Decolonizing the Bard: *The Tempest, Othello*, and the Politics of Imperial Authority

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how the reading of Shakespearean plays can be transformed from instruments of imperial assimilation into mediums of postcolonial critique. Once used to promote Western cultural hegemony, the plays such as *The Tempest* and *Othello* are now successfully inverted by postcolonial critics to interrogate imperial power. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon, this study demonstrates that Shakespeare's contemporary relevance stems from his capacity to scrutinize colonial power and racial supremacy. Instead of viewing his works as static monuments to British heritage, postcolonial scholarship reframes them as dynamic sites where marginalized writers negotiate power, identity, and historical trauma.

Keywords: Shakespearean Drama, Postcolonial, Imperial Authority, Negotiate Power.

1. Introduction: Colonial Legacy and Shakespeare

Colonialism has its advocates in Shakespeare's works, whether the Bard of Avon wants it or not. 19th-century English parliamentarian Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Indian Education" established an explicit blueprint for building a colonial project designed to educate individuals who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (429). This design was consciously planned to marginalize indigenous knowledge systems in favor of an English curriculum, achieving a systemic suppression of native thought. Ironically, William Shakespeare was central to this project, weaponized as an aesthetic benchmark to establish the cultural dominance of the British Empire. As Ania Loomba asserts, "He became, during the colonial period, the quintessence of Englishness and a measure of humanity itself. Thus the meanings of Shakespeare's plays were both derived from and used to establish colonial authority" (1). However, in the postcolonial era, we see a major shift in this perspective, treating the canonical texts of Shakespeare in a new light. With the formal collapse of colonialism in the mid-twentieth century, writers and critics didn't just toss Shakespeare aside—they picked up his plays specifically to challenge the imperialist undercurrents in his works and show the zones of resistance to colonialism.

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2. Theoretical Framework: Interrogating the "Universal"

Re-evaluating Shakespeare through a postcolonial lens requires dismantling the assumption that his plays express transcendent, universal truths detached from historical material conditions. As Edward Said emphasizes in *Culture and Imperialism*, canonical literary works are inextricably bound to the geopolitical realities of the empires that produced and institutionalized them (12).

2.1 Said's Contrapuntal Reading

Said expounds the idea that colonial expansion does not limit itself only to military supremacy, but relies heavily on expanding a colonial ideology that outlasts postcolonial nationhood. He strongly advocates for a "contrapuntal" methodology that reads canonical literature simultaneously alongside the imperial histories that enabled its creation:

We must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes—that of imperialism and that of resistance to it—which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded. (78–79)

When we apply this framework to Shakespeare, it calls for reading *The Tempest* right alongside seventeenth-century travel logs and the rise of early colonial trade companies. Shakespeare still matters to us today—not because we look past his ties to British empire-building, but because we bring those colonial undercurrents right into the center of how we read and question his work.

2.2 Bhabha's Mimicry and Ambivalence

The colonizers forced the colonized to unquestioningly adopt imperial culture and act as passive followers. This enforced process, designed to compel colonial subjects to defer to the metropolitan center, is what Homi Bhabha terms colonial mimicry. However, Bhabha points out that this kind of imitation always carries a catch: it inevitably creates a copy that is "almost the same, but not quite" (122). That little difference creates a lot of tension and uncertainty. Because of this, when postcolonial artists adapt Shakespeare today, it is never just a normal play. They mix their own local political issues into these classic stories, to re-examine the issues—turning something once used to subjugate them into a tool to fight back against empire. In other words, the very colonized people are now using the canonical texts to write back to the colonizers.

2.3 Spivak and the Silence of the Subaltern

Building on this dynamic, Gayatri Spivak's work tackles a tougher question: can people who are pushed to the margins ever truly speak or make their own choices

within a system built by empires? Traditionally, old-school Shakespeare scholars of the 18th and the 19th centuries treated characters like Caliban and Sycorax as simple villains or pushed them completely out of the picture. Even in the twentieth century we find almost no interest on the part of critics in the dispossession of Caliban and Sycorax. But a Spivakian approach zooms in on those exact silences and omissions. It clearly displays how the storytellers of empire consciously expunged the speech, history, and representation of colonized people, leaving the colonized with no institutional space to articulate an independent voice of their own.

3. *The Tempest*: The Grammar of Dispossession

At the heart of the colonial psyche lies a systematic dispossession of land, language, and culture. As Jyotsna Singh notes in her work on early modern colonialism, "the Shakespearean era marked an initial wave of imperial outreach, functioning as a period of "emergent, Western global colonialism (which some define as proto-colonialism)" (1). Alongside Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* stands as a foundational text for postcolonial studies, capturing early European transatlantic expansion. On the surface, the play appears non-political, purely joyful, and overtly symbiotic; however, a critical exploration reveals a deeply entrenched political undercurrent. While traditional humanist critics viewed Prospero's "Art" as a symbol of Renaissance intellect and moral order, a postcolonial lens turns this reading on its head. Through this framework, Prospero's magic operates as an early form of colonial technology—a tool used to subdue unfamiliar territories, extract resources, and ultimately usurp both the land and the minds of the colonized.

3.1 The Elizabethan View vs. The Postcolonial Re-Reading

In this context, we see two contrasting outlooks shaped by the audiences of different periods. For early seventeenth-century audiences, Prospero's rule over the island naturally aligned with contemporary concepts of natural order. Nothing seemed unconventional to Jacobean viewers, who took colonial possession for granted: commanding Ariel signaled spiritual elevation, whereas subjugating Caliban reflected the necessary control of an unruly body by a rational mind. Caliban can be subjugated without any qualms of conscience as he has been successfully demonized or made into a barbarous "other," as Ashcroft notices: "Caliban is the prototype of the colonized subject, whose baseness, as constructed by the colonizer, is the justifying prerequisite of colonization" (19).

If Caliban is a demon, Prospero is an angel to be worshipped and served unless and until his whims end. Ania Loomba highlights this critical blind spot, noting that

imperial interpretations often obscure the dynamic by emphasizing Prospero's Italian origins while downplaying the play's deep engagement with early English colonial expansion (30).Bill Ashcroft has brilliantly observed the parameters of colonialism in *The Tempest*, which can be called a guidebook for colonial hegemony as it exposes:

> the consummate binary set up between colonizer and colonized….the hegemony of imperial notions of order and good government; the profound link between such ideas and the technology of the colonizing power (which in Prospero is symbolized by his magic Art); the racial debasement and demonization of the colonized (articulated by Prospero's, and the play's, attitude to Caliban); and the belief that goals of 'improvement', of the civilizing mission, are a justification for subjugation (17).

Operating within this framework, a popular and conventional reading historically encouraged us to take a romantic view of the island's society, overlooking usurpation as a natural sequence. However, a postcolonial reading completely reframes Prospero as a colonial usurper. According to Ania Loomba, "Prospero is perceived as a figure more akin to Cecil Rhodes and Henry Stanley than a Jacobean magus" (12). His outwardly generous actions mask a drive for territorial seizure and forced assimilation, which are thoroughly reinvestigated and exposed as utterly colonial. He treats the island as unowned and his personal domain, completely overriding Caliban's indigenous claim. This approach mirrors the legal concept of *terra nullius* ("nobody's land") deployed by European states to justify colonialism. In addition, Prospero's assertion that housing Caliban and teaching him language legitimizes his rule reproduces Ashcroft's point about the "civilizing mission"—the premise that dispossession is an equitable exchange for European acculturation. Amplifying this critique, Aimé Césaire's adaptation *Une Tempête* presents Prospero's magic explicitly as firearms: an advanced technology used to enforce asymmetric occupation. Ultimately, a postcolonial reading of Prospero's manipulations reveals how the exact ideological patterns Ashcroft outlines manifest time and again across the long history of imperial exploration.

3.2 Caliban's Linguistic Resistance and the Limits of Hegemony

It is an earnest effort to establish the moot point of the essay: imperial conquest doesn't just conquer physical land; it takes over minds and cultures right along with it—a dynamic vividly captured in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Much like Caliban, who throws the colonizer's words right back at him as a weapon to curse, Crusoe's Man Friday suffers a similar silencing under imperial rule. Both figures eventually end up trapped in a linguistic cage where their true, original identities are muted.

In *The Tempest*, that fight for colonial power hinges entirely on language as a mechanism of control. When Prospero tries to spin his domination as an act of educational kindness—claiming he gave Caliban words to make his purposes known—Caliban fires back with a foundational critique of colonial language:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (1.2.363–65)

Unlike Ariel or Man Friday, Caliban the demonized has an appealing force due to his linguistic resistance pushing back against Prospero's attempt to subjugate him through speech. As Bill Ashcroft points out, Caliban doesn't just reject the master's tongue; he steals it, turning a tool meant for submission into a vehicle for rebellion. Throwing curses in the oppressor's language becomes a vital first step toward claiming real political agency. In *Caliban's Voice*, Ashcroft vigorously writes:

> He (Caliban) gives voice to an issue that lies at the centre of post-colonial studies: is that language good for nothing but cursing, or can Caliban use that language to change the world? So much depends on this question, …. that we need to examine it carefully and extensively (16).

Edward Said looks at Caliban as an archetypal figure who subverts the culture forced upon him. When you read Caliban's rebellion—including his messy alliance with Stephano and Trinculo—contrapuntally, it stops looking like silly, low-class comedy and starts looking like a genuine attempt to build political coalitions against an occupying power.

Twentieth-century adaptations take this even further, deconstructing the texts to break the conventional matrix of power and authority. In Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, Caliban completely rejects Prospero's terms, acting out what Said calls the "voyage in"—the moment postcolonial intellectuals step straight into the metropolitan canon to tear down its imperial assumptions from the inside. Thus, it is appropriate to claim that *The Tempest,* examined through a postcolonial lens, is effective enough to expose the linguistic coloniality of the colonizers.

3.3 *The Tempest* and Subaltern Silence: Ariel, Sycorax, and Gendered Erasure

While most postcolonial studies focus on Caliban's loud rebellion, a Spivakian approach examines the marginalized figures who are systematically silenced: Ariel and Sycorax. Gayatri Spivak's famous inquiry into whether the subaltern can ever truly speak inside an oppressive system illuminates both Ariel's conditional freedom and Sycorax's total absence.

Ariel's portrayal explicitly establishes the colonial machinery of introducing the compliant native who submissively attempts to earn freedom by navigating the master's rules. Rather than rebelling, Ariel repeatedly asks for release, pleading, "Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains, / Let me remember thee what thou hast promised" (1.2.42–43). Prospero maintains a tight grip through intimidation, displaying that even a favored helper remains bound to the sovereign will—a dynamic mirroring imperial divide-and-rule tactics that pacify cooperative populations to prevent unified resistance.

The trajectory of Sycorax exposes the foundational colonial mechanism of demonizing the colonized as the "other." Experiencing a double erasure defined by race and gender, her entire history is mediated through Prospero's biased narrative, which reduces her to a "foul witch" (1.2.258). This demonization legitimizes the dispossession of her island and the subsequent enslavement of Caliban. By silencing local counter-narratives, the imperial framework constructs an official record that denies the subaltern woman any autonomous voice. *The Tempest* thus maps out the mechanics of territorial theft and ideological subjugation.

Ultimately, a contrapuntal reading of *The Tempest* helps us understand the text as a profound document on colonial aggression, mapping the mechanisms of possession with a precision unmatched elsewhere in Shakespeare's canon.

4. *Othello*: The Psychology of Assimilation and the Imperial Host Culture

The world of *The Tempest* is magical and romantic; the world of *Othello* is violent and tragic. Yet a postcolonial reading can make both texts rediscovered and re-examined from a new light, exposing the colonialist undercurrents ever-working in the deep layers unforeseen by contemporary audiences and critics. Where *The Tempest* examines physical territory and land seizure, *Othello* shifts focus to the psychological consequences of living within a racially hostile host culture. Othello, the Moor, stands for the model of a fractured colonial assimilation that ultimately fails: he converts to Christianity, adopts Venetian manners, and commands the republic's military. Yet despite his service to the state, he remains a perpetual outsider—an "extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.135) whose social acceptance remains conditional.

4.1 Fanonian Alienation and the Psychopathology of Belonging

To understand the mind of the Black general Othello and his all-engulfing psychological inferiority in spite of his mighty military background, we need to align our reading of the tragedy with *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon, where he successfully diagnoses the psychological trauma of the racialized subject seeking validation within an imperial structure:

> The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man... That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question (17).

Othello demonstrates this internal division as his vulnerability originates not from a character flaw, but from what Fanon terms "epidermalization"—the internalization of an inferiority complex imposed by a hostile racial gaze (11). Fanon has drawn our attention to the fact that a colonized subject always undergoes a sense of insecurity due to the racial gaze of the masters, which increases the sense of vulnerability of the colonized. Iago's manipulation succeeds by activating the self-doubt that Venetian society continuously instills in Othello, persuading him that his Blackness makes him incompatible with Desdemona and the social hierarchy she represents.

Within this framework, Othello's marriage to Desdemona acts as a desperate attempt for social authentication and genuine citizenship in Venice. Fanon notes that in colonial hierarchies, intimacy with the dominant group often serves as a lifeline to recognized humanity—a way to feel that "By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man" (42). Consequently, Iago's destruction of Othello's trust shatters more than a marriage; it strips away his primary anchor to institutional belonging, plunging him into severe self-alienation.

As psychological pressure mounts, Othello internalizes this racialized self-doubt, adopting the language of his oppressors. He frets that he is "black, / And [has] not those soft parts of conversation" (3.3.267–68) and later brands his reputation as "begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.388–90). Surrounded by a culture that conflates Blackness with moral pollution, Othello ultimately absorbs these anti-Black constructs, turning the state's hostility inward. This internalization of colonial inferiority unquestionably proves Fanon's premise that colonialism leaves a profound psychological scar never to be erased.

4.2 Discursive Power and the Orientalist Trap in *Othello*

A combination of Edward Said's theoretical framework with Fanon's account of racial trauma reveals how Venice functions as an imperial power that utilizes, isolates, and ultimately discards racialized subjects. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said proves that Western dominance relies not merely on military force, but on "discursive power"—the capacity to produce knowledge about non-European societies by framing them as exotic, unstable, and subordinate (3). Central to this system is "imaginative geography," a process that divides the world into a rational European center and an uncivilized periphery (54). Venice colonizes this imaginative geography by valuing Othello strictly for his military utility. The Senate relies on his tactical expertise to

protect Mediterranean trade routes against the Ottoman Empire, yet denies him full domestic integration. So long as Othello remains confined to his mercenary role, Venetian society tolerates his background as an exotic element. Desdemona's initial attraction develops through her fascination with his accounts of "antres vast and deserts idle / Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven" (1.3.140–41)—a dynamic that illustrates Said's observation that the Western imagination constructs the non-European world as an inferior and exotic place just to be ignored and pampered, not to be taken seriously.

Othello's stepping outside these bounds by marrying into the Venetian aristocracy obviously disrupts the separation between the European center and its periphery. The polite Venetian façade immediately drops to expose underlying racial anxieties: Brabantio refuses to accept that Desdemona could freely choose a Black man, attributing her attraction to witchcraft or coercion. Furthermore, Iago weaponizes animalistic tropes—warning that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88–89)—to provoke public panic and enforce racial boundaries.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes that dominant cultures assert their identities most forcefully when perceived racial borders are threatened (14). Stripped of his autonomy and agency, Othello becomes entrapped within the Orientalist tropes manufactured by Venetian state discourses.

4.3 The Splintered Self and Systemic Imperialism

To understand the constant inner struggle of Othello, the unending mental agony of this superb general, and the easy manipulation of Iago over Othello, we need to have an understanding of the colonial psyche espoused by Frantz Fanon in his works. It is shown by Fanon's psychoanalytic model that colonial subjugation produces a split consciousness, instilling self-alienation within the racialized subject regardless of social status. Othello exemplifies this psychological fracture. In his final speech before committing suicide, Othello displays the collapse of an assimilated psyche:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (5.2.351–55)

Othello's tragic fate shows he remains to the end an outsider who must be eliminated to restore order. Analyzed contrapuntally, this ending exposes the mechanisms of imperial assimilation: the state instills its ideological values so deeply that the subject

enforces its judgment upon himself. Even the colonized subject does not lose their trust in the colonial system.

Thus, a postcolonial reading opens a new angle in the study of *Othello*. Whereas an Elizabethan interpretation treats *Othello* as a domestic tragedy driven by personal flaw and deceit, a postcolonial reading locates the tragedy in the structural conditions of the Venetian empire. By reading the play alongside Edward Said's critique of institutional power and Frantz Fanon's framework of racial trauma, the drama appears to be an anatomy of colonial mechanisms, showing how empires weaponized the martial labor of outsiders while denying them true citizenship and belonging.

4.4 Intersectionality and Subaltern Silence in *Othello*

Analyzing *Othello* through Spivak's theory of subalternity highlights how the text dramatizes the silencing of marginalized figures across intersections of race, gender, and class. The subalterns are those who are excluded from hegemonic power and denied representation within dominant discourse. This concept finds expression in both the racial outsider Othello and the women of Venice.

The paradox of the integrated colonial subject is personified in Othello. Celebrated for his unparalleled military service yet mistrusted in society, his power is only accepted as long as he serves the state of Venice by remaining within his limits. His tragedy comes from his internalization of the suspicions of the dominant culture, which leads him to commit patriarchal violence against Desdemona and replicate the systems that exclude him. Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot communicate within the dominant framework without being appropriated or silenced is supported by the sad life story of Othello.

In subaltern studies, it is shown that the marginalized and the social underdogs live on the periphery, having no meaningful voice. In *Othello*, the women—Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca—are all trapped by the rigid rules of Venetian society. Because of how their gender, social class, and the shadow of empire intersect, none of them have any real freedom. Rather than just being a personal tragedy of jealousy, *Othello* becomes a sharp critique of conventional social hierarchies that suppress marginalized classes.

5. Shakespeare in the Post-Empire Era

Far from remaining an immovable monument to British heritage, in the postcolonial era Shakespeare continues to resonate globally precisely because his plays offer an adaptable vocabulary for analyzing power, resistance, and state violence. Across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, directors and dramatists have transformed Shakespeare

from a vehicle of colonial assimilation into an instrument of political critique, enacting the dynamics of mimicry and appropriation outlined by Bhabha and Said.

In global cinema, this transformation illustrates Homi Bhabha's dynamic of colonial mimicry, where reproducing the Western canon creates a subversive disruption that is "almost the same, but not quite" (122). Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Haider* (2014) exemplifies this strategy by transposing *Hamlet* to the state violence and military insurgency of 1990s Kashmir. By deploying Shakespeare to interrogate the abuses of the contemporary Indian state, Bhardwaj systematically dismantles Macaulay's 1835 educational blueprint: an Indian filmmaker commandeers the central icon of British literary authority to expose postcolonial state repression.

This journey from colonial soft power to anti-colonial subversion highlights a central debate within postcolonial theoretical discourse, best illustrated by contrasting the positions of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Bill Ashcroft. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that European imperialism deployed language as a "cultural bomb" designed to erase indigenous memories, languages, and identities, conditioning colonized subjects to view their own heritage as inherently inferior (3). For Ngũgĩ, genuine decolonization demands the total abandonment of the colonizer's tongue and canonical apparatus; from this perspective, continuing to stage or study Shakespeare risks perpetuating colonial authority.

On the other hand, Bill Ashcroft—drawing on his arguments in *The Empire Writes Back* and *Caliban's Voice*—argues for strategic appropriation rather than wholesale rejection. According to Ashcroft, postcolonial writers and artists can seize dominant European literary forms and twist them to voice their own local political realities (38). Reworking Shakespeare produces what Ashcroft calls a "metonymic gap"—a transformative space where traditional Western structures are filled with indigenous historical experiences. Through this process, postcolonial creators flip an old tool of imperial control into a working engine for decolonial resistance.

6. Conclusion: The Sovereign Palimpsest

While traditional humanist critics echoed Samuel Johnson's assessment that Shakespeare was "the poet of nature" who held up "a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (59), postcolonial readings strongly argue that this "mirror" was historically bound to an emergent imperial worldview. He stays relevant today precisely because his works are no longer treated merely as a monument to British cultural superiority. Instead, the texts function as palimpsests—flexible foundations that allow global writers and directors to layer their own local histories, political struggles, and changing

identities right over the original material. Here, the long-espoused project of colonial education backfires; in our age, Shakespeare serves as a vital tool to analyze the mechanics of the colonial enterprise. Instead of glorifying the imperial saga, Shakespeare's texts help us excavate the secret workings of colonial encounters.

By reading Shakespeare contrapuntally alongside the history of empire, postcolonial critics have achieved something that early readers and critics could never have imagined. They have taken back the canon, stripped away its imperial authority, and turned his plays into instruments for psychological decolonization. By debunking the myth of an ahistorical and apolitical Shakespeare, postcolonial critics have made his work intensely contemporary. Ultimately, Shakespeare in the postcolonial era is more accessible—and more powerful—than ever before.

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