The Grotesque Fool in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Caliban, the Monster, and his Linguistic Misadventure

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Abstract

The present paper has the primary mandate of looking at a celebrated character like Caliban from a linguistic as well as grotesque point of view. The character of Caliban has an echo in Thus Spoke Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's masterpiece, the protagonist sets on an existentialist journey. The character of Caliban like Zarathustra is also on a existentialist journey – the question of being is haunting him day in and day out; hence been provided such a depth by William Shakespeare when it comes to the primary art of characterisation. His ribaldry is ripe so that every word he speaks is loaded with multiple connotations. The linguistic evolution that Caliban has in the whole play goes through reclusive to rebellious states. Along with his linguistic ribaldry, Caliban evolves as a grotesque fool through his monster like body. It's quite pertinent to mention that Caliban's grotesqueness is manifested through his linguistic enterprise (misadventure). He is called by other characters as *half human* and half monster that echoes the idea of metamorphosed being-something which is at the centre of grotesque transformation. This paper will try to look at Caliban both from his linguistic misadventure to his caricature as a grotesque fool. Throughout the play, he is trying to reclaim his lost kingdom; he plans with Trinculo and Stephano to overthrow Prospero's authority, but to no avail. His rebellion ultimately finds a powerful vent in his recourse to billingsgate. This is the linguistic space which he has been provided by Prospero himself. A subliminal repertoire that was alien to him before Prospero's arrival on the island, which ultimately gives him the space to rebel and rebuttal against the dominant ideological state apparatus imposed upon the island by an outsider in the form of Prospero.

Keywords: Billingsgate; Fool; Grotesque; Ribaldry; Zarathustra.

Caliban and Billingsgate

Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Caliban too is dealing with the question of *being* and *existence*. In their introduction to Nietzsche's seminal text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin comment upon the question of *nihilism* in these words,

"The problem, then, that Zarathustra must address, the problem of "nihilism," is a kind of collective failure of desire, bows that have lost their tension, the absence of "need" or of any fruitful self-contempt, the presence of wretched contentment, "settling" for too little. And these discussions of desire and meaning throw into a different light how he means to address such a failure." (20)

Unlike Nietzsche's hero, Caliban never lets the bow loose its tension nor there is a collapse of the desire. Caliban is the forefather of Zarathustra as he manifests the basic instinct of *life force* – that makes him to crave for the lost Elysium. Caliban enters into the linguistic domain which Prospero unfolded before him and he uses the same to rebel and reclaim back what was once his own. The *collective failure* as mentioned above in Zarathustra is reversed in Caliban through his recourse to *billingsgate*.

Historically the word billingsgate initially referred to a fish market in London from Queen Elizabeth's time – the language that was spoken by people was notorious for its abusive and pejorative content. The colloquial English was mostly slang and slowly became associated with lower class; something pungent and repulsive. In fact, the fishermen, merchants and women of *Billingsgate* were so ridiculously famous for their vulgar and abusive language that Holinshed's *Chronicles* of 1577 narrate the same in the account of *King Leir*. In Holinshed's words the lowliness of a messenger's language is reckoned to be "as bad a tongue ... as any oyster-wife at Billingsgate hath." (Webster) By mid-1700, billingsgate word had become a cliché for derogatory language. At the beginning of this paper, I have made a statement that Caliban and word *billingsgate* are historically and semantically entwined. To answer this, we have to look at Caliban not only through his abusive language but also through his grotesque body; something half baked, half finished – half human and half monster. To substantiate my claim the scene where Trinculo for the first time looks at Caliban, he is confused and addresses Caliban pejoratively with the word *fish* five times in four lines:

What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or

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fish, he smells like alive? А fish—a а very ancient fishlike kind of and smell, а not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish. Were I in England now, as once (2.2,25-28)

Interestingly Shakespeare is foregrounding ontology of Caliban in a very clandestine manner; so as to suggest not to proclaim his ancestry and historical legacy of the billingsgate — both as a place as well as a pejorative dialect. A closer look at the text reveals that Caliban has a subconscious repository of the shared history of the billingsgate both as a space as well as a chatter and clamour of the past which he is asserting throughout the play as a sort of rebellion against the *status quo*. The billingsgate of Caliban is a subconscious attempt of rebellion by Caliban for being stereotyped and looked down upon as the other by the new occupants of the island. Before the arrival of the people on the island, Caliban knew everything in his own way and language — we don't know about his billingsgate prowess as the play gives no clue to that prior to the arrival of the colonizers like Prospero. It's essential to understand the stereotyping of the aboriginals by the Invaders so as to create a binary of *I* and the *other* that consistently pervades the whole play.

In the Diario de Navegacion (Navigation Log Books) of Columbus there is an important entry from a European who speaks of an alien race. He graphically describes the most important event of the day. It was exactly, 4th November 1492 just less than a month after Columbus set his foot on this new found world, later to be christened as America. The memoir, Diario, by Julio C. Sal records: "He learned also that far from the place were men with one eye and others with dogs' muzzles, who ate human beings". (Qtd Fernandez, 11-12) In the light of the above entry of the diary one needs to understand the characterisation of aboriginals of the American continent by the early Europeans. Shakespeare has beautifully replicated the colonial setup in play, *The Tempest*. If Prospero stands for the white European, then Caliban is the part of the binary of the white/black, civilised/brute, beautiful/ugly etc. Caliban's resentment to surrender is essentially unsophisticated: he knows to speak but cannot write which makes him preliterate and consequently immune to law as he is not within the domain of law but outside its ambit.

Caliban: All the infections that the sun sucks up From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall and make him By inchmeal a disease! His spirits hear me, And yet I needs must curse. But they'll nor pinch, Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me i' th' mire,

Nor lead me like a firebrand in the dark Out of my way, unless he bid 'em. But For every trifle are they set upon me, Sometimes like apes, that mow and chatter at me And after bite me; then like hedgehogs, which Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount(Tempest, 2.2,1-12)

Caliban's suffering at the hands of Prospero come in the form of resentment through language, mostly billingsgate in two more eloquent forms of dialogue: as expletive and as counternarrative to the status quo established by Prospero. The prompt, diatribe quality of the curse as well as its pesky, repetitive colloquial nature and its capacity for intense and overwhelmingly localized expression keep it away one step from the symptom, as a manifestation of suffering and pain through the medium of minimal semantic signifiers. (Lupton, 11) Further, Caliban's incessast counternarrative symbolises pointed innuendos as a response to the stereotypical articulation of his body as grotesque. All that follows is an exploding set of signifiers that are abusive, pointed and rebellious in nature – for their subversive discourse.

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! (Tempest I.ii.366–368)

Part of Caliban's pathetic condition emanates vis-a'-vis his encounter with Trinculo and Stephano. Caliban's inability to communicate his counternarrative to them – a narrative that operates on the plane of an ideological state apparatus, makes him more vulnerable to exploitation and snare. Although he can't dress up his words like Trinculo and Stephano, his weapon lies in raw invective through billingsgate. Along with his linguistic ribaldry, Caliban evolves as a grotesque fool for his monster like body. It's interesting to see that the linguistic misadventure and the monstrosity of Caliban go hand in hand. Caliban is the archetype of the brute uncivilised foolish creature that needs to be taught the ways of civilised society as per Prospero and that is the only way Prospero justifies his ways towards Caliban. The attempt of Prospero to civilise Caliban finds an echo in Rudyard Kipling's poem, The White Man's Burden – a blatant colonial discourse to justify the ways of colonizer and his lust for power. Prospero as a trained colonizer never allows a counternarrative to take a formidable shape and he always sabotages any attempt made by Caliban through Ariel.

Enter Ariel

CALIBAN As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island.

ARIEL Thou liest[Ariel Mimicking Trinculo]

CALIBAN (to Trinculo) Thou liest, thou jesting monkey, thou! I would my valiant master would destroy thee! I do not lie. (3.2.36-46)

In a pattern repeated throughout the scene, Caliban attempts to relate his counternarrative, only to be interrupted by the sound of the invisible Ariel, mimicking the skeptical voice of Trinculo. One could surmise easily that the symbol of power that lies with Prospero exclusively tries to sabotage the evolution of a counternarrative not directly but indirectly through the intervention of Ariel who is at his master's call. The above scene is a testament to the act of sabotage as Ariel prevents any sort of active counternarrative to be articulated and executed. He creates confusion as a ploy to sabotage. The result is incoherent fist-fighting rather than the birth of a counter ideology with its own novel narrative pattern. The voice of Ariel represents the uncontested dematerialization of that same law that guarantees Caliban a voice. The act of sabotage is an eerie dilution of the counternarrative into every cove and corner of the island; it's in reality an effective measure of disabling any counterhegemonic stride or a movement. Symptom, curse, and counternarrative: these are the oppositional forms that the passion of resentment takes in Caliban's discourse. Although they cover a full range of articulate speech and open up the possibility of the creature's own creativity, they share the structure of reaction-formation and do not lead Caliban into successful conspiracy, let alone toward a genuine political program or philosophy. (Lupton, 12)

Another important aspect of the play is Caliban and his place in the *Great Chain of Being* – vis-vis his contentious position as a human or a *monster*. Certainly he is not perceived as a human but a creature of some *grotesque* nature. Hence the question that comes to the mind is what kind of creature he is? Doesn't the above account of the diary entry ring a bell of a particular stereotype about Caliban before the Elizabethan audience? Is he a representative of a particular racial cult or something different? Before we proceed further we need to answer the basic question of creation and creature around which the whole appropriation of Caliban is operating in the whole drama. Caliban enters into the dramatic as a creature; consider the following monologue of Caliban, where he is nostalgic of the past and

fearful of the present, the sense of past/present is juxtaposed to present the idea of a perennial loss for Caliban at the hands of his master:

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; and then I loved thee,

And showed thee all the qualities o'th' isle,

The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile-

Cursed be that I 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. (*Tempest*, 1.2.331-334)

In the above pensive monologue, Caliban is first reluctant to share the raw beauty of the island with the invaders, and then, he is taught by Prospero how to name things which he already knew in his own way. After entering into the linguistic domain Caliban realises his position as a tamed/colonized monstrous being. He consistently wails at the loss of his mother's dominion which Prospero usurped from him. Secondly the monologue gives a glimpse into Caliban's subconscious which is haunted by otherness and repressed desires for being betrayed by Prospero and the company. As soon as Caliban enters into the linguistic domain he enters into a stereotyped identity of a grotesque *creature*. The sense of being different and alien as good as a beast is pervading the whole plot of the play when it comes to the identity of Caliban. Caliban as a creature can better be analysed in the light of Franz Rosenzweig's modernist discourse of creation as a manifestation of critical enquiry rather than as an empirical or theological one. His book, The Star of Redemption (1921), fixes creation as one angle of a triangle, the other two being revelation and redemption. Creation, Rosenzweig says, is a continuous process: "For the world, its required

relationship to the creator was ... not its having been created once and for all, but it's continuing to manifest itself as creature. (120)

Caliban as a creature throughout the play is manifesting himself not as a mere static creature part of the creation but as an evolving being who learns, revolts and sometimes tries to reclaim what was once his own. The idea of monstrosity appropriated in Caliban finds an echo in Nietzsche through his autobiography *Ecce Homo*:

In part, the monstrosity of a philosophy that is Dionysian is indicated by the figure of Oedipus who both as husband and son, father and brother, foreigner and citizen is an inherently disfigured philosopher, a double figure like Dionysus and, in fact, like Nietzsche himself in *Ecce Homo*.(Brogan Walter,44)

The same duality of character runs through Caliban as a *subject* which he calls himself. What adds more to the complexity of Caliban is that he is reincarnation of Dionysus, smoothly oscillating between the duality of creature and mankind; consider Dionysus descending among mortals and disguising himself in the human form. Such duality takes shape under the arc of awe and wonder that catches Trinculo and Sebastian when they see him for the first time. The duality of Caliban in which he is thrown between the human and monster in the *Great Chain of Being* leads him to a dilemma: "This indeterminacy at the heart of Caliban also sets him adrift between the cosmos in its vast totality-the brave new world of primal Creation-and the particular worlds defined by culture and nation: Bermuda, Algiers, Milan, Naples." (Julia Reinhard Lupton, 2)

In the mainstream literary discourse of the creaturely and grotesque, Caliban is portrayed as somewhat disfigured, a hybrid or some natural anomaly. As part of *Great Chain of Being*, Caliban shares the bountiful world of Adam but is in want of the Eve hence his character is consistently thwarting attempts by mainstream scholarship to push him outside the ambit of universal humanity. He is not going to be subdued but uses every weapon in his armoury to reclaim his position. However the creaturely being within his grotesque appearance calls for attention as this un-trespassed domain of inhumanly lands Caliban in a space which is forbidden in terms of notion of common humanity. Yet we cannot blame him for the same as his emotional as well as physical is the manifestation of the Godly creation. He has no voluntary control over his libido drives as so called civilised beings are deemed to have.

The play includes him within the cosmos of Adam but only as its chaotic exception. If the creature Caliban both invitess and resists universalizing readings, the same is true for the drive to particularize him. As a monstrous exception to the human norm, Caliban's creatureliness propels him into the conceptual space occupied by ideas of national and racial difference, eliciting a long line of culturalist readings of his oppression. Yet Caliban outperforms through his adaptability, exceptional power of patience and rarity, all the three qualities are deeply unusual and highly uncanny. These features prevent him from being the monolithic statesman of a particular racial class or a cultural hotspot. Going back to the account of the diary of Columbus, one can surmise that such monolithic identification of an alien race was at the centre of the colonial agenda, the notion of man eaters – cannibals. Equestri, Alice, in her seminal work, *Armine … thou art a foole and knaue: the fools of Shakespeare's romances*, wraps up the historical evolutionary critical enquiry of Caliban as,

Caliban is certainly one of the characters most commented on by Shakespearean criticism, in that he has been taken to represent the victim of colonialism in an age when Western Empires were discovering and exploiting the resources of the New World in America. Being so much unlike any other character that came before him and given his triple identity as a savage, a monster and a slave, he has offered innumerable possibilities of interpretation, as well as issues for later cultural appropriations. (140)

Caliban survives within an unfathomable domain of Creation not yet classified into any categorise like nations, races, ethnicities etc. This is the prowess in his being that is reclaiming the lost bed rock of heterogeneous universalism divided into nations, forming the forgotten ground of a diverse universalism Caliban becomes a torchbearer of what Giorgio Agamben has labelled as "bare life;" pristine vigour stripped of its manifestation and importance along with any latent political gimmick and subsequently appropriated in the complex domain of human civilisation as its renounced core.(29) Although within the play, the word creature is not directly implied at Caliban in conjugation with his name, still his whole identity is hedged around the notion of a grotesque creature. In other words his whole identity is a manifestation of subversive caricature based on the notion of the ugly and the beautiful. Before the arrival of Prospero, Caliban happens to be the sole care taker of the island as a solitary Adam in reincarnation. He claims himself to be his "own king" (*Tempest*, 1.1.342).

Caliban is presented as a monster, who tries to molest Miranda and is consequently imprisoned for that. Caliban finds a hope to *coup* against

Prospero when he comes across Trinculo and Stephano – the two fools associated with king of Naples. What's important here to note is that Caliban and Shakespeare himself let the plot an angle of revolt through the carnival entry of two fools who compliment Caliban in their motley and drunken state. So basically the plot of revolt is what interests Caliban to usurp what was once his own. He is not afraid or ashamed of this grotesqueness. As the central theme of the whole study is fool as the harbinger of the carnival spirit and as an iconoclast, so does the triad of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban compliment each other. The monologue of Trinculo where he calls Caliban half monster and half fish is a mirroring of his own self through his own motley costume.

What fascinates the reader more to look at Caliban as the most eligible candidate for the archetypal fool outsmarting Trinculo and Stephano and a possible reason for overshadowing their dramatis personae in the whole play is that Caliban is a typical natural motley figurine unlike Trinculo and Stephano who are more of artificial clowns of the king of Naples. Caliban fulfils all the prerequisites of the carnival fool. During the carnival, the pagan rituals appeared in the prosaic life of commoners as was allowed by the Church so as to give a safe outlet to the pent up vagaries. Even the clergy was not spared during the carnival enterprise and was primary targets of fools who performed on the stage. In this context the worshipping of Setebos the pagan deity elucidated the motley foolish figurine of Caliban more and more – consequently his pagan and carnival roots become more and more conspicuous.

With regard to Caliban the critical question remains whether to classify him as a fool or not to which majority of the scholarship negates his archetypal Shakespearean traits of folly. Certainly his schematic mind makes him different than Clotten. He cannot be called a typical stage clown as he is not any entertainer like Trinculo-associated with King of Naples court. Despite all these peculiarities Caliban has all the prerequisites of a natural fool with natural motley unlike artificial motley of a court fool. Caliban and Adam have a something very common between them - their status of a creature fashioned from dust sculptured by the great artisan in His own Image, ever forming (creat-ura, "about-to-be- created") from primal raw matter into rhythmic animate life. Caliban is addressed as something belonging to earth, "Thou earth, thou" (Tempest, 1.2.314), "A thing most brutish" (Tempest, 1.2.356)," this thing of dark- ness" (Tempest, 5.1.275): throughout the play, Caliban has an analogy to Adam - both being creatures and thrown out of their blissful life. Like Adam had to put on the chagrin of leaves, Caliban has the grotesqueness, a disfigured body, the

idea of monstrosity — a strange breed between human and monster. Laurence Wright in her interesting article, *Caliban as a "Topsy Turvy" Grotesque: An Early Modern Theatregram?*, paints a new identity of Caliban as of a culmination point of esoteric ideation and grotesque realism. She says,

The figure of Caliban meaning not only his onstage physical appearance but the hinterland of literary, mythical and traditional discourse informing his character comprises of an extraordinary synthesis of esoteric and folkloric influence: obscure literary texts folk traditions historical references and sheer fantasy. (18)

The mainstream readership look down upon the son of Sycorax—the moon calf as a freak," freckled hag-born whelp". He is repulsive as some perennial shadow from the underworld much like the Minotaur of the Greek labyrinth. But if we look at his characterisation as part of the Shake-spearean scheme, we find that Shakespeare has a soft corner for him. There is never any lampooning from the omnipresent author. He is ridiculed by other characters for his sheer grotesqueness.

The average reader despises him for his attempt to molest Miranda. As has been pointed out earlier, the common critical discourse upon Caliban has been grounded upon the Elizabethan political, moral and social conditioning – which labels Caliban as a molester/monster. Yet there is much to his character as a natural fool. In my opinion in the whole Shakespearean canon Caliban finds a predecessor and a double in the likes of Dr. Falstaff. It's pertinent to mention here that as a predecessor to Caliban, he has the same ideation of bodily extravagance – pot belly, large fat lips. Dr. Falstaff is sometimes called the fat knight of Shakespeare through his grotesque extravagance and sometimes accused of being a womaniser. What makes Dr. Falstaff acceptable is his appropriation and part moderation in his extravagance. Though there is no superficial sublimity in Caliban, yet he is a pristine character loved by Shakespeare for his natural folly. In his article Caliban, Savage Clown, John McCloskey writes:

"Ludicrous though Caliban may be in his strange new world, he is, fundamentally, a likable character touched with Shakespeare's sympathy, and it seems not at all improbable that the dramatist intended him simply as a pathetic clown whose dramatic function in the play is to evoke sympathetic laughter." (354)

Yet Caliban can be called a "natural" fool on account of his created identity through other Characters like Trinculo and Stephano. Paromita Chakra-

varti in her article *Natural Fools and the Historiography of Renaissance Folly*, is of the opinion that there has to be an enlarged critical enquiry of the intricate nuances of foolery. She is particularly impressing upon the limited critical stereotyping of Caliban as a beast what the mainstream criticism has been advocating since the first premiere of the play. She further advocates the approach to balance the notion of wise folly with that of the notion of intellectual disability. To put it in more lucid way the author is advocating of looking at the notion of intellectual disability of a character like Caliban with the mainstream notion of wise fool—as both tow the notion of marginality in a world where a deformity like that of Caliban is a literal ideation of grotesqueness. Chakravarti further says,

Although he has clownish traits, Caliban is not the typical Renaissance stage fool; nor is he the Shakespearean witty jester. He embodies instead the pathology of folly and represents the idea of the fool as a monstrous natural. Critical literature on The Tempest, whether liberal-humanist or new historicist, reads Caliban as a "natural", a monster or a New World native, but rarely as a fool, suggesting that these discourses remain discrete in Renaissance scholarship.(227)

The same point is reiterated by Bakhtin in his seminal work Rabelais and His World. The grotesque representation of the body focuses on the apertures, convexities, and offshoots: the mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, and the nose. Those bodily phenomena are emphasized in which the body exceeds its limits, such as copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, agony, eating, drinking, and defecation. The body is "never finished, always creating and being created." (Qtd Czachesz, 2) Under this critical lens one can see that Caliban fits Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque with apertures, bodily deformity and excessiveness-his urge to copulate with Miranda for which he is made a slave by Prospero. Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda-can be conceived in two very different ways. In descriptions of his early life, Caliban resembles bestial man, living instinctively in relation to his environment, apparently without language or the ability to formulate concepts. This Caliban cannot be guilty of rape, since his actions were driven solely by sensual knowledge without rational or ethical mediation.(Kunat, 309) Caliban is through all the dramatic action presented as rustic, barbaric, uncivilised but with shades of intelligence whereby he knows his oppressor and revolts through his own masters language,

Conclusion

Apparently Caliban looks savage, uncultured and a rustic product of raw nature like Kipling's Jungle boy Mogli. Above all he has been separated from his mother which is the biggest trauma he is going through. At the end of the play he doesn't emerge as a monster but as an innocent being that has gone through too much travails. He has been reduced to a servant from being the legal heir of the whole island. All these things contribute to his grotesqueness and his sorry state of affairs. He has his own natural motley unlike the artificial motley of the court fools. The scene where he is introduced to Trinculo and Stephano and his mistaking of the white man as a god is full of humour and a window to his inner mindscape. He is more obsessed with the intoxication for which he begs Stephano as a slave and thinking the other as his god. He is more inclined to have the drink which for him has the magical power to relieve him from the magical spell of Prospero – and possibly get back what was once his own carnival realm – devoid of any imported sovereignty. Although Trinculo through his tirade labels Caliban a most poor, gullible, puppy-headed, scurvy, and abominable monster, at the height of his drunkenness Caliban's thoughts are serious, for his unifying character motive makes them so. Caliban through his serious monologue in a particular scene castigates the bootlickers of the Elizabethan/Jacobean court. Such subversive tactics employed by Caliban reflect his political statement towards the end of the play and qualify his buffoonery as wise folly.

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