

Rethinking the Slave as Hero:

A Deconstructionist Perspective in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Amadi's *The Slave*

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Abstract In the search for meaning, literature has been approached from several varying viewpoints over time. One of these approaches involves viewing it as a member of a specific class which can be engaged in a comparative study. This is based on the Aristotelian notion of mimesis as production, representation and creation of the probable as artists do not just create what they see but what could happen, accounting for the nature of art as a heterocosm. Thus, the approach this paper seeks to take is the phenomenological one which in a comparative manner, searches for core values which are embedded in all literary texts. It will do this by way of searching out the poetic symbol of the hero that cuts across genre form in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare and *The Slave* by Elechi Amadi. This image will also be considered in its contextual form as “slave” taking into account the social and historical contexts presented in the texts.

Key words slavery; archetype; poetic image; hero; slave.

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Introduction

That Shakespeare has dominated the literary scene and canon for centuries is evident by the scale of critical writings on his works. A question that readily comes to mind on encountering the topic of this paper is, why slavery? Slavery is an issue which has had recurring significance in society from the history of time. Once human beings evolved from the nomadic and isolated life of hunting and gathering and began to live in larger social groups, they found need for slaves. Even in modern day society, slavery is still ongoing although in new and different forms. Thus we have child labour, forced labour, bonded labour and human trafficking. Akosua Perbi posits that slavery arose due to the need for labour especially for agricultural purposes. Political intrigues, simple commerce, religious and cultural practices are other factors which instigated the practice of slavery (1).

Two basic dimensions have been given of African slavery (slavery involving black people). They are the external dispersal of subjects and their internal dispersal. In this vein, it is often the case that the treatment and living conditions of the slave varies as the externally dispersed slaves tend to have less liberties than their internally dispersed counterparts (Perbi 11). However one shared trait which all slaves seem to have in common irrespective of location is the absence of “will to action.” They most times do not have the right to make decisions and choices without the consent of their masters. In spite of this shared trait, it is noteworthy that the internally dispersed slaves especially those who were confined to Africa were in much better straits than their counterparts in America, Europe and other parts of the world who had been externally dispersed outside the continent (Bezemer, Bolt and Lensink 9, 10).

It is in light of this that this paper will argue the interconnectedness of the two texts: *The Tempest* and *The Slave* as both texts have central characters who are slaves but belong to the two major classes of dispersal enumerated above. *The Slave* is basically a novel about class status and the consciousness of this on the psyche of individuals. Centered on the life of Olumati who is an internally dispersed slave, it tells a story of love, strife and loss. Olumati in this text like a few other people in the Aliji community is a slave due to his association with and servitude of a god of the land, Amadioha. He is therefore banned from participating in certain activities unlike the free citizens who can engage in every and, any activity they wish to. In this process, Olumati loses the love of his life, and series of misfortune seem to trail his steps until he eventually decides to return to the house of his god and dedicate himself fully to service as living a civil life seems pointless since he cannot live it to

the fullest.

The Tempest, William Shakespeare's famous play which points to colonialism and demonstrates the phenomenon of imperialism holds invariably, the image of servitude associated with slavery. It opens up a discourse on the rigid and vastly unpleasant nature of imperial slavery where the slave has no rights whatsoever and is allowed to do nothing but the bidding of his master. This is the case with Caliban, the slave in the play who serves in company of spirits like Ariel, Prospero the master of the Island where they all reside. Like *The Slave*, this play is also riddled with the idea of love, strife and loss. However, unlike Olumati, Caliban is a slave to someone outside of his culture. His situation can therefore be referred to as externally dispersed slavery, especially as the island where he resides is not his initial home but an adopted home where he stays, isolated from the outside world after his mother's demise. While the love which Caliban has for Miranda his master's daughter is purely sexual and vengeful, he has lost his island to Prospero and the play demonstrates the strife associated with his attempt to regain control and ownership of what was once his. The play closes with Caliban regaining his freedom from Prospero and his island. However this is due to forces not of his own making.

The Slave as Caliban and Olumati

The slave is a character that occurs in both of the texts under study in this paper. Like the old wise man, the red dragon and the evil step-mother, the image of the slave is one which recurs in history and world literature. This paper will attempt to explore the idea of the slave from two different perspectives. While one view dwells on the socio-physical conception of the idea of the slave, the other will dwell on the recurrent image of the slave in myths, history and literature.

From the socio-physical perspective, Caliban and Olumati are presented as slaves in *The Tempest* and *The Slave*. However, the terms and conditions of their slavery differ bringing to mind what Perbi says about the difference between internally dispersed and externally dispersed slaves. Even though both of them are forced into slavery in situations which they do not seem to have full control over, Caliban is a slave in the 'Negro' sense of the word. He is the kind of slave associated with imperialism. His living conditions are bad, he is constantly derided and harassed by Prospero and Ariel under the former's directives. This comes in verbal and physical forms. Hence, Prospero says to him:

Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself

Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!...
 For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
 All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinch'd
 Hag-seed, hence!
 Fetch us in fuel; and be quick, thou'rt best,
 To answer other business. Shrug'st thou, malice?
 If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly
 What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,
 Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar. (Shakespeare AI SII)

He is thus forced to continue serving Prospero against his will as violence is used to make him comply.

Olumati in *The Slave* is not a slave to a man. He is rather, perceived by the community as being dedicated to the god- Amadioha. In this type of slavery where he has no human master, he does almost as he pleases but for the misfortunes which plague his family and certain restrictions of mixing with the free people in his community. He has a good relationship with the people of his village with the exception of the Okani family which has an ongoing feud with his family. It is only when it comes to the issue of marriage that he learns of the half-hearted acceptance which the Aliji people have towards him as Adiba mentions it to him. Prior to this time however, no one has insulted him or deprived him of any right because he is perceived to be a vassal of Amadioha. Rather, his presence is abhorred on account of the fear that allowing him to remain in the village will incur the wrath of the god. Therefore, one of the elders says to Nyege: "allowing an Osu of Amadioha to stay here is to invite the terrible anger of the god" (Amadi 20).

On the denial of Caliban's humanity, Prospero and the other characters in *The Tempest* demonstrate the moral excuse which Europeans used to facilitate slavery and colonialism. He mentions that he tried to refine Caliban but his crude nature would not allow for refinement. Olumati on the other hand is as fit and respected as any other member of the community of his age group. The people accept him for his deeds and worth and not for his lineage. From having nothing when he returns to Aliji, he becomes a great farmer, tapper, hunter and a home owner. Thus he participates in all societal activities which his unmarried status allows. Perbi has iterated the rights and privileges which internally dispersed slaves had within the African continent to include: the right to legal protection, independent income and political mobility. They include what Olumati enjoyed in his status as a supposed slave since Amadioha confirmed that indeed it was his father and not Olumati

who was consecrated to him. Consequently, the similarities and points of contrast between Olumati and Caliban become clear. Originally, they have the status of ownership and belongingness on the land in which they become slaves. However later on, their status as 'slave' differs due to their unequal treatment.

The Slave Archetype

Other than the socio-physical conditions of slavery which characterizes the conditions of Caliban and Olumati, the mythological image of the slave can also be deduced from their situations. The slave archetype like other archetypes transcend the texts under study. Going back to the history of the word, archetype which is Greek, literally means original type or old type (Elam 1). Thus, it is an image which is found in history, folk tales, lore and literature. It is associated with the absence of power of choice, self-authority or dignity which is sometimes complete (Myss 1). This absence of power of choice may be by deference to a divine or human master. Thus Sisyphus in the ancient Greek myth is enslaved for eternity and has to carry out the task of rolling a boulder up a steep hill which results in its rolling down and his having to do it all over again, endlessly (Camus 10). This is choiceless work which demonstrates Sisyphus's lack of self-authority or dignity as well as the absence of will to power. For him, there is no respite and at no time does the myth tell of a change in his situation. The Bible also contains quite a number of this image cutting across the Tanakh books into the epistles of the apostles in the New Testament. When this same slave image occurs in the Bible in the character of Moses, the element of choicelessness is also present. However, his will and choices are surrendered to a higher power than that of man. Divinity and the God factor comes in where Moses does not do what pleases him but what pleases his divine master and gets some fulfillment in the process. Whether this slave eventually transcends this position is another situation entirely even though most times, the slave is seen to achieve this. Other characters in the Bible who demonstrate this archetypal image are Joseph and Daniel although they both serve human masters and are able with the traits of humility and wisdom to rise to positions of prominence, saving lives and bordering on heroism. It is this image of the slave which had mutated over time and transcends into the hero symbol that this paper explores.

Shakespeare has been viewed from numerous and differing perspectives over the centuries. What this paper aims to do is to review the image of the slave as a hero archetype, a recurrent symbol in literary works with the aim of finding this same image in the two texts under study. The revisionist impulse of questioning

characterization in *The Tempest* is an attempt to contextualize the text and emerge with additional, novel meanings. Thus Caliban here, is not seen as a slave which he becomes under Prospero's rule but as a hero who struggles for freedom and to reclaim what is his, his land and way of life. Hence, he will be placed side by side with Olumati in this study. Olumati will also be viewed as exemplifying the traits of not a slave but a hero who struggles against forces outside his control to find happiness and fulfillment in society.

Although the archetype theory began with the work of Carl Jung, it was Northrop Frye who in his application of it in the criticism of literary texts, popularized it as a literary theory. Ann Dobie in view of this method of reading, posits that meaning creation from a literary text should involve a deep reflection, search for the mythological element, that recurrent strain or symbol of the human memory which finds expression in folklore, myths, literature, etc (58). For Frye, it is important that:

The criticism which can deal with such matters, be based on that aspect of symbolism which relates poems (literary texts) to one another, and chooses, as its main field of operations, the symbols that link poems (literary texts) together. Its ultimate object is to consider, not simply a poem as an imitation of nature, but the order of nature as a whole as imitated by a corresponding order of words. (96)

Jacques Lacan in positing the various minor archetypes outside of the shadow, anima and persona, iterates them as the hero, scapegoat, outcast and devil amongst other images of seasons, shapes and colours (Dobie 58-64). These symbols as they occur in texts may mutate over time, taking on additional characteristics to themselves (Akwanya 36). It is in light of this that the paper will consider the characters of Caliban and Olumati as images of the 'hero' in *The Tempest* and *The Slave*.

Rethinking the Slave as Hero

The hero as an archetype is an image which recurs in folklore, myths, legends and literary texts (Akwanya 37). Ancient literary texts such as the *Bible* contain this image in the character of Jesus the Christ who is born as a son to the lowly carpenter Joseph and his wife. He grows up as a normal child with few incidences which prepare and indicate his great future. Entwined in his role as hero however, is the element of the scapegoatism or sacrifice. His life is thus characterized by

struggle. The struggle to do good for society while faced with adversaries who are jealous, do not understand him and seek to destroy him. Joseph, son to Jacob and Rachael is another hero character in the *Bible* who is young, innocent and has events and omens which indicate his greatness. He later becomes prime minister in Egypt and saves thousands of lives while forgiving his brothers who had earlier sold him into Egypt as a slave and report him dead to their father. Other examples of the hero image in the *Bible* include David and Daniel amongst others (Gen 41:39-45; I Sam 17:35; II Sam 2:4; Dan 6). The hero is thus a young man, naïve and innocent who is born and raised in a rural setting away from cities.¹⁵ He usually has a mysterious origin, sometimes could return to the land of his birth and suffers from a deep emotional or physical wound from which he may or may not recover.¹⁶ It is this image which is foregrounded in this paper. Indeed the tragic element also finds expression in these characters, necessitating the contemplation of both of them as tragic heroes to a certain extent.

This paper is an attempt to compare the poetic image of the hero in the characters of Caliban and Olumati who are both slaves in Shakespeare's play *The tempest* and Elechi Amadi's novel *The Slave*. It has earlier been pointed that slaves were treated differently depending on the type of slave trade and dispersal involved. In *The Tempest*, slavery is a resultant effect of forceful conquering; aligning with the view posited by Perbi (4,5). Thus Caliban becomes a slave through no cause of his but by Prospero's colonialism and usurping of his power as ruler and owner of the island. He is then forced to undergo hard labour such as hewing of wood and fetching of water. His speech as he accuses Prospero reveals this.

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first. (AI SII)

Like Caliban, Olumati becomes a slave because his parents flee his ancestral home to seek refuge in the shrine of the god, Amadioha. Even though his mother is only pregnant with him before the incident and Amadioha does not claim him, Olumati is still regarded by the villagers as a slave. They attempt to send him back to the shrine when on his grandmother's insistence, they discover from a diviner that he does not belong to the god and is therefore free. In spite of this, there are those who do not believe in his freedom. Adiba says to him: "many in Aliji are still not sure you are not a slave of Amadioha...people are stubborn" (Amadi 184). Hence Caliban and Olumati are both not slaves in the actual sense but are rather perceived to be slaves and can hardly do anything about it.

The suffering which is a trait of the scapegoat hero plays up in the characters of Caliban and Olumati who are punished for crimes which they have not committed. Thus like Jesus who is tried and crucified on the basis of fear and hate, Caliban and Olumati are ostracized and never fully accepted as members of their respective communities.

On the element of birth which for the hero is unusual, Olumati like Caliban has his pregnant mother fleeing for refuge in a new place. While the former is born and nurtured in the shrine of Amadioha where his father serves, Caliban is born and nurtured on the island which his mother Sycorax chooses. Unlike Olumati who leaves Amadioha's shrine and returns to Aliji, Caliban does not relocate to a new place after he grows up. Rather, he is banished by Prospero to a barren and rocky part of the island thus demonstrating the mutating nature of poetic symbols which vary slightly in their re-appearance and take on new or additional meanings over time.

Struggle characterizes the lives of both of the heroes. For Caliban, the struggle is that of reclamation. He struggles to reclaim the island which Prospero has taken from him. It is in doing this that he gets to reclaim his freedom. Thus he employs a number of means to aid him in this. First, he tries to have sexual relations with Miranda in order to people the island with 'Calibans' which will invariably lead to his regaining his title as owner of the island through population or numerical dominance. This plan fails and his second attempt involves a collaboration with new arrivals on the island; Trinculo and Stephano to displace Prospero by burning his books which are the source of his magic, hence power. Caliban finds himself in this situation of having to struggle to regain his inheritance from Prospero due to his gullibility and innocence. When Prospero arrives the island initially, Caliban makes the mistake of showing him the strengths and weaknesses of the island, its fruits and resources without thought of what could happen next and what happens is that his position as island owner is overturned and he becomes the outcast.

Olumati is a heroic character whose life is also fraught with struggles. When he appears at the opening of the story, his presence in Aliji is contested by the villagers. After that is settled, he struggles to shoulder the responsibility of heading his family. He toils to build his house, cultivate his farm and make enough money to marry Enaa. Only, he does the last too late. His life is full of troubles and the situation is so dire that it recalls to mind the fact that "happiness... (could sometimes be but) the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (Hardy 188). In the course of struggling to achieve his goals, Olumati is challenged by Aso the son of the Okani family with whom Olumati's family has a feud. He also loses his grandmother

and only sister. With his father already dead and his mother in another village, he becomes truly alone and like Caliban, faces his battles alone.

Another point of demonstration of the hero status shared by Caliban and Olumati is in the quest which they each undertake. In *The Tempest*, Caliban's outmost desire is to reclaim his island from Prospero. His efforts are therefore geared towards achieving this goal. Thus he attempts to people the island with "Calibans" with Miranda's help and when that fails, works in tandem with Trinculo and Stephano, to oust Prospero. However, this attempt also fails and he remains a slave until Prospero leaves the island. This situation mirrors the case with numerous post colonies whose subjects did not succeed in ousting the colonial imperialists until they chose to leave on their own volition when it was no longer profitable to continue in the trend.

Olumati in *The Slave* also has a quest. His is to restore his family's place in the village and make their name great again. Even when he loses Aleru his sister and his mother requests that he leaves the house for a while, he refuses. It is the same case when Ovunda asks the same thing of him. Thus soon after he returns to Aliji, he undertakes palm wine tapping and hunting wild game in a bid to raise money for building his house as well as for the next farming season which he intends to participate in. He succeeds in his tapping, gaming and farming endeavours and plans on holding an Mgbede (outing ceremony before marriage) for his sister but she declines due to practical reasons. It is still in this quest to restore his family's place in the village that he desires to marry Enaa. This is the one event which leads to the wounding of the hero. He only relinquishes his house when it is clear that he has lost and will never achieve his quest of marrying Enaa and becoming fully integrated into the community.

Olumati in the demonstration of his ignorance and lack of maturity, decides that everything has to be right before he can ask Enaa to marry him. He waits so long and ignores the hardworking Adiba who openly demonstrates her care for him as well as offers by his kinsman Ovunda to marry one of his daughters. Olumati pursues the elusive desire he has for Enaa as he is not sure if he really understands her but makes a vow to marry her all the same when his sister dies desiring him to do so. After harvesting his yams and getting some money, he eventually feels ready to ask Enaa for her hand in marriage. However, it is too late as she has already accepted his friend Wizo's proposal. He is ignorant of the courtship and feels betrayed. It is at this point that Adiba tell him the people's opinion about him. He is still considered a slave and Enaa would not have been allowed to marry him if he had asked her to. He is crushed, subdued and retreats into the darkness of solitude.

All his struggles have been for naught since he cannot find a wife to carry on his family name. Olumati's wound as hero is emotional. It is so deep that he does not recover from it. He gives his stored money to Ovunda and Adiba and retreats back to the sanctuary of Amadioha's shrine from whence he came. He chooses this time, to become a slave to the god as he is already considered one being hindered what free men would get. Thus he says to his kinsman: "take my house...I am going away...three days later people who had gone to the market at Isiali reported that he had taken refuge at the shrine of Amadioha" (Amadi 189).

Caliban in *The Tempest* is also seen to have wounds. Both physical and emotional. He recovers from the physical injuries inflicted on him time and again by Ariel and other beings on Prospero's behest. He recounts his ordeal to himself along the way as he fetches wood.

His spirits hear me...

For every trifle are they set upon me;

Sometime like apes that mow and chatter at me

And after bite me, then like hedgehogs which

Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount

Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I

All wound with adders who with cloven tongues

Do hiss me into madness. (AII SII)

As he does seem to possess still his faculties, it shows that the snake venom-induced madness lasts only for a while and he overcomes it. His emotional wound of betrayal inflicted by Prospero's traitorous behavior of taking over the island and banishing him to a tiny and rocky portion of it is another wound which Caliban does not recover from. In the opening act of the play he mentions it. In subsequent scenes, he reiterates this and it is what acts as impetus to his overthrow attempts of Prospero's tyrannical rule.

The fact that the situations of Caliban and Olumati especially are not caused by any action or fault of theirs brings to mind the absence of the element of hamartia. While Olumati is condemned to a life of slavery by the singular act of his parents seeking refuge from murderers in the shrine of Amadioha while he is yet unborn, Caliban is condemned by his naivety and uncritical nature which makes him hospitable to a fault. These actions or lack of actions which could not have been preconceived and therefore prevented before they took place are the deciding factors in the fate of both characters. Caliban and Olumati are therefore presented to

be ordinary characters who in carrying out their daily activities are condemned by a power of fate beyond their control. They are therefore tragic heroes.

In viewing the slave as a hero character, some issues come up. The application of mythical or archetypal theory to literary criticism is viewed skeptically especially by critics who foreground the functional aspect of literary texts. It is often seen as reductionist and formulaic as it tends to generally exclude other extra-textual sources or phenomena. Other than this, it is also seen as old, having been overtaken by more recent theories such as eco-criticism and cultural studies amongst others. To account for this, this study has already considered the social and historical factors which informed and are at play in the texts. Although archetypal criticism is seen as subsuming the uniqueness of a literary text in the emphasis of patterns and motifs, it allows for a comparative study of texts irrespective of space or time. It also facilitates an in-depth understanding of the text. "At the level of depth interpretation, the text becomes a 'genuine object of understanding,' not a pointer to something outside itself" (Akwayana 47). Hence it encapsulates the very essence of art while demonstrating life forms. It is in light of this that the paper argues the dual interpretations of the characters of Caliban and Olumati. They are thus not just slaves but heroes as well.

At the surface level the texts seem to be about the failed romantic life and a master-servant relationship. On closer inspection with the mythic image however, deeper meanings begin to emerge and *The Tempest* becomes the story of a hero ousted from his place by a greedy and ungrateful tenant. This hero demonstrates various elements of naivety, struggle, quest and damage which indicate his personality beyond the mere surface slave which he is seen to be. Olumati in like manner becomes a hero struggling to restore his displaced family name and glory. He is no longer just a man who tries to build his life and encounters numerous hurdles and experiences loss but a tragic hero who through no fault of his, is overcome by misfortune evoking pity and fear.

Conclusion

Extra-textual basis for archetypal images often abound. For the hero archetype especially, these basis are found in religion, history and myths. "The mythological image or symbol is what gives this kind of literature the property of universality. The image is not exhausted or even properly contained in its existential representation; for it embodies human meanings which are not tied to time and space" (Akwayana 51). Thus, the hero in *The Tempest* and its appearance in *The Slave* serve as indicators that all literature indeed have the poetic symbol in common

as their production or creation emerges from that unconscious part of man which reveals “collective unconscious as a store house for knowledge, experiences, and images of the human race” (Dobie 58).

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