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‘Caliban’ and ‘Ariel’ Figures in Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*: A Study of Native Characters from Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract:

Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* is an astute representation of racial discrimination and social unrest prevalent in South African society in 1940s. In the narrative of the novel, Paton has deftly woven myriad characters hailing from different strata of society. Paton’s mastery as a narrator lies in the fact that he succeeds in giving voice to most of his characters in a very equitable and convincing manner. However, questions have been raised time and again on the objectivity and authenticity of Paton’s narrative owing to his belonging to the privileged race of European colonial settlers in South Africa. Paton’s “personal dimension” as an author-narrator invariably attracts postcolonial critique. In the present paper, therefore, an attempt has been made to deconstruct native characters through the analogy of two diabolically opposite Shakespearean slaves ‘Caliban’ and ‘Ariel’ to foreground the implicit binary of Master/Slave, Colonizer/Colonized, Civilized/Barbaric, and White/Black in the narrative of the novel.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination, Ariel, Caliban, Economic Exploitation, Apartheid

Introduction:

When a literary text is deconstructed from the perspective of twentieth century theoretical discourse, its covert narrativization is blatantly exposed. Alan Paton’s authorial presence is distinctly felt in the narrative of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, when meticulous attention is paid to the characterization of White and Native characters in the novel. Apparently, Paton has created both White and Native characters on a broad spectrum where there are highly noble characters, incredibly demonic characters and characters with shades of grey among both Whites and Natives.

As such it is difficult to say whether his portrayal is racially biased or honest. Nevertheless, there seems to be an undercurrent of racial supremacy in the portrayal of native characters as noble or demonic, depending on their subservience to European colonial Masters. Just as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* delineates two contradictory instances of master-slave relationship in the form of Prospero's equation with obedient slave 'Ariel' and disobedient and defiant slave 'Caliban', Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* espouses two conflicting attitudes of the natives towards European domination in South Africa. Some of the native characters seem to be very subservient and accommodating towards White colonial supremacy, while some others refute and challenge their authority.

Analysis:

At the outset, attention should be paid to the central character Stephen Kumalo. Stephen Kumalo is not only the protagonist of the novel but also a terminal figure in the spectrum of native characters delineated by Paton in the novel. He comes out as a noble, religious, subservient native, who has the utmost faith in Christianity, a religion that came to Africa in the wake of European emigration and settlement. Stephen Kumalo is revered by one and all in his native village of Ndotsheni. His dignified bearing and righteousness earn him the respect of even those, who come across him in Johannesburg for the very first time. In the portrayal of Stephen Kumalo, one can find Paton's intense involvement at every level as a creator. Undoubtedly, it is Stephen Kumalo's loss and agony that is the pivot of the novel's narrative. Nevertheless, it is equally significant to note that Kumalo is a conformist figure who quietly accepts his subservient position in society. He does not nurture any ambition to question or topple the racial supremacy and authority of European settlers in the South African society of the 1940s. He is, indeed, an 'Ariel' figure in the narrative of Alan Paton. Though Shakespeare's Ariel raises a mild voice of rebellion once in the play when he demands his "liberty", he is snubbed back to his subservient and obedient former self soon enough by Prospero, who reminds him of the great favour done by Prospero in emancipating him from the bark of a tree:

Thou best know'st
What torment I did find thee in. Thy groans
Did make wolves howl, and penetrate the breasts
Of ever-angry bears. It was a torment

To lay upon the damned, which Sycorax
 Could not again undo. It was mine art,
 When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape

The pine and let thee out. (Shakespeare *The Tempest* Act I Scene 2: lines 340-47)

Prospero's strategy of enslavement is that of a quintessential colonial master who makes the colonized feel that the colonizer has done a great favour in enslaving them for which the colonized should be thankful. Throughout *Cry, the Beloved Country*, one comes across such subservient natives, who feel grateful to their colonial masters for enslaving them. Other than Stephen Kumalo, there is one more such subservient native character in the novel, who feels grateful to White European settlers for uplifting and civilizing him and his people. The character is Theophilus Msimangu, who works as a priest in the Mission House, Sophiatown, Johannesburg. Msimangu is yet another angelic figure of a native in the novel. He is, indeed, Stephen Kumalo's "moral and spiritual guide" (Goodman 157). He extends a helping hand to Stephen Kumalo in searching his son Absalom in Johannesburg. Msimangu, however, does not fully approve of colonial intrusion on native culture and deems it one major reason for ongoing social unrest in South African society. His indebtedness to White colonial masters, as well as his disapproval of cultural onslaught and subsequent mayhem in society, is evident in the following lines:

My friend, I am a Christian. It is not in my heart to hate a white man. It was a white man who brought my father out of darkness. But you will pardon me if I talk frankly to you. The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again. The white man has broken the tribe. And it is my belief—and again I ask your pardon—that it cannot be mended again. But the house that is broken, and the man that falls apart when the house is broken, these are the tragic things. That is why children break the law, and old white people are robbed and beaten.
 (Paton 25)

Msimangu's dilemma towards white supremacy emanates from the fact that he feels indebted to his white master for religious reform through Christianity, but at the same time, cannot turn his eyes away from the fact that reform came at the cost of destruction of their indigenous clan and culture. Analogically Msimangu serves as a better Ariel figure in the novel than Stephen Kumalo, for Msimangu seems to be endowed with a rebellious streak like Ariel, which is completely missing in Stephen Kumalo.

Yet another fact evident from the narrative of Paton is that most of the native characters that seem noble in the novel are firm believers in Christianity. Whether it is Stephen Kumalo or Theophilus Msimangu or even Mrs Lithebe, who provides boarding and lodging to Stephen Kumalo when he comes to Johannesburg, all three have utmost faith in Christianity and arduously follow Christian principles of love, patience and sacrifice. While all those native characters, who have lost faith in Christianity, seem to be demonic. In this category, the name that first comes to mind is that of John Kumalo, younger brother of Stephen Kumalo. John Kumalo seems to be the most apt 'Caliban' figure in the novel, since he questions White supremacy and social injustice in South African society. His character has been delineated as a trouble-making union leader who demands for equal rights and opportunities for native workers. He has a charismatic personality and exceptional oratory skills through which he can create ripples among the masses. Msimangu informs Stephen Kumalo that John has made a name for himself as a prominent politician of Johannesburg. He, however, has "no use for the Church anymore," for he believes that "what God has not done for South Africa, man must do" (Paton 25). When Stephen Kumalo goes to see John Kumalo in Johannesburg and asks him to come back to Ndotsheni, John bursts into a long harangue against village chief whom he considers "an old and ignorant man, who is nothing but a white man's dog" (Paton 34). John Kumalo further explains the reason of his irreverent attitude towards Church:

. . . the Church too is like the chief. You must do so and so and so. You are not free to have an experience. A man must be faithful and meek and obedient, and he must obey the laws, whatever the laws may be. It is true that the Church speaks with a fine voice, and that the Bishops speak against the laws. But this they have been doing for fifty years, and things get worse, not better. (Paton 34)

John Kumalo is very similar to Caliban of *The Tempest*, for he knows it all. After coming to Johannesburg, he got to know how White European settlers built their Empire by exploiting native workers, who toiled hard in the gold mines for a meagre wage of three shillings a day. He is not ready to be further exploited by White Mine owners who relegate native workers to the abyss of poverty and disparity and enjoy all the creature comforts and privileges on their own. John Kumalo boldly raises his voice against racial discrimination and social injustice and punctures the façade of development and material prosperity of South Africa. According to him prosperity comes only to the Whites at the cost of native exploitation:

Go to our hospital . . . and see our people lying on the floors. They lie so close you cannot step over them. But it is they who dig the gold. . . . We live in the compounds, we must leave our wives and families behind. And when the new gold is found, it is not we who will get more for our labour. It is the white man's shares that will rise . . . They do not think, here is a chance to pay more for our labour. They think only, here is a chance to build a bigger house and buy a bigger car. It is important to find gold, they say, for all South Africa is built on the mines . . . But it is not built on the mines . . . it is built on our backs, on our sweat, on our labour. Every factory, every theatre, every beautiful house, they are all built by us. And what does a chief know about that? But here in Johannesburg they know. (Paton 34-35)

It is, indeed, interesting to note that John Kumalo exercises “power” over the natives due to having “knowledge” of the bitter truth of South African society. He, however, does not carry his opposition and rebellion to a decisive point, since he fears for the loss of his own power. Whenever John Kumalo speaks, he fills the audience with zeal and energy, but he soon lets the rising furore among the natives fall to an abysmal level. Everybody knows in Johannesburg that John Kumalo can be a dangerous man, since he has the ability to mobilize native workers against the injustice of the White Mine owners. Msimangu aptly explains the reason why John Kumalo eventually comes out as a harmless rebel:

Perhaps we should thank God he is corrupt, said Msimangu solemnly. For if he were not corrupt, he could plunge this country into bloodshed. He is corrupted by his possessions, and he fears their loss, and the loss of the power he already has. (Paton 161)

In the speeches of John Kumalo one can find bitterness and anger of Shakespeare's scheming rebel ‘Caliban’, as also boldness and courage of Milton's glorious rebel Satan, who exhibits undaunted valour even in the face of extreme suffering and adversity, and who refuses to compromise with his powerful Foe even after being defeated and thrown into torturous Hell:

What though the field be lost?
 All is not lost—the unconquerable will,
 And study of revenge, immortal hate,

And courage never to submit or yield:

And what is else not to be overcome? (Milton *Paradise Lost* Book 1)

John Kumalo's fiery speeches have the same hypnotic effect on the native workers that Satan had over the fallen angels:

John Kumalo sits down, and the people applaud him, a great wave of shouting and clapping. They are simple people, and they do not know that this is one of the country's greatest orators, with one thing lacking. They have heard only the great bull voice, they have been lifted up, and let fall again, but by a man who can lift up again after he has let fall. (Paton 160)

Alan Paton has drawn the character of John Kumalo in a very intriguing manner. When John Kumalo talks about social injustice prevalent in South Africa, his tone seems to be that of morally uplifted preacher. But when it comes to his personal morality, one finds him extremely pragmatic and ethically deficient. When he gets to know that his son Matthew Kumalo was an accomplice in the crime of breaking into the house of Arthur Jarvis with Absalom Kumalo and Johannes Pafuri, he immediately hires a lawyer for his son's defence. On the advice of the lawyer, Matthew Kumalo pleads not guilty in front of the Judge. Stephen Kumalo is aghast at the audacious lie of Matthew Kumalo that he was not there at all with Absalom on the fateful night, when Arthur Jarvis was murdered. But John Kumalo does not have any pricking of the conscience in this whole affair. His dual standards make him an object of Stephen Kumalo's anger and reproach. At the same time his hypocrisy as a politician also comes to the foreground. In the portrayal of John Kumalo as a political firebrand but morally deficient native, Paton's "personal dimension" as a White European settler is most evident (Said 33). Stephen Watson believes that Paton's utmost faith in Christian Liberal vision is the real reason behind dubious characterization of John Kumalo:

Now it is all too clear that throughout *Cry, the Beloved Country* Paton is preaching for a revolution of hearts ("Change from Within") rather than for a revolution in social and economic structure ("Change from Without"). . . . He himself does not seem to realize (though John Kumalo makes this clear) that although Christianity might offer profound spiritual strength to people at bay, it also imparts a political weakness which dictates, however necessarily and realistically, an acceptance of the hegemony of the oppressor. (41-42)

John Kumalo's cohorts Dubula and Tomlinson are the other two native characters in the novel, who mobilize native workers in Johannesburg against inequitable treatment and economic exploitation done by White Mine owners. Msimangu informs Stephen Kumalo that in the troika of John Kumalo, Dubula and Tomlinson, Tomlinson is the "brain", John Kumalo is the "voice" and Dubula is the "heart" and consequently the one who the Government is most afraid of (Paton 40). It would have been interesting to know how native leaders like Dubula and Tomlinson rattle government authorities through their mass movement activities. Unfortunately, Paton's narrative falls short on this aspect, as one finds limited representation of Dubula and Tomlinson. Similar is the case of Napoleon Letsitsi, the native agricultural specialist, who rejects the idea of white supremacy and believes that he does not need "White Master" to guide him and wants to enable his native people to be independent and free (Gunes 39). Paton's representation of all these native characters, who want to change society through social activism, seems to be peripheral, since pivotal position is acquired by Christian Liberalist figures of Stephen Kumalo and Msimangu.

There are two other important native characters in the novel, who exhibit utter disregard to dictates of social and religious norms of which Stephen Kumalo has been a flag bearer throughout the narrative of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. However, both these characters do not fall in the category of John and Matthew Kumalo, who do not have any qualms in following the path of evil and depravity. The characters in question are Absalom and Gertrude. Both Absalom and Gertrude come to the city of Johannesburg in search of better prospects in life but experience the ugly truth of racial discrimination. Gertrude comes to the city in search of her husband but fails to find him and later gets trapped in the mire of illegal activities. She explains it to Stephen Kumalo that she had to take to such immoral activities like the sale of illicit liquor and prostitution for her own and her child's survival in the ruthless city of Johannesburg. She also knows that there is no going back from this dreadful world of crime and prostitution. Hence, she quietly disappears from the house of Mrs Lithebe after entrusting her child to Stephen Kumalo's care and custody.

Absalom Kumalo also goes through moral dilemma like Gertrude. He got tempted by the charms of a big city like Johannesburg and eloped from his native village, Ndotsheni with dreams of a better life. He, however, ended up as a thief and later a murderer, who is given extreme punishment in the form of hanging by the neck till death. Absalom Kumalo seems to be a quintessential tragic hero whose suffering is more than what he deserves. The character of Absalom Kumalo in the novel represents native youth in Johannesburg, who become anarchic to

exhibit their resentment towards the government that failed to give equal opportunities to all the citizens irrespective of their skin colour. Probably that is the reason that the Judge passed an extreme judgment on Absalom, so that his predicament serves as a strong reminder to all the other native youth involved in illegal activities.

Alan Paton, nevertheless, also throws light on the flaws of the legal system prevalent in South Africa at the time. While passing judgment on Absalom, the Judge of the Court goes through the utmost conundrum. He feels convinced by the arguments of Mr Carmichael that Absalom should not suffer the extreme penalty, for he confessed to his crime forthrightly and is shocked and stricken by his deed. Besides, attention should also be paid to the fact that the whole society is an accomplice for causing disaster that has overwhelmed native tribal society. The Judge, however, passes his final judgment on Absalom on the basis of Law, which he believes is sacrosanct:

But even if it be true that we have, out of fear and selfishness and thoughtlessness, wrought a destruction that we have done little to repair, even if it be true that we should be ashamed of it and do something more courageous and forthright than we are doing, there is nevertheless a law. . . . a Judge may not trifle with the Law because the society is defective. If the law is the law of a society that some feel to be unjust, it is the law and the society that must be changed. (Paton 171)

Alan Paton deserves applause for capturing nuances of racially segregated South African society in such a vivid manner that reader's sympathies keep on shifting from one to the other. Even a criminal like Absalom Kumalo draws sympathy of the readers for his unintended act of murder and subsequent acknowledgement of the crime in front of the Judge in an unflinching manner.

Conclusion:

Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, undoubtedly, succeeds in subtly portraying various native characters on a wide spectrum. There are both 'Ariel' figures like Stephen Kumalo, Theophilus Misimangu, Mrs Lithebe and 'Caliban' figures like Napoleon Letsitsi, John Kumalo and his cohorts Dubula and Tomlinson. Besides, there are characters like Absalom and Gertrude who riddle with moral dilemmas throughout the narrative of the novel and eventually end up as victims of their circumstances. The thorough analysis of the native characters in the novel,

however, foregrounds Alan Paton's personal dimension as a White European settler who appreciates "Ariel" figures in the novel for their submissive, accommodating posture and forewarns "Caliban" figures with dire consequences for their irreverent, rebellious audacity.

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