

Unlocking an Enigma: Shylock

Roopa Manjunath*

Department of English, Seshadripuram Composite Pre University College, Bangalore 560020

Abstract – Shylock, the famed character of Shakespeare’s ‘The Merchant of Venice’ is a three-dimensional character who remains an enigma. He is loved, yet hated and oppressed time and again by his Christian neighbours. Antonio holds a deep hatred towards him for charging a high rate of interest for the money lent to his fellow Christians. Shylock is more humane than the other characters and is emotionally pressurized by all claiming him to be a devious usurer. Though Shylock is an antagonist in the play, he essays the role of the central character, at times out shadowing the protagonist Antonio, the merchant of Venice. Shylock is a man of his word. He is deeply hurt when his beloved daughter Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, a Christian, sells her mother’s ring treasured by her father and ultimately converts to Christianity. Money and hatred thus plays a vital role in this play – money is the bone of contention between Antonio and Shylock, for Shylock charges high rate of interest, whereas Antonio gives money ‘gratis’. Shylock is hated by all basically because he is a Jew and Antonio is a respected nobleman of Venice. The court scene in Act IV, scene I, where Shylock demands for his pound of flesh reaffirms the power of the dominant class. The fair Portia in the guise of the lawyer beats him at his own game .i.e. the letter of the law. Finally, he is forced to give up his money and convert to Christianity. A defeated Shylock totters out of the court, pained to death by this iniquity of the Christian world.

Keywords: Jew, Christians, Vengeance, Usurer, Enigma

-----X-----

Drama, as a form of literature, employs plot and characters, develops a theme and arouses emotions in the reader. This is portrayed directly through the characters created. Shakespeare, the master dramatist, has created one of the profound characters of all times .i.e. Shylock, in his famous play ‘The Merchant of Venice’. Shylock is a three dimensional character and intrigues the reader.

Jews, in Shakespeare’s age, were suppressed and subjected to anti-Semitic prejudice. They were depicted to be usurious, cunning, malevolent and potentially murderous. They also lent money on high charge of interest which portrayed them as greedy and devious.

The play ‘The Merchant of Venice’ takes its title from Antonio, who is the merchant of Venice. Though he is the protagonist, Shylock is the central character who appeals to the readers’ sense and sensibility. Here, Shylock plays many major roles – a responsible father to his beloved daughter Jessica, a Jew in racial conflict, a money lender by profession, and a miser. Besides, he is repeatedly wronged by the Christians of his time which makes him antagonistic towards them.

‘The Merchant of Venice’ is a play monumental to human folly. Antonio, the noble merchant, is forced to borrow money from his staunch enemy Shylock in

order to help his dear friend Bassanio to go to Belmont in order to woo the fair Portia. The Venetians respect Antonio, but Shylock abhors him for his magnanimity in lending money ‘gratis’. Also, Antonio had redeemed the debtors in Shylock’s clutches. He is uncharitable towards Jews, Shylock in particular. The plot revolves around money and hatred - hatred between Antonio and Shylock.

The Jewish community in Venice was comparatively wealthier than their Christian neighbours and so, was isolated. Shylock expresses his hatred towards Antonio for economic reasons – i.e. lending money for gratis. He says, “I hate him for he is a Christian, he lends out money gratis and brings down the rate of usance.....cursed be my tribe; if I forgive him!” As Graham Midgley rightly points out, ‘the central conflict in the play is between the calculating business world of Shylock and the romantic world of love and marriage symbolized by Belmont’. Both Antonio and Shylock are lonely throughout the play.

Shylock is portrayed as a vicious, cunning, avaricious and a cruel heartless man. But he is without a friend. There is no one in Venice who can speak ‘good’ about him. The boys of Venice mock him in the streets; even his daughter Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, a Christian. Shakespeare

exhibits the ordinary Elizabethan prejudice against the Jew; but in his heart, despite his English nationalism, he can feel for Shylock too. Thus Shakespeare makes us see Shylock not just as other characters see him, but as he views himself. This vision and insight make the character of Shylock what it is – an enigma.¹

Being a product of racial persecution, and always addressed as a 'Jew' than by his given name by the Christians, especially Antonio calling him "cut-throat dog" many a times and "spitting upon his Jewish gabardine", has made Shylock bitter and vengeful. He is so deeply wounded by these barbs, he claims, "Suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe".

Thomas Campbell opines, "Shylock was an ill-used man and the champion of the oppressed race". While Shakespeare highlights the prejudices of Christians towards the Jews, he draws a philosophical picture of the energetic Jewish character and traces its faults to the iniquity of the Christian world.²

Though Shylock is an antagonist, his frequent musings of the cruelty meted out to him by the Venetian Christians makes it difficult to label him a monster. In one of his monologues, he argues that Jews are humans too and calls for a quest for vengeance. The other characters in the play describe him to be obsessed with money and a cruel father to his daughter Jessica; on the contrary, Shylock is a protective father who is proud of his Jewish ethnicity and religion. But Jessica longs for the freedom which the Christians enjoy and hence elopes with Lorenzo and converts to Christianity. By doing so, she betrays the true Oriental warmth of her race and its craftiness. She claims she is a daughter to Shylock's blood but not to his manners. Shylock is miserable when she elopes with Lorenzo, along with the money and jewels. More than anything, he misses his daughter, and is aghast that she has sold the 'ring' given to him by his beloved Leah during their courtship. He rants, "My daughter! O my ducats! O, my daughter! Fled with a Christian!..." (Act III, scene i). Shylock is most hurt. This is beyond the monetary value of the ring. This incident is catalytic; his hatred towards Antonio and his men deepens.

The Jews are associated with hatred and cruelty, the Christians with love and mercy. This is apparent in the famed courtroom scene, the bond and the letter of the law, and the romantic world of Belmont. Since Shylock's hatred towards Antonio is deep rooted, his coming to him for a loan of three thousand ducats is a golden opportunity to avenge for his race and his tormentors. He bitterly says, "Fair Sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last, you spurned me such a day; another time you called me a dog; and for these courtesies I will lend you thus much monies!" He is applying the same lessons he was meted out by his Christian neighbours.

Shylock is shown in stark contrast to Antonio. Shylock was portrayed as a hateful monster that has a staunch loyalty to his race and religion, whereas Antonio is ready to give up his life for his dear friend Bassanio. Shylock utters powerful pleas for the rights of his despised race. He states:

"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, passions?If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not avenge? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means....as a Christian is?" (Act III, scene i). His enmity to Antonio becomes a point of his race's honour. He continues, "Antonio.....he hates our sacred nation....cursed be my tribe if I forgive him".

When Antonio's ships are lost at sea and he is unable to repay his loan to Shylock, no time is wasted to demand for his pound of flesh. Shylock's "so I will feed fat the ancient grudge" reveals that this vengeance stems from the deep persecution faced by Jews not just in London / Venice, but throughout Europe.

The famous courtroom scene (Act IV, scene i) depicts the bias against the non-dominant groups .i.e. the Jews. ³ Though Shylock demands for his "pound of flesh and blood" from Antonio, it denotes both his ties of kinship as well as the bond between Antonio and Shylock.

"Shylock's inability to enforce his bond due to the inseparability of flesh and blood is a reaffirmation of the power of the dominant class" reiterates Clayton Koelb. ⁴ He shows no compunction at the dangers of Antonio bleeding to death and whets the knife on his shoe. Portia, in the guise of a lawyer, tries to free Antonio from his grip. He rejects her plea for mercy and just as he readies himself to plunge the knife in his "enemy's heart", he is defeated by Portia using his own weapon .i.e. the Letter of the Law. His fate is dreadful – being forced to give up his wealth and convert to Christianity. "This forced conversion of Shylock reveals the manipulation of the law by the dominant group to oppress the minority". ⁵

It is ironical that Shylock financed the endeavour that leads to his own downfall. His act in the trial scene is remarkable. He blends the spirit of the aged and avaricious merchant with that of the Hebrew burning to avenge his notional and individual wrongs. "It definitely arouses our indignation against the bare injustice meted out to Shylock".⁶

The Venetians may consider that they are favouring a Jew by converting him to Christianity, but Shylock is pained to death and he totters out of

the court. He is a man who keeps his word – he means what he says and says what he means.

“Shylock’s conversion reflects an allegorical representation of harmony. Shakespeare thought of the conversion of a Jew primarily in the theological and abstract terms”. If a person wanted to be socially accepted, politically safe and economically stable, conformity to the politically correct religion of the day was imperative. 7.

Shylock is a miser, usurer and a Jew. Jews had been from time immemorial, objects of popular detestation and ridicule. The union of all these characteristics is visible in Shylock. To the popular imagination, money lenders are generally sordid misers with a hooked nose, but Shylock is a money lender for whom self respect is as important as money. It is an unhappy ending for Shylock – the true merchant of Venice, who loses everything he holds dear - his money, his daughter Jessica, the ring given by his beloved Leah and ultimately he is forced to give up his religion. He bears much torture, insult and sufferings.

As McCarthy states, “Shakespeare’s ultimate motive is to understand Shylock, especially in the agony of his downfall, where he loses his court case and thus his house, his fortune and his daughter, and is forced to abandon his religion and convert to Christianity. It is a terrible fate”.

Shylock will remain popular as the wronged hero – an enigmatic character in the acclaimed play ‘The Merchant of Venice’.

REFERENCES:

1. Shakespeare, William (1993). ‘The Merchant of Venice’, Wordsworth Classics, ed. Cedric Watts.
2. Campbell, Thomas: Criticism of ‘The Merchant of Venice’
3. Islam, Nazifa: Shylock and the Law: A Critical Analysis (TCLR Online)
4. Koelb, Clayton (1993). The Bonds of Flesh and Blood; Having it Both Ways is ‘The Merchant of Venice’.
5. Koelb, Clayton (1993). The Bonds of Flesh and Blood; Having it Both Ways is ‘The Merchant of Venice’.
6. Posner: Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism, ed. Walter Cohen, Vol. 49, No.4.
7. Oldrieve, Susan (1993). Marginalized Voice of ‘The Merchant of Venice’.

8. McCarthy, Michael (2016). Independent, 23 march 2016 (online)

Further reading:

‘Style and Assessment’ by A. R. Humphrey

‘The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism’ by Walter Cohen

Introduction to the play ‘The Merchant of Venice’ by Cedric Watts

Corresponding Author

Roopa Manjunath*

Department of English, Seshadripuram Composite Pre University College, Bangalore 560020

roopakabadi07@gmail.com