



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

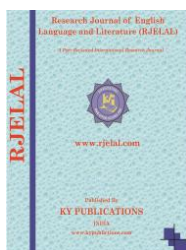
## EQUIVOCALITY AND THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

VASVI GUPTA

Student, Mayo College Girl's School, Ajmer

[guptavasvi@gmail.com](mailto:guptavasvi@gmail.com)

doi: [doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.373](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.373)



### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to appraise Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* through a multifocal perspective. It broaches the themes of jurisprudence, religious bigotry, marginalization and the omnipresence of anti-Semitism in Venice and analyses them through the various lenses of literary ideologies prescribed by scholars over time. In this way it explains the play as a story of the misconstrued pain and misery of a misunderstood man, alienated on grounds of adhering to beliefs that opposed the majoritarian religious code of the day. This paper goes on to juxtapose the Venetian ghetto with the social order of contemporary India by interrogating into the similarities between these pluralistic geographies through a postcolonial perspective. It further explains *The Merchant of Venice* as oscillating between an infectious remainder of historical prejudices and a still suppurating, exigent exposé of our contemporary stereotypes. It unravels *The Merchant of Venice* as a contemporary social commentary on the binary of inclusion and exclusion.

### Equivocality and *The Merchant of Venice*

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" -L.P. Hartley

#### Introduction:

One of the four plays in the Bard's pantheon that deal with non-white characters, *The Merchant of Venice*, although initially seen as a canonical piece of literature opens up a world of parallel narratives that stand in direct dissonance with the Elizabethan orthodoxy that it seems to convey at its surface. By explaining the psychology of a misunderstood and ostracized Shylock, the playwright calls into question the morality of Western society and the demeaning nature of the Elizabethan gaze that ousts the "other" to the repressed and inconspicuous fringes of its society.

A two-dimensional reading of *The Merchant of Venice* trails a narrative wherein Shylock, directly in

the words of the Duke and in various other respects by the his Christian interlocutors has been described as "A Stony adversary,/ an inhuman wretch/ Un capable of pity, void, and empty/ From any dram of mercy." A constricted and insular understanding of the play compels the reader to look at Shylock as a depraved Jew who uses law to quench his rancour against Antonio, a benevolent Christian whose admiration, wealth and respect the former was deeply envious of. It further shows Portia as a "fair maiden" of "wondrous virtues" who uses law to render service to man and as a mark of her love and devotion for her husband, Bassanio. These establish the tenets of the Elizabethan order that conforms to the normative ideas of beauty and power, while condemning the outsider for the foreignness of his manner that violates the larger hegemonic order of the day.

However, critical theory, through its explanation of Binary Opposition, suggests that literature sparks dialogue both in favour and in critique of what it represents by pitting language and thought against one another. This leads us to explore *The Merchant of Venice*, mired in incessant scholarly debate and contention, through a multifocal lens in order to unveil a wider spectrum of understanding. The elasticity in the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* is due to the fact that this text is riddled with disturbing lacunae in the pattern of paradoxes it creates, puzzling the reader as to whether Shylock is simply a character foil to the magnanimous Antonio or is *The Merchant of Venice's* central character, set against Elizabethan propriety.

Drawing upon this idea bring us to Jacques Derrida, who, in this philosophical theory of deconstruction, explains that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings rather than being a unified, logical whole. He upends the Western metaphysical tradition of logocentrism that creates dualistic oppositions and privileges one binary upon the other, and further goes on to propose the idea of taking different vantage points to deconstruct ideas so as to interpret them from a dynamic frame, as is necessary in the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Using this principle, Shakespeare's representation of the subaltern in a racially divisive and ethnically isolating setting can be construed as a mirror of the Elizabethan society's abhorrence that led to the formation of these pertinent disparities. Delineating the text in this context leads for the emergence of a parallel narrative, one that rebukes the Elizabethan society for its violence of marginalization and identifies their artefacts of injustice as pulsating beings, trying to balance on their own moral grayscale. This interpretation has been widely used and replicated in various adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. The predicament of Shakespeare's play exposes the anti-Semitic Elizabethan society as the real architect of Shylock's ignobility.

However, before delving into the dissection of this text and the implication of the suit that it pursues, it is important to understand that a text must not be isolated from the socio-cultural milieu it represents and is set in. Rather, understanding the underlying historical context imparts necessary meaning to the events, dialogue and didacticism of the play. Multifarious scholars operate in the paradigm of literature and history, and it is widely noticed that the latter explains and contextualizes the former. This truth extends to *The Merchant of Venice*. Historical exposition of the society that *The Merchant of Venice* mirrors seems necessary to really understand the Elizabethan age against which the injustice meted out to Shylock is set.

The Venice Ghetto was first of the many places that divided people due to religious differences and kept them under surveillance for the same. The term ghetto first originated here as "geto," signifying a foundry. However, with time, this term was corrupted to mean ghetto. According to belief, Jews have been disenfranchised from the Elizabethan community and universally viewed as reviled outsiders ever since the execution of Christ. Rampant racial stereotype and parochialism shunned them to the fringes of the shared Elizabethan ethos and value system. Thus, persecution, social isolation, banishment and inhuman atrocities have often characterized episodes of religious intolerance, evident in the historical narratives of Jews since the Norman Conquest in 1066, when England became the centre of Jewish migration from European countries. These aliens established themselves as traders, agents and artisans, or simply pursued this sanctuary to escape the intolerance they faced in Catholic states, incumbently exponentiating themselves in both materials and strength. The power they wielded was in monetary terms, such that they possessed huge estates and material affluence. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were some of the richest men in England. Despite their material predominance, they faced economic and political modulation through taxation norms, were denied citizenship, and accorded the statues of aliens. Their social expulsion and rejection by the Elizabethan community even extended to threats of deportment.

This historical background of *The Merchant of Venice* is reflective of the suffering that extended to Shylock's entire tribe and prompts us to view Shylock's narrative as that of the collective Jew, persecuted due to the foreignness of faith. The Jewish genocide that took place in Germany holocaust can be viewed as an inevitable consequence of this established supremacy, purposed to alienate, persecute and oust a species that was considered not only alien, but also inferior to the predominant society.

Over time, several scholars have attempted to explain power structures in conjunction with social orders. The doctrines of Louise Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Alan Sinfield enable us to explore *The Merchant of Venice* by pivoting it with necessary context and explanation.

Attempting to explore *The Merchant of Venice* using Louise Althusser's principles allows us to dissect in view of his theory of interpellation, also known as "hailing." Althusser implies that an individual has no intrinsic significance, rather is a subject or an element in a larger social subset, recognized and labelled by prevailing ideology. This is true in *The Merchant of Venice*, whose Christian characters conceive of Shylock as a Jew before an individual- understanding bolstered from the fact that the word Jew and its various forms such as *Jewish*, *Jewess* and *Hebrew* were used seventy-four times in the play, thus bearing anti-Semitic characteristics, used to imply negative racial attitude and stereotypes. Furthermore, he speculates that ideas do not originate in our minds alone, but are instead planted there by society. Thus, prevailing ideology is a "social process," not enforced upon the individual through violence, but infused into our subconscious through reinforcement and encouragement of its consensual acceptance. This is visible in the way Antonio, despite the benignity and maleficence that he is attributed with in the course of the play, goes against his very inherent nature to slander Shylock and his community. It is evident in the vigour with which Gratiano postulates abject contempt for his Jewish adversary. In all their attempts of dishonouring the Jew, *The Merchant of Venice's* Christian contemporaries manifest the very ideology that they have willingly subsumed into their subconscious,

receiving strong validation on this front, not only from their shared contempt, but also that which extends to society they are a part of.

In Rabinow 1991, Michel Foucault prescribed, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." (Foucault, 1980: 131) Thus, by viewing truth as a social construct, native to the majoritarian belief of particular societies, he established that the reputation of the Jew was an archetype prevalent in the Elizabethan society. The "general politics" and "regimes of truth," are by extension, applicable to *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock's mistreatment is incorporated into the Venetian convention, and should be interpreted a way of life for the Jew, rather than an isolated instance of rancour. Thus, it reveals the society as one that convinced itself of the alienation and inferiority of the other, using a prevailing background, as the precedent, antecedent as well as the descendent of this exclusion.

Within this framework, Alan Sinfield uses his 'idea of plausibility' to explain the existence of powerful (plausible) discourse/s that prevails in society so as to keep the others subservient to the humiliation they are accorded with, and the way disruptions in these prevailing, plausible ideas regarding ethnicity, gender and hierarchy materialize in literary texts, as is visible in *The Merchant of Venice*. He further advocates: "First, the texts we call "literary" characteristically address contested aspects of our ideological formation. When a part of our worldview threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then we reorganize and retell its story, trying to get it into shape—back into the old shape if we are conservative-minded, or into a new shape if we are more adventurous. These I call 'faultline' stories. They address the awkward, unresolved issues; they require most assiduous and continuous reworking; they hinge upon a fundamental, unresolved ideological complication

that finds its way, willy-nilly, into texts. Through diverse literary genres and institutions, people write about faultlines, in order to address aspects of their life that they find hard to handle." These ideological fissures that Sinfield draws upon can be used to understand the use of anti-Semitic elements in *The Merchant of Venice* that emerge as a result of the conflicts that plague contemporary society. The paradox in *The Merchant of Venice* that both condemns and explains Shylock can be aligned along these faultlines, arising from the alienation of the Hebrew community as well as the sympathy that this 'otherization' evokes. It exposes the Venetian society as one torn between conforming to prevailing social customs as well as one that was latently cognisant of this violence.

Time and again, the orchestration of a neo-colonialist societal order with regard to First Nations peoples has been scrutinized from different vantage points, and the element of religion, based on a regional conflation has often loomed large in these comprehensions. Despite the general public's acclimatization to such phenomena, the subtle presence of colonist hegemony and the violence of parochialism cannot be overlooked. Similarly, Shakespeare is indicted with having introduced an element of colonial colour in his *The Merchant of Venice* by the vehicle of its subaltern, Shylock. Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist philosopher used the term 'subaltern' to describe people of inferior standing based on class, gender, race, religion or ethnicity, politically, culturally and socio-economically excluded from the hegemonic power structure. Gayatri Spivak (Leitch, 2001, p. 2193) deemed a subaltern as an entity who "has no voice of its own." This description is apposite for *The Merchant of Venice's* antagonist, Shylock who stands unredeemed through the course of this romantic comedy, this exposing the anti-Semitism that characterises *The Merchant of Venice*. A post-colonial understanding reveals the hybridity of the Venetian order as one that hyphenated the colonised to the superior regime of the coloniser, rather than bringing about an osmotic exchange, as is seen in the way Shylock was enslaved to Elizabethan order.

This religious bigotry is evident in the various social precepts and ploys that *The Merchant of Venice*

hatches out. The upholding of the Elizabethan idea of beauty is postulated in the way Portia's golden tresses and fair complexion is accorded reverence and adulation, which stands in stark opposition to her underlying contempt for the black-skinned Islamic suitor, the Prince of Morocco. Furthermore, the term Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* has non-neutral connotations, used to depersonalize Shylock, thus justifying the inimicalness of his enemies as inspired by his religion and attributed towards that very part of his identity. Furthermore, Shylock's religious identity invokes the kind of malignant attitude from Antonio that stands in complete dissonance from the benevolence that he has been attributed with throughout the play. The fact that it is this religious persecution that invites Shylock's cold suit is evident these lines: "...If a Jew wrongs a Christian, 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." (3.1.68-73). The so-called ignominy of his religion exacted that every avenue of dignity and modicum of honour was closed to the Jew: he was granted nothing except the privilege of his wealth, for which too, he was railed against.

This anti-Semitic attitude of the Elizabethan depicts them as people who look for mercy and acceptance but don't grant it themselves. Their ethnic imposition is further illustrated in the way the Elizabethan cohort slanders Shylock for practicing usury as it contravenes their Elizabethan doctrines. Their inability to understand that such a practice is acceptable in the religion professed by the professor of such a 'crime' is representative of the social and cultural hegemony to which they are themselves enslaved. By segregating and indoctrinating the Jew, the Venetian laws create the very resentful monsters they abhor. *The Merchant of Venice*, in this way, depicts a system that criticizes the very attributes that it sows into its marginalized by apportioning them with mistreatment.

Interrogating the postcolonial reading of the play also facilitates reclamation of Shylock's honour in the famous court scene where Portia's brilliant rhetoric suffices to render the Jewish accuser legally bereft. The nature of 'justice' met out to Shylock in this part of the play dresses as of the restorative kind.

However, in reality, the violence and deprivation that it ensues actually dulls the Christian ideal of charity. It asserts itself as both redemptive and retributive by defining punishable offences from a religiously parochial lens. We perceive the dual imposition of this law as colonization, in the dispossession of Shylock's wealth and property, and as neo-colonization in the expropriation of his religion, followed by the injunction of adhering to Christianity. The shift from treating Shylock as an object of plunder to an object of mercy signifies the oscillation from colonialism to neo-colonialism. In this manner, the play exposes the immorality of Shylock's nemeses, who decree him injustice by putting him on trial from a Christian's idea of fairness. They contravene the Christian values of love and mercy by the two-fold stripping of Shylock - snatching away not only his means, but also his identity.

*The Merchant of Venice* stands to be one of the most problematic plays for today's audiences in William Shakespeare's expansive body of work, because of its presentation of its alter ego, in that Shylock is not a typical construct of a Jew that is made to converge to the prejudices of the era, rather he has been constantly humanized throughout the course of this play: his 'barbarism' almost always accounted for. *The Merchant of Venice* is different from other literary manifestations that were replete with anti-Semitism, in that Shakespeare humanized his demon, showing his need to be explained. Through the demonizing of Shylock, Shakespeare impresses upon the Elizabethan the echo of popular opinion by repetition. He caters to the mass demand of incriminating the imposter to a majoritarian society. However, the explanation that he constantly provides on Shylock's behalf serves as a fisher for an emerging parallel narrative - one that proves to us the humaneness of Shylock's 'barbaric' tendencies, his rankling contempt for the Elizabethans and his unbridled thirst for the means to live.

Through his description of the hateful slurs that Antonio, and all his Christian contemporaries impress upon Shylock, Shakespeare exposes the contemporary Venetian society as one that is hell bent on disenfranchising the Jew. The play describes a Shylock who discernibly hates the goyim, but secretly wants to be liked by them; one who rails

against his Christian counterparts in his quest for revenge, but in his heart of hearts, really wants to be accepted.

The Bard accords his tragedian with a touch of humaneness while describing the way by which interacting societal forces compelled him to resort to treachery and vengeance. *The Merchant of Venice* exposes him as an artefact of injustice, victim to the ills of an insouciant society and the rancour of his daughter's domestic treason. Furthermore, he is imparted the most humanized speech in the play:

"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." (III.i.49-61)

This monologue is reflective, not only of the violence of injustice that this Jewish adversary faced but also exposes the fact that the Jew's acrimony and contemptuous acts are of a vengeful nature, following the norms of reciprocity of the social boycott met out by the Elizabethans. The multiplicity with which Shylock has been presented - oscillating between condemning and humanizing Shylock - shows his fallibility as explainable. This begs the question as to whether, through his vehicle of the villainous yet humanized Shylock, did Shakespeare fulfil canonical archetypes or rebel against them?

In this respect, several modern adaptations of the play have made an attempt to weed out the biases in *The Merchant of Venice*, thus explaining the forces of truth that form the punctum of a simple yet confusing picture such as this. Shylock is my Name, by means of its anachronistic crossover, monologues and denouement, uncovers the plight of Shylock by materializing in our collective contemporary



subconscious. Its title character exclaims, "These Jews! They don't know whether to cry for me, disown me or explain me." Also, the artistic director for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Trevor Nunn, asserts that *The Merchant of Venice* is both anti-Christian and anti-Semitic.

A contemporary interpretation allows us to look at Shylock as a victim to the hegemony of a stereotyped society, Shakespeare's latent representations of which have not escaped the literary eye. This predominance couples the wave of Hindutva that has surcharged India, subverting the British colony to establish a colonial regime that is now coloured by religion, and not skin: saffron approximating the white man and all his burdens. The wave of Hindutva that is engulfing India is apparent in the way ideological dissemination is being harnessed to make India a Hindu state as opposed to a secular one. Modern day politics has adopted a regressive method of retelling history, in that the parliament is renaming its geographies to adopt a more Hindu flavour, as is seen in the renaming of the city Allahabad to its Hindu version Prayagraj.

This convergence in history and politics is further reinforced in the revamping of Indian history textbooks to replace Mughal history by replacing Aurangzeb with Shivaji as its protagonist. The idea of an outsider has been made more tangible through the National Register for Citizens in India, aimed to oust all its 'illegal immigrants' as they hog a considerable amount of Indian employment. Today, the threads of pluralistic tradition that India proudly upheld in the past are actually dabbled with scepticism and marginalization. This stems from the fact that societies, with their out-group biases, have a propensity to look at religion as a construct that exists merely in the two-dimensional view that it impresses upon the outsider. The Hindu propaganda that has suffused India has invariably labelled Muslims as aliens or terrorists- an idea constantly reiterated by the numerous agents of modern media. This limited understanding of the other resonates in the alienation of the Muslim community- a suppression that comes with its own acts of rebellion. *The Merchant of Venice*, through the ostracism faced by Shylock and his community, offers a parallel voice to India's myriad manifestations of otherization. The

anti-Muslim dialogue prevalent in India and the labelling of Muslim as a terrorist is congruous with Shylock's depiction as a barbarian.

In this saffronized state of India, Antonio would be an upper-class Hindu and Shylock, a Kashmiri Muslim, not integrated into the mainstream society. Shylock's forfeiture of a pound of flesh would be as sacrilegious as the idea of killing a cow, both of which are repudiated by the law and the majoritarian society in the respective timelines in which they exist. Just as Muslim women's purdah is not intelligible to the mainstream society of India, Shylock's instructions of closing the windows is deemed conventional by the Elizabethan eye. Shylock's depriving the members of his domicile from adequate food and garments, considered miserly by his Christian contemporaries, finds resonance in the Muslim's idea of denying oneself in their celebration of Ramadan. Muslim cultural ethos is misunderstood in the similar criticism that is hurled at the Muslim woman's *burkha* and Shylock's gaberdine, upon which Antonio spits. Alan Sinfield's idea of the plausibility of Christian ideals mirrors the quiescent acceptance of Hindu norms in the religiously heterogeneous society of India.

The binary of the insider and the outsider is exemplified in the way Shylock- like the Jew community he represents- is an outsider despite having been assimilated to the motley culture of Venice. This corresponds to BJP's regulation of the prevailing food culture and Shiv Sena's rightist endorsement of cow vigilantism to prevent the consumption of beef, as is mandated in Hinduism. We find certain strands of Shylock's modern-day Venice in Ayodhya, which is mired in the dispute between whether it is Islam's Babri Masjid or Hinduism's Ram Mandir that has precedence there. We see the tussle between these religious apostles as an endeavour by Islam to subvert the controlling paradigm in which it exists, and the Hindu's repetitive imposition of its omnipotence. Just as Shylock's practice of usury, although constantly criticized by the Elizabethan narrative, is in abidance by his Jewish conventions, India is also plagued with the majoritarian idea of scrutinising Islamic scripture from the aloof, yet majoritarian perception of a Hindu. These phenomena are problematic in the way

they misconstrue a divine instruction that they have no business interpreting. This evolving world, irrespective of time and geography, has seen its majority groups deem itself the proprietors of a social order, simply based on number. This is the standard practice of subordinating an entity that is deemed inferior on the basis of its numerical strength and the 'foreignness' of its origin, citizenship and culture.

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