

Depiction of Revenge Marring Universal Human Values: A Study of *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract

Faith plays a crucial role in driving people's lives in any society. It is the faith that gives a distinct identity to individuals. This research paper explores that the sentiments of revenge prove disastrous for the harmonious co-existence of people of varied religions in society. It showcases how the Christian Characters direct their hatred that results from anti-Semitism towards a Jewish character, Shylock amidst the Christian majoritarian society and likewise how Shylock too becomes revengeful as he has undergone a deficit in profit from the business of money lending because of Antonio, a Christian. While slightly throwing light on the major themes of the play i.e. friendship and love, the paper primarily focuses on how the sentiments of revenge are equally reciprocal and lead to binaries like Christians versus Jews and turns out to be catastrophic for the humanitarian values and how the universal human values of love, truth, right conduct, peace, and non-violence do not exist despite the exemplary presence of friendship and lover's love in the 16th Century Britain.

Keywords: The Merchant of Venice, Faith, Anti-Semitism, humanitarian values, revenge.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is regarded as the most celebrated playwright of all time in English literature of the world. He has immortalized some of the characters through his creative genius. (Trivedi 99) Most of his plays have been adapted into films in many languages that have become blockbusters. *The Merchant of Venice* was first published in 1600. In this play, Shakespeare projects the plot where the themes of friendship and love become the central concern for the audience or readers.

Literary scholars have explored *The Merchant of Venice* since the Centuries. For example, Hinely in his article has sought to view Antonio's love as an expression of homosexuality or friendship just by emphasizing the bond agreement and the circumstances that emerged thereafter (Hinely p. 232). Walter Cohen traces the Possibilities of Historical Criticism in his article and writes that the penalty for default on the bond is closer to folklore than to capitalism while claiming a pound of flesh, Shakespeare seems to literalize the traditional metaphorical view of usurers. Further Cohen writes, that Marxist theory, whatever its intentions, tends to reproduce the defects of Renaissance theory whenever it remains isolated, as it currently

does, from a now scarcely existent, larger, contemporary movement for social and political transformation capable of once again uniting learned and popular culture, and thereby both justifying a theoretical project like the present one and providing Shakespearean drama with its most resonant context at least since the early seventeenth century. (Cohen p. 769-784). Holmer brings out the moral education of Antonio and the attempted moral education of Shylock as one of the central concerns of *The Merchant of Venice*. "The theme of education is announced in the first scenes of the play with Antonio's emphasis on the need for self-knowledge-"I have much ado to know myself" (I.i.7)-and Portia's speech on the crux of the play's educative process, the discrepancy that exists between knowing the good and doing the good: "the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree" (I.ii. 17-19)" (Holmer p. 307). Hurrell takes up the themes of love and friendship and proves exemplary in the history of English Literature (Hurrell pp. 328-341) whereas Cox deliberates on the religious and moral thinking of 17th Century England (Cox pp.39-46). The essayist Bailey revisits the question of why Shylock chooses flesh over money in his essay "Shylock and the Slaves: Owing and Owning in *The Merchant of Venice*" (Bailey pp.1-24). Besides, Rene E. Fortin (pp.259-270) and Barbara K. Lewalski (pp.328-342) present fundamental moral and religious debate through biblical allusions and allegories in their essays.

The playwright represents the revengeful attitude of the Jews through the character of Shylock in the play. At the beginning of the play, Bassanio reaches Venice to meet his friend Antonio, the merchant of Venice. He expresses that he has fallen in love with Portia, the heiress of Belmont, and also informs Antonio that her father has announced that he will marry his daughter to the one who chooses the correct casket. To try his luck at this Bassanio needs money which he does not have. Therefore, he requests Antonio to help him financially, but Antonio shares about his financial constraints as his ships have not returned from the sea at the scheduled time and some of them have been lost into the sea. Antonio advises Bassanio that he can borrow the required amount from the moneylenders in Venice in the name of Antonio. He assures that in case Bassanio is not able to return the amount within the stipulated period, he will return on behalf of his friend. After being decided to borrow three thousand ducats from the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, the revengeful facet of his character gets revealed when offers Antonio a unique bond to sign. The extreme condition of this bond is that if Bassanio fails to return the given amount in the given time i.e. three months, Shylock would be entitled to take one pound of Antonio's flesh from any part of his body. The playwright writes:

SHYLOCK: This kindness will I show,
 Go with me to a notary, seal me there
 Your single bond, and in a merry sport,
 If you repay me not on such a day,
 In such a place, such sum or sums as are
 Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit
 Be nominated for an equal pound

Of your pure flesh, to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me?

ANTONIO: Content in faith, I'll seal to such a bond,

And say there is much kindness in the Jew. (Shakespeare 15)

Thus one can see the bloodthirsty and money-minded image of Shylock, a Jew who becomes revengeful because of his professional rivalry with Antonio who used to lend money without any interest whereas Shylock uses to lend money at heavy interest rates. Moreover, the sentiments of revenge make him an inhuman person.

Further, the sentiments of revenge affect the personal life of Shylock adversely. Over engagement in business pursuits changes the atmosphere of his home and his daughter starts feeling alienated at home as she finds a suitable companion in the form of Lorenzo she elopes with him from her home while taking the jewelry and money from her home. (Shakespeare 28) This shows the failure of a father to understand his daughter, Jessica, and to give her proper time. Besides, his servant, Launcelot also feels suffocated there and leaves Shylock for Bassanio (Shakespeare 20). The revengeful temperament of Shylock snatches his peace, love and his right conduct gets interrogated.

The playwright presents not only the Jewish character, Shylock in a revengeful tempo but the Christian characters also. The Christian characters are more revengeful than the Jewish ones. They seem to relieve the burden of ages through anti-Semitic behaviours. In the trial scene Portia disguised as a young lawyer, Balthazar in the great hall of Venetian High Court of Justice, argues to save the life of Antonio who is standing as a prisoner, but Shylock in no case is in the mood of showering mercy rather he becomes ready to cut one pound flesh of Antonio from near the heart with a knife. In the meantime, Portia re-interprets the meaning of the bond according to which Shylock has the right to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body but without shedding a single drop of blood:

PORTIA: Tarry a little, there is something else,

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,

The words expressly are a pound of flesh:

Then take thy bond, take thy thy pound of flesh,

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy land and goods,

Are by the laws of Venice confiscated

Unto the state of Venice. (Shakespeare 62-63)

Thereafter, Shylock takes a step back and readies to take the principal amount i.e. three thousand ducats being offered by Bassanio, but now the Portia becomes adamant that now Shylock will get only justice as per the bond. The next argument Portia gives is that there is no clarity on whether Shylock advertently or inadvertently plotted against Antonio's life. Therefore, half of his property will go to the state, the other half will go to Antonio and his life will be at the mercy of the Duke. But the Duke forgives his life and cuts down, forgives half of the state's share with a fine, and announces that Antonio must get his share. Listening to this, Shylock does not wish to live more. Then, Antonio requests the Duke not to confiscate Shylock's property which is to go to the state and the other half must go to Lorenzo and Jessica if he converts into a Christian and write his will in their name. If he goes against this, the Duke will not forgive him. Now, Shylock becomes ready for everything. (Shakespeare 64-66)

The Above analysis shows that the sentiments of revenge destroy universal human values i.e. love, truth, right conduct, peace, and non-violence. For example, the Jewish Character, Shylock and all Christian Characters do not each other with love and respect. There is no inter-communal love as Jessica's conversion to Christianity was predefined on terms. Truth gets destroyed with elopement and Portia's disguise into a lawyer, Balthazar. Right conduct gets distorted in the case of Shylock, Portia, and Jessica. The peace flies away and everyone becomes restless after becoming aware of the bond and casket events. If non-violence is thought, psychological and ideological violence resonates throughout the play except in the scenes describing love and friendship. Moreover, the message about human nature and values Shakespeare preached in the 16th Century is still relevant and will remain forever because of its agelessness. More significantly, the playwright manages to entertain, inform, and instruct society through the characters and ideas projected in The Merchant of Venice.

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