelligence and self-respect. These women are aware of the society's expectations and also are aware of their self-awareness. Elizabethan audience would uproar with such ideas of gender equality if only Shakespeare would not have shown it as a fiction. Fiction is revealed by the mystical connotation of the forest scene and the presence of Hymen, the God of marriage. Viola was left alone but she acquired the right to marry Orsino only when her brother was there to give her away to Orsino. It shows that without a man to give her away the marriage would not have been possible. Beatrice and Katherine were witty enough using their sharp tongues. They were not willing to accept everything that was thrust upon them. But everything ends up happily for they tie the knots in a mutual understanding. Shakespeare, in no way had to remain attached to the expectations of Elizabethan society and he made this true by ending up all his comedy heroines becoming wives. Marriage was unavoidable for the

Elizabethan heroines and all the four female heroine's problems were resolved by the acceptance and protection of men. In *The Tempest* Shakespeare has used the fairy machinery with magic spells and enchantments. In his early plays the fairies were used for merry making and to create fun but in *The Tempest* one can see that these fairies are totally under the control of a male named Prospero. It is this man without whose permission and direction the fairies cannot act. The spirits do not possess any kind of independence and opportunity of action but it is only Prospero the wizard like man by whose orders they do act. One can see Ariel too who instead of possessing so much of powers cannot act on his own for he is bound to perform anything and everything only by his master's command. It is clearly revealed that he and all his fairylanders can only act by the command of a mortal lord. That Ariel is a diminutive being is found in these lines:

Where the bee sucks there suck I  
In a cowslip's bell I lie:  
There I couch when owls do cry,  
On the bat's back do I fly  
After summer merrily.

In *The Tempest* Shakespeare introduced the fairies as the means of redressing the wrong done to one mortal by another. The fairies and their powers are exploited by Prospero in such a way that they are compelled to fall on their knees and make amends. The title "*The Tempest*" itself tells the reader or shows the viewer that it is about a storm----- a violent storm in the sea as well as in the mind of the major character in the play that is Prospero. Prospero is the Duke of Milan but he is wronged by his own brother Antonio. He was also accompanied by Alonso in this deed. They have been stranded on an island for twelve years. Miranda, Prospero's three years old daughter was also with him. They were provided with enough food, clothes, water and good books of Prospero's by the counselor Gonzalo. Here, Prospero the possessor of great magical spell is served by spirits and specially Ariel. Although Ariel is portrayed as a very mischievous spirit still one cannot deny the fact that he is a sincere and obedient one for he does act with the command of only Prospero who he thinks is his master. This is perhaps because he was saved by Prospero from Sycorax who was supposed to trap him in a tree. Ariel is overall a loyal. In this play Prospero is portrayed as a character who always goes on performing his magical spells with the help of his slave and spirit Ariel. But whatever he did was only to show all the wrong doers the right way and to reveal the truth before the audience. He did not do anything for mere fun. He also performed his magic to bring Miranda, his only daughter closer to Ferdinand so that they fall in extreme love and become one. Prospero cannot be an evil soul and so also the case with Ariel. Both performed magical spells to do the right things and to show others the right way. This is proved at the end of the play when one finds that Prospero being wronged by so many other than his brother Antonio forgives them. No doubt he warns them not to repeat the same further. And when everything is alright he buries his magic properties and throws his book of magic in the waters.

A colonist can love the place where he builds a colony like his own country. But he only explores and exploits it for mere selfish ends and then leaves it like anything -----And this is very true of Prospero. This shows his colonial mentality. Caliban is a reflection of the native and Prospero a colonist. Prospero's treatment of Caliban is clear from Caliban's speech where he speaks thus-----

I must eat my dinner  
This island is mine, by Sycorax my mother  
Which thou tak'st from me.

Prospero rules with a hegemonic attitude of a colonizer in the island. He is portrayed as a dictatorial colonial ruler who treats the native (Caliban) like a slave and abandons the colony as soon as his job is completed.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In *The Tempest*, one can find a male character that seems to be doing magic with the help of a spirit where the spirit was treated as a slave by the protagonist of the play. But the spirit, Ariel's loyalty is not sublimed. Here Shakespeare did not try to bring Ariel's loyalty, obedience and sincerity to the forefront. He was a subaltern character for he was not of this world but of the other. Without the presence of Ariel in *The Tempest* there would not have been the tempest and the play as a result would have been paralyzed from being developed. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's plays reflect the Elizabethan image of women in general where women were bound to rules and conventions of the Patriarchal Elizabethan era. Shakespeare wanted to portray women as witty and strong but this was only for his great admiration to Queen Elizabeth. He, at last, could not but take the help of male characters thus weakening the wit and strength of their female counterparts only because he was aware of the society where he existed and was also conscious of the uproar and chaos that might be the outcome of such a play where women would be shown as a powerful one, equal to men in all respects. For Elizabethan audience was not at all happy by the rule of a queen, they wanted a patriarchal system.

In Hamlet and Macbeth one can find characters like Gertrude and Lady Macbeth on the one hand and on the other in The Tempest one can find the character of Ariel-----all them being the subalterns in their own way. Gertrude and Lady Macbeth were given importance as far as their male counterparts were helped, exalted or supported by them. As soon as the male counterparts did fall their importance in the plays were lost and they fell down from the top position to somewhere where they were lost at once. Likewise in The Tempest the spirit Ariel was the most important character without whose contribution there would not have been any development in the play and where Prospero's actions totally depended upon Ariel. But to our surprise Ariel was only in the play acting as a mere slave to Prospero and individually his character does not find any such ground on which he can stand firm. It seems as if without Prospero there would not have been Ariel but would there have been Prospero and his resourceful magical spells without Ariel, is a thing to be considered. However, Caliban is not only a deformed slave but a native of the island over whom Prosper rules. Prospero thinks Caliban is genetically inferior-----

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature

Nurture can never stick;

Caliban is a symbol of colonial injustice. He is a symbol of European imperialism and colonization. He was disinherited, exploited and subjugated. He was torn between his own culture and a culture that was imposed on him by Prospero. Caliban finally repents for his rebelliousness and promises to remain obedient and sincere to Prospero ever after.

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