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"Snapshots of Caliban": Suniti Namjoshi's 'Contrapuntal Rewriting' of The

Tempest

Abstract I: In Culture and Imperialism, Said suggests that Caliban should ally

himself with all subjugated people, yet in his works he dedicates little

space to differences of gender or sexual orientation. In her cycle of

poems "Snapshots of Caliban" (1984), Suniti Namjoshi amplifies Said's

concept of reading contrapuntally by offering a cultural resistance

that is at the same time postcolonial, lesbian and feminist. Being at a

crossroads of three variables, Namjoshi has a vantage point on

imperialism and gives an alternative kind of 'contrapuntal reading'

that is actually a 'contrapuntal rewriting', and therefore fosters new

developments and possibilities in postcolonial studies.

Abstract II: In Cultura e Imperialismo, Said suggerisce che Caliban debba

allearsi con tutti gli oppressi, anche se nelle sue opere dedica poco

spazio alle questioni di genere o di orientamento sessuale. Nel ciclo

di poesie "Snapshots of Caliban" (1984), Suniti Namjoshi amplia il

concetto di lettura contrappuntistica coniato da Said, offrendo una

resistenza culturale che è allo stesso tempo postcoloniale, lesbica e

femminista. Trovandosi all'incrocio di tre variabili, Namjoshi ha uno

sguardo nuovo sull'imperialismo ed offre una 'lettura

contrappuntistica' che è di fatto una 'riscrittura contrappuntistica' e

perciò incoraggia nuovi sviluppi e possibilità per gli studi

postcoloniali.

"Remembering Shakespeare always, but remembering him differently"

(Doolittle 1949: 31)

Over the centuries, there have been countless adaptations of The Tempest that have experimented with the characters in the play, changed the setting of the story, or played with the plot. Writers stemming from the Caribbean have seen Caliban as a mark of the resistance of colonized people over the colonizers. Classic re-appropriations by postcolonial writers – for example that offered by Aimé Césaire in his play Une Tempête – were mainly identifications with Caliban, the male colonized subject, and this is why adaptations of the play by postcolonial authors have been written for a long time almost exclusively by male authors, with a perspective on colonization that was unconsciously male. Women writers have focused instead on the overwhelming patriarchy disclosed in the play, employing Miranda in their re-inscriptions, and sometimes recasting her as a heroine who rebels against the authority of her father. As a consequence, many contemporary re-appropriations of The Tempest tend to focus either on the colonial/postcolonial experience, or on the defiance of what has been considered to be Prospero's restrictive power. Yet, for postcolonial and black women writers neither Miranda nor Caliban are satisfactory identifications, because Miranda is white and European, while Caliban is a man. In order to claim their postcolonial and gendered positionality, postcolonial and black women writers had to think of different strategies. One has been to allow more space to Sycorax, Caliban's witch mother whose entrance on stage never happens, while another has been that of fantasizing over Caliban's female descendants, and his intention to people the island with Calibans (1).

Refreshing the Inaugural Figures

Considering its undeniable appeal for Caribbean writers, *The Tempest* does not seem to have inspired many Indian writers, perhaps because its setting on an almost uninhabited tropical island is perceived as too distant from the Indian

experience. An exception is Indian-born poet and fabulist Suniti Namjoshi, who uses *The Tempest* as a reference more than once in her work, dedicating two cycles of poems, "Snapshots of Caliban" (1984) and "Sycorax" (2006), to the play (2). As Said puts it when he discusses Caliban as a figure of resistance to the empire, "it is a measure of how embattled this matter of 'inaugural figures' has become that it is now virtually impossible to say anything simple about any of them" (Said 1993: 212). As a matter of fact, in the Caribbean, the discussion on *The Tempest* has been going on for decades, and has been in a sense 'crystallized' by certain fundamental texts (3). Perhaps because she does not come from the Caribbean, Suniti Namjoshi is able to bring a fresh perspective on the 'inaugural figures' featured in the play, as well as on the connections between colonialism, patriarchy and sexuality raised by the text.

"Snapshots of Caliban" departs from most appropriations of The Tempest in the sense that its author attempts to incorporate the postcolonial and the feminist perspectives. Furthermore, for a lesbian writer like Namjoshi, the stringencies of colonialism and patriarchy are only contiguous to those dictated by heteronormativity, which is related to the assumption that in the elaboration of culture heterosexuality is always conceived as the norm, and alternative forms of sexuality are often not taken into consideration (4). As a matter of fact, Suniti Namjoshi's cycle of poems "Snapshots of Caliban" curiously imagines Caliban as a lesbian woman, colonized by the white people who have taken possession of the island she had considered hers. Here Namjoshi attempts to find a gendered and postcolonial, as well as lesbian, space of representation within the literary text. Her way of approaching The Tempest is consistent with the critique attempted by Laura E. Donaldson, who talks of a "Miranda complex", to be paired with a so-called "Prospero Complex", that is to say a "reading structured so tightly by a single principle [...] that it excludes all other interpretive categories" (Donaldson 1992: 17) (5).

Said and Intersectionality

In Culture and Imperialism Edward Said suggests that Caliban should be used as an example of solidarity between all subjugated people, be they men or women, black or white, heterosexual or homosexual, and so on. He writes: "it is best when Caliban sees his own history as an aspect of the history of all subjugated men and women, and comprehends the complex truth of his own social and historical situation" (Said 1993: 214). Yet, in spite of this attempt at inclusion, as critic Robert Aldrich has observed, Said "had little to say about homosexuality" (Aldrich 2003: 7). When he writes about Forster's A Passage to India, for instance, he never considers possible connections between the author's homosexuality and his point of view on colonial relationships, in fact never mentioning Forster's sexual preferences, which other critics have judged important in order to understand his view of male bonding as a "distant desire" connected to other lands (Baski 1996). In other words, Said has been criticized for what has been called a "conspicuously heterosexual interpretive framework" (Boone 1995: 90). At the same time, Reina Lewis has lamented the paucity of gender issues in Orientalism, observing that "for Said [...] Orientalism is a homogenous discourse enunciated by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional and irredeemably male" (Lewis 1996: 17). Moreover, as Susan Fraiman notes in an essay on Said and Jane Austen, while he is ready to grant Conrad an awareness of situations of marginality due to his own condition as a foreigner in England, he does not consider the possibility that in the same way Jane Austen might have been influenced by her gender, and therefore by her own marginality, in her opinions and commentaries about colonialism. Said's treatment of Jane Austen, Fraiman argues, is indicative of "a more general gender politics underlying his postcolonial project" (Fraiman 1995: 807).

It is evident that when he deals with authors who are interesting to discuss with the help of what could be termed 'intersectionality', Said tends to "[proceed] for the most part along a single axis" (Fraiman 1995: 816), thus

reproducing that unconscious Miranda's complex that Donaldson writes about (6). Far from discarding Said because he did not always highlight the intersections of gender, class, or sexuality with colonialism in his work, I think it is useful to recognize the blind spots of his readings, in order to be aware of the possibility of reproducing some of the structures one is trying to dismantle (7). In the light of these reflections, it is important to acknowledge how writers and critics like Suniti Namjoshi, who find themselves at the crossroads of at least three variables, have a vantage point on cultural imperialism and can give fresh insights into the topics raised by Said.

Namjoshi's Contrapuntal Axes

"Snapshots of Caliban" is a sequence of seventeen short poems. While some are written in prose, others are in the form of diary entries written by the various characters in Shakespeare's play. In Namjoshi's re-inscription, Caliban forms an alliance with Miranda against Prospero's patriarchal power, but a fracture between the two women is also present because Miranda is seen as complicit with Prospero's colonial domination. In other words, Caliban and Miranda are 'sisters', but as Lady Shy says in another of Namjoshi's works, the enigmatic longer fiction Building Babel, "there certainly is a problem. The problem is that the sisters aren't sisterly" (Namjoshi 1996: 28). Miranda is discriminated against and patronized by Prospero because of her gender, but at the same time she discriminates against and patronizes Caliban because of her race. As the author claims in an interview, "what sometimes happens in the course of activism is the tendency to claim moral ascendancy on the grounds that one is oppressed and that is not really reasonable. For one thing, if one is oppressed in one way, it does not imply that one is oppressed in every way" (Vevaina 1998: 195). By the end of the cycle, however, Miranda and Caliban manage to reach a compromise, laughing about their past skirmishes. Differences need to be acknowledged, while bridges between gender, class, race, and sexual

preferences need to be made, Namjoshi seems to tell her readers.

The term "snapshots" in the title – perhaps a reference to Adrienne Rich's collection of poems Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) – points at the fragmentary nature of the poetical material at stake, at the multiple personae who are voiced in the text, and at the heterogeneous forms employed. The title of the sequence, with its allusion to photography, consciously hints at different perspectives and subjectivities, and at a lack of narrative unity. Another connection to the work of Adrienne Rich is evident if one considers that Namioshi's cycle of poems enacts what Rich defines as "re-vision", which is, according to her, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with a new critical direction" (Rich 1972: 35). That performed by Suniti Namjoshi in "Snapshots of Caliban" is therefore a peculiar kind of 'contrapuntal reading', or rather of 'contrapuntal rewriting'. Said famously defines his contrapuntal strategy as "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 1993: 51). For him, reading a text contrapuntally means being able to take into account the point of view of both the colonizer and the colonized, simultaneously. Accordingly, Namjoshi says that her work is engaged in shedding light on what she calls the 'warring egos' in the Shakespearean text and in her identity building (Namjoshi 1989: 83). The warring egos of Prospero, Caliban, and Miranda mirror the author's warring and simultaneous identities as a woman, an Indian person living in the West, and a lesbian. The work of writers like Namjoshi helps fracture some of the binary oppositions unconsciously created by Said, such as the clear-cut distinction between supporting and resisting imperialism. What Namjoshi does is offer many intersecting axes, rather than just two, which is what Said does most of the time in Culture and Imperialism. Said's strategy of looking at a text contrapuntally needs not be discarded, but it certainly needs to be expanded, as if the harmonically interdependent but rhythmically separate voices of the sheet

music he offered as a metaphor were actually more than two, and somehow multidimensional, so that multiple melodic lines are available for the reader to compare and analyse.

Keeping in mind the "warring egos" Namjoshi is interested in, it is easier to understand why the inspiration for these poems came from W.H. Auden's The Sea and the Mirror (Kanaganayakam 1995: 57). In that long poem, written and published in the 1940s, Auden criticized the Manichean opposites he saw engraved in The Tempest, and tried to recast the characters in the play as complementary. In Namioshi's re-vision of The Tempest, as in Auden's work, the idea is that each character opposes and compensates the others, so that Miranda has something of Caliban inside her, and Caliban something of the "gentle" Miranda, not to mention of Prospero, who in turn acknowledges both creatures as his. If Said tends to sublimate identities, such as that of the Orient, which he criticizes but also ends up reinforcing due to a reluctance to use a less essentialist terminology throughout his work (Ahmad 1992; Young 1990), Namioshi constantly works to make her readers aware that identities are not fixed. In Because of India, which is an anthology of her works with useful retrospective commentary, Namjoshi writes: "Identity isn't only a matter of selfdefinition. It also depends on the identity that that other attributes to one. [...] As a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities, or perhaps I mean their own identifications? It's apparent that the components of the core identity change from place to place and period to period" (Namjoshi 1989: 84).

Fracturing the Conventional 'I' of the Poem

In order to show the tension of allegiances of the "Third World lesbian woman", the overlapping territories a writer like Namjoshi is forced to walk on, the author makes the personae of her poems hard to distinguish. It is impossible to attribute "Snapshot i", for instance, to either Prospero, Caliban or Miranda, because all

are possible speakers in the poem. Namjoshi writes:

Not wrong to have wanted you,
but wrong
should the desire, being thwarted,
turn to rage.
And there is rage.
Cal, Cal, Caliban
threshes her limbs. For this –
pardon
I and my creature
must seek for grace (Namjoshi 1989: 85).

Since the title of the sequence mentions Caliban only, one is inclined to think that the persona of the poem is the "abhorred slave" (Shakespeare 2000: I.ii) of Shakespeare's play, here transmuted into a woman who desires Miranda, repents about her rage (perhaps a reference to the attempted rape in the original text, also suggested by the assonance "rape-rage"), and punishes herself, also evoking the rebellion against Prospero in the play, where he cheekily calls out "'Ban Ban', Cacaliban" (Shakespeare 2000: II.ii), playing on his own name. The last verse of the poem is the most ambiguous, as "I and my creature / must seek for grace" may point at Prospero as a speaker, who acknowledges Caliban as his creature in the play, or at Caliban's own dark and raging side that must be tamed, as suggested by the reference to the moment in The Tempest when Caliban says "I'll be wise hereafter, and seek for grace" (Shakespeare 2000: V.i). Moreover, the sudden introduction of Caliban's gender in the sequence ("Caliban / threshes her limbs") comes as a shock for the reader, and is a reminder that gender should not be taken for granted in lyric poetry. One starts wondering whether the speaker of the poem, who unexpectedly takes an active role in loving someone, is a woman, perhaps

Miranda having a homoerotic affinity with Caliban but having ambivalent feelings about it. Subversion is an important element in Namjoshi's writing, and because of this, intertextual references can be misleading and contradictory, as illustrated in this first snapshot, where the use of a seemingly Calibanesque language ("Cal, Cal, Caliban") suggests one speaker, while the reference to the moment when Prospero acknowledges Caliban as his "thing of darkness" seems to suggest another, equally possible persona.

In the second poem of the sequence, explicitly addressed at Caliban, a first series of alliterations – "she was / squat and ugly", "sometimes she cried. / Sometimes she lied", "she was so sly, and sometimes / so forthright" – is an allusion at the disgust that the unidentified speaker feels for the slave. A second series of alliterations – "murderee", "monstrous me", "save herself / and me from me" (Namjoshi 1989: 86) – suggests Miranda, whose name also begins with 'm', as the 'monstrous' speaker with murderous intentions. In the third poem of the cycle, the speaker is again impossible to determine:

Suppose I came across her while she was sleeping, her lips half-smiling, her body calm, wholly absorbed in her dear dream; or caught her staring her ears prickling to the strange sounds, the brave scenes or found her fishing in a cranny of the island, unaware of the others, would I not like her? Would I not speak, and approaching her slowly

try to make friends?
Indeed, as I watched the monster,
would I not feel a monstrous grief? (Namjoshi 1989: 87).

Reading the first lines of the poem, it would appear obvious that it is Miranda who is seen sleeping, her lips parted and her breath gentle, her body peaceful, not at all monstrous. After all, the name Miranda is traditionally interpreted as meaning 'she who is being watched', and in the Shakespearean text Miranda refuses to look at Caliban, who is in fact construed as the one who is not to be looked at. Yet, while the poem goes on, it becomes impossible to distinguish who is speaking and who is the passive object of the gaze. It is in fact Caliban who in The Tempest listens to the strange sounds of the island, who knows its secrets, and who could easily be fishing. The reader slowly begins to contemplate the possibility that it is Caliban, rather than Miranda, who is being watched. In other words, Namjoshi is reversing the idea that a Medusa-like female monster, or the barbaric cannibal slave, or worse the depraved black lesbian woman, should not be watched, nor approached with friendliness. It is therefore unclear whether it is Miranda who is watching Caliban and is feeling an almost homoerotic desire for her, or whether it is Prospero, safely male, approaching his slave in a sexual way. It is hard to deny that in this sequence of poems Namjoshi is commenting on a play that already discusses the anxiety over both homoeroticism and misgenation, for example in the scene where Trinculo and Caliban are under the gabardine and appear to Stephano as one monster of an animal.

In "Who Wrongs You, Sappho?", an essay written together with her partner and fellow poet Gillian Hanscombe, Namjoshi writes: "in the lyric tradition of poetry in the English language [...] the 'I' – the lover, the pursuer, the wooer, the thinker, the speaker – was assumed by convention to be male; whereas the 'you', who was addressed, but who – of course – remained silent, was assumed to be female" (Namjoshi and Hanscombe 1991: 156). Further on in the essay,

Namjoshi and Hanscombe assert that, "despite the richness of the poetic tradition, its whole universe was a rigidly heterosexual one, at the centre of which was a long continuity of male consciousness, which was itself patriarchal in its assumptions about all forms of order. [...] In other words, it wasn't simply that pronouns were gendered, but also that imagery itself was gender role stereotyped" (Namjoshi & Hanscombe 1991: 157).

The third poem of the sequence is followed by "Caliban's Journal", a section written in the form of short prose poems that are also entries from a journal Caliban is writing in her new acquired language. It is interesting to see how Namjoshi makes her Caliban literate. Gone is the play's "startling encounter between a lettered and an unlettered culture [...], almost parodies, in the relationship between a European whose entire source of power is his library and a savage who had no speech at all before the European's arrival" (Greenblatt 1990: 23). Here Namjoshi is not merely answering with what Said calls a "journey in" (Said 1993: 216) to "the great colonial masterpieces, which not only misrepresented [the former silent natives] but assumed they were unable to read and respond directly to what had been written about them" (Said 1993: 31), but she is suggesting that counter-representations – of colonized people, of women, of homosexuals and so on, but also of any combination of those – are often conceived and written in conjunction with those offered by the colonizers, and they can also clash one against the other. In other words, it is not always a question of writing back from the former colonies, but of writing alongside or against imperialism. In those prose poems, Caliban also confronts herself with heterosexuality in the person of Ferdinand, here an educated white man who remains unnamed in the sequence, and whose hands Miranda accepts to look at, while still refusing to look at Caliban's. The opposition between Miranda, "she who is admired, looked at", and Caliban who should not be watched, is evident here.

"Snapshot viii" is in the form of Miranda's journal, where she also writes a

hate poem to Caliban, but then crosses out her furious outburst, finally acknowledging that Caliban is a part of her. In the same way, Caliban in

"snapshot xvi" finds a way to accept her raging side, epitomized by a tiger she

dreams of, and can finally laugh about how different she is from Miranda.

Interestingly, in "snapshot ix", where the speaker is undoubtedly Prospero,

the situation is reversed, because Caliban and Miranda are impossible to

distinguish, due to their intrinsic difference in the eyes of Prospero. Namjoshi

writes:

Two monsters are crawling out of my eyes

and onto the sand, scrabbling and scuttling,

climbing and sliding on top of one another,

tipping over stones, doing themselves,

and one another too, some damage, perhaps.

Of the two crabs which is more dainty?

Which one of the two least crab-like?

Most graceful? Is there a lovelier sheen

no one curved carapace, a subtler shine? (Namjoshi 1989: 94).

Here Namjoshi conjures up a veiled erotic scene, reminiscent of the one

featuring Caliban and Trinculo in the original play. From an aesthetic point of

view it is one of the best achievements in the sequence, as the word

"scrabbling" contains the word 'crab', and the hard sounds ("scuttling",

"crawling") recall the dissonance and uneasiness that Prospero feels while

watching the monsters he created. The last poem of the sequence offers once

again Prospero's point of view, where he, not unlike Miranda and Caliban who

have both accepted their dark side in previous poems, acknowledges both

Miranda and Caliban as his creatures, both a conflation of "maiden and

monster" (Namjoshi 1989: 102). Prospero has no answers to explain how and if he

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created Miranda and/or Caliban. Emblematically, the poem contains four question marks, as if to emphasize the impossibility to attribute fixed identities and meanings to the characters, and also to the whole sequence.

In conclusion, in "Snapshots of Caliban", Namjoshi plays with the reader's assumptions about the personae of her poems, deliberately refusing to assign clear identities, determined either by race, gender or sexuality, and blurring the subjectivity of each character. Namjoshi denounces how cultural imperialism, through the implied speakers of poetry, plays an important role even outside of the opposition between colonizer and colonized. Writers who, like Namjoshi, straddle numerous marginalities open the study of cultures and imperialisms to topics that were unconsciously neglected by Edward Said, fostering new developments and possibilities for postcolonial studies. One could say that the contrapuntal strategy devised by Said is therefore amplified, rather than rejected, by Namjoshi, who uses the concept of the simultaneous awareness of multiple histories and points of view within literary texts in order to highlight the ambiguities and the conflicting allegiances often inherent in them.

NOTES

1. Attempts to retrieve Sycorax include, apart from Namjoshi's cycle of poems "Sycorax", which will not be discussed in this essay, Malaysian American artist and performance artist Chin Wong Ping's play Psycho Wracks, first performed in 2001, British-Italian-Caribbean writer Marina Warner's novel Indigo, or Mapping the Waters (1992), as well as some lyrical essays written by Caribbean women writers such as M. NourbeSe Philip and Michelle Cliff. Among male writers, Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite with his 'Sycorax video style' has also offered Sycorax the possibility to finally enter the stage. By Avon River, an experimental text written by H.D. and published in 1949, even tries to retrieve Claribel, Alonso's daughter who is married off to the King of Tunis. Fantasizing over Caliban's female descendants is another possibility

adopted several times in order to offer the perspective of a postcolonial woman, for instance in an anthology of Caribbean women's writing called Daughters of Caliban. Moreover, Michelle Cliff wrote an essay entitled "Caliban's Daughter: the Tempest and the Teapot" that retrieves Sycorax but

2. "Snapshots of Caliban" was first published in 1984 in From the Bedside Book of Nightmares, and later included in an anthology of Namjoshi's writings called Because of India (1989). The quotations from "Snapshots of Caliban" included in this essay are from the latter. Suniti Namjoshi, born in Bombay in 1941, is the author of several volumes of poetry, books of fables, and longer fictions. Her most famous and praised book to date is Feminist Fables (1981).

also reinforces an identification through Caliban's descendants.

- 3. George Lamming's The Pleasures of Exile, Aimé Césaire's play Une Tempête, and Roberto Fernández Retamar's essay "Calibán" are considered the pioneering re-interpretations of The Tempest that work on Caliban as a mark of resistance to Prospero, the colonizer. Hailing from Barbados, Martinique and Cuba respectively, these writers give an idea of how iconic The Tempest is in the postcolonial debate of the Caribbean.
- 4. This is not the only postcolonial and lesbian feminist work on *The Tempest*. Lesbianism is in Cliff's agenda in the essay "Caliban's Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot", where she discusses the value of both the concept and the terminology related to lesbianism in the Caribbean. Furthermore, in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* there are implicit references to *The Tempest* and to the reclamation of the existence of a female colonial subject, not to mention to forms of sexuality that defy normativity. Lesbianism in Kincaid's novella is nonetheless hinted at, but with the assumption that it will be re-absorbed into heterosexuality once the protagonist's turbulent period of adolescence is finished.
- 5. "The Prospero Complex" is a concept initially developed by French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, who had worked in various French colonies,

and in 1950 published a study called La Psychologie de la Colonization, then translated into English as Prospero & Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization. He based his analysis on observations made in Madagascar, soon after a revolt of the indigenous people ended with one of the harshest repressions in colonial history. Mannoni considered that the colonized subject is constantly in a dependency relationship with the colonizer, and therefore the former requires the presence of the latter. Prospero, on the other hand, always according to Mannoni's study, suffers from a paternalistic complex. Mannoni's work was criticized by both Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, who attempted to write about the same dynamics from the point of view of the colonized. Laura E. Donaldson, in a study called Decolonizing Feminisms, criticized any monolithic reading of The Tempest, or of any other text for that matter, considering how the obsession for one relationship – either that between master and slave, or that between mother and daughter – obfuscates the other relationships in the play, making the critic blind to other dynamics within the text.

- 6. The concept of 'intersectionality' was first introduced in the late 1980s by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw with reference to the influence of both race and gender in the discrimination against black women in the USA. It was successfully adopted as a valid model to discuss the intersections of many variables in women's experiences, such as race, sexuality, class, and ethnicity.
- 7. As Susan Gubar humorously writes in an essay on feminist criticism, while acknowledging the faults of certain readings, it is better to avoid writing "depressingly knee-jerk essays rejecting out-of-hand the speculations of a given literary or theoretical work simply because it neglects to discuss x (fill in the blank bisexual Anglo-Pakistani mothers; the heterosexual, working-class Jew-for-Jesus community of Nashville, and so forth)" (Gubar 1998: 890-1).

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