

**“SYCORAX ON STAGE”:
THE UNVOICED SHAKESPEAREAN FEMALE OTHER
FINALLY SPEAKS IN SUNITI NAMJOSHI’S *POETRY***

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***Abstract:** The witch has always been the representation of an unspeakable absence. Sycorax embodies all silenced African women, experiencing double patriarchy (a term used by Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka). Associated with the margins, she represented the barbarian Other to European culture. Sycorax de-colonizes the male-dominated world of Prospero: from absence, she is turned into presence, as she constructs her subjective narrative.*

***Keywords:** adaptation, authorship, dialogism, feminism, post-colonialism.*

1. Introduction

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and the character of Sycorax, have been considered the prototypes of post-colonial literature and have been examined in a quite wide-ranging way. In the discipline of post-colonial studies, a number of critics highlight the Caliban – Prospero relationship as the model of the colonizer vs. colonized subject relation. Sycorax is either

taken for the evil Algerian witch, the counter character to Prospero, the ‘white magician’, or, according to feminist and post-colonial criticism, she is seen as the embodiment of the silenced indigenous woman. In this essay, after a contextualization of the figure of Sycorax throughout literary history, I approach Sycorax from a new perspective. Namjoshi’s Sycorax is neither absent nor silenced. Voice has been given to her, along with subjectivity, and thus she is able to narrate her life story. She is no longer evil. The narrator stays with her as with a dying person in his or her last hours. I examine Namjoshi’s Sycorax cycle from both a feminist and a post-colonial point of view and reach the conclusion that Sycorax, the blue-eyed hag, is in fact a colonizer.

This essay discusses the path which Sycorax has followed as a literary character, from being the representation of absence, through her occasional appearance in modern works, to the point at which she is given the agency and authority of narrating her own story. The section focusing on literary history suggests a link between the typically absent figure of the witch in ancient and Renaissance works and the process of othering and misogyny to which the witch often fell victim. In the twentieth century Sycorax has appeared in a number of literary works by post-colonial authors, as well as in films and theatrical productions. Although she is physically present in these works, as in Peter Brook’s *The Tempest*, her figure is still marginal on stage. By contrast, instead of being presented by male characters (Prospero and Ariel) talking about her, the Sycorax character in Namjoshi’s poetry creates her own narration; she becomes the main character in her drama as she delivers her soliloquy, nicely framed in a Shakespearean manner by starting with a prologue and ending with an epilogue.

Born in India in 1941, Namjoshi is an important contemporary post-colonial author who deals with the issue of identity in terms of gender and ethnicity. In her collection of poems and fables, *Because of India* (1989), she defines her identity as “diasporic, Indian lesbian feminist” (quoted in Mann 1997:97) in relation to others’ variously particularized identities. Our identity, according to Namjoshi (1997:97), is not only based on gender, sexual orientation and skin colour, but also on culture, defined by religion and environment, and therefore identity, as such, varies from “place to place and period to period.”

2. Tempestuous Race and Gender Relations

Post-colonial literature offers ample instances of artists living in formerly colonized countries overwriting and rethinking so-called ‘Westernized’ literary history and Lyotardian ‘Master Narratives’. Such works can be shown to possess both post-modern and post-colonial literary features, as they position previously marginalized characters in the focus of the work. These pieces often emphasize the feminist viewpoint in their writing, as seen in the 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (the post-colonial intertextual rewriting of *Jane Eyre*) by Jean Rhys. Similarly, Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (1979) presents an alternative viewpoint to *Othello*. In Aimé Césaire’s work *A Tempest (Une Tempête)* the social status of Prospero, Caliban and Ariel is different in terms of the hierarchical system of colonization. The characters are not now magical beings. Prospero is the white colonizer, Caliban is an African slave, while Ariel is a mulattocharacter living on the Caribbean island. In Césaire’s play the rebellious Caliban condemns Ariel for being a servant of the colonizers. *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) by George Lamming is a collection of essays

that also deconstructs the Shakespearean drama by reconstructing the colonized subjects in the Caribbean region, deprived of their own language and cultural roots.

Although these 'revisited' works all provide an alternative viewpoint to Shakespeare's metanarrative, they do not reflect on the *silenced* characters, such as Sycorax or Prospero's wife. In Shakespeare's drama, these two women characters are never present physically; and information about them is mediated by the main male character, Prospero. While Sycorax's name is mentioned seven times (Harder 2005:127) in the drama, not by any means in positive contexts, Prospero's wife does not even have a name. This female character – as is often the case for women - is defined by her family relationships (Prospero's wife, Miranda's mother) that deprive her not only of voice but also of any independent existence, thus representing absence. Prospero does not have a positive opinion about either of these female characters. In his conversation with Miranda in the second scene of the first act he tells his daughter that his wife was virtuous; however, this is not necessarily Prospero's own opinion, as he is only telling Miranda what his wife had told him, so the information regarding his wife's virtuousness is mediated.

Your mother was a piece of virtue, and /She said You wast my daughter;
and your father / Was Duke of Milan; and thou his only heir
And princess, no worse issued. (*The Tempest* 1. 2.56-58)

The gap that is left by the lack of mother figures is filled by the spirits of the island. Although Miranda's mother is absent, as Stephen Orgel points out, Prospero "several times explicitly, presents himself as incorporating her, acting as both father and mother to Miranda" (1984:4). In

one of the dialogues between Prospero and Miranda, the voyage to the island is described as a “birth fantasy” (Orgel 1984:4).

When I have decked the sea with drops full salt, / Under my burden
groaned: which raised in me / An undergoing stomach, to bear up /
Against what should ensue. (*The Tempest* 1. 2.155-158)

The island provided the possibility of a fresh start for both Prospero and Miranda. The magician and his daughter not only started a new life on the island but also colonized it, throwing Caliban, Sycorax’s son, into servitude. The witch herself was the “victim of banishment.” As Orgel (1998:4-5) notes, the memory of Sycorax is much more present in Prospero’s mind and “she embodies all the negative assumptions about women.” Everything we know about Sycorax is mediated through the memories and stories of Caliban, Ariel and Prospero. She herself does not appear in the action, since she had died well before the narrative time of the play. She was brought to the island from Algiers, as a form of punishment, but it never actually becomes clear what her sins were. As readers, we often give credit to the white magician’s words. “This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child, / And here was left by the sailors. You, my slave, / As you report yourself, were then her servant.” (*The Tempest* 1. 2. 269-271) Probably, it is also due to Prospero’s mistrust in women’s virtue that he tells us that Sycorax’s son was “A freckled whelp, hag-born, not honoured with/ A human shape.” (*The Tempest* 1. 2. 284)

Sycorax is represented as an evil, diabolical witch, a feminine version of Richard III. The reason for such vehement ‘satanization’ does not lie only in Prospero’s obviously misogynistic attitude but, just as in the case of the major vicious character of Richard III, also involves historical and

literary traditions. While the infamous king is a remake of the *Devil* character from the medieval mystery plays, Sycorax is a witch, a person who is always already a marginalized subject. As Montaigne writes: “[w]hat is foreign is that which escapes from a place” (quoted in Purkiss 1996:250). Witches often live in a ‘voluntary’ or ‘forced’ exile, usually close to nature. As Purkiss (1996:250) suggests, they are “always located on the edges, [...] open country or forest,” without being either an acknowledged member of society, like the wise woman or clairvoyant of the village, or even being “part of the social network” (1996:250); the relationship is a problematic one. The stage representation of the witch is inevitably one of invisibility; that is, the aim is to remove her “conceptually and topographically [...] from the centre of dramatic action” (1996:250). Throughout the twentieth century, this marginalisation was often ignored by theatre and film directors alike. In Peter Brook’s 1965 stage version of *The Tempest*, for example, an enormous Sycorax figure appears and gives birth to a grown-up Caliban in a black sweater.

3. From Absence to Presence: The Pre- and Post-texts of *The Tempest*

The source for the character of Sycorax is to be found in classical Greek and Roman texts, such as the myth of the revenging Medea, or Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and equally in contemporary stories of the New World describing witches. As Purkiss (1996:258) argues, Sycorax has much in common with these ancient witches, namely the fact that they are all from North Africa, lunar and man-slaying, and embody “a fear of miscegenation”, which becomes a major source of fear of contamination and impurity in their representation.

The New World, strange and foreign as it may have seemed to the explorers, had to be understood, and the easiest way was to turn to classical texts. The newness of new lands as well as their cultures and peoples had to be assimilated to pre-existing categories. As Purkiss (1996:258) points out, the new knowledge was primarily integrated via classical (literary) texts, “because the classics together with the Bible constituted the master discourses of the period.” But even these classical texts were confusing regarding the “discourse between classical and new world geographies, spectacles and narratives” (1996:258). In most cases, newly discovered lands were seen as idyllic and pastoral, the “home of the deities, chased out of Europe” after the spread of Christianity (1996:258).

The Tempest can be read as a metaphor for encountering the New World. Both Catholic and Protestant explorers, settlers and colonizers found themselves in new lands where Christianity was unknown and indeed unheard of. Native Americans were said to be demon-worshippers, while their religion - which connected the indigenous people to Mother Earth, as the sacred beliefs of pre-historic and pre-Christian Europe had once done – was said to be pagan, barbarian. Thus, the images of the ‘savage Indian’ and the ‘barbarian Other’ from Hellenistic and ancient Roman thought were inevitably merged. We can observe the process of ‘othering’ in Shakespeare’s creation of Sycorax, so that the strange, indigenous, woman Other becomes the witch on the Elizabethan stage (Purkiss 258-262).

Several twentieth-century *Tempest* adaptations do have a Sycorax character physically appearing, but they often fail to challenge the subject relations set by Shakespeare. As Thomas Cartelli (1995 :95) writes, authors such as Césaire “accept positional stereotypes whose only real claim to legitimacy is their continued circulation.” He argues (1995:95) that such

works ironically accept “the play’s limited cast of characters as representative of enduring colonial(ist) configurations, as if Shakespeare had immutably fixed the only available attitudes of master, servant.” In order to overcome the “parasitic relationship” of the post-colonial text to a master narrative it has to reconfigure the “fixed subject positions” (95).

At the same time, in colonial literature, Sycorax is the representation of female subjectivity that is the most problematical of all, and this stems from the fact that post-colonial women are subjected to a ‘double bind’, that is, they experience two forms of alienation and/or ‘othering’: gender and racial. As Abena P. A. Busia points out, “both of these factors are the major metaphors of strangeness within colonial discourse” (84). From whichever perspective we approach the issue of Sycorax’s absence and/or presence, in *The Tempest* or in its rewritings in post-colonial literature, the focus remains on patriarchal conquest over female subjectivity, dramatised in the allegory of conquering the tempestuous island.

The common denominator of Sycorax and her predecessors throughout literature is the patriarchal control that casts female characters into an object position. Being deprived of voice and of the agency of speech, they are cast into the grammatical object position by being talked about but never talking themselves. The major problem with the interpretative rewritings of *The Tempest* is that, as Busia (1989:85) states, regardless of our perspectives of “the colonial encounter, Caliban and Ariel are quintessentially male in their activities and objectives.” Women in the play (Prospero’s wife and Sycorax) exist only in relation to the male characters. Post-colonial female characters are not necessarily absent from the plot physically, as their “prototype Sycorax” is (1989:86), but, even when present, they are deprived of their voice and the chance to tell their own

stories. Usually males talk for them, so their stories are mediated several times, just as Sycorax's is filtered through Caliban, Ariel and Prospero:

This damned witch Sycorax, / For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries
terrible / To enter human hearing, from Algiers, / You know, was
banished. For one thing she did / They would not take her life. Is not this
true ? (*The Tempest* 1. 2. 264-267)

Her sins and her one deed that saved her life remain hidden. It is not only the text about Sycorax that is full of absences/gaps, but, according to Busia (1989:86), she is constructed as being essentially absent from any locus of dramatic action or power. Sycorax's absence on/from the Renaissance stage represents voicelessness, i.e., absence from a discourse in which sexuality and access to language together form the discourse granting access to power. This voicelessness is often a "deliberate unvoicing" (Busia 87). It is, however, often crucial in the representation of post-colonial women. At the same time, the marginal position is not necessarily the negative side of the binary of margin versus centre; it may be a form of resistance to economically oriented culture. More crucially, bell hooks notes that "the margin need not be defined as a place that holds markings of less value. Rather [...] it is a "site of resistance" (quoted in Williams 1989:xvii) to racial and gender oppression, silence, despair and invisibility.

4. Sycorax: The Literary De-colonizer

Suniti Namjoshi has experimented with rewritings of the subject positions in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in two poem cycles entitled *Because of India* (1989) and *Sycorax* (2006). In the first of these, she recreates the figure of Caliban. The traditionally masculine Caliban

becomes a woman and thus the heterosexual encounter between the male savage and the civilized female becomes a lesbian erotic relationship. In the *Sycorax* cycle she reanimates the dead Sycorax. Namjoshi comments on her poems in her "Letter to the Reader". Sycorax returns to the island and tells her own story after Prospero and all the other characters are gone, including Caliban, who also "went with the gods who were only men. It's/what he deserves. He wanted so much/to be like them" (Namjoshi 2006:xi). Sycorax represents presence in Namjoshi's poetry by becoming an author and narrating her own story. Her authorship is emphasized on the one hand by the procession of iconic Western and post-colonial authors, such as Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas and Kamau Brathwaite, whose works all appear as intertexts. On the other hand, Sycorax's activities, such as fantasising, dreaming etc., are also associated with mental creativity.

Like many post-colonial authors, Namjoshi also expresses a certain failure to belong to either the Western or the Eastern world. Namjoshi is of Hindu origin, but was educated in the Western world. S. Mann (1997:96-7) notes that instead of achieving "any idealized sense of belonging to one essentialized culture, nation, or group, or, conversely, to arrive at a universal state," Namjoshi occupies a "third space," an interstitial location between nations and cultures, as theorized by Homi Bhabha (quoted in Mann 1997:98).

Approaching Namjoshi's work from both feminist and post-colonialist perspectives, I argue that Sycorax is a literary de-colonizer. As Barbara Fuchs (1997:46-9) contends, in Shakespeare's age Sycorax might arguably have meant the act of colonization, being the representative of the Islamic world which occupied extensive territories in Europe during the

time of the Turkish Ottoman (Islamic) Empire. In this sense, Sycorax is the first colonizer.

It would be more plausible, however, to interpret Sycorax in Namjoshi's text as a de-colonizer, but not in the traditional sense of the word. She occupies a 'little island' for herself in the ocean of world literature, by being given the voice to tell her own life story. When she gains authority over her own narration by the end of her life, agency is also attributed to her, through the simple act of being able to speak.

Old women do not die easily, nor / are their deaths timely. They make a habit /
of outliving men, so that, as I am still here, / I am able to say clearly that when
Prospero / said he took over an uninhabited island / save for Caliban and the
enslaved Ariel, he lied. (Prologue 1-7)

She uses Prospero's method: claiming something to be one's own property. Whereas in *The Tempest* Prospero out-argues Caliban, claiming the island to be his own, Sycorax does the same in Namjoshi's poetry: "I LIVED ON THAT ISLAND" she announces, "It was my property (at least as much as it was anybody else's)" (Prologue 1). Mahadevan-Dasgupta notes that Namjoshi's Sycorax "is an assertion of identity and rights", by her claim that the island is hers. But more importantly, by the act of claiming a piece of land as her own, she applies the mechanism of the Austenian speech act. Ownership is reversed by a simple linguistic utterance: "mine". Sycorax de-colonizes the island by de-constructing the ownership relations of the piece of land as well as the Shakespearean text. Ironical as it may seem, the line points to the mechanism used by the colonizers in appropriating lands.

The excerpt from the prologue is arguably a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, since in this case the text does not *overwrite* the first one (as in the case of a palimpsest), but while revealing the host text, it also adds to it, thus forming a dialogic relationship, resulting in an inverted version of Prospero's lines being given by Sycorax. More credit can be given to Sycorax's words than to Prospero's (as far as her life story is concerned), since in Shakespeare's play Prospero talks about her in a mediated way, in the third person singular, but in Namjoshi's text she tells us her own narrative, in the first person singular.

The rich intertextual nature of this poem cycle is connected on the one hand with authorship, while it results in a number of linguistic modifications in comparison with the host text. The poem cycle or rather mono-drama is framed by two pieces, a prologue and an epilogue, the same framework that we find in many Shakespearean dramas. The choice of mono-drama as generic category for this text is plausible, as in Namjoshi's work Sycorax takes over Prospero's role: she becomes the subject, with agency, and all the other characters become objects, by being talked about. The absence of Sycorax and the presence of the Shakespearean characters are both reversed.

The poem sequence alludes both to Western European and American poets such as Sylvia Plath and Dylan Thomas and to post-colonial authors. Some of the allusions are overtly presented in the text, as is the line: "Ariel is, perhaps checking his reflection in yet another pool" (Prologue 17-18). The allusion to the mythological Narcissus brings sexuality into the focus of this particular piece. Ariel in Shakespeare's play is an androgynous creature: there is no reference to his or her sex. As Sycorax is absent from the Shakespeare play, so the specific gender of some characters, such as Ariel,

is missing. Referring to the Greek mythological story in which Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection introduces the topic of same-sex attraction. Ariel's being a "type of a gay man" is revealed explicitly in a later line (Ariel 1).

A somewhat less conspicuous reference is Sycorax's malfunctioning mind:

One day my mind malfunctioned. / It made copy after copy /of me as I am, / So I
kicked my mind. / It then produced copies /distanced in time./ It said to me, 'You
may speak /to the good witch Syco / at the age of five'. (Copies 1-9)

This stanza recalls Kamau Brathwaite's poems. In these few lines Sycorax tells us that it was only her earlier mind that acted like a muse to Brathwaite (Gowda 1994:691). Although neither Brathwaite nor his poem sequence is mentioned explicitly, the allusion clearly points to the conception of the poems, allowing for a self-referential poem.

The intertextual references to Sylvia Plath are both overt and covert and are closely linked to the issue of Sycorax's authority in the work. Her blue eyes and blonde hair make her similar to Sylvia Plath, though only in appearance.

It's not much fun meeting copies of earlier selves. One knows what they
know. And their stunned disbelief when they look at one is not always
flattering. But the other day, that erratic computer, my meandering mind,
produced a copy of my mother: Syco The Dam, also blonde, and blue-
eyed, but twenty years older, and also engaged in taking leave of her
senses. I asked her—something... Perhaps I asked ... But it's no use. Her
hearing was the first to go. She hears voices, of course. Always has done.
(*Copies* 23-31)

In this passage Sycorax starts a dialogue with her earlier selves. At one and the same time, this not only refers to Brathwaite (erratic computer) and to Plath's appearance (also blonde and blue-eyed) but is a brief and humorous summary of the otherwise serious issue of female authorship. In the cases of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, the anxiety of authorship appears, something which is even more applicable when it comes to post-colonial writers rewriting so-called master narratives. Sycorax - as their sister or daughter in authorship - turns to her predecessors in vain, since none of them can answer her, as they themselves both took leave of their senses when they committed suicide.

Namjoshi inserts an almost word for word intertext to Plath's poem *Daddy*. In *Physicality*, Sycorax says: I am the old woman, who lived in a shoe who had so / many children she didn't know what to do because they were / all starving to death (*Physicality* 7-9). Similarly, in Plath's poem, we have the lyrical I also lived in a shoe: You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot (*Daddy* 1-3). Besides the apparent similarity between the two excerpts, there are also some important differences between the two poems. In both cases the lyrical "I" was kept silent by certain authorities, i.e., they were absent from the public arena, but while the authority appears explicitly in *Daddy* (being the despotic father figure), in *Physicality* the authority is not necessarily one single person. The oppression appears not only in the form of patriarchy, as in *Daddy* ("lived in a shoe", but also in the form of poverty: Sycorax "had so / many children she didn't know what to do because they were / all starving to death." (*Physicality* 7-9) At this point, the Sycorax-poem and *Daddy* are involved in a dialogic relationship. The subjectivities composed by both Plath and Namjoshi are silenced by a patriarchal authority: one is *Daddy*, the other is

the imperial power of the colonizers, represented by the Shakespearean figure of Prospero.

Besides the intertexts, Namjoshi uses her witty feminist parody and eroticized grammar to subvert the masculine and misogynistic language of the colonizers. Her verse goes on as follows: “I am Old Mother Hubbard, who lived in a cupboard, / who couldn’t give her dog a bone, because she needed it for soup and / had gnawed on it herself” (*Physicality* 9-11). In the web of intertextual references to literary icons, a few lines from the seventeenth-century nursery rhyme *Old Mother Hubbard* crop up. The allusion takes part in the textual playfulness, strengthening the image of being enclosed in a private sphere (“lived in a cupboard”), which refers to a kitchen, which is usually associated with feminine roles and to the fact that, for centuries, women could only occupy this private sphere and were excluded from public life.

Words expressing creative mental functioning, such as: “fantasize”, “dream”, and “inscribe”, make Sycorax the symbol of creativity. Such mental activities are associated with creativity, especially since Romanticism. According to M. H. Abrams (1934:ix) for instance, poets of that era used the dreams they had had under the influence of different narcotics, such as opium, as raw material for their poems. At the same time, Alethea Hayter (1988:334) notes that opium alone might not have been enough to create a poem such as those of the Romantics. In her view, both a tendency to day-dream and an ability to recall that trance-like state of mind and communicate the images seen in the trance are crucial in the conception of a poem. As for Sycorax’s creative powers and authorship, the expressions mentioned above make the poem sequence self-referential.

Finally, we may interpret Sycorax's words as a reflection on the voice she has gained. The poem cycle, being a reflection on artistic creativity and defiance, even in the time of old age, is a plausible path for our understanding, given the line: "I am not going quietly into that good night, am I?." (Namjoshi 8) This line is a paraphrase of Dylan Thomas' poem *Do not go gentle into that good night*. Both authors urge their lyrical subjects to make their voice heard, even when the time of death is close. The difference between the two lines lies in their modalities. While the title line in Dylan Thomas' poem is a command to the lyrical I to bravely accept death but reject silence, the line as asked by Sycorax is a question, as Sycorax cannot be sure whether her words - the fragmented poetry - she wrote on the sparrows' backs would ever be read by anyone; she can only hope for this.

5. Conclusion

This paper has given a brief overview of the Sycorax and / or witch figures in world literature. As we have seen, witches in history, like Sycorax herself, have always been represented as the marginalized 'Other', thus leading to their absence, or at least voicelessness, in master narratives such as *The Tempest*. If *The Tempest* is the dramatization of imperial dominance and the allegory of colonization, then this poem cycle is the dramatization of a post-colonial self, struggling for the authorship represented by telling one's life story.

In Namjoshi's cycle, Sycorax appears as a lonely old lady who understands the whisper of the wind and the song of birds. She tells her story at the end of her life. Through her authorship, she has de-colonized Prospero's universe by claiming *his* island as *hers*. Her authorship is

reinforced by intertextual references to iconic figures among both Western and post-colonial authors. Her dreams and fantasies are written in fragments, just like post-(modern)-colonial text, and are enscribed on the backs of sparrows, who are willing to take Sycorax's word for it that she has always been present in our cultural memories.

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