

Shylock's Monologues: Amalgamation of Identity and Ideology in The Merchant of Venice

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Abstract

There is a close relationship between language and identity. It is one of the media through which people express themselves, and communicate with others. It is also a tool that people use to define their identity. In other words, the language or the choice of words and the accent say a lot about the one who uses it; values, beliefs and customs, apart from its literal meaning. The Merchant of Venice, published in 1600, is still one of the marvelous plays of William Shakespeare which is being read widely and appreciated for Shakespearean craftsmanship and Shylock, a Jew. Shylock is the most lovable, memorable and vivid character in The Merchant of Venice. His monologues or dialogues not only drives the play but also unwraps the grotesque conditions of their existence. The present study is proposed with a view to examining the monologues of Shylock in terms of his identity and ideology.

Keywords:- Identity, speech, reveal, view and discriminate.

Antonio, the merchant and Shylock have known each other for a long time. Although, they have traded at Rialto in Venice together, and inhabited the same city for years, and yet regarded each other with disgust and hatred. Antonio and other Christians' anti-semitic views, they display overtly, hurt Shylock badly. This intended approach from the dominant group engendered a feeling of being discriminated in Shylock.

During the renaissance Jews lent money for interest, and Christians availed themselves of this service. In plain English, the Christians borrowed that money. But at the same time, they pronounced the lending for profit as the sin of usury. When Shylock was approached 'to supply the ripe wants' of Bassanio, an associate of Antonio, Shylock's reply, though camouflaged and terse, is very conspicuous that reflects his craving for identity; to be acknowledged as a human being, though of different religion. Shylock, a conservative Jewish Moneylender, is a bigot and is very candid in his dealings, devoid of religion. When Bassanio invites him at dinner to discuss certain formalities about loan, readers are stunned at Shylock's rejoinder.

BASSANIO:- If it please you to dine with us.

SHYLOCK:- Yes, to smell pork! to eat of the habitation

which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the

devil into. I will buy with you, sell 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. (Shakespeare 44)

Shylock is a human being, and possesses all the traits that are warranted and necessitated in a human. He is not a God. He, as a human being, craves for the means of his survival, and whosoever bars his path receives the rebuke; though disguised, from him. The Jew are not entitled to run any business in Venice, as per its degree; the only means of livelihood for a Jew could be lending out money on interest; the only occupation that is allowed. The repeated mistreatment which Shylock receives from his fellow Christian traders, especially Antonio, regarding his business: charging interest on lent out money, have hardened him. He is particularly and specifically targeted, and insulted by the dominant class; the Christians. His religion/faith is his identity, and any disrespect to his sacred nation and pious worship jolts him. On seeing Antonio, his monologue is a crystalline of his thought process, which is resultant of the atrocities inflicted on him in the course of time by the dominants.

SHYLOCK:I hate him for he is a Christian;
 But more for that in low simplicity
 He lends out money gratis and brings down
 The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
 If I can catch him once upon the hip,
 I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
 He hates our sacred nation; and he rails,
 Even there where merchants most do congregate,
 On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
 Which he calls "interest." Cursèd be my tribe,
 If I forgive him! (Shakespeare 46)

Shylock, who is frequently insulted, demoralized, abused and jibed at not only for his business: though "other professions are closed to Jews" (Weinstein, 2007, p.191) but also for his faith and religion. He suffers all 'these courtesies' patiently because 'sufferance is the badge of' his tribe. As and when, Shylock gets an opportunity, he is very candid in highlighting the dichotomy of affected behavior of Venice Christians, particularly of Antonio, towards a fellow-trader. Because of this, his identity and ideology are deformed and distorted. Through the stories of Jacob and his uncle, Shylock endeavors to blazon his identity and ideology. These historical and allegoric stories blended with the words 'beard' and 'my Jewish gaberdine' echo his values, and he draws his power, strength and determination from that identity .

SHYLOCK:- Signior Antonio, many a time and oft

In the Rialto you have rated me
 About my moneys and my usances;
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
 For suffrance is the badge of all our tribe;
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
 And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
 And for all use of that which is mine own.
 Well then, it now appears you need my help: (Shakespeare 50)

Shylock's remark on Salerio's question: what Shylock's future course would be if Antonio 'forfeit' the bond, and the forfeiture: 'his flesh' would not be 'that good for', speaks sound about Shylock, the oppressed; apart from being a moneylender, and expresses his tribulations because of his Jewishness. Shylock recalls how Antonio has 'disgraced' and hindered him 'half a million' apart from instigating his 'enemies; and that too without any reason. Shylock's monologue is a dignified paroxysm of an ethnic minority in Christian dominated Venice. Though some critics termed the monologue just a 'rather obvious superficial message', but this impassioned verbose of Shylock underlines the naked truth hammered in among the people of Venice other than the ruling Christianity. Shylock uses collective pronoun 'we' in the monologue that suggest his pleading for the whole community to acknowledge his humanity but also to feel the intensity of pain that was perpetrated by the Venetian Christians on the Jewish community.

SHYLOCK:-..., 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?
 (Shakespeare 112)

However, the unprecedented quickness of Shylock asking Tubal, another Jew, to fee him ‘an officer’ almost ‘a fortnight before’ to ensure Antonio’s ruin, is unreasoned for. Shylock is a man of unrelenting and implacable sprit, destined to win. He wants to enliven his dented sprits; damned with the elopement of Jessica with Lorenzo; a Christian and Bassanio’s friend. His revengefulness is further fanned by spending spree of Jessica, contrary to the proverb ‘Fast bind, fast find’. Shylock’s ultimate purpose: ‘to feed fat the ancient grudge’ that he harbors is revealed through the monologue. Shylock epitomizes for his justice of revenge; an animal need, in the name of justice. It is not a question of misplaced priorities. Shylock never wronged Antonio directly. Instead, Antonio’s animosity fuels shylock’s desire for revenge.

SHYLOCK:- ..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.
 (Shakespeare 112)

Infuriated over the blot that Jessica has smeared/casted on their race; both morally and financially, Shylock’s being portrayed as ‘a stone adversary, an inhuman wretch’ appears to be colored. Double wronged Shylock bets for his ‘due and forfeit’ of the bond endangering the charter of the freedom of the city. His passion for the ‘extraction’ may seem un-mollifiable and immoderate. However, if viewed in the frame of reference: the struggle for survival, the demand seems just. Shylock has a ‘lodged hate and a certain loathing’ for Antonio because of certain vexatious incidents, run-ins and broils, which is further fuelled/incensed/aggravated by stealing not only the hard earned money but also his daughter, Jessica. Shylock is left with the choice; either perish or survive. And Shylock, the dispirited father and a marginalized Jewish money-lender, decides to secure his territory and resolves to do it other way; to get rid off and eliminate his competitor turned tormentor. This trait of Shylock makes him a human being of undaunted spirit who is always in the habit of swimming against the current.

The duke who heads the court, convened on the request of Shylock, should exhibit impartiality. However, the conduct of the Duke is not above board. His concern for Antonio, indeed, shows his kind heartedness. Apart from his kindness, Antonio feels indebted to the Duke for his ‘rigorous course’ to counter Shylock’s ‘very tyranny and rage’. The trial scene, alongside Shylock, also mirrors the prejudice of the court;

the Duke, and the other Christians. The phrases: ‘a stony adversary’ and ‘an inhuman wretch’ used for Shylock by the Duke himself delineates his thought process for a complainant who does not belong to his religion. Duke’s prejudice is reflected in his address: ‘call the Jew into the court’. The malice carried within the Duke frequently exhibits itself through his repeated address to Shylock as Jew. Shylock, who was accustomed to this racial, immoral and inhuman treatment, knows the hypocrisy of the Christians. The Duke fangs Shylock’s identity as Jew while expecting ‘a gentle answer’. Not only the Duke and Antonio, but every Christian present in the court address Shylock, not by his name, but by his religion. Gratiano’s profanity, in court room, and that too in the very presence of the Duke, portrays how Shylock, a member of despised minority, endures mistreatment; being called ‘inexcrable dog’ and whose ‘desires are wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous’, on daily basis.

Then what can be expected from a person, a living being, in hostile conditions which are not conducive for his survival? Does mercy must flow from a father: a Jew, whose daughter has been coaxed to run off, with a huge quantity of treasures, to marry a Christian? Besides abandoning her Jewish faith, Jessica: Shylock’s daughter, is recklessly wasting money; the hard-earned money of her father. Expecting ‘gentle answer’ from a person, who has been reduced to just to his racial identity; repeatedly and continuously subjected to all kinds of possible abuses, is just gibberish. Brow-beaten Shylock asks ‘wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?’

The Christians hounded Shylock, first by making Jessica: her daughter, elope with money; thus making Shylock weak; both morally and financially, and secondly, by trapping him, through a disguised lawyer who is very apt in misguiding the reasoning of a human being. Portia, who is very dexterous in extorting things to desired results; plans to place ‘a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket’. impersonating as Balthazar, befooled the court. In the name of mercy, she showcases Antonio; ‘a tainted wether of the flock, Meetest for death’, who ‘stand within his danger’, because of malicious intentions of Shylock. Portia betrays her entire oration on salvation and mercy; the quality which is ‘an attribute to God Himself’. But when her turn comes to show mercy on Shylock, her hypocrisy is no surprise to the readers, as it is embedded in her personality.

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PORTIA:-I can easier teach
 twenty what were good to be done, than to be one
 of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain
 may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper
 leaps o’er a cold decree: (Shakespeare 34)

Shylock approached the court for his bond. A court has the right only to provide relief to a person for which he or she filed a suit. However, the court headed by a Christian Duke not only denied justice to Shylock but also charged him for plotting against the life a Christian, and ultimately confiscating his entire property. The height of intolerance exhibits itself when Gratiano, Bassanio's friend, isn't content with Shylock losing his wealth, and wants him to be 'hanged at the state's charge' in the end of the courtroom scene. However, in coercing him to convert; on the condition of pardon, they; the Christians including state, are stripping him of his identity as a Jew, pulp his ideology, and forcing him to give up his only available occupation, because Christians may not practice usury. In other words, they reduce him to nothing not more than a bare animal. This pain reverberates in the words of Shylock.

SHYLOCK:-Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:
 You take my house when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house; you take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live. (Shakespeare 186)

Shylock's monologues are very terse and curt, but very well highlight the agony of a human who is humiliated and ridiculed occasionally; that too without any reason or provocation from his side. His strive to establish his identity; the identity to be mutually recognized and respected by others, is embedded in his words.

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