



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DECENTRALIZING THECENTRE: JULIE TAYMOR'S RE- PRESENTATION OF *THE TEMPEST*

V.S. SUJITHA

Assistant Professor

St.Joseph's College, Irinjalakuda

Thrissur, Kerala.



ABSTRACT

Adapting a literary work in to a film is a complex process as it is the transformation verbal language into visual language, which consists of visual and verbal signifiers. I signifiers in the visual medium convey more concrete signifieds which makes it a power medium to convey or question ideologies prevalent in the society. Our society which basically phallogocentric, is constantly engaged in the activity of identity creation. This he it to perpetuate the laws of patriarchy. Literature and films are two powerful mediu through which these notions are propagated. Both these streams make use of their o signification systems to construct identities. In patriarchal construction, woman is alw; regarded as the 'Other', the passive ones whose value lies in their virginity and th reproductive power. William Shakespeare, one of the great dramatists, too has follow this pattern. His play *The Tempest* revolves around a male character Prospero and i identity of other characters lies in relation to this male character.

Julie Taymor's movie *The Tempest* can be regarded as a re- reading of Shakespeare's pl She brings in a major change in her adaptation. She changed the gender of the m character- thus Prospero becomes Prospera. Instead of a father/patriarch – daugh relationship, the movie highlights a mother- daughter relationship. By doing this, Tayn challenges the power –hierarchies associated with the concept of gender. The gen; roles are closely associated with the power structures prevalent in a society. This pap analyzes the difference between the power structures in Shakespeare's play and Taymc movies.

Keywords: Gender, Power Structure, Film, Literature

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When a verbal text is transformed into a visual text, the process entails many complications. The transition is not an easy one. It is not possible to accommodate each and every part of the verbal text. The director has to decide what the key points of the story are; what are the points that might help to establish the setting and atmosphere; which all characters are necessary to carry on the story and which all aspects have to be modified in order to accommodate it within the scope of visual text. If the verbal text is converted into a

movie without any change, then the outcome will be disastrous. As Virginia Woolf says in "The Movies and Reality": "Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples" (Bluestone 22).

When a film is based on a literary work, though it might be following the story line of the text, it might create a different effect. At times it pleases but most of the times it displeases the spectators who come up with a comparison between the verbal text and its film adaptation. Usually such comparisons are brought in to show that the film was not able to capture the real spirit of the literary text and hence is inferior to the text. George Bluestone discusses this problem in his work *Novels into Film*. According to him the comprehension of any literary text is purely subjective; it varies from reader to reader. The director is also a reader trying to present the literary text through the medium of visual signs. It will definitely incorporate his/her own perception and analysis.

...when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel... he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel- the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from the language and, like heroes of a mythic legend have achieved a mythic life of their own.... the filmist becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right. (62)

Bluestone further supports his point by quoting Bela Balzas who too has analyzed the relationship between a literary text and its adaptation. He says that "...while subject, or story, of both works is identical, their content is nevertheless different" (Stone 62). It is this different content that has been presented by the director through film medium.

The Tempest by William Shakespeare, which is quite popular among the literary critics, has also been a favourite subject for many film makers. It has been adapted by different directors- some maintained the original story and characters and the others just took the basic plot line but presented them in whole new situations. In 1908, Percy Stowe directed a silent film *Tempest* which was of 10 minutes duration. Fed M. Wilcox brought out a science fiction *Forbidden Planet* based on this play in 1956. In 1960, again the text was adapted by George Schaefer. In 1979, a movie directed by Derek Jarman *Tempest* came out. It was a homoerotic presentation of Shakespeare's play which portrayed a Prospero who takes immense pleasure in exploiting his servants. In 1980, BBC came out with another adaptation. In 1982, Paul Mazursky again brought the play on screen. Though the title of the movie was *The Tempest*, it was set in a modern age with modern characters, situation and language. Only the basic plot is adapted. In 1991, another experimental movie *Prospero's Books* by Peter Greenway appeared with Prospero as the author of *The Tempest*. In 1992, Leon Garfield came up with *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*. Jack Bender in 1998 presented the story in the background of Civil War. In this version, Gideon Prosper/ Prospero is Southern slave- owner.

Julie Taymor's film version of this renowned play in the year 2010 brought in a drastic change by transforming the central character Prospero, a male into Prospera, a female. Though this variation has been tried on stage, it was brought in to a movie for the first time by Taymor. Again in the stage adaptations, only the gender changes but the power structure and the authoritative voice of Prospero remains. Taymor brought a change by shifting the power dynamics and depicting Prospera as more of a mother than a ruler. Her adaptation belongs to the category of 'Commentary' as discussed by Geoffrey Wagner. According to him such adaptations are those "...where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect...when there has been a different intention on the part of the film- maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation" (224). Taymor remains faithful to the text. The main change brought by her is the gender change of the main character but this change effects the meaning generated at different levels. Her presentation can be regarded as a modern reading of the text.

The movie begins with a close-up shot of a sand castle. The background is blurred so as to emphasize the castle. Suddenly it starts raining and the sand slowly dissolves, revealing a palm and then Miranda. She is shown from a low angle establishing her importance and the dissolving of the castle in her hands indicates the loss she had a long time back. The sound of thunder is heard and Miranda looks towards the sea. The camera

moves accordingly and from her angle the audience get to see a ship caught in a storm getting tossed on the sea. The ship looks puny. Then the scene shifts to chaotic situation within the ship which reveals the helplessness of the people within it. They are screaming, slandering and some are praying. They look totally powerless in that situation. The scene suddenly shifts to a woman standing on the top of a rock wearing a black robe and having a staff in her hand screaming at the top her voice trying to control the elements of nature. She is presented from various angles. The low angle makes her look very powerful. There is an extreme close up shot of her face which reveals the strain she is undergoing. Taymor has mentioned that this scene reveals the power of nature.

At the start of the drama, one of the major themes of the play is posited: Nature versus Nurture. In one brief ideograph, civilization, represented by the simple form of a child's sandcastle, is destroyed in a downpour. The perilous storm that destroys the ship also establishes this theme, by exposing the fact that the lofty position of the King of Naples on board is rendered meaningless when Nature is in control. The irony is that it is Prospera who, at this moment in time, is in control of Nature. (Rough Magic 469)

In the play, Miranda runs towards her father, but in the movie the father figure is replaced with the mother figure. Prospero has been transformed into Prospera. The power structure discussed in the last chapter gets inverted here. At the top of power structure we have a female.

Miranda pleads to her mother to stop the storm. It seems as if Prospera is in a trance and voice of Miranda brings her back to reality. At once she makes the storm subside. Prospera too replies in the same manner as Prospero but it is not an authoritative voice of a patriarch that we get to hear. Instead, the spectators get to see the worries of a mother. She seems to be sure of her action but at the same time is considerate about her daughter's feelings. She tries to console Miranda as a good parent would do. Unlike Miranda of the play, Miranda of the movie seems to be confident. She is not afraid of her mother. The scene depicts a strong mother- daughter bonding. As Taymor comments, "It is the mother's protective love for her daughter, Miranda, that fuels the tempest she has conjured" (Taymor, 166).

Prospera further informs Miranda the injustice that was done to her by her own brother Antonio. Here Taymor has added a part which is not there in the original text- the past of Prospera. Prospera explains to Miranda

Twelve year since, thy mother held the dukedom of Milan and its princely powers....who long ago was wife to him who ruled Milan most liberally; who with a staunch hand towards me gave license to my longer hours in pursuit of hidden truths, of power contained within some elements to harm or heal. On thy father's death, authority was conferred as was his will to me alone.

Along with the narration of Prospera, the scene reveals a Prospera who is engaged in some kind of scientific study and is busy with her equipment. The husband/ ruler looks at her from behind her in an approving gesture. He is not looking 'down' at her as if she is inferior to him. He is placed at her same level showing that he considers her as an equal and respects her individuality too. Prospera though is engaged in study is not oblivious of her duties. She is also looking after her child in midst of her work. This scene establishes Prospera as an individual who is not merely a 'wife' or 'queen'. Virginia Mason Vaughan comments in her essay "Miranda, Where is Your Mother?: Female Prosperos and What they tell Us" that

... Taymor's *Tempest* offers a feminist critique of patriarchal power by providing Mirren's Prospera a backstory to explain her status as Duchess of Milan.... This narrative is spoken as the screen shows flashbacks of Prospera at her experiments and of Sebastian and Antonio lurking in the palace's dark corners as they wait to entrap her. (350)

This scene presents a contrast to Shakespeare's characters. In his play Prospero's wife has only one function to perform and that is to give him a legitimate heir. It seems as if she didn't do anything other than that and hence Prospero doesn't think it is important to remember her or talk about her to his daughter. She has been assigned only a passive role in the text which goes along with the general thoughts of the Elizabethan era. Her individuality, her capabilities, her likes and dislikes have been totally ignored and hence she has been denied

an identity by the author. She is portrayed as a mere machine who follows the rules of the patriarchal society. She is 'virtuous'- "Thy mother was a piece of virtue" (1.2.55) - and has given him an heir- she has fulfilled the duties assigned to her by the phallogocentric society. Prospero has instilled the same values in Miranda, who believes that woman is beneath man; a woman should remain virgin till she is married and that the ultimate value of a woman lies in giving an heir to her husband. His 'tutoring' has reproduced the woman whom every man desires to have.

Contrary to Prospero's wife, in the film we have Prospera- a person who pursues her interest but without neglecting her duties towards her husband and daughter. The husband of Prospera- the Duke of Milan is also presented in a new light. Unlike Prospero, the Duke of Milan presented in the movie respects his wife's decisions and supports her pursuit of knowledge. He seems to be standing behind her giving space to her and her interests. Instead of an authoritative husband, we see a husband who is affectionate, kind, sensitive and sees her as a capable individual and not a machine to obey his orders.

Julie Taymor has through her version of *The Tempest* presented to us a modern concept of family where the husband and wife have an equal space. In Shakespeare's presentation, which reflects the point of view of the society of his time, wife is beneath her husband and totally absent outside the family circle. A daughter who grows up in such a circumstance immediately takes in her inferior position and admires her father and not her mother. Helen Mason in her work *The Thin Woman* analyses Lacan's concept of identity formation in relation to the presence or absence of phallus.

For Lacan the phallus stands for this moment of division in which subjectivity is constituted (Rose, 1982).... That is, the phallus has the 'privileged function of ...representing human identity' (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986). It signifies the effect of the signifier, of language or the Symbolic order in creating subjectivity (Lacan, 1958). And being constituted only in relation to the phallus, identity is also profoundly gendered. (17)

Lacan believes that a male child who enters the Symbolic order propagates the Law of the father whereas a female child recognizes her role as the object or the 'other' (Hayward, 198). "It should be recalled that woman, for Lacan, is not viewed as a subject in her own right but rather as an object upon which the male desire is written" (Filou, 77). Hence it is not surprising that Miranda has constituted her identity in relation to Prospero in the Shakespearean version and feels that it is her duty to uphold the principles passed onto her by her father.

The family Taymor has introduced is of a more stable nature. Instead of totally neglecting the father figure, though briefly presented, the Duke of Milan has been presented in a positive light. He is not afraid of his wife stepping out of the boundaries set by the society. Prospera recalls how he was a good king "who rule Milan most liberally" and used to support her when she was engaged in her studies. He is depicted as a sensible king and husband who doesn't have a lust for power. His confidence in his wife is depicted through his last action of conferring his authority on his wife after his death. He could have passed it onto his brothers or some male members but instead of that he chooses Prospera as he believes in her abilities to be a fair ruler. There is no protest against it as the councilors seem to be supporting her which again depicts a society which is not afraid of having a woman at the top of power structure.

Prospera's brother Antonio becomes greedy for power and he uses her own study to tarnish her image and turn people against her. Prospera tells Miranda how he told people that "His sister (is) a practiser of black arts, a demon not a woman, nay a witch. And full knowing that others of my sex have been burned for no less". This shows how by evoking a common image of a witch, a patriarchal construction, he reconstructs her identity. Her interest in her studies makes her different from other women and perhaps this 'difference' was not digested by the male community. As soon as Antonio tells the councilors that she is a witch, they are ready to accept it as the truth. This perhaps is also a criticism of the beliefs held by the patriarchal society, especially the Elizabethan society. James I of England had brought out a study on the witches titled *Daemonologie*. The women who had strong ideas and tried to move away from the conformities of the patriarchal society were labelled as witches. Many were tortured and burned on stakes to please the society which had internalized the

inferior/passive position of women. Taymor has made use of this concept to show why Prospera was dethroned. It was not her lack of efficiency that led to it but the conspiring and vile nature of her brother.

Another interesting difference between the character portrayals of Prospero as a ruler by Shakespeare and Prospera as a ruler by Taymor is their attitude towards their duties. Prospero, in the play, tells Miranda

I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which, but by being so retir'd,
O'er-prized all popular rate, in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature. (1.2.89-93)

Prospero was so lost in his studies that he totally neglected his duties as a Duke. It was Antonio who executed Prospero's duties. Still Prospero blames him for becoming greedy and making Prospero's men as his men: "...new created/ The creatures the creatures that were mine, I say, or chang'dem..." (1.2.82-83). Taymor's Prospera is not an irresponsible ruler like Prospero. Though she was immersed in her studies, had a daughter to look after, she is shown in the flashback to be engaging in the activities of the state. She is shown as sitting with her councilors discussing matters. Instead of neglecting her responsibilities, she moves forward to take their entire burden. She expects Antonio to help her just as the other councilors would do but her brother takes it as an opportunity to acquire power. Prospera, in the film, is the rightful ruler from whom her position was snatched away but Prospero in the play does not fit into the position of a good ruler. So Prospera acquiring her position back looks more justified than Prospero acquiring the same as negligence of one's duty is a key factor which led to his dethronement whereas in the case of Prospera, it is gender discrimination.

Taymor presents Prospera and Miranda living within the cell which is situated within the earth. The cell, which contains Prospera's lab equipments, her books, a wheel, tables and a bed looking like a part of ship, resembles the dark womb of mother. The walls are unpolished and are without a particular structure. There is a darkness within the cell but it is not a terrifying one but a comforting one. With the help of some soft lights Taymor has created a cozy atmosphere within the room. The mother and daughter are safely lodged within it, away from the harsh world outside. Another room in front of this cell has a different construction. The walls have been painted white but still maintain their rough exterior. There are two staircases leading to a door above. This room also contains a dark pool in the shape of a demi-moon. The inner room can be equated with the inner world of women which is accessible only to women. The outer room represents a world where there is a mix of inner and outer world- a mix of black and white. The door above is a door to the external world. This can also be equated with Freud's notions of 'Unconscious', 'Pre-conscious' and 'Conscious.'

The Conscious level consists of the processes which come within the normal awareness of a person, at a given time. The Pre-conscious consists of memories that could be recalled with little effort. The conscious contains ideas, memories and images which are not accessible to the conscious mind under ordinary conditions. Later, he realized that the Unconscious was not only the area of repressed memories, but was the receptacle of deep instinctual desires, which try to find expression in socially acceptable ways. (Silva, 187)

In the movie, the external world can be equated to the Conscious; the outer cell to the Pre-conscious; and the inner dark cell to the Unconscious. Thus the inner cell represents the latent desires and dreams of these two central women characters- Prospera and Miranda. It is a world of their own.

The island with all its features - forests, pools and cliffs – can also be considered as a contrast to the closed and dark rooms of Milan's castle. When Prospera's narration in the flashback takes the spectators through the dark rooms of the castle we see Antonio conspiring against his sister along with Alonso and Sebastian.

These brief shots of Milan's claustrophobic built space establish a contrast between European power politics, dominated by the masculine figures of Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, and the sunlit vistas of Prospera's island. Although her underground cave features the 'brave utensils' she needs for scientific

experimentation, as the characters wander around the island from one landscape to another, shots of lava beds, ironwood forests, standing pools, and ocean-washed cliffs create a sense of openness and possibility. This is Prospera's world, which, like the half-moon pool of water near her cell, is gendered female. (Vaughan 350)

The island in a way is the world of women, where nothing is under any constraints or has to follow any artificial structures. Everything retains its naturalness unlike the artificial environment of Milan.

Taymor showcases a strong mother-daughter relationship. In the play, though Prospero repeatedly mentions that whatever he has done is keeping Miranda in mind, most of his actions contradict it. In the film version, Taymor presents a mother who not only is a strong and powerful character fighting against the injustice done towards her and her daughter but also a compassionate mother for her daughter. When she talks to Miranda, though Taymor has used the same lines from the text, Helen Mirren (who plays the character of Prospera) has presented it in a new dimension. It is not the outrage of a monarch that Miranda hears but the warning given by a concerned mother about the treacherous world outside. Helen Mirren very skilfully combines the toughness of a ruler and tenderness of a mother in her acting. She instead of imposing values on Miranda becomes a role model to be followed. Taymor has mentioned in an interview: "I think what you get with Helen's performance is this unbelievably complex woman who's both powerful and vulnerable, has an incredible maternal side to her, which is very unique, to have this mother-daughter relationship" (Yamato).

In the play, though Miranda is the daughter, most of the time she is also a subject who is forced to follow her king Prospero. In the film Prospera and Miranda do not share such a power dynamics. This is evident from the way Miranda interacts with her mother. In the beginning though she is pleading to her mother to "allay" the storm, the defiant look on her face contradicts her pleading tone. She is quite sure of her decisions. When Prospera narrates the past events, Miranda demands to know how her past is related to the present tempest. Instead of subduing her, Prospera seems to be reasoning with her, trying to convince her.

Prospera's inner strength and a strong sense of identity is displayed throughout the movie. When Miranda asks her "But are you not my mother?" , she replies confidently "The same". When Miranda in the play asks Prospero the same question, he instead of giving a direct answer talks about his wife's fidelity and virtuous nature implying that all women are not virtuous. In the movie, the topic of fidelity or virtue, values of patriarchal society are not presented. Instead of a doubtful Prospero, we see Prospera who is quite sure of herself. This quality is displayed by Miranda too.

Taymor by changing the sex of the main character is challenging the gender hierarchies. In the patriarchal society, father is assumed as the center: "*The Tempest* along with Shakespeare's other late romances, likewise participates in a conservative reestablishment of the father as the lynchpin of society, burying the mother and validating patriarchy" (Penuel, 115). Prospero takes up the role of both father and mother which makes the presence of a mother figure inessential. In the film, Taymor displaces this patriarchal structure by placing a woman at the center. This displacement questions patriarchy. Miranda brought up under a mother seems more confident and matured than the Miranda described in the text, who naively follows her father's instructions. In the scene where Prospera and Miranda confront Caliban, Miranda too participates. She tells Caliban: "Abhorred slave/ which any print of goodness wilt not take/ being capable of all ill! I pitied thee/ took pains to make thee speak". In the text, these lines are uttered by Prospero while Miranda remains as a passive listener. Caliban breaks Prospero's trust when he tries to destroy the 'virginity' of Miranda- an important value which makes her a valuable commodity. Though it is her body that Caliban tried to violate, it appears like a crime done towards Prospero, his tutor. Miranda, the victim, never gets a chance to react or respond. In the movie, Miranda stands along with her mother and expresses her repulsion towards Caliban. It can also be noticed that Prospero makes use of this violation as a reason to keep Caliban as a servant whereas Prospera's only intention is to keep her daughter safe. Taymor in her essay "Rough Magic" mentions this difference:

Prospera's protective feelings for her daughter are quite different from those of a father. There is no male ego involved, no competition with the young suitor, and no "honor" defiled as in most

attempted rape scenarios. But instead, Prospera's actions are a direct result of her knowing intimately what Miranda is experiencing as a young virginal woman and where the dangers lie. (472)

Taymor by giving an identity to Prospera which is different from the one bestowed by the male-centered society, she is creating a "counter – universe" as explained by Lenz

Restoring women to the plays, feminist critics call attention to the importance and intensity of female friendship in Shakespeare. They find that woman's shared conversation, mutual affection, and extraordinary intimacy create a kind of female subculture apart from man's world.... They delineate a female "counter- universe" that is a repository for styles, attitudes, and values sharply contrasting with those of the dominant male order. (5)

Prospera and Miranda together constitute a world different from that of the patriarchal order. The phallogocentric society expects woman to be passive, submissive, chaste, unsure of themselves, lacking decision making skill, unable to defend themselves and expecting men to take care of them. Taymor's women characters break all these notions. They are independent, sure of themselves, active, not succumbing to any pressure, self-reliant and taking care of themselves. Even their attires indicate their deviation from the normally accepted notions. When Prospera is introduced for the first time engaged in creating a tempest, she wears a black robe. Taymor has mentioned that she made this garment to reflect the inner condition of her main character.

In essence Prospera herself is a volcano, burning from within, primed to erupt and destroy, but ultimately to redeem and regenerate.... Her magic robe is made up of shards of blue/black volcanic rock placed in diagonal flows on a large conical space. It is more a sculpture than a robe. Her everyday tunic is of natural indigo-dyed fabric, stitched together in layers, also like a lave flow. (Rough Magic 447)

With short hair and robe which rejects the confinements of her gender, Prospera appears a liberated woman who is her own master. In the flashback, we see Prospera wearing a tight corset as was required by the customs of the land. Her free spirit is imprisoned within that costume. On the island which is her own world, she created a garment according to her need. Even Miranda appears in a white dress with a tomboy look. Her physical agility sets her apart from the fragile Miranda in the text.

Towards the last when Prospera is going to face her enemies and reclaim her position, she asks Ariel to fetch her "skirt and bodice" from her cell, so that she can present herself as Prospera, Duchess of Milan. While Ariel is tightening her dress, there is a sad look on her face and she says "So, so, so". The repetition of 'so' three times in varying tones conveys a lot about her mental state. First 'so' seems like an acceptance of reality. She knows that she has to leave the island and be back in Milan. The second 'so' with a falling tone conveys her immense sorrow. It shows she is not happy to leave as the island had provided her with freedom that was not possible in Milan and hence there is a dilemma within her. The last 'so' in an affirmative tone shows a confident Prospera who has decided her course of action. Unlike Prospero who is happy to have his position back, Prospera is sacrificing her freedom for her daughter's happiness. The grudging look she gives Caliban towards the end, who now will be the sole authority, depicts her inner struggle.

The concept of power struggle depicted in the movie is totally different from that portrayed in the play. Prospero keeps on constructing the identity of other characters- his brother, Sycorax, Caliban and Miranda- so that he can have a control over these characters and hence maintain his 'rightful' position at the top of power structure. He is afraid of losing his position that leads him create the 'Others'. Antonio is wrong as he usurped his brother's position; Sycorax is evil because she practiced black magic (unlike his white magic), and her son Caliban is evil because he is illegitimate and born to Sycorax. Thus Prospero establishes his position by establishing the faults of others. In the case of Prospera, this struggle is absent. She does not construct Sycorax as her opposite. She is not afraid of losing her power. Her daughter's well-being and future, and claiming her dukedom back are the only concerns of Prospera. In the movie, the reaction on Prospera's and Miranda's face when they go to meet Caliban depicts a fear they have within them. This fear elevates the position of Caliban. He is almost an equal.

Taymor has successfully disrupted the structure that Shakespeare created through his work. By introducing Prospera, she destroyed the center based on gender. Though Prospera is powerful she is not dominating other characters like Miranda, Caliban or Ariel. Her conversations with Ariel reminds us of the conversations between the mothers and their sons. Though she rebukes him, it is not the voice of an autocrat. It is as if she is chiding him for not following her instructions. Her role as a ruler and a mother is presented in a balanced manner. Neither of them override the other. Though her women characters are trapped within the modes of patriarchal language(as she has remained loyal to the original), within that discourse they have created their own space.

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