
Suniti Namjoshi, *Istantanee di Caliban. Sycorax*, ed. and introd. by Paola Bono, trans. by Paola Bono and Serena Guarracino, afterword by Laura Di Michele (Napoli: Liguori 2008), 98+ xxvii pp.

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Used as colonial text and pretext, *The Tempest* has often been relocated and revised in order to expose the limits and explore the critical reconfigurations of the fixed relationship of master and slave represented by the Prospero-Caliban dyad. Feminists have usually found few possibilities for literary revision in Caliban, the symbol of the voiceless colonial male subject, turning to the more inspiring figure of Miranda as feminist heroine, or giving voice to the absent female characters of the play, Claribel and Sycorax, conveniently erased from the *dramatis personae*. In the wake of female rewritings such as HD's *By Avon River* (1949) or Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992), *Snapshots of Caliban/Sycorax* by the Indian-born poet and writer Suniti Namjoshi offers a radically new perspective on *The Tempest* by focusing on the Caliban-Miranda relationship and giving voice and physical presence to a dying Sycorax. A conflation of two poetic sequences mixed with prose and written twenty five years apart – "Snapshots of Caliban" and "Sycorax" – the text presents the Italian reader with a rich introduction in which Paola Bono appropriately contextualizes the writer and her text, while accounting for the complex issues intersecting the multiple identities of the diasporic British Indian lesbian poet.

Originally published in *From the Bedside Book of Fables* (1984) and translated by Paola Bono, "Snapshots" is inhabited by multiple voices/noises, just like Prospero's island. But if in *The Tempest* Prospero dominated and manipulated the narrative, his meditations are interrupted here by Caliban's and Miranda's journals, syncopated and forthright like an adolescent's diary, fragmenting and dispersing the master's narrative in the snapshots of the title. The irruption of other voices thus offers the possibility to imagine a different web of relations in which Namjoshi suggests a complex and unexpected interplay between the master and his "creatures", each inextricably linked to the other.

The critical reconfiguration informing the characters' relationship fractures expected representations and offers a radical re-vision (A. Rich) of the play. By imagining a female Caliban entangled in a repressed lesbian relation with Miranda, Namjoshi sheds new light on the Calibanesque figure which has often embodied the possibility for postcolonial agency and "writing back". Although she joins a "Calibanic genealogy", Namjoshi's Caliban conveys a different image of the subaltern by intersecting it with

issues of gender which complicate conventional male assumptions. While she shifts from the claims of territorial sovereignty and political freedom foregrounded by male writers, Namjoshi creates an oxymoronic 'delicate monster', a girl marginalised and excluded by the intellectual games of Prospero and Miranda or of her imaginary Ferdinand ("They are playing chess. I could learn too. I am not stupid. But they say it's a game intended for two. They have left me out", 10). Yet, although the writer seems implicitly to identify with the ill-treated Caliban, here reconfigured as a creature marginalized for her race, gender and sexual orientation, Namjoshi suggests that no character is ontologically good or bad, but each proves to be part of herself, as the poet claimed during a conference at the Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale": "I remember that when I began *Snapshots* I was fascinated by the irrepressible and unkillable Caliban. It was almost as though I wanted to kill that part of me that was like Caliban. But the person who disapproved of Caliban, namely Prospero, was also a part of me; and was this person who disliked Caliban so thoroughly all that admirable? And then there was Miranda - always fitting in, always conforming - I didn't like her much either, but perhaps she too was part of me?" ("You taught me language, and my profit on it is I can ask questions: A Discussion and Reading based on *The Tempest*", 29 April 2005, Naples).

Writing at the intersection of cultures, at the borders between self and other, Namjoshi blurs any clear distinction between maid and monster: bound by a common childish cruelty, Prospero's 'monstrous' creatures are inextricably related. As he watches them fighting over the possession of a sand castle, Prospero comments: "Caliban howls/ with bitter rage. Not very pretty,/ these little children"(8). Thus de-mythologized in her association with Caliban's monstrosity, Miranda is not the silent and obedient creature 'to be looked at', the 'wonder' praised by Ferdinand (I, ii, 427), but she is rather the rebellious little girl who hates Caliban and poisons her out of envy and rage. It is significant that, in her stereotypical depiction of Caliban as a debased creature, Miranda mimics male imperialistic justifications that "if she had her way, she would rule the island"(14). As is evident in the recasting of Miranda as a hating and vengeful girl who disturbingly mirrors Caliban's bad temper, the crossing of boundaries of self/other contributes to dismantle reassuring given categories. Unable to recognize Caliban as her equal and oscillating between disgust and identification, Miranda represses her homoerotic desire and channels it into violence towards her impossible love object.

However, Namjoshi's Miranda develops a critical and autonomous conscience, deliberately breaking her conventional image of passivity. As she starts to distance herself from her overwhelming father who "made her" a dream, she becomes increasingly aware that "in myself I was nothing"(26). The ambiguity of the line ("he made me a dream")

strengthens Prospero's power over her daughter while it resonates with the usage of dreams in *The Tempest*. By contrast, all the dreams evoked in the poem are invariably shattered by Caliban. Whether she smashes Miranda's "pretty dreams" of getting married (18), or reveals the deceptive nature of Prospero's art ("They dreamed it. There was no storm, no shipwreck. Nobody came", 16), Caliban relentlessly contests and unmasks illusory mental constructions. Likewise, if Miranda still fashions herself as a pure, snow-white creature, who can be "a thing or a *dream*" (34, emphasis added), Caliban's empowering dream of hunting a tiger will serve as an actual instrument of reconciliation. The offer of the tiger as a gift to Miranda attests to an effective gesture of forgiveness and sharing which opens up the possibility for mutual recognition and for the elusion of normative sexuality.

By recasting the Shakesperean relationship of abuse and punishment as female alliance, Namjoshi suggests new alignments which defy the claims of a global sisterhood erasing racial difference. The laugh re-shaping the relation between the two at the end of the poem is pertinently associated by Laura Di Michele in her Afterword with the laugh of the Medusa analysed by Hélène Cixous. Frightening and empowering at the same time, the laugh excludes Prospero and contests his power, prefiguring both the liberation of same sex desire and the dismantling of imperialistic claims. By the end of the poem, an uncomprehending Prospero will not dare claim the girls as his own, finally aware that the two are equally 'monsters', allied against his controlling and divisive patriarchal authority.

In the following poetic sequence, "Sycorax", translated by Serena Guarracino, and published in *Sycorax. New Fables and Poems* (2006), Namjoshi transforms the "blue-eyed hag" into a good witch who, left alone on the island, is deliberately imagined as having bright blue eyes and finally free to "fantasize". Just as Caliban discloses her own version of the story, revealing that there was no tempest and no wreck, Sycorax similarly relates her truth in which not only does she deny her death, but she also outlives Prospero and denounces his lies. As a symbol of Prospero's darker side in the Shakespearean text, Sycorax has some elements in common with him: both arrive on the island respectively with their daughter and son-to-be and both use their magic to control the elements. Yet, by appropriating the centre of the stage in Namjoshi's revision, Sycorax now dominates the narrative through the manipulative power of language. As Guarracino argues in the Translator's notes, the uncanny specular relation between the two is signalled by the depiction of Prospero as "grown into a hoop", thus reusing the Shakespearean description of Sycorax. In addition, this textual subversion dispossesses Prospero of his linguistic mastery and marks the achievement of a verbal agency which will also prefigure the territorial reappropriation of the island.

The recovery of her voice and of her island allows Sycorax to carve a space for her narrative which poetically combines fragments of memories, secrets, and the voices of the animals inhabiting the island. She claims she is part of the place, “whether or not the birds and the beasts acknowledge it”(46), on the grounds that on the island she is able to dream again. Yet, as problems of material survival combine with the “malfunctioning” of her mind producing copies of herself, Sycorax becomes aware of the nature of her real enemy: not Prospero, not Ariel, but the enemy who devours her daily, tarnishing her eyesight and deafening her.

Although Sycorax spitefully distances herself from Prospero, obsessively recalling her destiny of dispossession, she inevitably replicates his concerns about old age and death. Pressed by the passing of time, fearing she may fall into oblivion, Sycorax decides to leave her name on the waters, her “entire inheritance to those who will keep my name from dissolving...”. Yet, just like a child or a fool, she will deny dissolution and try to postpone her impending death by suddenly claiming: “I leave you nothing./ I need it for myself./ Pray precede me./ I have no intention of just as yet dying”(70). It is significant that in desperately seeking to regain control over her life, Sycorax will write her own poem in order to preserve her heritage through writing. If Prospero’s books are consigned to the waters, her poem, fragmented and written on the backs of the sparrows, is similarly entrusted to the sky, engendering a powerfully evocative image of the cultural dissemination of Shakespearean texts. When Sycorax dies, she meaningfully leaves the stage empty for someone to occupy it later. Namjoshi thus suggests the ceaseless work of revision which will fulfil the epilogue’s invocation: “O keep the blue wave from closing / over her head,/ the foam from dissolving, the wind/ from carrying all traces away”.