

Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant* and Intertextuality: An Adaptation and Appropriation of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract: Interestingly, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there was a propensity among the authors to rewrite the works of their predecessors but with some alterations in theme, style, manner and representation. Theoretically, it is called 'intertextuality' or interdependence in writing. The Post 1950s playwrights like Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker and Tom Stoppard showed their interest in rewriting the plays of William Shakespeare. This paper proposes to explain how Wesker adopts Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and reshapes it in a new fashion.

Keywords: Intertextuality, adaptation, appropriation, Judaism and Christianity.

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Of all the major literary figures who are grouped together under the title of East End writers to refer to the authors such as Emanuel Litvinoff, Wolf Mankowitz, Bernard Kops, Arnold Wesker *et al.*, Wesker (1932-) is undoubtedly an exceptional literary genius who 'came

to fame on the crest of the new wave of so-called kitchen sink drama in the 1950s' (Efraim Sicher, "The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's *The Merchant*", 59). Wesker was born in the East End of London and was among several playwrights to emerge on the post World War Anglo-Jewish scenario. In his dealing with Jewish themes, he shows what seems to have been a Jewish temperament which is, of course, totally different from being preoccupied with Judaism, and sometimes he even takes a revolutionary step, thereby bringing in a new phase in English literature. Wesker's *Trilogy* (1960) dealing with an East End Jewish family and *The Old Ones* (1972), a distinctly Jewish play about old Jewish people attained some recognition but in the case of Wesker's most interesting play, *The Merchant* (1975), the playwright goes beyond the use of Jewish milieu or Jewish speech. Here he attempts to portray the condition of the Jewish community in the context of historical background, and most significant it is to point out that he consciously serves his purpose through his handling and rewriting of Shakespeare's enchanting comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*. The chief aim of this paper is not only to fall a searching glance upon Wesker's adaptation of the content and reconstruction of Shakespeare's play but also to assure how he voluntarily negates some parts of the content, and remakes and reshapes the bard's text in a new way — an approach which is absolutely different from that of Shakespeare.

At first, focus should be given on the three key terms which have been mentioned in the title of this paper — 'intertextuality', 'adaptation' and 'appropriation'. The term 'intertextuality', a most sophisticated term of present day literature, basically means an interdependence in writing, or to simplify, it is not possible to study a text in isolation, rather texts are connected with 'an endless repertoire of other texts and in endless ways' (Rama Kundu, *Intertext: A study of the Dialogue Between Texts*, 1). Prof. Kundu assertively says:

This kind of writing attempts to integrate the new text into the literary tradition primarily by referring to specific earlier text/s, which it exploits as edifice/s to be simultaneously used and destroyed.

(2)

An attempt to deal with the term 'intertextuality' draws attention to an explanation of the origin and the historical development of this practice. Though the term 'intertextuality' has been fostered and nurtured, at first, by Kristeva, a literary scholar would not negate that Kristeva's attempt is actually to combine the insights and theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist and Michail Bakhtin, the founder of the thought of dialogic criticism. Saussure declares that the signs are not referential; meanings are produced because they have an associative relation to other signs. Signs never possess meanings of their own; their meanings are set up only through their similarity to and difference from other signs. This revolutionary thought can be regarded as an origin of the theory of intertextuality. Any perceptive reader can realize that Bakhtin's 'dialogism' and Kristeva's 'intertextuality' are almost inseparable and in order to understand the latter, the scholars should have some knowledge about the former. A focus on the

key Bakhtinian concepts like ‘polyphony’, ‘heteroglossia’, ‘double-voiced discourse’, ‘dialogism’ and ‘hybridization’ necessarily explains Bakhtin’s view of language and its essentially intertextual nature. In his seminal book, *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen opines:

A site of words and sentences shadowed by multiple potentialities of meaning, the literary work can now only be understood in a comparative way, the reader moving outwards from the work’s apparent structure into the relations it possesses with other works and other linguistic structures.
(12)

Both the two terms— ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’— have been borrowed from Julie Sanders’ epoch-making book, *Adaptation and Appropriation*. In her book, she assures that the processes of adaptation and appropriation are ‘in many respects a sub-section of the over-arching practice of intertextuality’ (17). She also asserts that in the late twentieth century we view a tendency among the contemporary writers to focus less on writing an original text, but more on rewriting, reshaping and recreating, to pay less attention to creation and concentrate more on ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’. In her attempt to deal with the term ‘adaptation’, Sanders says:

Adaptation can be a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself... Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved more often by offering a revised point of view from the ‘original’, adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalised. (18-19)

Although both the practice and the effects of ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ intersect and interrelate, a clear distinction should be made between the two terms. An adaptation can never deny its relationship with an informal source text or original. But on the other hand, Sanders says, appropriation ‘frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations’ (Sanders 26).

Julie Sanders in the third chapter named “ ‘Here’s A Strange Alteration’: Shakespearean Appropriations” of her seminal book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, focuses on the tendency of the contemporary writers to rewrite Shakespeare because the Shakespearean plays written against the sixteenth or early seventeenth century historical background are supposed to be anachronistic today and they, therefore, fail to absolutely satisfy the audience’s/readers’ taste. Sanders affirms that the dramatic adaptation of Shakespearean plays had become almost a fashion from 1660 onwards since playwrights such as Nahum Tate and William Davenant attempted to change plotlines, add new characters and add music to Shakespearean scripts for performance. Sanders says:

The adaptation of Shakespeare invariably makes him fit for new cultural contexts and different political ideologies to those of his own age. As a

result, a historiographical approach to Shakespearean appropriation becomes in many respects a study of theoretical movements; many theories which had their intellectual foundation in recent decades, such as feminism, post-modernism, structuralism, gay and lesbian studies or queer theory, and postcolonialism, have had a profound effect on the modes and methodologies of adapting Shakespeare.(46)

Shylock, the heartless and merciless villainous figure of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, has been acknowledged as an ominous symbol, an evil epithet, a marker of greed and corruption. The play had been staged innumerable times successfully and the audience— from the Elizabethan era to the modern time— had enjoyed and fully encouraged this stage performance, and the play ending with the forceful conversion of Shylock, the cut-throat Jewish moneylender, into a Christian had been considered as a happy romantic comedy. Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock is that of a blood-thirsty monster, a veritable kind of man-eater, thereby dehumanizing and undermining the humanity of the Jew. In the post-Holocaust period, a Jewish writer feels the necessity of making an attempt of a change of their public image; they endeavour to vehemently shatter and batter the image of Shylock as a Jew as attempted by Shakespeare, a representative of the Christian community, in order to check the flow of this ignominious, disgraceful and dehumanizing projection of the Jews. Efraim Sicher in his essay, "The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's "The Merchant"" says:

Wesker questions the conceivability of Shylock ever cutting human flesh on the stage, because he is addressing a modern audience as one whose people has been gassed in concentration camps and weighed up into bars of soap like so many pounds of flesh. (67)

However it was not Wesker's target to deny Shakespeare's overarching authority and ignore the bard's genius, actually it was Jonathan Miller's production of Shakespeare's play in 1973 at the National Theatre which compelled Wesker to rethink and rewrite the play. He was terribly stirred by the play's anti-Semitic spirit, and thought that such a representation could never be judged as an intellectual evaluation. In the much discussed 'Preface' to *The Merchant*, Wesker expressed his disgust and despair. He says:

Neither in Miller's production nor in any I've ever seen, could I recognize a Jew I knew... Shylock is revengeful and insists upon his pound of flesh against all humanity and reason. It is a hateful, ignorant portrayal. (Li)

The portrayal of Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is that of a calculative moneylender for whom money is the sole source of joy and happiness, and usury is the basic means of multiplying wealth. His very first appearance in the play draws the readers'/audience's attention to his money-centred nature. When Bassanio comes to Shylock for three thousand ducats, the readers/audience are immediately conscious of the easy, confident flow of colourful talk and his unyielding speech:

Shylock. Three thousand ducats, *well*.

Bassanio. Ay, sir, for three months.

Shylock. For three months, *well*.

Bassanio. For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

Shylock. Antonio shall be bound, *well*.

Bassanio. May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?

Shylock. Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
(13, italics mine)

We can construe Shylock's hesitation as playing for time while he actually forms his plan. He is punctilious in his approach and very much tricky in his demeanour and speech. His utterance of the word 'well' (italics above) again and again hints at his calculative mind. Shakespeare presents Shylock as a man who is simply jealous of Antonio's munificence. He expresses his deep hatred for Antonio since the latter is a Christian and apart from that, Antonio is the man who creates a hindrance in his business by bringing down the 'rate of usance' (14).

In his play, *The Merchant*, the rewriting of Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Wesker refuses to accept this portrayal of Shylock as a cut-throat Jewish money-lender. In fact, he takes the raw material from the bard's play but reshapes and reconstructs it in a new fashion. Zumrut Altındağ in *Reading Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice And Richard II: Wesker's The Merchant and Ionesco's Exit the King* rightly declares:

It was easy for the sixteenth century audience to condemn Shylock as a villainous usurer. Yet, the modern theatregoer looks for some reasons in Shakespeare's play which make Shylock so revengeful. Today, the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* is regarded as a person who has valid reasons to behave in the way he does... In writing *The Merchant*, Wesker does not abolish the respect that people have for Shakespeare, instead he wants to offer a more realistic account of the state of Jews and their relationship with the Christians at the time. (5)

What is significant is that in *The Merchant*, Wesker represents Shylock as a bibliophile, a man of knowledge, a symbol of humanity and a worshipper of true bonhomie. Moneylending never appears to be 'a full-time occupation' (3) to Shylock, rather he is a true admirer of book, especially his secular works as he announces, 'I'm a hoarder of other men's genius. My vice. My passion' (3). He is not at all meticulous about collecting money and multiplying wealth, instead he is interested in collecting book and multiplying knowledge — 'I've friends who buy for me all over the world (3). Though Shylock along with his community has been suppressed and oppressed, subverted and silenced, humiliated and dehumanized, and is bound to lead a confined ghetto life, he willingly tries to deny his circumstances by gaining knowledge and gathering intellectuals in his house.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Antonio has to look up to Shylock for three thousand ducats in order to help his friend, Bassanio, Shylock rehearses the story of Jacob and Laban, and also reminds Antonio of his demeanour towards the Jew:

In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances

...

You called me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help. (16)

Shylock offers his friendship and declares that he will not then force Antonio to sign a bond and also refuse to take usury from the latter, but Antonio stands firm in his contempt for the Jew and refuses to borrow the money as a friend. He urges Shylock:

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed of barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty. (17)

Shylock immediately demands for a 'single bond' (17) and proposes 'a merry sport' (17) and claims an equal pound of 'fair flesh' (17) from that part of Antonio's body which pleases him if the amount cannot be repaid within the stipulated hour.

But in Wesker's *The Merchant*, Shylock is ever ready to provide the amount that Antonio claims. He is happy to know that at last his bosom friend has come to ask a favour of him. When Antonio asks what Shylock wants as 'a surety in the contract' (23) the latter is amazed as he reacts, 'A bond? Between friends? What nonsense are you talking Antonio?' (23). The playwright asserts that Shylock is not guided by a money-centred psyche and that his Jewishness never corrupts his humanity; on the contrary, he is a true admirer of friendship and is aware of the truth that a human being should stretch out his helping hands towards his neighbour when the latter is in distress. Here the playwright assertively suggests that Shakespeare's representation of Shylock who demands for a bond whenever Antonio comes to ask of his favour is actually a corruption and suppression of the fact. In fact, it is the Venetian law which decides, 'no dealings may be, made with Jews unless covered by a legal bond' (23).

Shylock is not persuaded to sign a bond until Antonio reminds him of the racist hatred of the Christian community for the Jew as Antonio says, 'Your life, the lives of your people depend upon contract, just as your contract with the city councillors they must respect'(25). Then Shylock proposes that they should undermine the Venetian laws which attempt to undermine their friendship:

SHYLOCK. I'm persuaded, oh yes, I'm very, very persuaded. We'll have a bond

ANTONIO. Good!

SHYLOCK. *A nonsense bond.*

ANTONIO. *A nonsense bond?*

SHYLOCK. A lovely, loving *nonsense bond*. To mock the law.

ANTONIO. To mock?

SHYLOCK. *Barbaric laws? Barbaric bonds!* Three thousand ducats against a pound pure flesh. (25, italics mine)

How could one ignore the truth that their chief purpose was to mock at the Venetian laws which threatened their bonhomie? They are actually engaged in playing a merry sport or a childish game though it is not that kind of sport which Shylock proposes to play in the bard's play. Zumrut Altındağ in *Rereading Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice And Richard II: Wesker's The Merchant And Ionesco's Exit the King* assertively declares:

Different from Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jew in Wesker's play is not full of the desire for revenge but it is the laws which long for it... In addition to ridiculing the law, Shylock also aims to assert his wish to be treated as a human being who is capable of good intensions. He wishes to revolt against the prejudice that the Jews are not to be trusted. (87)

The popular sixteenth century controversy on moneylending reminds us that the opposition between Antonio and Shylock as it has been described in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was not limited or purely personal issue. Though the practice of moneylending along with usury was considered as one of the damnable sins, at that time this practice was available in the society. Any literary scholar should not avoid the fact that as the law itself gives a free licence to usury, the Jews have not sole responsibility for the effect of this practice. It is the law which has given men freedom but right at the same time it has restrained their liberation.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Antonio fails to repay the amount within the fixed hour, Shylock faces the happiest moment in his life. He prepares himself in order to pounce on Antonio who is none but simply a mare now. Shylock assertively announces:

I'll have my bond! Speak not against my bond!

I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.

Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,

But since I am a dog, beware my fangs. (56)

In the trial scene, he becomes wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous. He sharpens his knife in order to hack the flesh of his enemy and when Bassanio asks 'Why dost thou whet thy knife so

earnestly?’ (67), Shylock immediately answers, ‘To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there’ (67). The cannibal in him wakes up; he is now devoid of mercy, love and sympathy.

But in *The Merchant*, when the bond is due to be forfeited within the stipulated hour, Shylock is tormented and tortured severely by his pricks of conscience. On one side lies his bosom friend, Antonio and on the other stands his community which will be at stake if he refuses to claim his pound of flesh. He is well aware of the fact that now the Venetian law will take its tolls. The law that they disdained and ridiculed now attempts to threaten their lives. It is for the benefit of his community, Shylock is forced to sacrifice Antonio, his dear friend and one part of his soul. But whatever it may be, the Venetian law fails to create a breach in their bonhomie. When Antonio escapes death through Portia’s intelligence and commonsense, Shylock becomes the happiest man on the earth so much so that he cannot restrain his excitement and hilarity:

Thank God! Thank God! Of course! Idiots! Cut flesh draws blood. No blood no flesh. Oh Antonio, how could such a simple fact escape us?...
Ha ha! No blood, no flesh. I love the lady. Young lady I love you. You have a future, I see it, a great future. (78-79)

Sabine Kroh in ““The Merchant” — A Historical Drama? Arnold Wesker’s Adaptation of William Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” ” says:

The Jew is just the scapegoat to relieve peoples’ conscience from being burdened. The ideals of the new era, the turning to tolerance is defeated by the here presented Venetian people’s stubborn belief in their old laws. Merchants are not much unlike usurers in what they do, and in former times merchants and usurers were being accused of committing the same sin, but the Venetian court ignores that generously. (16)

At the end of Wesker’s play, Shylock stands as a tattered and tortured figure but unlike Shakespeare’s play, in Wesker, he is not converted into a Christian but here he stands as a bibliophile having no permission to enjoy books, a man who has lost all his great expectations in life, having no other choice than facing hard times. Shylock realizes that knowledge is not necessary now since it is knowledge which often tries to find out the loopholes in laws, thereby unmasking hypocrisy and corruption lying underneath the surface. He concludes:

(...)We have need of the law, what need do we have of books?
Distressing, disturbing things, besides. Why, dear friend, they’d even make us question laws... Perhaps now is the time to make that journey to Jerusalem. Join those other old men on the quayside, waiting to make a pilgrimage, to be buried there, wherever it is. My appetites are dying, dear friend, for anything in this world. I am so tired of men. (81-82)

Not only Shylock, even as a literary person and a renowned playwright, Wesker faced difficulty while living in London only because of his identity as a Jew. Even his play, *The Merchant* was not, at first, permitted to be staged on The National Theatre of London. In his

interview with Karl-Heinz Stoll, later published as an article named “Interviews with Edward Bond and Arnold Wesker”, Wesker expresses his despair:

Stoll: What direction do you feel you are going to move into?

Wesker: I feel that the direction I’m going into is madness [laughs]. *The Journalists* and *The Wedding Feast* haven’t been done here. If *The Merchant* wouldn’t be performed, I am going to feel quite desperate.

Stoll: Does that affect you so much? You are being performed in other countries.

Wesker: Of course, I want my plays done everywhere, only just everywhere. But since I live here I would like to be performed here.

(432)

So, Wesker’s defence of the Jews and his projection of inequality, inhumanity, injustice and hypocrisy that the Jews suffer in the Christian society undoubtedly raise so many questions and must alter people’s opinion of the Jews. In the twenty-first century, the reading of Wesker’s play is obviously fascinating, fertile, fruitful and rich.

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