

The Merchant of Venice: An Antithetical Discourse

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A discourse is the concurrent dialogues of various groups that are constantly channelized to arrive at newer understanding of the historical processes. According to Foucault discourse refers to...*ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations, which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning.* (Weedon)

This definition explains that knowledge is a subjective process which is continually defined and redefined due to various socio-cultural variables (it is impacted by other significant factors as well: geographical positioning of the subject, scientific experience among others). A discourse, being a conglomeration of diverse knowledge at each juncture of history, is a sum of all its customs and beliefs which must be comprehended in context of the power play deciding the societal inclusions and exclusions of the time. It follows that a discourse is based upon historical a priori truths, which are open to multiple interpretations due to continually shifting perceptions of an individual and collective consciousness. An acceptable and established discourse at one particular point of history can be studied as an antithesis due to altering social state of the affairs. An exemplar of such discourses is literature.

Literature is a formative discourse mimetic of the society at a given time but it may entertain diverse contextual meanings with the changing time. The subjective perception of a work of literature adds more significance to the text by giving it varying connotations. This proves to be an enriching exercise and simultaneously increases the popularity of the work and the artist. A befitting instance would be William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which has evolved as a work by its varying interpretations and also because this year, juxtaposing its original anti-semitic acceptance, for the first time ever the play was staged in the Venetian Ghetto, its actual setting.

The Merchant of Venice is among the most memorable and debatable of Shakespeare's plays. The story as evident from the title on



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First Folio is "the most excellent history of the Merchant of Venice with the extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew towards the said merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh and the obtaining of Portia by the choice of three caskets". It was written in the last decade of the 16th century and was located in Venice. The play is often seen as a compilation of separate plots among which the main are the bond story and the casket story. The former and central story is that of Antonio, a reputed Christian merchant of Venice who takes loan for the sake of his friend Bassanio from the greedy Jewish usurer Shylock under an unusual and vindictive bond. In the course of time Antonio forfeits the bond and must pay the debt by his flesh, but he is saved by the clever and disguised intervention of Portia, an emblematic Shakespearean heroine.

The play was seen as a romantic comedy and the treatment of the Jew villain as humorous and deserving, in accordance with the society of the time. Before venturing further it would be profitable to understand the acrimonious relation between the Christians and the Jews that frames the central theme of the story. From times immemorial Jews have been the persecuted race of the mankind. History has witnessed massive acts of crime against them for many irrational reasons (religious, social, cultural) right from Exodus to Holocaust. English society in the Elizabethan era has often been described as anti-Semitic. The Jews were maltreated and many prejudices were held against them. They were marginalized community barred to enter the city gates without prior permission; had to live at the outskirts of the city. Venice was the first city to establish a Jewish Ghetto. They were also lawfully expected to wear identification marks like a red hat to demarcate them as alien to the state and its Christian citizens.

In literature Jews were used as villains and objects of mockery. It was thoroughly acceptable in the times to not only show Jews in a negative light but also as deserving to be abused and subjugated by the Christian superiors. Jews were often represented on the Elizabethan stage in repulsive caricature, with hooked nose and bright red toupee, and as rapacious usurers. A fine example would be Christopher Marlowe's extremely popular play *The Jew of Malta*, which features a comically wicked Jewish villain called Barabas, whose fame might have inspired Shakespeare as well. On pages as in reality Jews were pigeonholed as evil, deceptive, and greedy. These stereotyped images harnessed negativity and continue to do so, defining Self's fear of the Other.

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is seen as a continuation of this anti-Semitic tradition, a compelling discourse on the European society of the 16th century: its prevailing social norms, Judeo-phobic concerns, its laws and economic setting. The play was first registered under the title '*The Merchant of Venice* or otherwise *The Jew of Venice*'. In its time the play's story must have been seen as exalting the Christian virtues against the Jewish vices. The play presented a befitting contrast between the merciful nature of the Christian characters and the greed and vengefulness of a Jew. It was meant

to satiate the notion of Christian superiority so much so that even the forced conversion of the Jew was seen as a medium to redeem the appalling Jew and as a contented ending. The play did certainly fit with the anti-Semitic trends of the Elizabethan England.

Shakespeare's drama *The Merchant of Venice* continued to be staged and read with pleasure as a comedy for a long period. But over the years the play has been premeditated upon several times. The significance of a text and the genius of a writer lie in their ability to invite multiple perspectives. The rational mind intervenes and initiates us into a radical and all-encompassing understanding of the characters of the play and the dramatist's motive in creating and complicating them.

Evolving understanding of the histories of the world and the representation of the past brought about essential changes in the way we construe established ideologies, situations and individuals. Each new era ushers in a new set of understanding of the world, facilitating and probing us to re-analyse the set discourses of literature, preventing the world to be wedged in the quagmire of passé and constricted ideologies and beliefs. The expansion in the psychological studies about individual and society, of conscious and subconscious have also altered the way we tend to perceive and interpret a character. The contemporary porous boundaries and the integrated identities require us to recognize the convergences and divergences, the inclusions and exclusions and develop a mutual tolerance of the differences rather than harnessing fear and rejection. There is a tendency in the modern reader to re-construct the apparent and accepted categories of black and white in order to allow-in shades of grey and thereby reinstate the popular villains and heroes.

The play *The Merchant of Venice* became debatable around the beginning of 18th century, popularly with the view of the German Jewish publicist Ludwig Boerne. He designated Shylock as 'an exalted Jew and an avenging angel', who decided to risk his life for the respect of his 'nation tribe'. Another German poet Heinrich Heine also focused on the Anti-Semitic aspect of the play and recognises Shakespeare's humanity when he says that in Shylock, Shakespeare has justified "an unfortunate race"

Such analysis are products of not only the liberal and radical consciousness of the critics, rather it is the genius of Shakespeare that infuses the text with ample scope to invite juxtaposed perspectives. It was the playwright who has drafted such points of departure from the set tradition in the script so as to give the reader a food for thought. The powerful litanies of Shylock are composed by Shakespeare to shift our understanding of him from a villain to a victim. The Jew's forced conversion and the final incongruous capitulation, "I am content" are carefully weaved into the plot, which was basically centred on his destruction, with the intention of constructing an analogous and complementary perspective. Whatever the dramatist has shown on stage was certainly acceptable, then why did he give the reader ample opportunities to develop paradoxical line of thought? Through his art Shakespeare tried to subvert the

established norms and proposed the play to be studied as an antithetical discourse, why? If he wanted to go with the prevailing norms he could have easily edited the sections of the script which create sympathies for the villain, but he didn't do so, why?

There are no biographical truths to reason this. Shakespearean critics like Harold Bloom suggest that there are no clues in his works to discern his religious and political inclinations but it does seem that he was afraid of authority and uprisings. Evidently society and power becomes a conduit for the literature to be accepted. The idea of social acceptance and rejection was also decisive in the way a writer shaped his story and characters. Shylock was fashioned according to the preset stereotypical notions. But moving beyond the historical a priori judgements Shakespeare let his notion of human prevail; his understanding of human nature makes Shylock timeless and memorable both as a victim and as a villain.

Shylock's cries for a pound of flesh have made him one of literature's most memorable villains, and his tenacity for justice have made him a persuasive and sympathetic figure. Shakespeare puts one of his most eloquent speeches into the mouth of this "villain":

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,
Dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
The same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
To the same diseases, heal'd by the same means,
Warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer
As a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us,
Do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.
If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility?
Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his
Sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge.
The villainy you teach me, I will execute,
And it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
(Act III, scene I)*

Shylock is a more composite character than any of his predecessors, and Shakespeare makes him appear more human by showing that his hatred is natural outcome of the exploitation he has suffered in a Christian society. Shakespeare's character includes an element of pity as well as humour, meaning that he elicits from readers and audiences empathy and compassion, rather than simply contempt and disdain. Many modern readers have read the play as an entreaty for tolerance as Shylock emerges as a sympathetic character. Shylock's 'trial' at the end of the play is a charade of justice, with Portia acting as a judge when she has no authentic right to do so. Thus, Shakespeare is not calling into question Shylock's intentions, but the fact that the

very people who scorn Shylock for being dishonest have had to resort to trickery so as to succeed.

The victimization of Shylock brings to fore the smugness of the Christian characters, their unlawfulness, greediness, and abusive nature. Antonio is the protagonist yet surprisingly is the most passive title character of Shakespearean works who does nothing but kick and abuse the Jew; Bassanio as a prodigal who does not work and rather capitalize on his looks and live off of other people, and who wants to marry Portia to end all his debts; Portia as a hypocrite who imparts a fine rhetoric on mercy but does not follow her own teaching. She herself says it is better to teach twenty but to be one in twenty. In the play among the main characters, Shylock is the most morally upright character. Shylock does not deceive, trick, lie, kill, steal, or do anything mischievous. The promise of a pound of flesh upon default of the loan was something Antonio freely agreed to. Still it can hardly be moral for Shylock to demand a pound of flesh from Antonio as this will kill Antonio. Shakespeare was using the story of Shylock to attack prevailing hypocrisies.

To read *The Merchant of Venice* only as an anti-Semitic play would be undermining the brilliance of Shakespeare. It must be read and analysed in a holistic way if we have to truly comprehend the art of the dramatist. Shakespeare characters are his invention even if they are imitation as he has manifested in them surpassing passions and emotions. It is Shakespeare's "preternatural ability to endow his personages with personalities and with utterly individuated style of speaking" (Bloom, 32). The dramatist has completed his craft and readers of each era receive it subjectively, and that is the beauty of his works.

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Endnotes

- ¹To mark 500 years of Venetian Ghetto and 400 years of Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* was staged in its original setting July, 2016.

² First Folio was published by Edward Blount and William and Isaac Jaggard in 1623.

³ Venice established the first Jewish Ghetto in was instituted on 29 March 1516, though political restrictions on Jewish rights and residences existed before that date.

⁴ Portia shares with Nerissa in Act I, Scene II "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, then be one of the twenty to follow my own teaching."