



# Configuring the *Other* in Shakespeare: Exposing the Diatribe of Racist Continuum

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The contours of comfort of the twenty first century worldwide *global village* (www) – a modern techno tenet we all swear by – are wrought with blinkers that dazzle with their sincere appeal to ford humanity. What perhaps began in the boardrooms and labs, and field experiments to advance State agenda(s) now has become a universal, lived Catch 22 humongous grotesquerie. The global village is a superstructure that ignores or at best lip services stifling brutal diglossia where poverty and the culture/language of impoverished communities are seen as intrinsically flawed and natural roadblocks that stymie growth. The entire non-Western world laps up to pop-homogenization where it is passe to confront and verify the naked fact. The non-West guns itself to believe that the greatest of social scientists come from Western echelons where the axes of comfort like boardrooms, labs and field experiments appear neutral infrastructures and therefore unbiased. What however remains writ in water are the drivers and their cogman who steer, manufacture and filter. As we grow close, we are fraught with anxiety of unprecedented levels ever, increasingly wary of change and suspicious of intrusion. The *White* whittles into every single aspect of our lifestyle, thought, health and ecological concern, ingeniously fashioning us to cohere. The times are challenging and rather onerous where resistance is always interpellated as kitsch, unauthentic since it is outside and defies controlled precincts. William Shakespeare, whose trenchant writings defrocked a ubiquitously ambitious Brittany, is today the kitsch of thinkers who search for ways to give teeth to the margins. Derek Walcott's oeuvre explores the erasure of the African diaspora from dated *topos* and *chronos* while Robert Browning's writings document resistance to forced homogenization.

European Renaissance was a time when glory was being gutted, and while State censorship refused to let political critics speak, subversion remained a festering bedrock. Shakespeare's plays are a ludic locus for engaging with this world whose seams stitch over and gloss rankness to create a pristine *White*. While Shakespeare lived in an age of anomalies where Americas were beginning to be explored and colonized, Robert Browning experienced at first hand the British Empire's guts and glory. His *Caliban Upon Setebos* recasts the Bard's Caliban, who had been forcibly dispossessed by the proverbial European of every material belonging and made to feel like an animal without a modicum of intelligence and worth, as sensitive, soulful and yet alone. The grafted vantage of the White community continues to simmer with discontent because the proviso of space to alternate voices remains conditional, limited and circumvented. Derek Walcott who lived and taught in the Americas till recently was an Afro-White American whose works like *A Branch of Blue Nile* and *Goats and Monkeys* explore and explode the politics of effacing the African global footprint in crafted euro-centric myths and classics which despite obliterating the Black continue to be the staple of academics in postcolonial societies.

Presumption of White hegemony across the European and American intellectual trajectory is a regressive social mnemonic that has been armature to singular power arrogation and insularity where every non-White is reduced to an aberrant or an intruder. Romanticizing Europe's past as nothing but a mecca of art, literature and human values is a human tragedy that refuses to probe or chart the social backwaters of the Renaissance, and whitewashes the exploitation of its non-Whites. Shakespeare lived during an age when Europe was getting adventurous, expanding its borders and strategizing a global tenacle. His plays and sonnets ground the paradox that the more Europe opened up the more stringent and harsher it became towards those who did not agree to its prescribed national(sic) character, i.e. White and Christian. Afonso Álvares, a poet and playwright of the sixteenth century faced harsh criticism because of his suspect Jewish ancestry and Black blood.<sup>1</sup> Proscriptions, censorship and parochialism characterized British monarchy. Henry VIII broke away from the Vatican while his daughters when they became monarchs persecuted those who did not profess the monarch's faith. This inhumane monarchy has been explained by culture pundits as logical corollary to the threat of the powerful Ottomans whose armies had Moors from North and North West Africa. The fourth Ottoman-Venetian War (1570-73) resulted in Cyprus coming under the Ottoman crown which caused extensive cultural anxiety. The Maghrib unsettled the Europeans and rattled them with their inhering agrarian, prosperous and self-sustaining social structures.<sup>2</sup> Alessandro de' Medici, the first duke of Florence (1529–1537) was pejoratively “nicknamed

‘the Moor’ and ‘the mule’ of the Medici” because of his mixed ancestry.<sup>3</sup> In 1596, Queen Elizabeth ordered the deportation of the “divers blackmoores” from the country<sup>4</sup> despite many of them having rendered sterling service to the kingdom. Fear of miscegenation was seen as cardinal sin which buffered jingoism and economic consolidation. Renaissance hermeneutics denigrated the Black and Semitic mien and culture, subtly inveigling and evincing Whites as chaste, beautiful and superior. Documents of this period attest to a widespread fallacy that blackness was not racial but Satanic and evil.<sup>5</sup> The position of Moors who had respectable status in Europe became tenuous toward the end of the seventeenth century.

Shakespeare’s powerful characters like Othello, Cleopatra and Shylock suffer not because of inhering flaw or behavioural lapse but racial prejudice; in counter-assonance his White characters with flaws/prejudices like Portia, Antonio and Prospero prosper because they are White, ergo, inherently superior, socially infallible and not to be contradicted. The expose on socio-ethical duplicities of the European Renaissance so intelligently inextricably combs through Shakespeare’s plays that writers re-visit his enigmatic cultural morass to redefine *just* and shutterbug incandescent culturalists/moralists. *The New World* – where the natives were being systematically stripped off their rights and brazenly exploited extended the European political mulch to proactively decimate the indigenous and create a viscous subservience to the Whites. Shakespeare’s Caliban manifests the effect of this twisted discriminatory xenophobia. Born on an island to which he has natural affiliation, Caliban is emotionally screwed to feel ignominious and dysfunctional. European intrusion into his natural precincts reduces him to an informer and an underdog who unwittingly abets a seamless takeover by the intruders. Sentient reading unravels the under trail of colonization across America which repeated the excesses and infamy of the Hellenic empire. What began in west and Southeast Europe to subdue North Africa was repeated in Americas, and later became the flashpoint to derail Africa in toto and India. Shakespeare takes us through a cosmos where the rumblings of White arrogation can be heard and we witness how a tacit European consensus to wall in the *other* was underwriting and legitimatizing racism and Xenophobia.

Robert Browning acutely felt Caliban’s deprivation and angst especially in the Victorian context since Britain’s colonial spoils had created and ossified a wealthy class, which was not only unapologetically utilitarian but smug about widespread poverty and indigence within England, and acute economic, social distress overseas in its colonies; destitution was valorized as naturally merited by laziness and incompetence. In his poem *Caliban upon Setebos*, Browning frisks through the irony of celebrating Rousseau’s “natural savage” in relief to the colonial decimation of economically naïve communities. *Caliban upon Setebos* is a

graffiti which rends the placid screen of post-Enlightenment Humanism and bares its two-facedness and opportune volte face – a powerful satire on the undermining of the natural dignity of civilizations. We meet Browning’s Caliban during one of his rare leisure hours where we gradually realize that he never lets off his guard for he feels constantly threatened as desecration and defilement of his person, habiliment, dwelling and milieu have embittered him, rendered him vulnerable, as also violent and hunted. His imagination, philosophy and powerful language reveal his sensitivity and soulful beauty which is not misshapen but very different from Western aesthetics. So brutalized is Caliban that he mutates into a surreptitious image, caricaturing his subjugators’ dark intent: one of the “evils”, “Warts” and “sores” which can only be “cured with slime.” This impossibility of ever approximating the correct/ original chirrs a schrei where the natural *being* is restrained to becoming a lapse. Caliban’s schizoid and fractured self reveals itself in the way he relates to himself in the second person and considers his speech “rank.” He feels guilty when upset with Prospero and Miranda whom he has been brain-washed into accepting as divine beings with a divinely sanctioned birthright to an easy lifestyle made possible by his indentured labour. Not only does his gruelling labour go unrewarded but he is punished for every minor slip-up. It is a colossal tragedy that Caliban identifies not with his human counterparts but with the island’s fish that cannot survive in cleaner waters. The poem’s epigraph “Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself” articulates the poem’s ethical trajectory since our apperception of the Creator reflects our condition and conditioning. Caliban’s God, Setebos oscillates between being a manifestation of indifference and malevolence, Himself at the receiving end of an unfeeling Supreme Being. Caliban’s God is an *imago* of Shakespeare’s Prospero. Prospero had taught Caliban and refined his sensibilities, so Caliban imagines Setebos to have created an intelligent hardworking animal life. Like Prospero, Setebos appears to inflict underserved and out-of-proportion punishment – “...much craft, / By no means... love.” Prospero’s take-over in *The Tempest* simulates the *colonial politics of gassing* where tribes were pitted against each other, isolated and eventually hunted out. As such, the original inhabitants of the land are given a raw deal: Caliban is divested and confined while Ariel is given conditional liberty and is expected to keep a vigil on Caliban. The thrust of *Caliban upon Setebos* is to portray Shakespeare’s Caliban as a “site of interdiction” where knowledge and truth about colonial violence are tabooed and foreclosed. Browning understands the vitriolic politic undercurrent feeding Victoria’s empire – the vitriol every Elizabethan buccaneer had made his swashbuckling passport to righteously mow down natives.

It is intimidating to imagine being Black and walking down the corridors of Europe's past where xenophobia was endorsed by the authorities. Epidermalization devalued an individual to their melanin. Interracial romance or marriage was considered socially transgressive though it did happen and there were children of colour. Shakespeare empathetically portrayed the dilemma of being Black and ambitious which made one an absolute misfit and therefore dispensable. His Moor, Othello is a double whammy because of his birth and social audacity. He codifies not only the horror of miscegenation but an ossifying of the perception that Blacks are naturally indiscriminating and lascivious. Othello's over possessiveness and jealousy are seen more as racial and intrinsic rather than as hamartia. This stereotyping is cleaved in Derek Walcott's writings which etch Africans and the African diaspora as individuals who are what they are because of their temperamental leanings, not their racial antecedents – "no more/ Monstrous for being black", insinuating that race is and cannot be a yardstick to an individual's worth. The poem *Goats and Monkeys* strips myths as cultural cognates that underwrite a Black man as "horned beast" and Africa as antagonistic to the Whites. Europe's cultivated ignorance of and superficial fascination with the *Other* reduces the *Other* to a "vast sidling shadow." The White noblewoman Desdemona's murder is deliberated and strategically manufactured as a "racial, panther-black revenge" and made to appear inevitable and embroidered in "...the zodiac." *Goats and Monkeys* implicitly persuades its readers to revisit their cultural codex and explore why and how human sentiments are "faricically knotted" by aldermen so that black is naturalized as bestial and despicable.

Blackness as a *White* trope of unnatural superimposition in the play, *A Branch of the Blue Nile* strobes the plight of dark-skinned men and women in contemporary times. Forced to live as second-class citizens whose intrinsic worth is secondary to their epidermis, they are a *colony* of fractured selves. Their postcolonial Caribbean society has a euro-centric education system which induces paranoia. The system stifles. The only possible escape from this is abject abnegation and alteration of one's appearance and affect – (an impossible) de-aligning from the familiar and intimate. We meet Caribbean actors who rehearse and stage Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. An African woman with power is a very difficult proposition for them as their success in theatre largely depends on whether or not their looks appeal to the Whites. *A Branch of Blue Nile* begins on an ironic note with the dialogue "Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have/ Immortal longings in me," which takes us into a world of actors who are all lost and defeated but armed with an elusive hope for success and survival against insurmountable odds in a colony of privileged Whites which progressively shuns the non-Whites or lets them in conditionally. The mimicking of the grandeur of ancient Egypt in *A Branch of Blue*

*Nile* enables a double speak since *Antony and Cleopatra* is a European writ enacted by probable Egyptians who never knew Egypt. The colonizer's values and beliefs are a whammy for the Caribbean actors who derisively refer to themselves as "rangatang people," i.e., monkey folks with "fat lips" and "no brains."

Two Caribbean actresses enacting Cleopatra find it rather farcical and far-fetched that a Black woman, monarch or not, is felicitated by a White man. They denigrate this powerful ingenious Queen as "sensual" and a "lecherous serpent." One of them who has scant talent manages to become an overnight sensation by revealing her body and titillating her audience. Through her, Walcott parodies Europe's cultural fix over Cleopatra's exotic looks, over and above her incisive intelligence; demonstrating "the tendency to create an inchoate 'other'" from what is "but a piece of material evidence that is textual... of received ideas."<sup>6</sup> The simulacra of pop culture create an explosion of mindboggling images which like the pornographic exhibition of bodies suspends intellection and induces moral acquiescence. *A Branch of Blue Nile* raises the explosive issue of "black Christian... bondage in Egypt" which Walcott compares to "Gulags past a Hundred and Tenth" where White captivity was requisite to and tantamount to salvation because you were now less Black – the mighty Nile transformed into the river Jordan. An actor with a degree English literature and experience of teaching undergrads in the West detests the West because of his first-hand experience of its social engineering which he believes creates "hysteria" and teaches the Blacks "to devour their entrails, their own race." However, the play exposit that racism and xenophobia are complex social constructs. When its Black community treats its White director and one of its actors married to a White woman tritely, we realize xenophobia genders a backlash which is tacit vendetta. A world with absolute racial empathy will remain a myth as long as human memories are. But, if we are willing to go beyond the constraints of comfort and create villages of respect for the *other*, a Caliban and his Setebos will have a level playing field with friends in lands away from home.

Notes:

1. Bethencourt, Professor Fransisco. "Review of *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/619> Accessed on 14.08.2022
2. Hays, Jeff. "History of the Berbers and North Africa," <https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat55/sub394/entry-5932.html> Accessed on 15.08.2022
3. Bethencourt, Professor Fransisco. "Review of *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/619> Accessed on 14.08.2022.

4. “Black British people,” The Reader View of Wikipedia [https://thereaderwiki.com/en/Black\\_British](https://thereaderwiki.com/en/Black_British)  
Accessed on 15.08.2022
5. Ibid.
6. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1999. p. 113.

