

POST-COLONIALISM IN SHAKESPEAREAN WORK

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO APPROACH NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY ATTEMPTS TO CONSIDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF MARGINALIZED, EXPLOITED OR SUBALTERN SYSTEMS AND THE SOCIAL GROUPS THAT BECOME STIGMATIZED AND IT IS A REFLECTION ON THE DIFFERENCE, A REFLECTION ON THE ‘OTHER’, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, AN ADDRESS TO THE COLONIAL OTHER. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY ATTEMPTS TO ANALYZE THE SITUATION OR CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION THAT DETERMINE THE COLONIAL OTHER. THE PAPER FOCUSES ESPECIALLY ON THE SHAKESPEAREAN WORK, ‘OTHELLO’, A PLAY WHERE THE ‘OTHERNESS’ OF THE CHARACTER MAY BE LARGELY DISCUSSED AND REINTERPRETED.

KEYWORDS: POSTCOLONIALISM, SHAKESPEARE, THE OTHER, RACE, COLONIAL.

In an interesting study devoted to psychoanalytical geography, Romanian professor Corin Braga states that, “starting with Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism*, contemporary postcolonial and cultural studies have exposed the ideological rationales that presided over modern geography.” Thus, using postmodern deconstruction, scholars have been able to highlight the stereotypes that lie behind the imaginary construction of the frontiers between continents, civilizations and countries. According to Braga, “most of these clichés spring from and feed on unconscious phantasms and unquestioned pre-conceptions.”

“Real” or realistic geography is the geographical representation that tries to reproduce the outer space most accurately. It depends on a mimetic principle. Its main criterion is positive observation and empirical verification. Of course, it still has to make use of icons and symbols in order to represent on a sheet of paper the complexity of the real space out there, but it is assumed that one can safely use a map in order to orientate her or himself in the real geographical world. The upper limit to which “realist” geographical representation could aspire is to become an accurate “perception” of the world. In order to validate the geographical truth and to obtain scholar credibility, “enchanted” geography utilized a set of criteria that have meanwhile been discarded by modern geography, such as: non-mitigated respect towards authoritative sources; subordination to a revealed, supposedly divine, model; geometrical and esthetical harmony; apprehension of the world through a system of qualitative categories; utilization of a language based mainly on symbols and analogies; *horror vacui*, and so on and so forth. This refined cognitive device created, throughout human history, a series of maps and *mappae mundi* where holy geography, as described by the classical myths, the Bible and patristic writing, overruled

empirical geography and obliged factual data to fit into the greater theological model of the world.

The larger geography of the world was often drawn up by Europeans in theological terms during the medieval centuries in which biblical narratives might form the central interest of maps and heathen populations occupied the periphery of the field of vision. Despite the trade routes established into Asia by earlier explorers such as Marco Polo, the accounts passed down about Viking discoveries to the West and the exotic riches to be found on the African continent, the main focus of English life with its international neighbours concentrated upon the area from the German states to the Mediterranean basin in the opening decades of the Renaissance. Peter Neagoe is an important example who stayed of the confluence of two literatures and two cultures: English and Romanian literature. His English novels *Easter Sun* and *Halting way „try to expose the national specific and our traditions”* (Curelar M., 75).

The term of “post-colonial literary theory” derives from the incapacity of European theory to approach the numerous cultural origins of postcolonial literature. European theories develop from particular cultural traditions which are considered as being “the universal”. Postcolonial theory attempts to consider the circumstances of marginalized, exploited or subaltern systems and the social groups that become stigmatized and it is a reflection on the difference, on *the Other*, but more importantly, an address to the colonial *Other*. Theories of style and genre, premises about the universal character of language and value systems are all entirely analyzed by the forms of post-colonial literature. Post-colonial theory also attempts to analyze the situation or conditions of production that determine the colonial *Other*. Post-colonial theory mainly discusses about the notion of resistance, of subversion, or opposition, but with the problem that resistance always inscribes *the resisted* into the structure of *the resisting*. The concept of resistance brings with it ideas about liberty, identity, individuality, which ideas could not be held in the colonized culture's view of society.

Producing a national or cultural literature may seem in most cases a strange concept for the colonized peoples, as they had no literature as it is created in the western traditions. Sometimes, there may be in fact, no literature or writing at all. They could not see art as the promoter for constructing and defining cultural identity, or were, like the peoples of the West Indies, transported into an entirely different political, economic, geographical, cultural world. We can talk about a changed, but hybrid identity, which is created or in the attempt of constituting a national identity. However, it may be difficult to conceive or convey the concept of identity in the cultural traditions of colonized peoples.

In his article “Postcolonial Criticism” in Greenblatt and Gun's “Redrawing the Boundaries: the transformation of English and American literary studies”, Homi Bhabha says that: “Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether we are talking about the voyage out of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement - now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies - make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences - literature, art, music, ritual, life, death - and the social specificity of each of these areas as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social

systems. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation - migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation - makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of culture particularity, cannot be easily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition.”

Colonialism in Shakespearean works has become a topic of major interest among literary critics. There are new perspectives on the author’s celebration of the superiority of “civilized races”.

Four of Shakespeare’s plays deal with non-white characters: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, while in *The Merchant of Venice* we have non-Christian characters. Aaron and Othello are North-African Moors, Cleopatra is Egyptian – though her belonging to the African race is only superficially hinted at; Caliban’s race is not very well defined, readers understanding him as a savage from the recently landing Jew of Venice. There are a few other characters who contribute to the general picture of Shakespeare’s perception of a racial *Other*: Othello’s mother (only mentioned in relation to the handkerchief); Shylock’s daughter Jessica and his friend Tubal, but also the Prince of Morocco and Lancelot’s Moor woman mentioned in *The Merchant*; Aaron’s black baby by Tamora; and Caliban’s mother (also only mentioned by Caliban, who says she is from Algiers, that is of North African origin). Thus, we have five female *Others* – Othello’s mother, Jessica, Cleopatra, Sycorax, and Launcelot’s Moor, and seven males – Othello, Aaron, Shylock, Caliban, the Prince of Morocco, and Aaron’s baby. Besides the Jews, all the others have North African origins.

The Elizabethans’ perception of the ‘Moor’ was more comprehensive than it is today. They had a clear-cut knowledge of the Muslims who were either Turks or Arabs, but – due to the numerous reports of the travellers – Ethiopians and other Africans were often taken for Muslims. Othello himself is often described as ‘black’: statistics mention as many of fifty-six uses of the word in the play.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘black’ applies to Negroes and other *non-European* races, which leads to a complete exclusion of *the Other* from the civilized, European identity. For us, ‘black’ means ‘African,’ but for Shakespeare’s audience – so familiar with the presence of ‘blackamoors’ in the streets of London, the term ‘black’ could equally apply to the Arabs. According to Norman Sanders,

Iago’s derogatory comparison of Othello to a ‘Barbary horse’ (1.1.111-112) would not be taken by any member of the Blackfriar’s audience to be other than to an Arabian steed; and his scornful use of the term ‘barbarian’ (1.3.343) is exactly that used by Elizabeth’s courtiers to refer to Abd el-Ouahed [the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth in 1600-1601] and his entourage. (Sanders N., 14).

Put into plain English, the comparison of Othello to an Arabian steed might have intrigued and even enraged the audience just as a present-day affair between a black man and a white woman might enrage a certain category of less than tolerant public.

Othello stands as an image of *the Other* who every tolerant or strategically pragmatic society would want to adopt and have work for them, given his loyalty, attempt to become accepted (not least by marrying a native woman, an ambivalent desire which can be read as a scandalous violation of a taboo, or, as the Venetian council concur, a legitimate act signifying assimilation), and useful knowledge of how *the Other* operates (a

skill he is unable to employ because peace breaks out when the Turkish fleet is destroyed by the elements). Commenting on Othello's *Otherness*, Daniel Roux considers that

Othello's *Otherness* really describes or invokes a sense of self-estrangement essential to the humanist notion that the subject cannot be reduced to his place in culture or to the signifiers through which she is made present to others. The so-called 'unified self' of modernity is born in this gesture of self-alienation, a kind of aesthetic and philosophic certainty that there is something in the self that is more than or other than the self, a homeless, deracinated kernel that escapes all attempts to name it and essentially places the subject on a profoundly individual and interiorised path. There can be no fantasy of individual autonomy without such a concomitant fantasy of alienation from culture. Moreover, the fantasy of alienation and estrangement is not in itself subversive of social orthodoxy, or even at war with the notion of the unified subject. (Roux, 2009).

We should consider Ania Loomba's trajectory in "Gender , Race, Renaissance Drama": "Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way until he occupies his...position as its other". Othello is a stranger in a foreign world, precariously holding an identity that is constantly undermined and eventually replaced by a racist construction of what it means to be *the Moor*. The play demonstrates both the strength and character as its arbitrariness.

The Tempest and *Othello* are mainly the two most important pieces of Shakespeare for postcolonial writers and theorists. But this does not mean that there are only two works. Shakespeare offers many starting points for postcolonial critic beyond *The Tempest* or *Othello*. *Antony and Cleopatra* is certainly such a starting point, whatever the genetic identity of Cleopatra or her relationship with Antony, all topics involving European / non-European.

It seems that there is more to say about the connection between Shakespearean works and postcolonialism, as he became, during the colonial period, the heart of Englishness and a measure of humankind itself. The contents of Shakespeare's plays were derived from and used to establish colonial authority.

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