



BEYOND DUALISM: HUMANS AND NATURE IN A RHIZOMATIC FRAMEWORK IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* presents prismatic approaches for human beings focusing on the representation of humanity's relation with Nature. This article explores three central dimensions: how the play explores the tension between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, how Prospero, Ariel and Caliban embody various mindsets of human interaction with the natural world, and how its portrayal of reciprocity between humans and nature addresses the contemporary eco-critical debates. The study primarily argues that Shakespeare presents nature as a reciprocal force both generous and reactive while the characters in the play reflect humanity's potentiality along with triad of responses towards Nature i.e., eco-phobia, exploitation and integration. By interweaving ecological concerns with human behavior, *The Tempest* suggests that human survival depends upon their fulfilling collective ethical responsibility in treating nature neither as master nor as an enemy nor as a servant but as an existential partner in a calibrated ecological existence.

Keywords: *Humans, Nature, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Rhizome*

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1. Introduction

Literature reflects humans and nature on a broader ecological landscape which is part and parcel for their existence on the earth. The relationship between humans and nature has long been central to literature. Eco-critical study of environment in literature aims at possible solutions for the improvement of the contemporary environmental issues and examines the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Keeping in view the debates of anthropocentrism vs biocentrism, some questions arise: who is the most beneficiary of Nature? What is the behavior of Nature with humans? Is Nature ruling humans? More or less, it appears that the general representation of nature in literature is friendly for humans as they have been more enjoying the benefits of nature than any other creatures do on the globe and that nature is not ruling humans. No doubt, hundreds thousands of human beings have perished by calamities which Alfred Tennyson calls nature 'red in tooth and claw.' However, to some extent this ferocity of nature can also be attributed to humans' own misalignment with nature. It cannot be denied that nature plays most of its role as benevolent, beneficent and bounteous friend to humans. With this rationale, the study argues to create and conserve a balanced and harmonious relation between humans and nature as portrayed in *The Tempest*. The play suggests that it entirely depends upon humanity to generate reciprocal relation with nature by their genius and a positive approach. Following these perspectives, in this article, Prospero has been presented as humans in general, Ariel is the representative of human genius, optimistic, active and progressive facet while Caliban is the representative of sluggish, passive and regressive side of humans.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a compelling site for ecological inquiry. Ecocriticism, as the study of how literature represents the environment, engages with debates such as anthropocentrism versus biocentrism and explores whether nature exists primarily for human beings' benefit or as an independent force with intrinsic value. In this context, *The Tempest* dramatizes key strains in human treatment of the natural world.

1.1. Research Questions

To engage these perspectives critically, this article addresses three interrelated questions:

1. How does the play examine the eco-critical strain between anthropocentrism and biocentrism?
2. How does Shakespeare employ Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban to symbolize multiple human approaches to nature?

3. How does the play's depiction of reciprocity between humans and nature inform contemporary eco-critical debates on environmental responsibility?

By approaching the play through these questions, the study argues that Shakespeare presents nature as a reciprocal force, benevolent yet resistant and reactive. *The Tempest* dramatizes humanity's eco-phobic impulses, their exploitative tendency alongside its potential for harmony with nature. These strains foreshadow today's ecological crises from ozone depletion to glacial melting and natural calamities particularly Pakistanis are facing presently.

Civilization implicates environment as well as environment implicates civilization. Humans has two facets of their personae i.e., lighter one and heavier one, brain and body like all other creatures have. Ariel is the symbol of offshoot of the enlightened and refined intellect in humans. The efflorescence of brain is its power of reflection and putting its human manifestations into practice. It raises humans to the level of superior being to all other creatures on the earth and makes him most befitting to be called the better of creations. While Caliban represents passivity, regression and bigotry in humans in general. Another human, Prospero, has been deprived of his dukedom by the villainy and deception of his own brother Antonio. Yet, he employs his brain, makes the best use of his knowledge, befriends nature that plays the part of his friend and ultimately he restores his previous status through the power of knowledge. By establishing a reciprocal bond with nature, it befriends him, shelters him, helps him in the execution of his plans and proves itself to be the best friend to humans. Prospero's victory has been achieved by self-discipline, temperance and most importantly putting his churned and organized knowledge into practice with integration and reciprocity to natural powers.

2. Review of Literature

The interplay between human and nature in *The Tempest* can be examined through the dual lens of historical and cultural contexts that have shaped environmental perceptions over time. As ecocriticism evolves, it becomes increasingly clear that understanding these dynamics requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from both the humanities and the life sciences. For instance, the portrayal of Caliban as a figure of both victimhood and aggression reflects not only individual character arcs but also broader societal narratives surrounding colonization and the exploitation of natural resources, mirroring contemporary debates on environmental justice and conservation efforts. This duality emphasizes the necessity of recognizing diverse cultural attitudes towards nature, which can inform current strategies for ecological restoration and sustainable practices.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has long been read as a play about power, colonialism, and human mastery, yet it offers fertile ground for exploring humanity's complex relationship with nature as well. Frantz Fanon (1991) in, *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that Caliban represents a component of the process of decolonization through violence-based struggle (pp.26-27).

Similarly, according to Paul Brown (1996) *The Tempest* is "fully implicated" in the "euphemisation of power" characteristic of forms such as the Jacobean masque, yet at the same time it exposes the coercive mindset upon which that power depends (p. 48).

Likewise, early criticism foregrounded *The Tempest* as a drama of rule, mastery, reconciliation or colonization. New historicist and postcolonial scholars such as Greenblatt, Barker, Hulme, and Loomba read Prospero's sovereignty as a figure for imperial power. They position Caliban as the colonized subject and the island as a space of resource extraction and disciplinary control. While these studies rarely center the environment, they establish two enduring coordinates for eco-critical work:

- (1) The island as a material site whose resources are human swaged and exploited; and
- (2) Nature as a force that counters human designs most vividly in the form of storm and the island's unruly noises.

Lawrence Buell (1995) in his book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, discusses the representation of nature in American environmental literature. According to him nature is often endowed with intentional agency and moral reform potential not merely as scenery. He argues that texts can present nature as an active agent rather than a passive backdrop. Shakespeare's island reflects precisely this quality. It nurtures, resists, reacts and shapes the actions of those who inhabit it. At the same time, the anthropocentric impulse of Prospero, the biocentric vitality of Ariel, and the earthbound resistance of Caliban reflect distinct human approaches to the natural world. Lawrence Buell's (1995) views validate these arguments that literature can reimagine nature as a presence with agency is particularly relevant, as Shakespeare's island both nurtures and resists human control. Buell (1995) reframed ecocriticism and shifted attention from empire alone to the textual representation of the physical environment. His insistence that literature can ascribe agency to "nature" opens the play to readings in which weather, sea, air, and earth act upon characters rather than merely reflecting them. Greg Garrard's (2012) taxonomy, wilderness, pastoral, dwelling, pollution, animals, helps deconstruct the island's mixed ecology. It is at once a wilderness that eludes control, a pastoral resource that Prospero organizes and a dwelling made possible or impossible by competing modes of inhabitation.

However, Jane Bennett (2003) draws attention on new materialism and vital materiality, suggesting to read the play's matter, air, water, sound, wood as vibrant, and energetic participants in the plot. This complements Timothy Morton's (2010b) viewpoint as he critiques of "Nature" as a reified category in his book, *The Ecological Thought*, that, *The Tempest* disperses "nature" into specific, entangled agents of weather, tides, acoustics that disrupt simple human/natural binaries.

Steve Mentz (2007) unearths another direction and studies blue humanities and emphasizes the sea's unpredictability and the maritime world's ecological risk, highlighting how the opening storm re-orders human hierarchies and exposes the precocity of political projects at sea.

Further, Simon Estok (2013) reads the play through the lens of ecophobia—the fear or hatred of the nonhuman world. As Prospero views of the island as 'filth' and in the court party's unease with its strange sounds and soils. At the same time, the play offers counter-moments of harmony. Ariel's music creates balance and Gonzalo imagines a utopian ecology based on reciprocity. The island itself is not simply wilderness or colony but it is an ecological web where labor, sound, and species interactions shape the conditions of life.

However, postcolonial ecocriticism bridges earlier empire-focused readings and ecological analysis. Caliban's knowledge of springs, berries, and "freshest" is read as ecological expertise rather than "savagery," while Prospero's bookish art is framed as technocratic human engagement that risks instrumentalizing the island. Critics disagree on whether Shakespeare resolves these modes into an ecologically ethical settlement. Some view Prospero's renunciation as an opening to reciprocity; others read it as a return to court politics that brackets the island's claims. The play's persistent sonic ecology—"sounds and sweet airs"—remains a key site where scholars locate non-human agency and human receptivity.

Therefore, the existing scholarship generally maps power, empire, agency, and environment, but tends to polarize the play as either a drama of mastery or a critique of it. This article brings these lines together and integrates deep ecological intrinsic value with Buell's textual agency to show nature as both generous and resistant. Further, it presents Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban as modalities of human nature relation of stewardship/human engagement, harmony/attunement, and exploitation/regression rather than fixed moral types.

Nevertheless, *The Tempest* extends polygonal perspectives that ought to be explored and it should not be yoked only to colonial and postcolonial binary opposition. The play is replete with natural scenery which offers a broader landscape to interpret it in

human relation with ecological dimensions. Ecocriticism is a broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including "green (cultural) studies", "ecopoetic", and "environmental literary criticism". William Rueckert (1978) used the term ecocriticism in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. His aim was to focus on "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (p.240).

In the same vein, William Howarth (1996) a pioneer ecritic in, *Some Principles of Ecocriticism*, draws our attention to the roots of the term as following, "Eco and critic both derive from Greek, *oikos* and *krítis*, and in tandem they mean "house judge," ...writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature...So the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls "our widest home" (p.69). This approach is closer to cementing an association of humans with nature and the relation of Prospero and nature is a classic example of a proportional and friendly alliance of humans with nature.

Similarly, Arne Naess's (2007) deep ecology, which asserts that nature possesses intrinsic value beyond human utility. It argues that Shakespeare grants intrinsic value to the island's life beyond its utility for human ends. Critics debate the ethics of mastery: does the play naturalize domination of Prospero's "art" as enlightened control or does it expose its limits by staging nature's resistance? For instance, the storm's ungovernability; the island's recalcitrant sounds and Caliban's earth-affinity. This perspective helps interrogate whether Shakespeare positions nature as a servant of human ambition, a partner in coexistence, or a resistant force dehumanizing respect. In this light, Prospero's mastery, Ariel's fluidity, and Caliban's earthiness symbolize distinct modes of human orientation toward the environment.

Moreover, Timothy Morton (2010) in his book, *The Ecological Thought*, formalizes his concept of the "ecological thought" as a way of understanding reality of nature. He advises to avoid mechanistic binaries and engages with object-oriented ideas.

Therefore, within this wider ecocritical landscape, these three debates recur, the anthropocentrism, biocentrism and integration. Their questions frame Prospero's knowledge/power as a human-centered ecology, Ariel and the island's spirits suggest an alternative dimension establishing bio-centered perspective while the play offers a site for diverse ecological deliberations.

3.Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in ecocritical literary criticism to examine the anthropocentric, biocentric and rhizomatic relations of human in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Through close textual analysis, it explores how ecological landscape structures within the play, facilitate the objectification,

normalization and calibration of humans relation with nature. The analysis is informed by key ecocritical theories, particularly, those articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and considers how characters, narrative and thematic elements convey rhizomatous and calibrated relation of human with nature. Secondary scholarly sources are also incorporated to contextualize these interpretations within wider ecocritical discourse.

Glotfelty (1996), a key critic of Ecocriticism in the USA explains her ideas in *The Ecocritical Reader* that, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (p. xviii). Therefore, the obsession with hierarchy and the tags of superiority or inferiority, in accordance with humans and nature, fades its hues when we study the inseparable relation between humans and nature since the time immemorial. She observes “the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” Ecocriticism provides a critical lens to examine how *The Tempest* stages humanity’s interaction with the natural world, not as a passive backdrop but as an active and shaping force.

Deleuze and Guattari (2007) observe *The Tempest* as the rhizome which is a useful ecocritical instrument. They expand theoretical possibilities by dismantling hierarchical thought and proposing a generative, egalitarian model. Prospero’s affable interaction with nature gives ample precedence that nature mirrors. Ariel looks Ariel and Caliban remains Caliban. The difference between the two is of intellect, refinement, contemplation and putting them into practice. Following these perspectives and by using a rhizomatic model, Deleuze and Guattari (2007) argue that the play’s ecological relations are non-hierarchical and reciprocal. This positions *The Tempest* not as a lesson in domination or abdication but as an assimilation in ecological discipline that contemporary ecocritical debates on environmental responsibility are seeking.

To engage with the central tension between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, the framework further draws on the concept of the rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari (2007) that offers a useful metaphor for the play’s network of reciprocal relations, emphasizing interconnectedness over hierarchy. Additionally, the study invokes Greg Garrard’s key ecocritical categories—such as wilderness, pastoral, and dwelling—to situate the island setting within broader ecological debates. As Deleuze and Guattari (2007) argue that “the tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (p.21). Their views suggest the interconnections between literature and the physical environment. This converged framework provides the tools to explore how *The Tempest* dramatizes humans’ ethical responsibility toward nature and suggests that survival and harmony depend on

viewing the environment neither as foe nor servant, but as a partner in a shared ecological existence.

By situating the play within debates between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, alongside Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model of interconnectedness, this study argues that *The Tempest* envisions nature not as enemy or servant, but as partner. Such a perspective resonates strongly with contemporary ecological thought, suggesting that the survival of humanity depends on recognizing its reciprocal bond with the environment.

4. Textual Analysis

The Tempest offers a rich exploration of eccentric frictions between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. The play anticipates Darwinian evolutionary ideas, offering a dialogue between literature and science on one side and on nature and human nurture on the other (Love, 2011). While recently interpreted through a post-colonial lens, the play also reflects environmental issues of (dis)proportional relation of master and slave. The interplay between characters such as Caliban and Prospero not only reflects personal conflicts but also symbolizes broader societal melees regarding the exploitation and stewardship of nature. This duality invites scholars to draw parallels between Shakespeare's portrayal of ecological balance and current environmental issues, thereby enriching our comprehension of the text through a new lens. This ongoing dialogue between literature and ecological awareness underscores the relevance of Shakespeare's work in contemporary discussions on sustainability and environmental ethics. Shakespeare's exploration of ecological themes in *The Tempest* remains a vital resource for understanding the complexities of human interactions with nature in the context of modern environmental challenges.

Set on a mysterious island where storm, sea, air, and earth hold sway over human fate, the play dramatizes the tension between human desire to control the natural world or the possibility of living in reciprocity with it. In this sense, *The Tempest* becomes more than a tale of magic and reconciliation. It is a narrative that stages the ecological question of how humanity can (re)position itself in relation to the environment. In this way, Shakespeare suggests for a deep, reflective stance, an "ecology of the mind" that makes human integration with environment.

The Tempest opens with an on-going furious hurricane with thunder and lightning which causes the shipwreck. The victims are prominent dignitaries, Alonso, the king of Naples, Sebastian, his brother, Antonio, the then usurping duke of Milan, Ferdinand, the son of the king of Naples, Gonzalo, an honest and kind counselor and other sailors. Tempest and the sea-waves play vital role and seem to be controlling and supervising the

very course of the play and the lives of voyagers. Earlier, after being expelled from the dukedom, Prospero, with his infant daughter Miranda, was left at the mercy of stormy waves. The sea eventually deports the father and daughter in the hands of the wilderness of an unknown island. In the beginning, the same sea deports Prospero and becomes indifferent to his plight when he is unaware of his potentials and falls to the level of Caliban, the ignorant soul. However, as soon as he employs his intellect, gains knowledge of the rules and art of nature, he rises to the level of nature while the same sea turns to be his supporter and operates for his smooth course of life. As Prospero says:

From mine own library with volumes that
I prize above my dukedom (I.ii.167-168).

As per rhizomatic perspective, the island can be presented as the symbol of the earth because all fundamental elements of existence for humans are found here e.g., land, water, air and fire. Prospero makes the best use of these friendly natural phenomena to regain his 'paradise lost.' Nature helps Prospero not because he controls them by force rather he integrates his knowledge and intellect with nature and associates himself to the supreme level of higher natural order. The following utterance by Ariel claims the manifestations of latent human faculties:

To answer thy best pleasure; be't to fly,
To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride
On the curl'd clouds, to thy strong bidding task (I.ii.190-192)

Prospero symbolizes human consciousness as well as contentiousness in context of his duties and relations with nature. He neither damages the environments of the island nor tries to rule over nature nor becomes its slave rather applies his own intellect and responds to the friendly helpful calls from nature to (re)gain his prosperity found in the lap of prosperous nature. Therefore, the play represents the enlightenment, adoptability and determination of the humans in the story.

Prospero, in the end, frees Ariel because he has regained his equitable status in society with the help of nature. He is not voracious like Antonio or Sebastian to usurp others for more power or pelf. At this point, he has attained his intellectual maturity and reached his destination. He is not compelled to release Ariel nor does Ariel get uncontrollable to him. He customizes phenomena of nature i.e., Ariel for constructive and not for destructive purpose, therefore, nature helps him and he regains his rightful positions on the earth.

Along the same lines, Caliban's utterance suggests he is not the representative of nature as he is deformed both mentally and physically. Nature can never be as controllable and submissive as he is and nature never behaves as he does: "And I will kiss thy foot: I prithee, be my god (II.ii.149). Later, "I'll kiss thy foot; I'll swear myself thy subject" (II.ii.152). Therefore, it appears to be very unjust to entitle him as "the true representative of nature in its purest and most unaltered form." As the play suggests he is a slave not because of his deformity in body but in brain. The lines:

"I must obey: his art is of such power,
It would control my dam's god, Setebos,
and make a vassal of him" (I.ii.372-374),

reflects his thoughts and ideas in wrong direction and his actions in misalignment with powerful nature.

At the same time, Caliban reflects the passivity, inaction and sluggishness of human side. He too, like Prospero, can make best relationship with nature where he has been living, yet he is ignorant of the magnanimity of environment and willingly yields to slavery. He is bent on destroying books that symbolizes his slave tendency to be governed by the powerful. He deliberately shrinks from the books that symbolize intellect and consciousness of humans. He expresses his grudge to books time and again because he knows these books make the difference between the two. Caliban says,

"Having first seized his books, or with a log
Batter his skull or paunch him with a stake,
Or cut his wezand with thy knife" (III.ii.86-88).

His changing of his masters and feeling no remorse to assassinate Prospero and molest Miranda shows his bestial elements which shows through unharmonious human equation with nature. This tendency urges him to licking the shoes of others which shows not only his acceptance of subordination but willing passivity also. The exclamation, "how does thy honor? Let me lick thy shoe" (III.ii.23) reflects his conscious surrender and volunteer docility to powerful nature.

Similarly, magic plays a vital role from the outset till the end scene of the play. Prospero's magic is neither trickery nor violation nor deception nor exploitation of other rights. His magic symbolizes education and knowledge. Prospero's books are, in fact, his 'magic.' Time and again, there are references to his books which play key role in getting back his 'right status' through his integration with forces of nature on the earth. As Caliban remarks,

First to possess his books; for without them
He's but a sot, as I am (III.ii.89-90),
shows his conceding to superiority of knowledge.

Therefore, the depiction of symbolic 'Magic' by Prospero is not merely an exploitative desire of renaissance by humans to control the world and manipulate its natural order nor it is an unproductive foray to 'manicure' or to 'civilize' nature. It is a rhizomatic integration of human intellect and creativity with phenomena of nature; a right move in a right direction for a rightful purpose on a right occasion. It is most befitting of humans to refine their intellect and redefine their hierarchy in great cosmological order as the closest partner of nature and not as inferior or superior being to it.

5. Conclusion

Humans are not creator or master of nature; however, they can be called the crown of creation if they associate with nature and employs its resources. If they trespass its physical laws, they will become a beast like Caliban who discards magnanimity of nature and remains in search of masters to become slave only. Therefore, Shakespeare's play suggests that humans' relation with Nature ought to be of friend and neither of foe nor of slave. Thus, the fictional portrayal serves not merely as a reflection of its time but as a critical commentary on ongoing environmental dilemmas, urging readers to reposition their own roles within the intricate web of life and the responsibilities that come with it. By engaging with the ecological dimensions of *The Tempest*, we can better appreciate how Shakespeare's insights remain relevant in addressing even modern environmental crises and fostering a deeper connection with the natural world.

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