

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Caliban is a Black African

“Caliban, a feral, sullen, misshapen creature in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The son of the sorceress Sycorax, Caliban is the sole inhabitant of his island (excluding the imprisoned Ariel) until Prospero and his infant daughter Miranda are cast ashore. Shakespeare gives Caliban some complexity, with the result that the character has drawn much critical attention, both in contrast to Ariel and Ferdinand and as a symbol, perhaps, of the natural human. Other interpreters consider him a representative of native peoples suffering under imperialist oppression”

(“Caliban”)

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as the main text which I am going to analyze is very important because of its depiction of some critical ideas pertaining to Caliban's race and his complex character. The play presents many controversial issues embodied through Caliban's character who inhabits the island before Prospero's and his daughter's Miranda being exiled to the island by Prospero's brother Antonio. In this essay, I will focus on presenting my argument and its discussions. I will argue that what is understood from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is that Caliban's African race does not empower him to gain his freedom, but rather they led him to be enslaved, dehumanized, and exploited by Prospero and other characters.

My argument's discussion will be concentrated on investigating Caliban's African race. I will discuss and prove Caliban's black African race even though his race is not mentioned in *The Tempest*. I will discuss how Caliban's character -as a black African character- leads him to be

enslaved by Prospero, Trinculo, and his friend Stephano; in addition to his struggles from them, he is dehumanized by the white characters.

Connection between Shakespeare's Island and Caliban's Black African Race

Before discussing Caliban's African race, I will examine the location of Shakespeare's island that will give very important relationship and investigation of Caliban's African race.

According to Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan:

In 1989 Theodore Elze proposed that *The Tempest's* island was Pantalaria, Between Tunis and Italy.... Elze contended that Pantalaria could readily have been reached by a drifting Prospero and Miranda after their exile from Milan- assuming that they left from Genoa, the nearest port- and by Alonso's windblown ship en route from Tunis to Naples. Pantalaria also boasts the right topology: fresh springs, brine pits, barren and fertile places, and almost everything else in The Tempest's description of Prospero's island. (32)

Pantalaria is very close to Tunis, a country which is located in the African continent. It is also considered a coastal city that has a wonderful location on the Mediterranean. When Alonso, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Antonio, Stephano, and Trinculo returned from Alonso's daughter, Claribel, to the prince of Tunis in Africa, they encountered the storm in the Mediterranean; consequently, they found themselves later on a strange island which thought to be Pantalaria, according to Elze's saying. What is more, the Shakespeare's island in *The Tempest* gives a great sign that it is located on the Mediterranean Sea, between Tunis and Italy where Alonso's and other characters' ship was destroyed and sunk completely by the storm.

If we can say that Shakespeare's island were Pantalaria in *The Tempest*, it would have meant that Caliban's race would be an African not only due to Pantalaria's closeness to Tunis but also due to the similarity between the Tunisian city Calibia and Caliban's name. Though there are many critiques and controversial debates and issues pertaining to Caliban's character and his race, here is some crucial details which explore and predict his black African background and his origin. Pantalaria island is very close to Calibia city in Tunis which "... offered Shakespeare's a linguistic prototype for the son of an Algerian witch [Sycorax]" (ibid) "...that Shakespeare's hides in the play's background" (Federici 107). Therefore, Vaughan's saying regarding Caliban's mother's race can be considered as an initial sign to say that Caliban is an Algerian African character in the play: "More significant for Caliban are the clearer indications that his mother, Sycorax, was Algerian before her banishment to the island and his birth.... Theodor Elze... saw an etymological connection in the town of Calibia... as the likely origin of Caliban's name and posited as well an African genesis" (51).

Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Lynn Garafola, David Arthur McMurray and Robert Marquez who not only argue that Caliban is an American Indian who lived in the Caribbean Sea and represented the American culture, but also argue that Caliban's name is anagram of the word "Cannibal" (15). Additionally, many critics, such as James E. Robinson in his article "Caribbean Caliban: Shifting the 'I' of the Storm" argues that Caliban's character in *The Tempest* is Antillean: "My purpose here is to pursue the metamorphosis of Caliban as an Antillean figure by examining certain interpretations of *The Tempest* by two Caribbean writers whose uses of Shakespeare's play involve much more than the casting of Caliban as a general symbol in the manner of Marquez and Retamar" (432). But I disagree with them regarding Caliban's race as an American Indian, and consequently here are some predictions which may be used as authentic

signs to prognosticate and know his black African race. The name “Caliban” has different meanings, uses and roots in some languages. It might be associated with the Tunisian city, Calibia, (in Arabic قالييه) that has many interpretations and meanings. One who was from Calibia was called Calibian or Caliban. In one hand, Caliban means “the vile dog” in Arabic which derived from the Arabic word *kalebon*, but this possibility is still under examination and investigation by many critics (Vaughan 33). But for me as a native speaker of Arabic, I will try to explicate some important information regarding this issue.

like the Arabic literature’s periods, the Islamic period (570 AD- 632 AD); Umayyad period (661 AD- 750 AD); Abbasid period (750 AD- 1258 AD); the Mamluk and Ottoman period (1258AD- 1900 AD); and the modern period (1900- present), the pre-Islamic period (1- 570 AD) had many shocking acts and doings. For instance, some Arab people in Asia and Africa used to name their sons after animals without giving any clear explanations why they did that. This doing or habit (I can call) has lasted from the pre-Islamic period until today in all Arab countries from Peninsula to North Africa. For example, here are some Arab people’s names after animals: صقر (falcon), ذئب (wolf), نغمول (baby elephant), سرحان (wolf), اسامه (lion). Also Caliban’s name is derived from and close in pronunciation to the Arabic name *Kalebon* (كليب) which is a reduction of the Arabic word كلب (dog). And this why Caliban’s character in *The Tempest* was depicted for the Royal Shakespeare Company as if one who “...had been played as... a dog with one head” (Vaughan 192). Moreover, The Arabic Dictionary of Almaany not only says that *Kalebon* means a group of dogs or those people who are afflicted with rabies, but also means one who is mean and aggressive. Also in some Middle Eastern countries, it is thought that if someone is named after an animal, he/ she will take some characters from that animal

according to the proverb: “Every person must have some characters from the meaning of his/her name.” Therefore, naming someone after an animal is for dehumanizing that person.

The name *Kalebon* from where the name Caliban was derived is used widely in Arabic literature and some Arabic series. For example, one of the greatest warrior and king who had strong and good reputation among Arabs was called *Kalebon ibn- Rabia*: كليب بن ربيعة التغلبي هو أول ملك في القبائل العربية حيث لم يكن لقب ملك معروف لدى القبائل العربية قبله، وقد كان ملكاً على قومي تغلب وبكر وبعض العدنانيين وقد أصبح العدنانيين في وقته هم المسيطرون على الجزيرة العربية وهذا كان في الفترة الواقعة قبل ميلاد *Kalebon ibn- Rabia al- Taghlibi* was the first king of Adnan’s and Bakr’s tribe in the Arabian Peninsula. He was one of the dominant kings in the Arabia before Muhammad’s birth and time”; (“Location of Kalebon ibn- Rabia’s Tomb”). Before his assassination, Al- Taghlibi is depicted as a strong and demanding character in the Arabic Syrian series known as *Azzir Salem* that was released in Ramadan, 2000. The series consists of many episodes that depict what happened in the Basus War in the pre-Islamic period when al- Taghlibi tribe tried to revenge against the tribe for their leader’s assassination.

More significantly Vaughan says that Shakespeare’s familiarity with gypsy language in England made him derive the name Caliban from it: “... Shakespeare must have been familiar with gypsy language, which had flourished in England for a century before 1611. *Cauliban* (or *kaliban*) meant ‘black’ or things associated with blackness” (33- 34). Also in his book, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, E. K. Chambers adds, “Caliban appears to be derived from the Gipsy *cauliban*, ‘blackness’ (494). Therefore, Caliban’s character is not only an African, but also black. This is why he is oppressed, dehumanized, mistreated, insulted, subordinated, and relegated to a weaker position and status by Prospero and his daughter,

Miranda, in the island though Caliban helped them when they came to the island. He helps them and gets Prospero to know every place on the island until he knows everything on it.

Caliban's name is very expressive and widespread in Africa, especially in African literature as well as the appellation of Caliban is known to many African playwrights and people. Consequently, Charlotte H. Bruner says:

Several recent critics of African literature have described the African writer as Caliban; yet Caliban; yet these critics are not only sympathetic but also appreciative of the very writers they so label. Even more strangely, some of these writers themselves have accepted the label. Is this act of acceptance a mark of shame, of defiance, of brutish depravity? Is it perhaps acceptance of others' rejection so that subsequent regeneration can occur. (240)

Some critics of black literature associate and describe some African writers as Caliban because they have incapacity of thinking philosophically. Paget Henry mentions: "... Calibanization of Africans could not but devour their rationality and hence their capacity for philosophical thinking.... He [Caliban]... does not think and in particular does not think rationally. In the European tradition, rationality was a white trait that ... blacks could not possess," and "...the inability to see the African now reinvented as Caliban, in the role of sage, philosopher, or thinker. In short, this new radicalized identity was also the death of Caliban's reason" (12). Because of that, those critics' use of Caliban's character to describe the African playwrights signifies and makes an indication that Caliban is black African slave who is enslaved by Prospero in the play. So, many African writers are proud of the name Caliban and Shakespeare's characterization of him in *The Tempest*. Prospero's white race leads him to colonize and make Caliban under his authority and control. Though Caliban was the king of the island, he became

Prospero's servant and slave who cannot disobey or refuse any order from Prospero. Caliban says:

This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
 Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
 Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
 Water with berries in't; and teach me how
 To name the bigger light, and how the less,
 That burn by day and night; then I loved thee
 And showed thee all the qualities o'th' isle,
 The fresh springs, brings pits, barren place and fertile.
 Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
 Of Sycorax- toads, beetles bats, light on you!
 For I am all the subjects that you have,
 Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
 In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
 The rest o'th' island. (I. ii. 332- 443)

Caliban in *The Tempest* is described as the colonized character who forcibly obeys Prospero, the colonizer. The verses above clarify the image for us to grasp and be cognizant of how Caliban's disappointment and sadness when Prospero relegates his position, from the king of the island to the servant of Prospero, is influencing and destroying him. So, Shakespeare's characterization of Caliban as a slave for Prospero indicate and have "... the common understanding of and appreciation for Shakespearean allusion in West Africa, and thus we may gain insight into the African adoption of Shakespeare's label, Caliban, as a meaningful to an African public" (Bruner 241).

In modern theatres, Caliban is represented as an African black figure who can perform many African characteristics, such as African rituals, music, and dances. He represents any

oppressed African group and people. In New York, he became visible as a punk- rocker with sunglasses, cropped hair, and cockney accent. He appeared as a black slave who performed African dances and rituals during scenes of Trinculo and Stephano at a Germanic theatre. And there are many black people who played Caliban's character as a black African figure, such as Joe Morton (Vaughan 194-195).

The modern theatre's representation of Caliban's character as a savage black African figure provides an important role in conveying many radical thoughts which create and make many people have non-humanistic ideas pertaining to the Africans in general. In other words, Anne Kowalcze Pawlik discusses in her paper "What's Past is Prologue': The Age of Caliban" the notion of "...the Renaissance discourse of monstrosity... [which is] a set of cultural beliefs and practices clustered round the notion of the non- human" (57). This can be seen how Shakespeare's *The Tempest* consists of many non-humanistic ideas said by Prospero and Trinculo and his friend Stephano regarding Caliban's character. They not only call him a fish and tortoise, but also call him a deformed and vicious slave. Consequently, "... the mode of characterization of Caliban in the play suggest[s] extremity/ abnormality in physical appearance and a decided lack of civility, from which stems radical categorical instability within the binary system of classifications as human/nonhuman" (ibid). Trinculo and Stephano in *The Tempest* depict what Pawlik is indicating above regarding attribution of some non-humanistic ideas to Caliban. They call him a monster many times. Stephano thinks to be the king of the island if Caliban's success in assassinating Prospero though Caliban is the native of the island.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* not only depicts Caliban's as the deformed black African slave, but also there are many literary works do the same thing. The English playwright Ben Jonson, who was born in 1572 AD and died in 1637 AD, depicted Caliban in one of his work as

a subhuman person: “Indeed, one of the first preserved comments on Caliban, coming from Ben Johnson’s induction to *Bartholomew Fair* [written in 1612] provides an allusion to the character as a ‘Servant- monster’” (ibid) which, according to Kevin Pask, “ ...[is] the central example of Johnson’s own distinction from William Shakespeare, who represents a... monstrosity of ... theatrical practices.... As a character, Caliban seems to embody the entire domain of improbable ‘drolleries’ Jason associates with late Shakespearean entertainments” (739).

The dehumanization process of the Africans was widespread among the Europeans. The Europeans used to mistreat the Africans as slaves who should be enslaved and colonized. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Prospero’s and Trinculo’s dehumanization of Caliban can have many signs and references to how Europeans mistreated the African slaves at times of their enslavement and slave trade in Europe. For instance, Prospero enslaved Caliban and made him work for his own advantages. Caliban brings wood and food for his master. He looks after Prospero and his daughter Miranda though he tried to revenge against his master when he met Trinculo and Stephano upon their arrival to the island. When Trinculo sees Caliban, he not only thought whether Caliban is a monster, fish, or tortoise, but also made Caliban kiss his foot for sake of his protection from his master, Prospero. In his *Caliban in Africa: An Impression of Colour- Madness*, Leonard Barnes says pertaining to Trinculo’s words on his first seeing Caliban: What have we here? A man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish- like smell; a kind of not the newest Poor- John. A strange fish” (quoted in Vaughan 158). Trinculo’s words in the play allude at how the enslaved black Africans were dehumanized and seen as strangers with animalistic appearances. What is more, Henry says: “With the arrival of slave from Africa, Caliban became African. As George Lamming points out, ‘the slave whose skin suggests the savaged deformity of his nature becomes identical with the

Carib Indian who feeds on human flesh. Carib Indian and African slave, both seen as the wild fruits of nature..." (5) who are cannibals and savage people.

Slave trade was popular since the sixteenth century until its cancellation in the nineteenth century. Hilary McDonald Beckles pertaining to her book entitled *Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans* says: "This book's focus, however, is on slave trade itself, the beginnings of which are usually dated to 1502, when the first references to enslaved Africans appeared in Spanish colonial documents, and which ended in the 1860s." (11). So, the Europeans used to purchase and sell African black slaves for their own benefits. This is why slavery was only used in many writers' works between 1502 and 1800 to refer to the black Africans in particular. Many Europeans, such as Germans, Britishes, Netherlanders used to not only bring Africans or black slaves to work in the New World, but also to work in European countries. So, the word "slave or slavery" was strongly associated with the black Africans. Beckles examines the history of the Transatlantic slave trade from the Spanish American imports between 1595 and 1640. She adds that the first African slaves were imported and sent to the New World was in 1502 (3-4). Robert William Fogel says, many Africans brought from Africa during the peak of Trans-Atlantic trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth century to work in sugar plantations and other places like mines and "...[in] artisanal crafts"(173). So, Shakespeare knew how Africans were used to be brought to those places in Europe and used for commercial purposes. Therefore, he depicts the slave trade in *The Tempest* when Alonso's and Trinculo's thoughts of Caliban as a black African slave to bring him to Europe for marketing only. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, when Antonio notes Caliban at the end of the play, he says: "Very like. One of them / Is a plain fish and no doubt marketable" (5.1.265-266). Antonio's thoughts to bring Caliban to his kingdom for marketable purposes refer to how some black Africans were

brought forcibly to live in “human zoos” to bring money for their owners through histories. And therefore, Antonio looked at Caliban’s character at the end of the play for purpose of bringing him to his kingdom in Italy to get people to pay for seeing Caliban. Overall, Antonio’s non-humanistic gaze for Caliban represents how Some Europeans and others saw Africans as non-humanistic creatures.

In short, Caliban’s black African race leads him to be mistreated and enslaved by Prospero and other characters in *The Tempest*. Though there are many writers who say that Caliban is an America Indian, I examined that he is African slave because his name can popular and can be found in Arabic literature, especially in the pre-Islamic period. Moreover, the name of Caliban or Kalebon is popular among some Arab tribes in the Arabia, Sudan, and Egypt. Unlike those scholars who say that Caliban is an American Indian, I disagree with them due to many aforementioned reasons which examine that he black African. I conclude that Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is like a prediction to what would happen among different races, especially among the whites and the blacks through history. For example, some white men cannot accept the African race as a race which deserves its freedom and independence, and this can be figured out among relationship between Prospero and Caliban. Prospero never sees him as a man who deserves respect and kindness, but rather he insults and dehumanizes Caliban’s identity and body. Finally, I can assume that Shakespeare wants to tell us through *The Tempest* that the racial conflicts among humans cannot be solved easily and will remain controversial issue for good.

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