

SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK: THE VICTIM OF DIS(IN)CRIMINATION

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Abstract

The present article intends to explicate and display the forces of discrimination and incrimination at work in the society of Elizabethan days. These two forces are exercised by people vested with interest. In order to rule the roost for good, people vested with interest firstly play the game of discrimination in the perspectives of caste, class, gender, and even religion. After discriminatory politics put to challenge people vested with power take recourse of the forces of incrimination. After the failure of incriminatory forces, crimes accompanied by murder, bloodshed, and many more other forms of state punishments are meted out. Discrimination and incrimination both are the hands of power politics. Above all, it is also objectively tried to check and evaluate whether the playwright portrayed the conditions of Elizabethan period impartially. The present short paper tries to answer why the central character of the play Shylock is made the victim of discrimination plus incrimination.

Keywords Shylock ,discrimination

Just a few pages past an ordinary reader can smell the enmity extant between Jews and Christians in Venice. The playwright boldly depicted intentionally (most probably) Shylock in negative style. Shylock is castigated repeatedly and openly by Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano, Lancelot Gobbo, Lorenzo, and her own daughter Jessica. Most Christian characters in the play are prejudiced against Shylock for no specific reasons. What did Shakespeare actually wish to convey the message to readers and audiences by imaging Shylock negatively? Does Shakespeare intend to prove Jews cruel and bad folks? Or does he wish simply to entertain Elizabethans by giving vent to popular ideas about Jews? Whatever does Shakespeare have the purpose while drawing Shylock is very difficult to arrive at and as such subjected to much conjecture? Shylock is portrayed as the representative of Jewish folk of Venice city. In the play we see the virtue of mercy as an exclusive trait of Christians as advocated by them. The virtue of mercy starts working as it approaches Christians. Christians are by nature kind and merciful and Jews cruel and heartless.

Shylock is by all certainties the victim of discrimination and incrimination. Criminals are not born, but they are made by the forces of discrimination and incrimination. These forces are the hands of power politics. Crime is something unethical. An act done through force, fraud, or burglary is criminal act. Crime includes both the act and the intent to commit something harmful to humanity. More often than not, crimes are done in the state of emotional and intellectual suspension. In general, crimes are originated through the forces of poverty, unemployment, poor socialization, disrupted family system, poor guardianship, inequality, racism, caste and gender discrimination, excitability of nervous and organ system especially among youths, even early bitter life experiences, alcoholism, failure of educational machinery, self-centeredness, extreme materiality, and will to control over other concomitants in the cosmos. In the dearth of all forms of crimes, by all certainties there is utter slackness of sympathy, sensibility, and sensitivity towards others.

Let me introduce key characters of the play. Antonio is by faith Christian and the merchant of Venice. Since Christianity prohibits usury among Christian brothers, Antonio loans money to fellows without interest. Bassanio, a Christian fellow is in love with “a lady richly left” of

Belmont. Her name is Portia. Bassanio comes to Antonio for debt the moment his all business was at sea. Antonio asks Bassanio to use his credit in Venice for loan. Bassanio goes to Shylock, a Jew for “three thousand ducats, for three months, and Antonio bound”. In the name of Antonio, Shylock agrees. Bassanio asks Shylock to have dinner with him and Antonio. Shylock’s quick response shows racial hatred and enmity between Christians and Jews. Examine the remark of Shylock:

Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you. (Act I Scene III, Lines 27- 30)

Shylock dislikes Antonio for various reasons. He hates his Christian faith for, Christianity does not approve of usury with (Christian) fellows. Antonio lends out money to Christian fellows free of interest and as such brings down interest rate in Venice city. Antonio openly speaks abusively of Jewish folk and nation in the merchants meet. Antonio neither lends nor borrows money on interest. But Antonio is ready to break his promise for his friend Bassanio. Antonio condemns Shylock’s money and money-lending practices. Shylock justifies his money-lending practice by quoting scriptures. Antonio frowns at Shylock and calls him repeatedly ‘devil’, ‘evil soul’, ‘villain’, and ‘a goodly apple rotten at heart’, ‘misbeliever’, ‘cut-throat dog’, ‘dog’ etc. Shylock is yet ready to loan money. In fact, Antonio frequently incurred Shylock’s displeasure and was determined to do so in future too:

I am as like to call thee so again,

To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

If thou will lend this money, lend it not

As to thy friends- for when did friendship take

A breed for barren metal of his friend?

But lend it rather to thine enemy,

Who if he break, thou mast with better face

Exact the penalty. (Act I Scene III, Lines 122-29)

Shylock responds to Antonio's anger that he wants to have love and friendship (Antonio's) forgetting all the shameful remarks used by Antonio for him. He is ready to loan Bassanio in the name of Antonio free of interest. Antonio takes Shylock's friendly initiative otherwise. Antonio points out:

Hie thee, gentle Jew.

This Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind. (Act I Scene III, Lines 169-70)

Antonio's remark implies that kindness and Christianity are synonymous. The virtue of kindness cannot usher in non-Christians. Antonio's attitude towards Jews cannot be justified. He adores his Christian faith but abuses others religion for no substantial reason. To this extent, Antonio's pride and prejudice is responsible for enmity.

Portia, another key character of the play is possessor "of wondrous virtues". She is bound by a bond designed by her late father. By the bond, she can neither choose whom she likes nor refuse whom dislikes. She for no reason loves Bassanio and hates all others. She dislikes people of colour. As she comes to know that the Prince of Morocco is about to come tonight, she immediately gives vent to her racial feelings:

"If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me". (Act I Scene II, Lines 106-108)

Portia thus identifies people of black complexion with devils. Just before The Prince of Morocco dare choice-making, he out of compulsion tried to convince Portia that she should not go by his complexion. When the Prince of Morocco failed at choice-making, Portia felt relieved and uttered her deep seated racial prejudice:

A gentle riddance....

Let all of his complexion choose me so. (Act II Scene VII, Lines 78-79)

Contrary is the stand of Portia towards Bassanio. She even wishes to coach him for some time before he tries his luck-

I would detain you here some month or two

Before you venture for me. I could teach you

How to choose right.... (Act III Scene II, Lines 9-11)

In this way, Portia is not above racial pride and prejudice. To her, colour of skin is more important than the virtue of sacrifice, dedication, and love. She dislikes people of color for no solid reasons. She is definitely a racist lady out of herself. Most probably, it was her master's choice that made her so.

Launcelot Gobbo, a Christian servant to Shylock, the Jew is very much critical of his master for no substantial reasons. He complains to his father Gobbo that his master has let him die from hunger. He wishes to quit Shylock right away and serve Bassanio as the latter offers "rare new liveries" to his servants. Like Antonio, Launcelot too takes Shylock "the very devil incarnal". Launcelot is so keen to take his leave of Shylock, the Jew as he had never been kind to him. Definitely, his stand against Shylock seems exaggerated. The case of Launcelot sustains the character of Shylock as devil. Jessica the daughter of Shylock (whom he fondly loves) is another character in the play introduced to view Shylock as devil. Jessica feels sorry over Launcelot's leave and justifies him as she also takes her house as hell. His presence relieves a little dullness of the house. He takes Jessica the very epitome of sweetness. He even predicts that some Christian will grab her one day. Jessica too dislikes her father:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me

To be ashamed to be my father's child!

But though I am a daughter to his blood,

I am not to his manners, O Lorenzo!

If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,

Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (Act II Scene III, lines 15- 20)

To Lorenzo, Jessica is gentle and would-be torch-bearer (perhaps for her readiness to quit her father and grab all jewelry) but her father Shylock “a faithless Jew”. Lorenzo loves her heartily:

For she is wise, if I can judge of her,

And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,

And true she is, as she hath proved herself,

And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,

Shall she be placed in my constant soul. (Act II Scene seven, lines 53-57)

According to Launcelot, Jessica is damned by mother and father both and there stays no mercy for her in heaven. But Jessica thinks that she will be saved by her husband as he has made her Christian. The common hypocritical view of the time was that only Christianity can save souls on the earth. Generally, all venetians think Shylock without human senses and feelings. After Jessica’s elopement with Lorenzo, Shylock was seen in the streets of Venice crying. Salanio took him simply “the villain Jew” and remarked:

As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:

‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! (Act II Scene VIII, Lines 14-15)

Jessica is opposite of Portia. The former is innocent and romantic by nature whereas the latter is witty and a little cunning. Jessica would have been the heroine of the play if Shakespeare had elaborated her character. However, by Jessica’s love affair with a Christian Shakespeare proved one key fact that love did not know the bound of race-line.

Salarino tries to bring Shylock round that there is no benefit insisting for Antonio's flesh. To him, Shylock "is the most impenetrable cur". Shylock is looking for a chance for revenge on Antonio. He justifies his stand and exposes Christian hypocrisy:

He (Antonio) hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies- and what's his reason? I am a Jew. 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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled 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, Lines 43-57)

Shylock is rigid to go by the bond. He even asks Antonio to beware of his fangs since he is a dog. Shylock gives vent to his mind boldly:

I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,

To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield

To Christian intercessors. (Act III Scene IV, Lines 15-17)

Even the Duke of the court like other Christian fellows also sees Shylock "a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch/ incapable of pity, void and empty/ from any dram of mercy". Even the Duke forewarns Shylock of probable forfeiture of his possession. The court is every way trying to bring Shylock around in the salvage of a Christian life. A Christian life is in danger yet Bassanio, Gratiano and other Christians look quite confident about the safety of Antonio and all court proceeding looks shallow display of legal operation. Bassanio, the friend of Antonio the victim of bond boldly calls him an 'unfeeling man' whereas Gratiano addresses him 'inexorable dog',

currish spirit, 'currish Jew' etc. After the failure of repeated request to have mercy on Antonio, Portia as a doctor of laws allows Shylock to cut the flesh but a single drop of blood must not fall otherwise 'thy lands and goods will be confiscated to the State by the laws of Venice'. In a single court proceeding how did Portia get mastery in the laws of Venice? Dramatically she did mastery in a flash. Perhaps it was the creator's choice to endow her so unbelievable intellect and persecute Shylock terribly.

Finally Shylock is incriminated and bound to pay the price for not accepting mercy appeal. Of course, Shylock in the play is portrayed too rigid. Why? It was perhaps for continuous humiliation he suffered at the hands of Christians. Christian characters in the play do not see him parallel to them. In fact they play with the respect and dignity of a non-Christian Shylock. They keep wrong perception about non-Christians. In fact all the Christian characters are responsible for Shylock's tough and rigid behavior towards Antonio. Shylock is compelled to convert into Christianity in order to escape forfeiture. Suppose, if Shylock had withdrawn his bond and let Antonio free, could it guarantee favorable and human behavior of Christians towards Shylock and his clan? No, perhaps it was for deep rooted racial hatred. In fact racial hatred turned Shylock brazen. Shylock is the target of all Christian characters. Tubal, the Jewish friend of Shylock is only referenced in the text. Thus Shylock is discriminated and incriminated strategically.

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Bio

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