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Reading Reflections of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* from Postcolonial and Postmodernist Perspectives

Venkatesh Puttaiah
Associate Professor,
Department of English
Maharaja College
University of Mysore
Karnataka – 570005
&

Sowmya A
Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Government First Grade College
Krishnaraja Sagar
Karnataka – 571607

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Abstract:

The significance of the title *Hag-Seed*, in the light of the enigmatic re-presentation of Caliban, potentially leads to two antithetical interpretations of Margaret Atwood's recreation of a Shakespearean classic: a value-coded, idealistic project legitimising its canon and a postcolonial venture problematising the hierarchical relationships to convey a different postcolonial reality. Beyond the two antithetical positions, however, could there be a "Third Space"? And in the process, how much does the novelist endorse or erase the colonial bases of the play? The first part of the article analyses the positioning of the novel in the milieu of postcolonial rewritings to examine it as a textual response of resistance.

Correspondingly, for readers who seek to recall the magic of *The Tempest* in today's spirit from *Hag-Seed*, the novel becomes a theatre of endless possibilities. The novel's inward gaze when it is self-reflexive and its backward gaze when it connects with the play travel in tandem. The reader traverses the novel's two worlds concurrently. Atwood's plot only makes the journey dizzyingly entertaining. The second part of the article assesses the postmodernist tendencies of the novel such as multiplicity, self-reflexivity, parody and interplay, which tackle the issue of power and exploitation mock-seriously with the main aim of entertaining.

Keywords: postcolonial, hierarchy, ambivalence, postmodernist, parody, interplay.

Through the Postcolonial Lens

The rewriting of *The Tempest* began in 1960s and 1970s in Africa and the Caribbean, coinciding with the emergence of postcolonial writings. George Lamming's novel *Water with Berries* in 1960 and Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* in 1969 written in French are noteworthy examples. In the twenty-first century, the Bard's classic has been recreated by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Hag-Seed*. Written by an acclaimed woman novelist from a developed country that was once colonised and set in a prison for symbolic as well as sociological reasons, the novel invites postcolonial questions from its readers.

Classics of earlier epochs are being subjected to rigorous enquiry for their racist, sexist, or colonial overtones in postcolonial studies. The postcolonial edge to literary criticism has unearthed hitherto hidden meanings in texts produced in earlier times and has critically engaged the texts to re-modify the dynamics of literary criticism and literary production. The rewriting of a classic in the colonial era/ backdrop and its appropriation to the contemporary world is often termed a political act with postcolonial connotations. *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare has generated a huge interest in literary criticism for its colonial content. It is the last and perhaps the most controversial play of the Bard eliciting a momentous discourse on the subject of hegemony owing to colonial relationships in the play. No other play of William Shakespeare, except perhaps *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, has been subjected to such intense examination in modern times as *The Tempest*. In the play, Prospero was seen as a reflection of Shakespeare bidding adieu to his craft and the play was touted as upholding the universal, humanist virtues such as forgiveness, love, and reconciliation until the onset of postcolonial studies. In the postcolonial phase the play has been read, reinterpreted and rewritten from coloniser-colonised perspective. The postcolonial interpretations of the play have incisively exposed the hegemonic, discursive efforts to construct the colonial enterprise at the heart of the play. They posit the blatant degradation of the colonised subjects and expose the colonial enterprise masked in the celebration of the essentialist values. The postcolonial criticism accentuates the master/ slave relationship of Prospero-Ariel-Caliban resembling the hierarchical coloniser/ colonised relationship.

Atwood's retelling of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed*, to commemorate the Bard's quatercentenary, resituates the plot and its characters in the present times of unprecedented transformations where no ultimate binaries, stereotypical models of human behaviour, or hierarchies of the relationships exist as standard. Reading the novel, the readers navigate two textual spaces, one mutated, contemporaneous, the postcolonial, and another pertinent to the past, the colonial, projected in *The Tempest*.

The postcolonial rewritings offer textual resistance mainly through two postcolonial strategies: dismantling of master narratives and reconstructing of identities fractured in the colonial space. The rewritings produced as an explicit expression of resistance expound the hegemonic, textual, and cultural supremacy of the white legacy. The “writing back to empire” tradition included “mixed genres, unexpected combinations of tradition and novelty, political experiences based on communities of effort and interpretation” (Said 335). The novelty in narration, character treatment, experimentations in plot are intended to create a counter-discourse to retrieve and recuperate the agency of the colonised and to overthrow tropes of colonial master narratives. To accomplish this, Atwood introduces many innovative elements: Ariel as an alien, puppets in place of goddesses, rap songs, multiple narratives/ metanarratives, and ambivalent identities.

In the novel, characterisation takes place in an ambivalent space. The portrayal of characters disrupts the hierarchical equations of the coloniser/ colonised relationship as it operates within a hybridised cultural space. *Hag-Seed* is centred around Felix, a modern adaptation of Prospero who, betrayed by his junior colleague, loses his job of theatre festival director. He sets out to avenge those who wronged him. The novel is in consonance with the storyline and themes of *The Tempest*. The setting of the novel is an actual prison cut off from the outside world, similar to the island where Prospero found exile. Felix’s personal secretary Tony betrays him in a “bloodless coup”. Felix lives in a shack alone with his hallucinated, dead daughter Miranda, a slight variation from Prospero who lives in a far-off island with his daughter subjugating humans, “lesser humans”, witches, spirits, and goblins. Felix takes charge of the Fletcher County Correctional Institute and finds a way to set things right through another bloodless coup executed with the help of his “goblins and spirits”. He orchestrates everything to punish his enemies till the point they are taught their lessons and his position and prestige are restored. He is the magus who achieves everything with the assistance of prison inmates just as Prospero does it with the help of Ariel.

Felix’s power resides in his theatrical genius. He casts a spell with “words”, “pitch”, “modulation”, and “performance”. He rules a class of prison inmates: “the island is a theatre. Prospero is a director. He’s putting in a play, within which there’s another play. If his magic holds and his play is successful, he’ll get his heart’s desire. But if he fails... he won’t fail” (*Hag-Seed* 116). The entire theatrical production of *The Tempest* and the execution of his revenge plan is on the lines of his alter-ego, Prospero. He impersonates two identities: in his experiential crossing, he imagines and aspires to be Prospero and to secure his private life after his dramatic descent, he creates for himself the identity of F. Duke. The characters are rendered

ambivalent in the context of the novel. Felix's character is anything but heroic but the readers are "willing to give him the benefit of the doubt" (Atwood, "Perfect Storm", *Guardian*, par.9).

Felix is "fallen... deflated...reduced" (*Hag-Seed* 10), a failed director who hits rock bottom after being on the top of his career. He is shown as a weak, old man bearing a grudge against the betrayers. He is vulnerable and barely heroic in whatever he does. The ambivalence in portraying Felix unfurls larger purpose of contextualising the play in the twenty-first century to suit the contemporary political and cultural dynamism. The prison inmates are unmistakably antagonistic towards Prospero of *The Tempest*, they call him "slave-driver", "land stealer", "sucking old white guy" (127). Felix does all in his power to render Prospero fair in the eyes of the inmates and tries to "absolve" him in their eyes as his identity and justification would depend upon that.

In her *Guardian* article, Atwood admits that she had to alternate the characters of Miranda and Ariel. Miranda, the dead daughter of Felix is re-presented as a home-taught, conservative girl oblivious to the outside world. She is supplemented by Ann Marie, a tough gymnast. Ariel as a fairy is farfetched to the modern audience, hence the fairy is made an alien in the novel. Atwood's defence of Prospero and recognition of Caliban's ability creates a new situation: "With a slight twist, Prospero might be the Grand Inquisitor, torturing people for their own good. You might also call him a usurper – he's stolen the island from Caliban, just as his own brother has stolen the dukedom from him; and you might call him a sorcerer, as Caliban also terms him. We the audience – are inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, and to see him as a benevolent despot. Or we are inclined most of the time. But Caliban is not without insight" ("Perfect Storm", par.9). The "free play of opposites" (Derrida), brings the binary structure that fashioned characterisation in *The Tempest* to ground neutral. A novel written to acknowledge the greatness of a play is engrossed with how the characters appear in the eyes of the modern-day audience even as it steers through the problematised relationships in the course of history.

Most of the characters of *The Tempest* have fictional re-presentation in *Hag-Seed*. There is Prospero in Felix, Ariel in 8Hands and Estelle, Miranda in Anne-Marie, Ferdinand in Freddie, Alonso in Sal, Antonio in Tony. The ambiguous re-creation of Caliban's character in the novel is in sync with the ambiguous title of the novel. The vagueness surrounding the character of Caliban is due to the inconspicuousness of the character representing Caliban in spirit and personality. Postcolonial interpretations regarded Caliban as a symbol of the "other" who offers resistance not only to the colonial project of his master but also to the unquestionable reputation of Prospero's approach to power and knowledge. Perhaps he is the

only character in the play who truly resists the power and hegemony of Prospero. The dispossessed aboriginal race of Caliban is precisely the reason for Caliban's oppressed status. His character raises a few unsettling questions about the integrity of Prospero. However, the absence of the re-presented character of Caliban in a prominent way nearly erases the overall postcolonial question, makes it vague and out of place. By "deleting" the central character, *Hag-Seed* unravels many questions: does the writer try to evade the disturbing issue? Or is the writer "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" (Gayatri Spivak, qtd. in Shoabo Xie 7) to circumvent adherence to the cultural paradigms and binary structures of the European world? In doing so, does the novel explore the "grey" beyond the binary, the "the third space" (Homi K Bhabha), to grapple with the ever changing, fluid, relational identities in the postcolonial context?

The diminishing of Caliban's character in adaptation becomes enigmatic as the title of the novel relates to him. Atwood remarks, "I called my novel *Hag-Seed*, which is one of the names used by Prospero when he is railing at Caliban, and Caliban is cursing him right back. Why name it after Caliban rather than Prospero?" ("Perfect Storm", par.19). Atwood reveals in her conversation at the Stratford Festival that it is to show the primacy of Sycorax as Caliban's parent. In a patriarchal society that is familiar to us, the offspring is recognised as continuing the lineage of the male parent; but the term hag-seed, Atwood informs, acknowledges the pre-eminence of the female parent. Prospero, however, called Caliban hag-seed reproachfully. Prospero's narrative scheme in an essentialist term projects Caliban as subhuman, enemy of culture and civilisation, and as a theoretical opposite to Prospero, the upholder of the divine knowledge.

Caliban's character, it must be remembered, created a spectrum needed for the sixteenth century audience who were influenced by the colonial ideologies of that time. They reacted in certain ways towards the character. He was a figment of imagination whose characterisation differed when presented in theatres. The supernatural elements that Shakespeare frequently introduced on his stage to induce elements of suspense and terror worked well with the Elizabethan audience. However, the concept of human subordination to perpetuate slavery is incomprehensible in personal realms of relationships and unrealistic in democratic political structures of our contemporary period. The elimination of the character of Caliban can be partially explained in the abhorrence in envisioning of a subhuman character without culture and civilisation contrary to the spirit of the modern age. Hence, there can be no Caliban in the contemporary era, at least, politically speaking. On the other hand, Caliban's character as a hag-seed sustains Prospero's colonial supremacy as a white, a European master

on a mission to civilise Caliban, Ariel and others. In the theatre production of *The Tempest*, Felix imagines Caliban to be a “paraplegic... Pushing himself around the stage on an oversized skateboard” (*Hag-Seed* 16). His creative representation of Caliban’s character is nonetheless rebuffed by Tony: “People would think you’re making fun of disability. Some of them would walk out. Or get wheeled out: we do have a substantial number of... our demographic is not the under-thirties (21).

The “absence” of Caliban in the novel, though seems like an erasure or departure from the original work, is not erasure of resistance the character shows towards the colonial hegemony. In the novel, Caliban’s character is transformed into a positive symbol of empowerment and is metaphorically represented through the prison inmates. Atwood tries to fill the vacuum left by Caliban’s absence with multiple Calibans, “Various Calibans, scowling and muscular: earthy, potentially violent” (84). The modern day Calibans learn to curse with the curse words from the play, a sign of their reformation. They are well behaved around Anne-Marie. Most importantly, their admiration and sympathies are with Caliban than Prospero. Felix mimicking Prospero, impersonating as F. Duke is to an extent driven by hegemonic principles. He employs subtle manipulation and he sets the inmates, “team of hag-seeds”, against the visiting politicians, Tony and his cronies. Most importantly, he feels that it is his “civilising mission” to punish the people who wronged him. The colonial overtones in Felix’s gestures are undeniable when Estelle breaks the news that the politicians Heritage Minister Price and Justice Minister O’Nally have chosen to end the Fletcher Correctional literacy program. Instead of feeling genuinely worried about the future of prison inmates, Felix feels elated as he considers the news “exactly the ammunition he needs to rally the troops” (194). Felix’s thirst for revenge and control is visible when he imagines the total subduing of his enemies, “Ah yes. He can see how it could unfold: Tony and Sal, surrounded by goblins. Herded by them. Menaced by them. Reduced to a quivering jelly. Hark, they roar, he thinks. Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour/ lies at our mercy all mine enemies. He looks around the classroom, smiling benevolently” (131). 8Handz is the first one to see through the “real project” of Felix and to acknowledge the covert operation of the master/ slave relationship, “Neat... I get it. Goblins ‘R’ Us” (131). If the Prospero/ Caliban relationship was the one based upon explicit master/ slave hierarchy, the inmates/ Felix relationship is both nurturing and exploitative, based on genial principles functioning in covert hierarchy. In *The Tempest*, Caliban was a hated figure, disparaged and downtrodden by almost everyone. In the novel, he becomes a symbol of empowerment and, for the inmates, he is a sensational model of motivation.

Another valid conjecture for the erasure of explicit hierarchical relationships in the novel can be to convey the continuity of the colonial project in the contemporary situations without the overt coloniser/ colonised relationships. The continuity of the hierarchy in subtle forms that perpetuate the interests of European, white and occidental world is the neo-colonial reality. The direct, dramatic, and sharp relationships between the coloniser and the colonised cannot be portrayed in the contemporary era. Rewritings that followed the beginning of the postcolonial phase mainly tried to expose the binary employed to endorse the colonial projects, which were otherwise masked in the guise of celebrating universal human values. To challenge, subvert and to expose the prismatic visions of the texts, the writers created characters with agency who would resist the subordination of the Eurocentric principles. The problem in this approach of “Writing back to the Empire”, often denounced by scholars, is that they would be operating within the same perimeters of the colonial agency with an oppositional approach. When rewriting takes place keeping an already existing classic as its prime model, the recognition of the new work would depend on the primary text. It would be in the shadow of the original text, thereby canonising the original’s place further. Atwood, who works through the ambivalent postcolonial identities in the novel without conforming to the binary principles, overcomes this challenge by sabotaging colonial enterprise inherent in the original text.

The artistic vision of the writer regards the “absence” of the character as a liberation strategy: “Caliban has escaped the play. He’s escaped from Prospero, like a shadow detaching itself from his body and skulking off on its own. Now there’s no one to restrain him. Will Prospero be spared, or will retribution climb in through his window one dark night and cut his weasand? Felix wonders. Gingerly, he feels his neck” (272). The passage undercuts the colonial tropes of subjugation and shows Felix as a prisoner of his own fantasy and ideology, like a coloniser “imprisoned in [his] own land” (Said 214).

In the play, the master narrator Prospero narrates stories of all characters, with him as the centre of all stories: story of himself as a wronged Duke, Miranda’s upbringing by him, Caliban’s villainy, and the betrayal by his brother Antonio. The dominant voice of Prospero drowns the voice of other characters. Prospero does many dominating manoeuvres – chastising, chiding, freezing, admonishing, imprisoning, drowning. In the novel, the Calibans with multiple voices, perspectives and narratives counter Felix’s justification of Prospero. Prospero’s dominant, singular narrator position is jeopardised by the prison inmates with different points of view. Felix, fighting on the brink, tries hard to defend and absolve himself (and Prospero) in the eyes of the inmates. The addition of rap songs by SnakeEye and Leggs replacing narratives of Prospero is a severe blow on his ego. Metanarratives through rap songs

throw a different light on the stage characters: Prospero's inherent weakness gave rise to anarchy and criminality of his brother and Caliban's oppression and resistance. In the novel, the chapter titled "Evil Bro Antonio" delineates Felix's anxiety while witnessing the tweaking of the play, which has been solely his. The play is being modified and bettered by the group of actors. The multiple narratives through rap songs untangle a set of multiple angles and refer to the aspect of liminality in postcolonial readings:

Now Hag-Seed's black and Hag-Seed's brown,
Hag-Seed's red, don't care if you frown,
Hag-Seed's yellow and Hag-Seed's trash white,
He goes by a lotta names, he's roamin' in the night,
You treated him bad, now he's a sackful of fright,
Hag-Seed! (*Hag-Seed* 271)

The term hag-seed is originally associated with Caliban in *The Tempest* to sustain his monstrous lineage of being born a "devil" of the witch Sycorax. Atwood uses "Hag-Seed" as a positive symbol of revolt and resistance: "ain't gonna get on the back of the bus / and you can give your land right back to us!" (271). The passage also offers limitless possibilities of applying the term in its offensive sense to Felix who, having been betrayed, plots a scheme of revenge to get back at his enemies. The blurring of the binary distinctions is highlighted again when Leggs says, "Caliban is like his bad other self. Like father, like son. So he owns up: 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'" (267).

In *The Tempest*, the characters were built upon the binary principles and the play itself was layered with loads of meanings that it was possible to render it into many interpretations. *Hag-Seed* is a result of its constant interaction with *The Tempest* and the spirit of the modern age. The characters in *Hag-Seed* occupy ambivalent position in terms of postcolonial identities. The fluid identities are necessitated by the contemporary postcolonial realities which cannot be made to subscribe to the binary principles. Felix's moves, reflections and thoughts are made available at every juncture so that the readers are inclined to "give him the benefit of the doubt". However, in the novel, Prospero is no saint but a mediating, pathetic figure, a fallen mock hero. Similarly, Caliban is not really a villain but a symbol of pride and interest so much so that the inmates are overenthusiastic to play him. Thus, the binary frame that earlier demarcated the virtue/ vice characters in *The Tempest* is rendered ineffectual in the novel. Blurring of the sharp distinctions between Prospero and Caliban in *Hag-Seed* actually creates what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space" which combines the two spaces taking away the superiority of the former and subjugation of the latter. There is a second dimension to every

character and Atwood pries open the layers in order to make them less opaque. The characters and the sites of the text have value neutrality. There is even multiplicity of characters: Ariel is reflected in Estelle and 8Hands; Prospero in Felix; Caliban in Felix and Anne-Marie. Self/ other contrast constituted in the drama is rendered perplexing as Felix as the “self” and the team of hag-seeds as the “other” evade the binary of postcolonial configurations. The hyphenated realities and hyphenated identities compound the complexity of easy categorisation. The fragmented identity is a dominant reflection and a powerful evocation of the postmodernist and postcolonial scholarship where fragmentation is defined as a way of living at the borders effacing binaries. Trinh T Minh-ha, a Vietnamese filmmaker and a postcolonial feminist scholar, observes: “Fragmentation... a useful term because it always points to one's limits. Since the self, like the work you produce, is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself, in the context of cultural hybridity, always pushing one's questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not... Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders” (Parmar and Minh-ha 72).

Atwood takes up for retelling a classic which was once interpreted as a reflection of Eurocentric ideologies, dismantles and recreates it in accordance with the temperaments of the twenty-first century. In the act of appropriation, she erases the aspects of Eurocentric ideals. The text exhibits the author's understanding of the normative standards. Her adaptation becomes a superimposition and emerges as a representative Canadian way of thinking and reflecting. She refrains from exoticisation of the “other subjects” represented through Caliban and Ariel. Still, the ambiguity surrounding the character of Caliban foreshadows many postcolonial complexities. The clash between cultures, race, and the hierarchical relationship is a burning issue as well as a reality, which cannot be denied in the present-day scenario. The creative adaptations of classics offer multiple avenues to explore the problematic human relationships while they also offer insights into evolving dynamics and inflections. In the backdrop of unequal relationships of race, cultures, and nations, sharp distinctions continue to dominate the present-day realities accentuated by migration, wars, and global politics. The character of Caliban, who “escapes the play” in the aesthetic adaptation of Felix, unmistakably leaves questions to ponder in Atwood's novel where she “walks the thin line between tribute and novelty” (Groskop, par.3).

Through the Postmodernist Prism

It is Margaret Atwood's signature style to offer her readers intricately layered narratives in her novels. Her novels open at once multiple vistas that along the way submerge and diverge.

The Handmaid's Tale, for instance, can be regarded as a feminist novel or a dystopian novel or a feminist-dystopian novel. And through its adaptations as a graphic novel, a film and a television series, it has further augmented its meaning and relevance. Atwood believes certainly in both the multiplicity of meanings a narrative can sustain and the possibility of reinventing the narrative itself; hence we have her novels *The Penelopiad*, an alternate reading of *Odyssey*, and *Hag-Seed*, a recreation of *The Tempest* for the twenty first century.

Margaret Atwood apprises the readers in her piece on *The Tempest* in *The Guardian* of the stimulating journey of William Shakespeare's play, which has inspired innovative interpretations through ages and across genres: how there has been an opera based on the play in the 18th century and a female version of Prospero in a 2010 film (par. 3). Her rewriting of the play as the novel *Hag-Seed* in 2016, a tribute to the Bard on 400th anniversary, is an enterprise of transporting the Shakespearean world and worldview to the 21st century Canada. Atwood's imaginative leap conquers the time lapse of four centuries through postmodernist parody. To appreciate Atwood's novel as a postmodernist parody of Shakespeare's play, some of the insights from Linda Hutcheon's seminal work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* would be of considerable value. Hutcheon's argument that postmodernism is "a reevaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present" (19) is at the heart of *Hag-Seed* for it is a work that endeavours to establish a dialogue with its predecessor throughout. One of the ways the novel (present) interacts with the play (past) is through its chapter titles. The prosaic (novelistic) titles such as "Meaner Fellows" and "Almost Inaccessible" are followed by the poetic (dramatic) titles that are actual phrases from the play: "This Isle Is Full of Noises", "This Island's Mine" and "Most Scurvy Monster". In the process of renewing a classic play, Atwood's novel presents a critique of its object. It operates in the space of the postmodern, a space where the boundaries between the genres blur. The novel cannot be, and is not, an academic study of the play, but it is nonetheless a captivating creative study of the play. When we regard *Hag-Seed* as both a work of art and a creative-critical appreciation, it qualifies as "paraliterary", a term by Rosalind Krauss, which Hutcheon uses to define the space of the postmodern (10-11).

Speaking of parody in the postmodern context, Hutcheon says "[T]here appear to be many possible pragmatic positions and strategies open to parody today—at least if we examine actual contemporary works of art: from reverence to mockery" (34). With *Hag-Seed*, the spectrum ranges from adoration to leg-pulling. One could recognise Atwood wondering or smiling at Shakespeare, but not mocking. The narrative in the novel recalls constantly the narrative in the original as it unleashes startlingly entertaining parallels. It is "parody as

repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity (33). The novel switches between high and low burlesque just as the play alternates between glorious speeches and cursing. The novel flourishes as a parody of the play but it stays away from being a pastiche which for Fredric Jameson, Hutcheon points out, is neutral or blank parody (33).

Atwood's narrative differs significantly in one way from Shakespeare's: while *The Tempest* is predominantly about the protagonist, a Shakespearean trait, *Hag-Seed* is also about the others, the characters on the margins. One can say Atwood does not discard Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – the characters William Shakespeare removed abruptly in *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard brought back to life parodically in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – but pursues them. To quote Hutcheon again, "Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (11). Furthermore, the many micronarratives in the novel rendered wittily make Atwood's parody unmissably postmodernist. She achieves this through her own bunch of tricks rendered through her creation Felix Phillips, a modern-day Prospero.

Felix's book of magic is technology. He uses the Internet to track people like Tony and Sal who are his targets for revenge, to find Anne-Mary Greenland to play Miranda and to create for himself a fake identity with a bank account and credit cards. Felix can be a consummate con artist and this trait comes in handy when he works with the inmates of Fletcher Correctional Home. It is amusing to note F. Duke is the nom de plume Felix assumes. F could stand for Felix or fake. Duke, however, alludes to Prospero. Felix constantly relating himself to Prospero – a character he plays and lives, even to the point of hallucination as he keeps interacting with his dead daughter who he had named Miranda – is bemusing, but in postmodernist terms, self-reflexive. Felix's self-reflexive saga is key to the *Tempest*-like revenge or, one can say, resolution.

Felix comes up with an interesting innovation of all actors/ inmates adopting stage names as he begins directing at the Fletcher Correctional. He searches the Internet for *stage alter egos* and finds out about the stage names of actors, opera singers, rockers and rappers (*Hag-Seed* 78). He puts the knowledge he acquires to a good effect and the inmates – his actors – chose their striking stage names such as 8Hands, Leggs, WonderBoy, Bent Pencil and SnakeEye. The *stage alter egos* of actors, coupled with Felix's nom de plume, add a dash of novelty to the enterprise. While it is Atwood's project to recreate a Shakespearean classic, her project must also stand on its own, hence the delightful improvisations, even innovations. One can read the stage names as a deliberate masking by the novelist to guard the identities of the

inmates. On the other hand, it is the inception of parallel realities. As readers we witness the journey of inmates as inmates, as well as inmates as actors.

The assigning of the roles to the actors in the novel is done through an autonomous process that places the readers in contemporary times. The actors are encouraged to talk about *The Tempest* and the roles they would like to play. Many of them eventually play the character that appeals to them, because they could both relate to those characters as well as fit the roles. Each role, however, is made to appear interesting for the actors by Felix. For instance, he lists the qualities of Ariel: "First, he can be invisible. Second, he can fly. Third, he has superpowers, especially when it comes to thunder, wind, and fire. Fourth, he's musical. But fifth, and most important...*he's not human*" (91). A brainstorming session on Ariel – whom everyone believed too weak and nobody wanted to play – supervenes. Ariel looms in the minds of actors as Superman, *Star Trek* kind of thing, like in *E.T.* and so on (92). A character that was laughed at as a fairy becomes admirable as a supernatural being. No doubt, it is Atwood's commentary on contemporary fascinations as opposed to olden charms. With his long experience as theatre director, Felix is impeccable in casting. The process of casting, seemingly democratic and modern, contains Felix's schema – his revenge. The staging of the play would also mean his spirit-child Miranda's liberation. The actors play the roles cut-out for them while they are, unknowingly, Felix's tools for revenge. Felix is playing god like Prospero, his original: by extension, Atwood is in Shakespeare's robes. This edifice creates a delightful interplay between the two texts and also between the role of their authors.

Like in the case of Ariel, there are no takers for Miranda at the Fletcher Correctional, a male-only prison, which paradoxically recalls the theatre scenario in the Elizabethan times when boys played women's roles. This, however, allows Felix to bring in Anne-Mary Greenland, a professional actor to play the role of Miranda. Atwood informs in her radio interview to CBC, she found out through her research that it is a regular practice for professional actors to play the roles of women in the play when plays are staged in a male-only prison. The amusingly foul-mouthed and admirably efficient Anne-Mary Greenland, when juxtaposed with Miranda, signposts the time lapse of four centuries between the original text and its reproduction. Anne-Mary as modern-day Miranda adds, above all, dramatic effect as readers switch between Felix's production and Atwood's characterisation. Intriguingly, there are many Mirandas in the novel: Felix's daughter named Miranda who died at three; her spirit, a manifestation that both haunts and guides Felix; Anne-Mary Greenland who plays Miranda and whom he treats as he would his grown-up daughter; and Miranda of *The Tempest*. Mirandas in the novel are ingenious substitutes for two terrific devices of Shakespeare, aside and

soliloquy. It is when Felix talks to Miranda, who only he can see, that we know where he is heading. In the original play it is Ariel that is visible only to Prospero. The spirit of Miranda is like Ariel. We see quite often mutability, even multiplicity of characters and situations creating perpetual dramatic effects, another postmodernist characteristic. Felix decides to play Prospero and with that Atwood adds a new dimension to Shakespeare-Prospero dyad. If the reader steps out to establish parallels between Shakespeare-Prospero and Atwood-Felix, the resulting light would be a refraction through the postmodernist prism.

Viv Groskop notes in her review of *Hag-Seed*, the novel is “a magical eulogy to Shakespeare, leading the reader through a fantastical reworking of the original but infusing it with ironic nods to contemporary culture” (par. 3). We learn from Atwood’s Acknowledgements at the end of the novel that Felix gets his last name Phillips from Robin Phillips, who was a director at the Stratford Festival in Ontario whom Atwood admired (*Hag-Seed* 244). Stratford Festival is refashioned as Makeshiweg Festival in the novel. Atwood’s novel, set in the present-day Ontario, is distinctively Canadian. She shares with her readers/audience in her Conversation at the Stratford Festival Forum her growing up in Canada, reading Shakespeare exhaustively at school and college, and specific details such as the meaning of Makeshiweg, which is fox in a Canadian language. The Canadian milieu of the novel coupled with the Canadian nationality of its author brings home Shakespeare for Canadians – at once a tribute to William Shakespeare and Atwood’s favourite Stratford Festival in Ontario. An indicator of multicultural Canada, the actors of the play in the Canadian prison are from varied backgrounds: 8Hands (Ariel) – East Indian background; Leggs (Caliban) – Mixed, Irish and black; WonderBoy – Scandinavian; Krampus (Alonso) – Mennonite; Phil the Pill (Sabastian) – Vietnamese; Bent Pencil (Gonzolo) – WASP; SnakeEye (Antonio) – Italian; Red Coyote (Stephano) – Native-Canadian; TimEEz (Trinculo) – Chinese; and PPod (Boatswain) – African Canadian (118). Hutcheon points out, “... parody has also been a favourite postmodern literary form of writers in places like Ireland and Canada, working as they do from both inside and outside a culturally different and dominant context” (36). The Canadian setting of the novel is also an attempt at localising it; and it is localised to such an extent incorporating Canadian quirky climate, landscape and multiculturalism, it is, in a paradoxical sense, contesting of claims to universality, even when it is Shakespeare. It seems to say, parodically, Shakespeare needs adapting.

Like most of Atwood’s improvisations that serve more than a single purpose in *Hag-Seed*, the three assignments Felix designs for the actors/ inmates are multipurpose in creating a network of trails. The term assignment is most apt as it is a learning program but it is also a

way of familiarising the actors with the play (with the first assignment), making them look deep into the play (with the second assignment) and offering them to construct their own endings of the play (with the third assignment).

The first assignment, where the actors have to identify all the curse words from *The Tempest*, is a delightful exercise for the actors, mainly because in their hard life that landed them in prison, they are overexposed to curse words. They are dealing here with something they know very well but something that existed in an altogether different outfit in Shakespeare's play. One of Felix's actors reads out the impressive list that contains, among other abominable words and phrases, such curse words: malignant thing, blue-eyed hag, freckled whelp hag-born, most scurvy monster, moon-calf, scurvy patch, demi-devil, thing of darkness and the curse word that became the title of Atwood's novel, hag-seed (*Hag-Seed* 82). In addition to indicating to her readers that most of the curse words in the no-bloodshed-freedom-upholding play were directed at Caliban, Atwood is suggesting the corresponding existence of the lowly and the lofty milieus in the play. Intriguingly, many of the curse words are spoken by Prospero, the educator in the play. Felix the educator makes an interesting departure, however. He allows his actors to curse but only with the curse words used in the play. The actors agree to this fresh challenge. The only two actors that we hear using the common four-letter curse words from outside the play are Felix himself rarely and Anne-Mary quite often. Felix doesn't allow his actors to curse and swear as it could, considering the background of his actors, derail his project. With Atwood, it is first a subtle irony as the only two actors who swear with familiar inanities are not inmates and next her way of keeping the novel grounded in the present-day.

The second assignment moves from profane utterances to profound thoughts: from the list of curse words to the number of prisons in the play. The class makes a consolidated list of eight prisons where it indicates who is the prisoner and who the jailer (110). Felix, however, says there are nine prisons in the play. The ninth prison is revealed only in the end. It is important to note that the assignment is about prisons in a prison to the prisoners. In her review Emily St. John Mandel observes, 'In "The Tempest," Miranda is trapped as surely as Ariel and Caliban. By the end of "Hag-Seed," it's begun to dawn on Felix that if Ariel longs to be released to the elements, perhaps the lost girl in his cottage longs for the same' (par. 16). The prisons are like enclosures within enclosures in the novel as the characters are imprisoned by one another in one way or the other.

The third assignment is a Rashomon-style delineation by the actors of the post-play lives of characters. The presentations made by various teams such as Team Ariel, Team Evil Bro Antonio, Team Gonzolo, Team Miranda and Team Hag-Seed. In Team Ariel's version Ariel stays on Earth and tackles climate change; in Team Evil Bro Antonio's version Prospero is stabbed and Miranda is raped; in Team Gonzolo's version an ideal Republic is projected; in Team Miranda's version Miranda is a smart, kick-ass girl; and in Team Hag-Seed's version, which perhaps is the most ingenious, Prospero is Caliban's biological father. These postmodernist micronarratives stand opposed to Prospero's totalising/ master narrative in the original; and "to use irony to implicate and yet to critique, is distinctly paradoxical and postmodernist" (Hutcheon 16). Further, by infusing the micronarratives into her work, Atwood is demonstrating her "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 356). Through the micronarratives, Atwood's readers gain access to "Postmodern knowledge" which in Lyotard's analysis "is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (356). The presentations by various teams are insights into the minds of actors as well as recognition of multiple roads of approach to Shakespeare. In other words, the remarkable adaptability of Shakespearean theatre.

Intertexts of *Hag-Seed* include, in addition to *The Tempest*, several other Shakespearean plays: for instance, the phrase "readiness is all" is a parodic reference to "Ripeness is all" in *King Lear*; Felix's stray thought on hinting Tony that some young stud had seduced his wife (46) is an off-shoot of Iago's designs from *Othello*; and then Felix at one point wonders about his dead daughter and thinks of the lost daughters in Shakespeare: "Lavinia, Juliet, Cordelia, Perdita, Marina. All lost daughters. But some of them had been found again. Why not his Miranda?" (24). *Hag-Seed* is also immensely successful in what Hutcheon calls "bridging of the gap between elite and popular art" (20) as pop songs, ski masks and spy cameras pervade charmingly into the staging of a Shakespearean classic. The novel's dexterity materialises in the postmodern space as its "intertextual parody crosses genre boundaries without reserve" (Hutcheon 139).

While at the outset *Hag-Seed* is a recreation, a tribute to *The Tempest*, at various other stages, where the Bard's play is recorded for the big screen in the prison, where it set to a song by the actors and where the actors reason out the post-lives of characters, it is parody in full play. Interplay between the two texts, *The Tempest* and *Hag-Seed*; the two genres, the theatre and the novel; the two eras, the Elizabethan and the 21st century; the two magicians/manipulators/ directors, Prospero and Felix; and the two literary giants, William Shakespeare

and Margaret Atwood transpires to such a degree in the integrating of irony and humour, plots and intertexts, and the traditional and the popular, the parody is unceasingly manifold.

Finally, to reveal the ninth prison to The Fletcher Correctional Players, Felix points to the last three words of Prospero in the play: set me free. We learn the creator was a prisoner in his creation, the ninth prison was the play itself. Atwood's *Hag-Seed*, an exaltation of art in a work of art, is self-reflexively metafictional. Atwood the writer/ artist is writing about Shakespeare's writing/ art. The novelist presents her readers the artistic creation of Felix Philip, a conduit to arrive at the art and creation of William Shakespeare.

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