

Stereotyping of the ‘Other’: Impact of Colonialism in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

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Writers of ancient and modern era focus the deplorable conditions of the marginalised people in the society. Being considered as ‘others’ in society, these people are pushed towards the margin. To maintain and safeguard their self-interest, a majority of people inhumanly control the minorities with their choice of words and deeds. Sometimes these unfortunate brethren are caricatured and made fun of by the elite and corrupt practitioners of the society. Committed writers point out this weakness of the community through their works, and in turn they expect a radical change in the community. The present paper analyses how Shakespeare portrays colonial stereotyping through the characters in the play *The Merchant of Venice*.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare presents an alienated and isolated character named Shylock, who is a marginalised usurer, has amassed an immense fortune by lending money to the Christian merchants. He is doubly marginalised in the society because he is a Jew and also the tremendous amount of interest that he demands the money he lends. He is disliked by most of the merchants in Venice, especially by Antonio. This is because, the Elizabethans are repeatedly taught that lending money is against God and in the Gospel it is written that, “Lend, looking for nothing again” (Luke 6:34) and so Shylock is looked down by the Elizabethan society.

To show their scorn towards the marginalised brethren, the ethnic majorities in the society, throw derogatory words upon them. This, in turn, creates suffocation in the minds of the marginalised. Shakespeare also uses such kind of words to mention the activities of Shylock. In the play, Antonio uses derogatory words towards Shylock and agonised Shylock repeats those words as follows: “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog” and “spit upon my Jewish gabardine” (*The Merchant* 16). These inhuman words haunt the mind of Shylock. To Shylock, Antonio seems to be a terror throughout his life. Another incident that haunted Shylock is as he narrates: “You spit on me last Wednesday last; you spurn’d me such a day” (16). Antonio cannot bear the thoughtful expressions of Shylock, and he says:

The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose

An evil soul, producing holy witness,
Is like an villain a smiling cheek;
A goodly apple rotten at the heart:
O, what a goodly outside falsehood, hath. (15)

Officially there were no Jews in England since they were driven out in 1290 by Edward I. Playwrights like Marlowe created mythical characters based on Jewish characters. The Elizabethan audience also was excited to see these characters on stage. John Palmer writes that “any horrible mischief which a Jew might contrive would be credited and any device by which the Jew might be foiled of his purpose, however childish or improbable, would be commended” (404). When Shylock is interested in executing his bond, Salarino tells him that “Thou wilt not take his flesh: what's that good for?” (*The Merchant* 42), which makes him arrogant and he cannot control his emotions. He shouts at Salarino, “Hath not a Jew's 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 disease . . . as a Christian is?” (42). Shylock's questions are unanswered, and he is projected a Jew who has no wits. Like the Elizabethan audiences Shakespeare also caricatures the Jew on stage. Shylock is alienated and marginalised within his household. Jessica, his daughter hates to live in the house, and she says, “Our home is hell” (26), even though Shylock has enriched his house with wealth and money. She also says, “To be ashamed to be my father's child” (27) and tries to differentiate herself from her father. She boldly declares “I am a daughter to his blood/ I am not to his manners” (27) and when her father is unwilling to accept her marriage to a Christian she boldly proclaims, “I have a father, you a daughter, lost” (30). To Jessica, her father lacks good manners, and she hates her father so much. Shylock is immersed in dismay when Jessica marries Lorenzo, a Christian and not a Jew.

The ethnic minorities are questioned of their race and eventually they experience oppression and repression. Janmohamed is of the view that “. . . The imperialist configures the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production” (19). When questioned of the race and social customs, Shylock is struck, and he is unable to digest the disparities shown by the people in the society in which he lives. To Salarino, Shylock expresses his agony;

He [Antonio] hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargain, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. (*The Merchant* 42)

Brilliant Shylock understands the fact that he is isolated and alienated and questioned because he is a Jew.

The colonial masters consider the ethnic minorities as ‘primitives’ or ‘backwards’, and they project these people as irrational as well as the people who lack moralistic attitudes. McLeod states that “Oriental stereotypes fixed typical weakness as (amongst others) cowardliness, laziness, untrustworthiness, fickleness, laxity, violence and lust” (46). In the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is treated as a colonial stereotype and is shown as having violence and lust for money. At first when Portia argues, she pleads Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio and asks him to, “take thrice they money; bid me tears the bond” (*The Merchant* 68). These words clearly show the cunningness of Portia because, when in a particular point of time Shylock is willing to accept money rather than executing the bond, she denies it telling that as Shylock has refused money at first in the open court, “He shall have merely justice and his bond” (71). This act clearly shows how colonial masters manipulate minorities and show them as useless and inferior.

In the Court of Law, Portia also tries to prove that the ethnic minorities are subalterns and they are capable of committing crimes when they live among the majorities. McLeod, a critic, is of the view that these minorities, “We often considered as possessing a tenuous moral sense and the readiness to indulge themselves in the most dubious aspects of human behaviour” (46). Portia tactfully handles the charge against Antonio and asks Shylock to take a pound of flesh from Antonio’s body without shedding a drop of blood. She also creates a situation that Shylock should not get the money or execute the bond. So she points out that Shylock is a culprit who has plotted against the citizen of that country. Shylock pathetically asks, “Is that the law?” (*The Merchant* 70) and here Shakespeare tries to prove that Shylock is an outsider who resides in Venice and unfamiliar with the law of that country. Shylock is shown in a deplorable condition when the Duke finally pronounces the verdict “. . . Half of thy wealth, it is Antonio’s; The other half comes to the general state” (72), and Shylock is left alone in a position of thinking about his survival.

The voices of the marginalised are unheard even in a Court of Law, though they are loyal to their words. Even though Shylock is deeply humiliated by the phrase of Antonio, he lends three thousand ducats to him as “merry sport” (17), with an understanding that if Antonio is unable to repay the money within the stipulated date, Shylock could cut off one pound of flesh from Antonio’s body. Shylock hopes that Antonio would refund the money as early as possible. After giving the money, Shylock says, “And for my love, I pray you wrong me not” (17). Unfortunately,

Antonio is unable to give the money to Shylock and both of them go to the Court of Law in Venice. In the Court of Law, Shylock repeatedly says, “I stand here for law” (65), “I crave the law” (67) and “I stay on my bond” (68), but his voice is unheard till the end. It happens so because of the racial discrimination that Shylock faces, and he is considered alienated ‘Other’ in the Court of Law.

The marginalised people are pushed towards the periphery by the majorities in society. This is because the majorities want to focus the idea that the marginalised deserve, “the enduring subjection, has the effect of fixing subjects into limiting positions” (Coronil 44). The degrading words of Portia towards Shylock, “beg mercy of the Duke” (*The Merchant* 72) and the Duke’s words “I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it” (72) make Shylock think that he is an unworthy human being to live in this world. These words of humiliations make Shylock say, “take my life and all; pardon not that” (72). Further Shylock is upset when Antonio proudly proclaims that he is willing to give his portion of wealth to Shylock if he agrees to provide it after his death to his daughter Jessica who has lately married to a Christian. The most essential insult that Shylock faces in the court is, before leaving the court, Portia asks him, “Are thou contented, Jew? What doest thou say” (73). As Shylock has no other way, he says “I am content” (73), which indirectly states that the ‘Others’ have to accept all the rules and regulations that the majorities impose on them.

When Shylock leaves the Court of Law, he’s stripped off all that he has, as a defeated man. As a man of complete sadness, Shylock further raises questions of his survival within himself and tells the Duke that “You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live” (72). In a depressed mood, Shylock says “I am not well” (73) and returns home. This inhuman verdict projects Shylock as a useless man in the society, and further it questions whether there is any possibility of his existence.

Shakespeare, in the play *The Merchant of Venice*, focuses the idea that in every society marginalised people are also a part of it. Being considered as ‘others’, they are marginalised as well as alienated, and they suffer from lack of identity and colonialism. Even though the minorities have dignity of their own, it is the harmful activity of the majorities erase it inhumanly and this, in turn, makes the minorities suffer eternally in their life.

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