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Julie Taymor's Cinematic Adaptation of William Shakespeare's  
*The Tempest: A feminist Study*

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study the gender reversal in the film adaptation of Shakespeare's classic *The Tempest* through the spectrum of feminism. It will try to bring out how with the introduction and presence of the female protagonist, the cinematic counterpart of the same text acquires new meanings and layers and hence can be read and interpreted in an entirely new perspective. It also attempts to bring to the fore how a female presence changes various dynamics in the narrative. The present paper analyses how changing the protagonist in the movie adaptation of Shakespeare's play adds a new dimension to the narrative and makes it more layered. It is interesting to observe how this gender reversal makes the cinematic adaptation of this literary text much more interesting and complex. Analysis from this multidimensional perspective would bring to fore how cultural norms impact the context of a film or a movie which is capable of generating astonishingly new meanings and interpretations when seen from an altered viewpoint.

Keywords: Shakespeare, feminism, *The Tempest*

Adaptations of literary works have always been regarded with some suspicion about the preservation of its literary sanctity (if there can be a term as this). It is not shocking that in 1932 Theodore Dreiser expressed his doubts about film adaptation of literary works "as a debauching process, which works harm to the mind of the entire world" and went as far as to call it "criminal? ignorant? or both?" (qtd.in Cartmell 2). But cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's classics have met with general acceptance as Orson Welles, a well-known stage and screen director points out about Shakespeare's plays "They aren't plays at all, rather they are screen plays written ironically three centuries before the birth of cinema" (Brode 6). The 2010 screen adaptation of *The Tempest* directed by Julie Taymor is a remarkable movie version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for the pertinent way in which it plays with the Bard's work.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, performed first in November 1611, deals with a day on an anonymous island which is governed by Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan. Here he has under his

command the spirit Ariel, and Caliban, the black slave and his own daughter Miranda. Prospero harbours a deep-seated feeling of vengeance against his younger brother Antonio who threw Prospero out of his own kingdom after usurping his status as the duke. In this evil conspiracy, the Duke of Naples, Alonso also assists Antonio. Prospero decides to avenge himself when a ship carrying Antonio, Alonso, Gonzalo, Ferdinand, Trinculo and Stephano comes near his island, by rousing a tempest in the sea. As Frank Kermode asserts, Shakespearean texts "are to hold on to their greatness (and who says we can afford to lose it?), [they] have to be reborn in the imagination of another" (Davies 4). Julie Taymor in *The Tempest* casts Helen Mirren as Prospera in the film taking the cinematic license and hence is able to make the narrative more complex than the Shakespearean play. Though the screenplay of the film, the sequence of events and specially the dialogues are same as the play's, the film enriches the various dialogues that the play generates, primary being that of utopia and post-colonialism. To the existing narratives about the play, Taymor is able to contribute as a filmmaker, add to literature and draw attention towards the issue of female agency in *The Tempest*. With the change of gender, all the events of the play can be seen in a different light altogether. The present analysis throws light on the various ways in which female presence changes various dynamics in the narrative. True to its source, the movie opens with scene of the tempest in the sea which endangers all the passengers on board the ship. In the next scene we see the petrified Miranda who is much in shock to witness the scene of the topsy-turvy ship. The third scene of the movie introduces us to the enraged Prospera, who, by the mixed power of her vengeance and her magic practices, is able to finally have an opportunity to harass the ones who threw her out of human civilization. The text of the play is not able to present the enraged Prospero quite justly compared to the film. However, the film doesn't fail here as we hear Prospera shout vehemently at the sight of the tempest, with great anguish harbored inside her against those who wronged her. This loud cry of anger and vengeance is able to capture that, which the play in its written form or uni-dimensional stage performance cannot achieve. Precisely this is hinted at by Davies (5) who points out that the world of theatre operates on the basis that both the audience and the director and actors imagine to be in a particular dramatic space. Cinema, however, is able to bring the audience to the geographical location at least in its images and sounds. Here, particularly, lies the merit of film over theatre. This dimension of the visual and the sound adds to the outrage which Prospera feels at her being exiled from her rightful home. Wearing a black cape made of feathers, this introductory scene (hinting at the role costume plays in cinema) introduces us to the ruler on the island who, through her knowledge of magic has been able to exercise some control on it and her own destiny. From the beginning till the very end, we see that Prospera is visibly quite fitting into the narrative of the film even as the female version of Prospero. Taymor adds another dimension to the narrative with Prospera being thrown out of her husband's kingdom being accused of witchcraft and hence, killing her husband through it. Prospera, quite agonizingly, reveals to her daughter Miranda:

Upon my father's death authority was conferred as was his will to me alone thereby awakening the ambition of my brother and thy uncle called Antonio ... perverting my upstanding studies now he is slandering and bile dipped brush to paint a faithless portrait - his sister a practice of the black arts a demon, not a woman nay a witch and full knowing that others of my sex have burned for no less the flame is now fanned; my counselors turned against me (*The Tempest* 7:07 - 8:02).

Taymor is able to add this feature to the film and hence displays the attitude of the masses in the Elizabethan England, towards people (especially women) who tried to connect with magic or occult. Women involved in sorcery and witchcraft were seen as a threat to the Christian religion. Peter Elmer points out in *Witchcraft, Witch - Hunting, and politics in Early Modern England*:

.... in the wake of the Elizabethan Church settlement, the growing support in elite and governmental circles for belief in witchcraft and the need to punish witches helped to purge and redefine the boundaries of the new confessional state. In the immediate aftermath of the

1563 Witchcraft Act, belief in, and prosecution of witches clearly served as a vehicle for consensus and as a positive test of the legitimacy of the new regime in Church and State. (Elmer 16)

Branded as a witch, Prospera, along with her daughter Miranda, was thrown out of the kingdom to be killed but a nobleman loyal to the former Duke helped Prospera escape with the little daughter and some books on magic. The gender reversal in Taymor's *The Tempest* quite insists on the need of female education back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Theresa D. Kemp writes in her *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* that even in books advocating female education, such as *Instruction of a Christian Woman* by Juan Luis Vives, the views for female education were quite conservative and narrow.

Although the book is pro-education for women, and Vives was on the vanguard of those advocating that both men and women learn Latin and Greek, he is definitive in his caution that women *not* be educated to rule or take their place in the public worlds of politics and theology inhabited by men...Vives answers that the primary purpose for women's education is "the study of wisdom, which doth instruct their manners and inform their living, and teacheth them the way of good and holy life" (Kemp 45)[*italics mine*].

Changing the sex of the protagonist gives a different perspective to the survival techniques employed by Prospero in the play. Compared to the Shakespearean play, Taymor makes the gender reversal in *The Tempest* put across the necessity of education for women, education that makes them resourceful enough to survive the toughest odds. Prospera could live on the hostile territory only because of her knowledge of magic. Her education of magic made her capable enough to master an island as soon as she lands up there. The usurpation of the island by a white woman is quite revolutionary an idea. There are hardly any instances of a female colonizer in literary history. Helen Callaway points out that women did not travel to colonies except as wives of the colonizers. As Colonialism was considered essentially a man's business, white women were merely "pawns in imperial politics..." and imperial policies determined the way in which women's needs were defined not by but for them (Ghose108). Prospera is a woman who is the "master" here (as Ariel calls her) but is also the subaltern and the oppressed in her own community. In a unique situation, we see the gendered 'Other' Prospera rule over the racial 'Other', Caliban along with the otherworldly Ariel. Hence, denied any agency in the world that she belongs to, she is able to capture/create it for herself as she moves to a new unknown and dangerous land. In her answer to Ariel, when labelled by him as a usurper of his rights, we come to know that she took Ariel under her care after freeing the island of the black magic of the witch Sycorax (Caliban's mother).

It was mine Art,

When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape

The pine, and let thee out. (*The Tempest* 15:26 – 15:32).

Even Caliban only lost favour with her when he tried to sexually assault her daughter Miranda.

I have used thee with a humane care lodged thee in mine own cell till thou did seek to violate the honor of my child (*The Tempest* 19:58 – 20:07).

The viewpoint presented about Caliban puts Prospera in a mother-like position towards Caliban, punishing an offspring gone wrong. Prospera's vanquishing of Sycorax and freeing Ariel, along with bringing up Caliban, makes much more sense considering the feeling of motherliness a woman is thought to possess, compared to the male protagonist in the original text. Interestingly with the change of gender, the tale of Prospera and Sycorax have much resemblance and may have given some cue to the director about how to make the gender reversal seem possible in the movie.

This damned witch Sycorax,

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For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible

To enter human hearing, from Argier,

Thou know'st, was banish'd... (*The Tempest* 14:36 – 14:44).

Pertinently, Sycorax was an inhabitant of Argier, present day Algeria, and hence a third world black woman. She is presented in a very negative light quite expectedly. Black women's physical and racial difference from White women was termed as inferiority and they were labeled as evil and unreliable. This very difference of color, race, physicality and society has been quite atrociously used by the imperialists to oppress Blacks especially their women. Literature, Art and media has quite unfortunately played a very negative role in this regard with their constant negative projections of black women. Bringing forth the idea that gender and racial issues are inseparable. Presentation of a black woman as a practitioner of black magic hints at the stereotypical representation of the blacks especially black women in media and literature. Stuart Hall observes,

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them-how we represent them-that we give them a meaning. We give them meanings by how we represent them -the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them....The politics of representation examines not only how representation produces meaning but also how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied (Hall5-6).

The female colonizer is able to succeed only when she liberates the spirit encaged by Sycorax who is at her beck and call for executing all sorts of duties. Thus, when Ariel decides to rebel somewhat, she is quick to remind him of her favours and punishment with coercion if he doesn't do what she asks of him.

If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak,

And peg thee in his knotty entrails, till

Thou hast howl'd away twelve winters. (*The Tempest* 15:37 – 15:46).

Her coercive powers have much more traumatized Caliban than Ariel who now and then rises in rebellion but subsides having realized that she has powerful spirits at her behest, 'I must obey: her art is of such power' (*The Tempest* 20:57 - 21:01). Though we do not see sexual liberty in Prospera, we do see her character with dual traits – simultaneously a woman who is a victim of patriarchal set-up forced to live on an island, with a daughter facing various physical dangers and a woman who colonizes the island with her magic, throwing the original black inhabitant out of it to enslave one of their kind to do various physically taxing chores on the hostile island. We see a woman trying to establish a home in the hostile island ousted wrongfully from her kingdom and a woman trying to make her slaves serve her by making them realize the favours she extended to them again and again. Thus, the gender reversal in the film version makes the duality of oppressed/colonizer more pronounced. It is somewhat problematic that if Prospera is able to have power over her oppressors, it is because of having another set of people under her coercive power. Her situation is aptly summarized by Anne McClintock:

[C]olonial women made none of the direct economic or military decisions of empire and very few reaped its vast profits...the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided – if borrowed – power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men. As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting. (McClintock 6)

After having subdued her opposition, one sees Prospera reciting the famous epilogue: '... and when I have acquired some heavenly music which even now, I do to work mine end upon their senses that this eerie charm is for, I'll break my staff, bury it certain fathoms in the earth and deeper... I'll drown my books' (*The Tempest* 1:30:14 – 1:30:57). We again see her assume the feminine ideal who decides to relinquish magic, bargaining for a quiet life as the Duchess of Milan. The relinquishing of magic acquires greater significance in case of a female protagonist as somewhere Prospera realizes that a woman practicing her 'secret studies' would not be able to play the role of a Duchess more fittingly. She realizes that in order to go back to the human civilization she will have to embrace a way of living more conducive to the popular way of how a duchess and a woman should live- the role assigned and determined for her by men and the patriarchal order which encourages the idea of a pure woman as opposed to a fallen or a disgraced one or a witch. The drowning of the books by a female magician can well be seen as coming to terms with the accepted and stereotypical ways of living for a woman in the Elizabethan times. Stereotyping in cultural studies helps us comprehend how the dominant group in the society through its dominant ideology defines and controls what cultural practices, values and norms are natural and normal in opposition to what are deviant and hence unacceptable. It makes a clear-cut demarcation between 'the self' and 'the other'. As Richard Dyer observes:

The establishment of normalcy through social and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups.... to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it does appear to them) as natural and inevitable – and for everyone and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony. (Dyer30).

Hence, the pathos of this particular scene is elevated with a Prospera and not a Prospero, soon seeking to live a life of acceptance and submission.

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