International Research Journal of Human Resource and Social Sciences
ISSN(O): (2349-4085) ISSN(P): (2394-4218)
Impact Factor 5.414 Volume 8, Issue 02, February 2021
Website- www.aarf.asia, Email : editoraarf@gmail.com

Finding The Lost Voices in the Noises of Caliban's Island: Resurrecting Sycorax in Marina Warner's *Indigo*

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One of the postcolonial literary practices is 'writing back to the centre', the term coined by Salman Rushdie in 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance' and used by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as the title of their famous study of postcolonialism *The Empire Writes Back*. The notion of Centre as applied to Britain goes back to the sixteenth century, when the colonial expansion had started but it became operational in the nineteenth century when English came to be studied as an academic subject and became associated with the spread of education for the 'natives'. Thus, the spread of English language and literature across the colonies and the expansion of the British Empire flourished in the same ideological climate. The literature of the period contributed to this Imperial project by highlighting the concepts of 'civilization' and 'humanity' which conversely established the concepts of 'savagery' 'native' and 'primitive' as non-British or 'Other'. So, Europe or more specifically Britain came to be the 'centre' virtually looming over the 'margins' or the peripheries constituting the Empire. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* has emphatically proved that the literature of the nineteenth century England, had contributed very influentially in presenting the image of Britain as an ideal state and the centre around which the world revolved.

As early as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, when the voyagers and discoverers were going out into the world to seek new territories, we find the role of Prospero closely allied to the image of the colonizer and that of Caliban to the savage, rude and ungrateful native. Hence in postcolonial studies, *The Tempest* is taken as a metaphor of colonization and has become the prime target of numerous rewritings by postcolonial writers in recent years. The play is seen as the obvious example of the British perception of the process of colonization. The play is clearly a product of the time in which it was written, a time when the British Empire was expanding rapidly. In the beginning of the Imperial era few people in England questioned the claims of the colonizers over the new territories especially if it fell into the non-European parts of the globe. Shakespeare was only one of the writers who, through the literature of the time, helped the Empire to legitimize its conquests by writing about the benefits of civilization the Empire brought to these backward, savage, heathen countries and people, without questioning the loss of personal or territorial freedom.

Through *The Tempest*, Shakespeare was able to uphold the British view of their self-imposed task of educating the natives as the 'White man's burden'. The play has been the important part of the established canon for the last four hundred years and, with all its prominence, has reinforced the stereotypes in people's mind about the colonies and the colonized. In writing *The Tempest* Shakespeare was influenced by many contemporary works, Halkyut's Voyages and the travelogues by Silvester Jourdan about a ship wreck off the coast of the Bermudas chief among them. The actual island Shakespeare used as the model for of the island where Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan arrives with his three-year-old daughter Miranda is now accepted to be Lampedusa off the coast of Tunis. When Prospero comes to the island it is inhabited by Caliban, a native, and Ariel, a spirit whom Caliban's mother Sycorax had imprisoned in a cloven pipe before she died. Prospero enslaves Caliban and releases Ariel who has to serve him for twelve years in return. Prospero's right to take over the island or enslave Caliban is not questioned anywhere in the play except by Caliban himself even though we are told that the island belonged to Caliban before Prospero arrived and it is he who teaches Prospero to cultivate the island. Thus Caliban's claims of proprietorship are based not only on previous occupation but his skills and understanding based on knowledge also support his birthright.

Prospero, on the other hand, displays his superiority by his handling of power and knowledge which is also another kind of power, particularly his command over language. This weapon is his greatest symbol of control and authority. Through his control of the spoken word, Prospero is able to dominate Caliban by refusing to acknowledge his language as anything more than senseless gibberish. Forcing the native to learn the master's language is here presented as conferring a favour for which he ought to be grateful.

Instead of being grateful Caliban protests against being made to learn a language he does not need. He already had a language although it was unintelligible to Prospero and he refused to acknowledge it as valid, preferring to teach Caliban his language rather than learning Caliban's, taking the role of a teacher rather than a learner to preserve the power dynamics of the master and the slave. Caliban's retort to Prospero regarding learning his language and having the satisfaction of cursing him in his own language is typical of the postcolonial discourse and the power to write back in the language of the erstwhile master, in both territorial and educational sense.

The entire dialogue between the two or rather the entire Act I scene ii of *The Tempest* is similar to the paradigms of the postcolonial situation, based on the deep-rooted issues of control and supremacy. This can also be seen in Prospero's attitude towards the islanders. He uses all kinds of expletives to describe Sycorax and Caliban, such as 'damned witch', blue-eyed hag' , 'freckled whelp', 'hag born', 'hag seed', 'misshapen knave', 'lying slave', 'abhorred slave' and so on. Prospero here assumes the godlike power to name things and categorize his surroundings and thereby conveys the impression of being superior to these half-human, ugly beings who are not even able to speak a proper language. Thus, Prospero's version seems to be the only and hence true version of the story and was generally accepted as such for a very long time as Peter Hulme says in *Colonial Encounters*:

> Not only- as has often been pointed out- can Prospero and Caliban be seen as stereotypes of the colonizer and the colonized, but Prospero is also colonial historian and such a convincing and ample historian that other histories have to fight their way into the crevices of his official document. (125)

The attempt to find a way into the crevices of the play has resulted in various rewritings and reinterpretations of the play especially from the former colonies of the Empire. The Caribbean writers have focussed mainly on the character of Caliban, the displaced native as a symbol of the colonized, namely George Lamming's *The Pleasures of the Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971), Aime Cesaire's *Une Tempete* (1969), Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) and Margaret Atwood's *Hag Seed* (2016).

Postcolonial readings of *The Tempest* frequently focused on Caliban and to a lesser extent, Ariel as victims of colonial power in the text and as figures of resistance and subversion. For Warner, however, as for many women critics, feminist readings of *The Tempest* were equally important. Marina Warner's *Indigo* is written from the perspective of the three female figures in *The Tempest*, Sycorax, Miranda and Ariel. In *Indigo* Marina Warner writes the story of Sycorax as she imagines her life to have been before the arrival of the strangers. She is seen as a mixture of the wise woman and a witch by the community who, as she is an expert in dyeing clothes and making herbal medicines, fear her as some kind of magician. Feminist critics frequently refer to the absence of any female figures apart from Miranda in the text and to Sycorax and Miranda's late mother who are talked of but never seen. Warner responds to that by making Sycorax both visible and central to her novel and by feminising Ariel as an Arawak girl. Warner follows in the footsteps of other women writers who have attempted to articulate the silent women of Shakespeare's play, most notably the modernist poet H.D. whose 'By Avon River' gives voice to Claribel and Iris Murdoch in whose novel *The Sea, the Sea* the opening lines have Charles Arrowby, the Prospero figure, reflecting on the "indigo" blue of the sea surrounding his island retreat.

Marina Warner's *Indigo* is unique among all the other reinterpretations of *The Tempest* as she is the great, great, great granddaughter of Thomas Warner, the first settler in St. Kitts and so she herself was of Creole lineage and a descendant of the colonizers. She uses the image of her ancestor as one of the perpetrators of the atrocities on the islanders and through the rewriting of *The Tempest* she wishes to expiate the sins of her forefathers in "an enterprise that so resembles Prospero's theft" (1993). *Indigo* focuses not only on the established characters of the play but resurrects the character of Sycorax who is already dead when the play begins. She may be a marginal character in the play but in the discussions of rights and legitimacy Sycorax and her legacy to her son are very important. Sycorax's appearance in *Indigo* is the first

time this neglected and almost forgotten character gets a chance to tell her version of the story as Marina Warner writes:

> As far as I know, nobody had attempted to discover in Caliban's mother Sycorax another being besides the 'foul hag' Prospero invokes. Yet it was she who ruled before Prospero came and, in my book, she becomes the embodiment of the island itself, of its inner life, as well as a woman of ordinary passions and skills who -I hope -grows to the dimensions of a full humanity.
>
> Because our family was involved in an enterprise that so closely resembles Prospero's theft, that foundation act of Empire, I felt compelled to examine the case, and imagine in fiction the life and culture of Sycorax, and of Ariel and Caliban, whom I cast as her foundlings; I wanted to hear their voices in the 'noises of the isle'. (Warner 1993)

Indigo is a novel that contains within it the traces of many other texts and genres like so many of the novels in the context of Shakespearean appropriation. It acknowledges its debt to a dramatic precursor by the inclusion of *dramatis personae* at the beginning of the novel, the list of "Principal Characters". Towards the end of the novel the dramatic genre re-enters the novel in the form of George Felix who speaks Caliban's famous speech on learning Prospero's language (I.ii.366-68). Yet the *dramatis personae* is preceded in the structure of the text by a map of the island and surrounding waters, a strategy more prevalent in novels about strange lands or travelogues. This has obvious connections to postcolonial concerns as Cartography was one of the means by which European travellers sought to claim and in a way "patent" their discoveries. In the context of the novel this map proves highly unstable as place names change many times and the name of the island itself undergoes many transmutations, changing from Liamuiga to Everhope Island to honour Kit Everard, the first colonial to set foot on the island, to Enfant Béate under French occupation, thus underlining the instability of nomenclature as a reliable signifier. Julie Sanders, in her *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth century women novelists and appropriation,* asserts that "Warner's appropriation of Shakespeare is as much shaped by critical interpretations of *The Tempest* that were dominant at the moment of the novel's conception as by a personal, subjective reading" (133). *Indigo* is strongly influenced by the 1980s postcolonial readings of *The Tempest,* especially by the views of Paul Brown and Peter Hulme whose *Colonial Encounters* Warner directly cites in her acknowledgments.

In *Indigo*, Marina Warner offers an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which draws on both postcolonial and feminist readings of the original text. It may be argued that Warner's novel is motivated by a desire to exploit and subvert the unequal power dynamic existent in *The Tempest* through the imposition of such theoretical frameworks. Shakespeare's unnamed magical island re-emerges as the Caribbean island of Enfant- Béate, and several of the original cast members of *The Tempest* are refashioned in order to play their part in a renewed struggle between coloniser and colonised.

Miranda is the granddaughter of Sir Anthony "Ant" Everard whose ancestor was Christopher 'Kit' Everard, the first white settler on Liamuiga, a Caribbean island renamed as Enfant-Béate under colonial rule. Liamuiga is a fictitious Caribbean island, where Sycorax, the 'blue-eyed hag' in Shakespeare's text, used to rule as a wise medicine woman, and indigo-dyer. Spanning over three centuries, the novel not only exposes the effects of colonialism on the original native inhabitants of Enfant-Béate, the sorceress Sycorax and her adopted family, Ariel the Arawak orphan girl and the African castaway, Dulé, but also the ways in which the descendants of Kit Everard, the first European to settle on the island, must come to terms with their Caribbean heritage.

The plot oscillates between 'now', with the Everards "shipwrecked," "storm-tossed" and marooned in a London tube in the 1960s, where a Caliban-like black guard takes them to his underground den, and 'then' in Liamuiga in 1600 when Sycorax rescues Caliban from the womb of a dead African slave jettisoned from a slave carrying ship. The novel is divided into six parts named after various hues and colours, from Lilac/Pink to Indigo/Blue to Maroon/Black at the end. Part II under the colour Indigo/Blue opens with one of Caliban's most poetic lines—"the isle is full of noises". But unlike *The Tempest,* where women are notoriously absent, here the makers of these noises are women, Sycorax and her modern counterpart Serafine. We first meet Sycorax around 1600 when she has long been dead and buried in the "warty trunk of her tree" and she takes us back to the day when she found some twenty battered and brine-filled dead bodies of men and women on the beach "like fish stranded after a hurricane" (91). The word "hurricane" recalls *The Tempest*

but the corpses are those of the failing slaves, too sick or dying to survive the journey, thrown overboard by the slavers from a slave carrying ship during the Middle passage. Among the slaves is a drowned woman with a live baby in her womb delivered by Sycorax with an oyster-shell knife. The baby is Dulé, the Caliban figure of *Indigo*, an African survivor of Igbo origin, "an orphan from the sea" (96).

Warner also clarifies the absence of Sycorax's husband in Shakespeare's *The Tempest.* Sycorax has been forsaken by her husband for being unfertile and for her "*sangay*, preternatural insight and power" (97). She returns first to her brother's village but being accused of witchcraft sets out to become an indigo-dyer. Under Sycorax's tutelage, the grown Dulé becomes acquainted with "the qualities of the isle" (104) and is soon joined by a five year old Arawak girl Ariel, who at the age of twelve leaves Sycorax's tree and moves to her own cabin. Ariel and Caliban embody "the (original) Arawak and African forced labour needed by the mutation in the labour/land ratio" which ensued "as a result of Western Europe's first-phase expansion into the Americas" (Wynter 361).

When Kit Everard lands on the island in 1618, his men indulge in loot and plunder, and set fire to Sycorax's tree. These sections which deal with the first encounter between the seventeenth century coloniser Kit Everard, and Sycorax's family, give Warner the opportunity to indict imperialism by exposing the immediate effects of colonisation on the native population of Enfant-Béate. The ways in which colonial authority is established through the erasure of the local cultural heritage and the enslavement and silencing of the colonised is brought out by the violent suppression of Dulé and Ariel. It appears that Marina Warner stages an encounter between coloniser and colonised in order to challenge the 'colonial' logic of *The Tempest.*

From the moment Kit Everard arrives on the island, the inhabitants gradually begin to lose their independence, identities and voices until they start planning a revolt to overthrow his rule. All hope is finally lost with their defeat in the battle for Enfant-Béate which is brought about by Ariel's betrayal of the island people reminiscent of Caliban's abortive rebellion and Ariel's role in the suppression of it. The horrifying effects of Everard's victory on the islanders are particularly evident in the requests they bring to Sycorax's grave: The slaves pressing their tin tacks into the tree whisper:

> -their love of a man, their love of a woman
> -their love of a child
> -their hopes to reprieve from punishment
> -their thanks for surviving punishment
> -their fear of being burned alive on a barbecue like the young slave who ran away last week and was caught and tried and sentenced to death by this method
> -their terror of having a foot chopped off for stealing (some of them have been stealing). (*Indigo* 207)

These prayers, offered to Sycorax's tree as her shrine no more than a century after her death, not only expose the tyranny of slavery, but also suggest erasure of cultural heritage through the imposition of the language and culture of the coloniser. The islanders have a hazy idea about Sycorax and her powers and have started praying to Christian divinities:

> They remember that the guardians of the tree run back through time to the one who only sang and never spoke, who used to keep vigil by the tree, where the sorceress Sycorax (but they have forgotten her name) lay deep with her grave goods….. Beyond them they can see other mighty divinities Jesusmaryandallthesaints, Peterandpaul, Matthewmarklukeandjohn. (*Indigo* 207)

The ways in which colonial authority is established through the demonising of the colonised other are exposed in Kit Everard's letters to his father-in-law, Lord Clovelly. Everard's letter informing Clovelly of the outcome of the battle for Enfant-Béate, explains how Dulé was transformed into the monstrous Caliban through the power of language and names. This report offers remarkable insight into the inner workings of colonialism, and suggests that Caliban's deformity and monstrousness is in fact created or "conjured" by colonial discourse:

> By due process of law we have sentenced him to be slit in the hamstrings to be an example to those who would follow him and make him a hero to the people… The aforesaid captain I shall endeavour to keep beside me as my bondsman; hobbled and under my eye, he cannot do me injury. He is a mordant wit, 'tis plain, and it diverts me to teach him our language as

> he serves me. He has already learnt how to curse. Some of our men call him "cannibal", seeking to undo the power of his monstrousness by naming it, like to conjuring. 'Tis to my mind a false notion, and I prefer the lisping usage of the children, Caliban. (*Indigo* 198-199)

The process through which colonial authority forces the colonised other to be silent by taking away their language is exemplified through the self-imposed muteness of Ariel. Forced to learn English in order to serve the British settlers, Ariel, unlike Dulé, does not use the language of the oppressors to curse them in their own language, but instead ceases to speak altogether, and becomes the embodiment of the silenced colonised subjects:

> Ariel herself made almost no sound; she choked on speech, for nobody could return an answer. Sycorax would not reply except to rasp her curses. Kit's language was bitter in her mouth. She sometimes pulled herself into a corner of the cabin with Roukoubé across her knees on her stomach and patted out a tune softly as she rubbed his back after feeding him, but she no longer made up words; she had no more words, indeed it seemed to her she no longer owned a voice, but only a hollow drum for a head on which others beat their summons. (*Indigo* 173)

These historical sections are in the nature of an indictment of colonial oppression and authority, and challenge the colonial logic of *The Tempest*. In the "present" section, Warner explores the precarious position of the descendants of Kit Everard. While Miranda is the direct descendant of the colonial forefather, Serafine, the mulatto nanny who represents Sycorax in the present age is linked to him through Ariel's progeny. Their struggle to come to terms with their postcolonial guilt, hybridity and Caribbean heritage leads them to return to the site of the first colonial encounter, the island of Enfant-Béate.

Through this return of her characters to the colony of their forefather, Warner essentially returns to the site of Shakespeare's play in the Caribbean. Warner stages a confrontation between the descendants of the colonisers and the colonised. Miranda, who is not ashamed of her hybridity, has now to confront those who are still victimised because of their otherness. When Miranda breaks away from the Flinders Stockade along with Xanthe, her child-sister, and goes to take a dip in the natural sulphur pools, they are threatened and pelted with stones by the children of Iqbal Malik, an opposition leader who is fighting for the expulsion of all the remnants of the colonial rule, including the descendants of the erstwhile colonisers. This incident forces Miranda to consider herself as an interloper and a trespasser imposing her presence on the island:

> She felt the full weight of the man's contempt, for no anger like Xanthe's rose to protect her against it; she felt now she had polluted him and his family. His displeasure and his scorn had scalded her, as she saw him in her mind's eye again, turning on his heel in silence and leaving them loftily to disappear into the canebrakes, following the children. (*Indigo* 319)

The antagonism between Malik's Shining Purity group and the pro-colonial government of Enfant-Béate finally culminates in a violent revolution. There is a change of government on the island and its new leader, Atala Seacole, asserts that the island will not be dependent on foreign investments. Warner's Miranda falls in love with and marries not Ferdinand, but her own Caliban, the black activist George Felix, whose Caliban-ness is reinforced towards the end of the novel when he plays the part of Caliban in a theatrical presentation. Their marriage and the hybridity of their child seem to signal a breaking down of the binary opposition of self /other and coloniser/colonised. *Indigo* concludes with an attempt to come to terms with these dichotomies by proposing a kind of de-politicisation of the contemporary situation in the erstwhile colonies. This is illustrated in George's final disavowal of all political goals and ambitions:

> "…Forget ACTion."—he plucked again at the T-shirt. "Forget the Middle East, forget AIDS, forget famine, the war, the hole in the ozone, torture, death, rape and murder. Forget South Africa, even, forget the mean-spirited eighties—I'm starting to forget right now, from this minute, even as I wear this. Because I'm so tired, as the poet said, of your fucking guilt and our fucking envy." (*Indigo* 373)

This radical conclusion suggests that just like *The Tempest* which ends on a note of reconciliation among all the warring factions, Warner chooses to end the exploration of the politics of colonisation with a utopian solution in which all past crimes are forgiven and a new world, which transcends politics, is created. This abrupt shift suggests the failure to negotiate the colonial implications of *The Tempest* through a simple subversion of its political agenda. It seems as if Warner's decision to rewrite Shakespeare's castaway

narrative springs from a sense of dissatisfaction with the outcome of the play. Miranda refers to the absurdly enforced happy endings of the plays with their possibility of a "magical reconciliation":

> It was absurd, this rush to the head of romance; if she were a character in a novel, she might find that someone like George or Shaka or whatever it was he was called now was available, free, no longer married, a real widower even. But this could hardly happen in her life. She wasn't living inside one of *Shakespeare's sweet- tempered comedies, nor in one of his late plays with their magical reconciliations, their truces and appeasements and surcease of pain*. No garland of marriages at the fall of the curtain would draw her into its charmed circle. In her world, which was the real world of the end of the century, breakage and disconnection were the only possible outcome. (*Indigo* 370. Italics mine.)

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