



## The Dynamic Interplay of Intertextuality and the Anti-Colonial Discourse in Rhys' Short Narrative *The Day They Burned the Books*

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### Abstract

In his *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge tackles the concept of intertextuality from a structuralist point of view. He articulates the referential relationships that link texts to each other. Lodge identifies intertextuality as one of these relationships. Within the context of post colonialism, making numerous references to other texts reflects a writer's quest and his perpetual struggle for power—a matter that echoes Foucault's idea of the interdependence between power, knowledge, truth and discourses. This essay aims at analyzing Jean Rhys' short narrative *The Day They Burned the Books* under the rubrics of intertextuality that highlights the dialectic relationship between Rhys' text on the one hand, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on the other hand. The essay identifies the way Rhys' short narrative is a writing back that is unconsciously motivated by Shakespeare's colonial discourse in his *The Tempest*. Moreover, it clarifies certain elements that bring together Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Jean Rhys' *The Day They Burned the Books*.

**Key words:** Appropriation; Intertextuality; Post colonialism

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*All texts are woven from the tissues of other texts,  
 whether their authors know it or not.  
 (David Lodge, The Art of Fiction)*

### INTRODUCTION

Graham (2011, p.18) in his *Intertextuality* believes that “One cannot understand an utterance or even a written work as it was singular in meaning, unconnected to previous and future utterances or works.” Within this context, one can articulate the fact that intertextuality, which includes under its umbrella appropriation and adaptation, is a process of productivity that highlights how certain work is influenced by a preceding one. In certain occasions, the writer is unconscious that he is drawing on certain canonical work which is part of his literary or cultural knowledge. This productive process establishes a kind of dialogical interaction between the original text and the new born one. This interaction, in fact, is placed within the context of Poststructuralism that permits a network or a web of hermeneutics. Allen's understanding of the process of intertextuality, appropriation, and adaptation may enhance the fact that Shakespeare himself is an adapter of different stories which he borrows from previous texts, social or literary, and locates them in a new context. Drawing on Silvester Jourdain's “A Discovery of the Bermudas”, Shakespeare uses similar materials such as the storm at sea and an uninhabited island.

### DISSCUSION

The English colonial project seems to occupy Shakespeare's consciousness throughout *The Tempest*. In fact, Shakespeare's colonial mentality was enhanced by Europe's rising global power that was motivated by the discovery of new oceanic trade routes which linked Europe to the East and the West Indies. European merchants, Jonathan Gil Harris' *Shakespeare and Literary Theory* explains, were

hungry for direct access to profitable exotic commodities such as gems, species, tobacco, silk, and calico—to set up outposts and factories in the America, Africa, and Asia. These laid the

foundation for several violent centuries of colonialism and empire. (p.190)

Accordingly, trade and its capitalist notion paved the way for colonial expansion. Harris confirms: "Even if England was in Shakespeare's time not yet a global power, it had already succumbed to fantasies and practices that anticipates its later imperialist adventures." (Ibid, p.195)

The island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is described by the characters as the "most desolate", "bare", "fearful country", and "desert." In many ways, the metaphoric depiction and artistic language used by Shakespeare to describe the island signify two dialectical perspectives: First, it is Prospero's island, an island of enchantment and control through supernatural means, and second, it is Caliban's island, an island of rough nature and natural resources exploited by Prospero. Caliban is indigenous to the island, while Prospero, according to the colonial discourse, is a colonizer. This to a certain extent is confirmed by Ania Loomba *Colonialism/ Post colonialism*:

In the tempest, for example, Shakespeare's single major addition to the story he found in certain pamphlets about a Shipwreck in the Bermudas was to make the island inhabited before Prospero's arrival. That single addition turned the romance into an allegory of the colonial encounter. (p.8)

Caliban's ownership of the land is indicated when he says:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from. 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 –  
(I.ii. 332-40)

Shakespeare's colonial consciousness has been, consciously or unconsciously, confronted by writers from West Indies. Rhys' *The Day they Burned the Books* shows the writer's unconscious affectionate contention with Shakespeare for the right to represent the Caribbean's history. She sets the events of her short narrative as well as her other fictional works in the imperial context of West Indies which is part of the Caribbean history. She locates her heroines within such location that enhances their sense of themselves as problematic Caribbean subjects. The events of the story are set in a Caribbean island which is employed as a stage that depicts the struggle between two binary oppositions namely the superior colonizer and the inferior colonized.

Through reading Rhys' fictional works, one can recognize that she neither relinquished her Caribbean identity nor came to think of Europe as her home. On

England, when she spent most of her life she says: "I have never like England or most English people much or let's say I am terrified of them. They are bit terrifying... it's this awful mixture of being very naïve and being very spiteful..." (quoted in Johnson, 2003, p.34) This is paralleled by the way Rhys describes the English colonizer as a "horrid colonial" as well as "ridiculous" in her short narrative. Her Creole background explains her ability to fictionalize the experience of the victimized outsider. Through setting her short narrative in a Caribbean colony, Rhys draws a picture that depicts the direct confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized that are symbolically represented through the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer, which is deeply marked by superiority and inferiority. Rhys portrays Mr. Sawyer as a patriarchal oppressor as well as a colonizer tyrant, who does not only exploit the natives for his benefits, but also treats them with racial and cultural hatred. Mr. Sawyer humiliates his wife and becomes rude to her when he is drunk: "Look at the nigger showing off, ... you damned, long-eyed, gloomy half-caste,..."

The relationship between Prospero and Caliban clearly parallels Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer's relationship. These two relationships echoes the relationship of a master and slave in a sense that the master usually reduces the slave to the level of an object in order to be the subject. In act I, scene ii Prospero's speech about Caliban enhances the master/slave relationship that links the two to each other:

We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,  
Fetch in our wood and serves in office  
That profit us. What ho! Slave! Caliban!

Miranda, prejudiced by her Englishness, describes Caliban as a "villain". She even reduces and humiliates his humanity by using the pronoun "it" in describing him: "Tis a Villain, sir/ I do not love to look on." In other places she describes him as a "savage" who belongs to "vile race."

In *The Day They Burned the Books*, one the leading characters is Mr. Sawyer. He "detested everything about Caribbean and he didn't mind telling you so." Like Prospero he settled in an island he doesn't like. Prospero was "A Prince of power" and the rightful Duke of Milan. He is banished to a remote island after the usurpation of his position at the hand of his brother. Years later Prospero becomes a learned sorcerer and he imposes his dominion over the island and its inhabitants, Caliban and Ariel.

In Rhys' narrative Caliban is represented by the "coloured women" Mrs. Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer tells his wife: "You don't smell right." Mrs. Sawyer's bad smell, according to abusive language of Mr. Sawyer, parallels Caliban's fishy smell in *the Tempest*.

What have we  
here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish:

he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; (II,ii)

Trinclo insists upon a view of Caliban as a “puppy-headed monster” and a thing “half a fish and half a monster.” Such qualities by which Caliban is described intensify his otherness and fix his identity within the context of the exploited colonized. In *The Day They Burned the Books*, Mr. Sawyer, particularly in a dinner party, pulls his wife’s hair to show that it is “not a wig”, an action that “others” his wife to an extent where her humanity is disregarded, and she becomes the object of a “sacred English joke.” In spite of the way he humiliates her, “she never answer[s], not even to whisper,” Though Mrs. Sawyer is “a decent, respectable, nicely educated...”, Mr. Sawyer, motivated by the prejudice of an English colonizer, could not respect her or promote her to the level of an agent who is not merely a receiver of power. Caliban, likewise, is treated as a savage colonized in spite of the fact that he acquired the language of the colonizer. Lacan believes that language forms consciousness. Accordingly, it is supposed that Caliban has the consciousness that would promote him to the level of his master. Yet all the time he is treated as a barbaric cannibal rather than as a civilized human being. This may take the reader to the British imperialist notion of association which indicates the fact that even with acquiring the language of the colonizer; the colonized will never transcend the boundaries of his inferior cultural heritage. In Rhys’ short narrative, the narrator informs the reader that *The Arabian Night* is one Mr. Sawyer’s book that she wants to borrow. *The Arabian Nights* is one of the sources upon which the European’s knowledge about the East is based. According to this source, European’s colonial mentality identified the East within the frame of a stereotypical image that enhances the inferiority of the non-European identity. In fact, the inferiority of the other is represented through two female characters in Rhys’ text, namely, Mrs. Sawyer and Mildred, the servant. Accordingly, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as well as in Rhys’ *The Day They Burned the Books* the non-European’s identity is that one of the inferior other.

Resistance is one of the focal points that distinguish the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Harris believes that Caliban resistance against his European master, Prospero, is indicated through his attempts to rape Marinade. Harris adds that this resistance, which is presented through the lenses of a colonial consciousness, signifies nothing but barbarism (Harris, 2010, p.201). In Fact, Caliban’s attempt to rape Miranda is not an action of resistance; it is rather a stereotypical image of the non-European identity that is fictionalized according to certain perspectives such as exoticism, barbarism, and inferiority. On the part of Mrs. Sawyer, she does not show resistance during the life of her oppressor. She reacts after his death. During his life, she is the

silenced subaltern; however, if one wants to claim that she resists, he would focus mainly upon burning Mr. Sawyer’s books. In fact the true meaning of resistance in Shakespeare and Rhys’ literary texts, is achieved through burning books, the representatives of the source of power.

Books in Rhys’ short narrative as well as in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* indicate three main key words: knowledge, discourse, and power. According to Foucault when the elites of society own channels of knowledge they would impose certain discourse that would regain them power through which they subdue and marginalize the colonized people. Prospero in *The Tempest* gains his magical power and knowledge through books. His magical knowledge enables him to manipulate everything in the island including its weather. As Caliban knows the secret behind Prospero’s source of power, he informs Stefano and Trinculo that the best way that would liberate them from him and help them to take over the island is:

First to possess his books; for without them  
he’s but a sot as I am, nor hath not  
one spirit to command—they all do hate him  
as rootedly as I. Burn but his books (III. ii. 94).

Caliban perceives Prospero’s power and control as a “disease,” he states:

All the infections the sun sucks up  
From bogs, fens, flats, on Prospero fall, and make him  
by inch-meal a disease (II,ii)

Mrs. Sawyer’s resistance is not directed against a colonial figure, but rather against his ideology which embedded within different types of books such as “*Encyclopedia Britannica*, *British Flowers, Birds and Beast*, various histories, books with maps, Froude’s *English in the West Indies* and so on.” She decides that these books will “be sold” while “The unimportant books, with paper covers or damaged covers or torn pages ... are going to be burnt—yes burnt.”

The only book that Eddie saves is Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*. Edward Said in his preface to *Kim* says:

Kim is seeking to find his place in the country in which he was born, while at the same time struggling to find, or create, an identity for himself. “Who is Kim?” “What is Kim?” Kim asks himself at several points in the novel, and although the plot has a loose picaresque structure, being held together by a journey, making it a kind of “road novel”, the theme of Kim’s need to find himself seems to be the backbone of the story.

In his preface Said mainly tackles the colonial discourse which permeates the action of the novel. He tackles also the ambivalent and the hybrid identity of Kim. This hybridity is what makes Kim, as a character, closely similar to Eddie, the Sawyer’s son. Eddie’s blood

is a mixture of two different origins, the European and the creole. Like Kim at the end of his journey toward self-discovery, Eddie's personality is improved by his strong desire to save what is left from the colonial discourse.

Eddie in Rhys' text and Ariel in *The Tempest* meet each other within the context of ambivalent and hybrid identity. Geraldo U. de Sousa in *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounter* explains: "Ariel presents three female roles: A water nymphs, a harpy, and the goddess Ceres. These female roles may seem appropriate to Ariel, a figure so thoroughly androgynous and sexless..." (p.168). Moreover, as we have discussed above, Prospero and Mr. Sawyer can be viewed as representatives of the colonial dogma. Accordingly, while "Ariel is Prospero's agent, carrying out his wishes" (Ibid.). Eddie is his father's agent as he strives, against his mother's will, to save one of the most outstanding postcolonial texts, and thus carry on the colonial ideology of his father that stands against the ideology of his mother.

*The Tempest* ends with the union of Miranda and Ferdinand through a royal marriage. Their marriage functions as a vehicle through which their fathers can serve out their reconciliation—a matter that resembles a kind of political pact between knowledge, represented by Prospero, and power, represented by Alonso. The same political union can be recognized in Rhys' text. In *The Day they Burned the Books* Eddie and the narrator are united through the mixture of their tears' drops, which the narrator considers a union of marriage:

We sat under the mango tree and I was holding his hand when he began to cry. Drops fell on my hand like the water from the dripstone in the filter in our yard. Then I began to cry too and when I felt my own tears on my hand I thought, "Now perhaps we are married," Yes, certainly, now we are married.

In fact, this metaphoric marriage can be seen as a kind of political league. It is a coalition between two parties that belong to the same familial ideology.

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## CONCLUSION

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The colonial and anticolonial discourses bring Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Jean Rhys' short narrative *The Day They Burn the Books* within the circle of the dialectical debate that is marked by call and response. She uses the subjective pronoun "they" in the title of her short story to indicate the concept of solidarity which marginalized people are in need for. Unconsciously, she adopted many fictional priorities from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, namely the physical setting, the prototype of subjugated characters, the motif of burning the books and the concept of superiority and inferiority that draw a line of demarcation between the Self and the Other.

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