



Marginalized characters of William Shakespeare

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Abstract

A massive scale inrush of dark skinned Africans that was witnessed during the Elizabethan Era England and the grave anti - Semitic attitude that severely pervaded the era, largely catalysed the already existing ethnic and racial stress in England, a nation that was quite unwilling then to look beyond their traditional ideas of religion and race. These became a burning theme for playwright like William Shakespeare who took to bringing out the woes of these marginalized segments of the late sixteenth century society through many iconic characters like Shylock, Caliban and Othello among others in his plays. This paper aims at analysing Shakespeare's brilliant presentation of racial and ethnic segregation through the two greatly remarkable characters- Shylock and Othello from his plays, the rom-com The Merchant of Venice and the tragedy - Othello respectively and the manner of their ostracization that also subdued all attempts of rebellion against the norms of the blurred peripheries that they were put to dwell on. Hapless Caliban from The Tempest also happened to be a victim of expulsion from his own territory. The paper also reflects on the purported idea of liberalism that the city of Venice claimed to be an epitome of, against which both the plays are set and how both the characters resting on the blurred peripheries become victims of the visible centre of the city.

Keywords: Victim, ghettoization, Venice, race, ethnicity, Shakespeare.

Marginalised Characters of William Shakespeare

How many Christians actually bothered to contemplate on Shylock's fate while feasting on the seemingly copacetic play's ending? Would their inherent beliefs have allowed a brook of sympathy to trickle down their hearts pervaded with a pride of their superior religion? A massive scale inrush of dark skinned Africans that was witnessed during the Elizabethan Era by England and the grave antisemitic attitude that severely pervaded the era, largely catalysed the already existing ethnic and racial stress in England, a nation that was quite unwilling then to look beyond their traditional ideas of religion and race. In both his plays The Merchant of Venice and Othello, Shakespeare embraces the 'other'- the very 'other' that had perpetually been the object of violence and hatred. He contradicts racism by stripping open the farce of racist and ethnic binaries, created to place Jews, Africans and individuals like Caliban away from the English Self, permanently labelling them as inferior and allowing them to interfere into the English order would only result into an uncontrollably chaotic society. Shakespeare being a keen observer of the political struggles of the England of his time, took to creating a kind of literature that was 'sugar-coated' in the sense that on a superficial level it appeared amiable to the Elizabethan audience but what floated underneath was a grotesque strain of the realities of the racially and ethnically marginalised strata of the Renaissance England. An excess of Melanin In 'The Moor's' body owing to the geographical location of the place he hailed from, proved to be immensely detrimental as it ignited deep seated prejudices. Othello was hardly ever addressed by his original name, just like Caliban from The Tempest, Prospero frequently insults and degrades Caliban,



calling him a "monster" and "slave". They vented out their contempt by blaming his uncivilised heritage and savage origins. In doing so, they try to justify their irrational hatred by projecting it on racism, calling him the "erring barbarian" (Oth. 1.3.356), "thicklips" (Oth.1.1.66) and "an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe". (Oth. 1.1.87-88) Critic Sukanta Chaudhuri observed that Iago "is fascinated by the morbid stereotype of the gross but virile Negro possessing the delicate but perverted white woman." All those gathered together with Othello as their virtuous leader to find a solution to the national crisis are consciously aware of his alien background evident in his black skin. As long as he fulfils his job of a valiant soldier it is fine but when he dares to love the daughter of one of them he becomes the target of racial attack by the father. Brabantio's beliefs flowering from the inherent traditional beliefs that the blacks are the practitioners of witchcraft, finds expression when he holds Othello liable- "She is abus'd, stol'n from me and corrupted, / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks, / For nature so preposterously to err / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not" (Oth. 1.3.61-64). But Othello's cry of defence was no soft affair. He doesn't just meekly give in to these allegations, rather refutes when he says, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them, / This only is the witchcraft I have us'd" (Oth. 1.3.167-169). Brabantio's wrath made him say that if Othello is not punished, the first offices of the state will be filled by black complexioned "Bond-slaves and pagans," (Oth. 1.3.99) of Africa. Othello became a victim of backstabbing by Iago who pretended to be on Othello's side but was actually robbing Othello of his possessions. Both Shylock and Othello are victims of fooling. Portia, the disguised lawyer incorporated an improbable clause that was not present in the bond- "Shed thou no blood;" and when Shylock should have received his bare principal he got a curt reply - "Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture, / To be so taken at thy peril, Jew" (MV. 4.1.346-347) and the entire Christian community held her as a "second Daniel" (MV. 4.1.343) that has come to judgement. Likewise, Othello deserved the marital bliss yet he was perfectly deprived of what could and would have been his and he eventually succumbs to the injury gifted by his offenders.

The malignity in Shylock is not motiveless. Clear traces of motives can be traced in the play to account for the malevolence in him, which is evident when he bitterly screams out about his treatment at Antonio's hands- when Antonio calls Shylock "misbeliever, cut-throat dog", and Antonio spat upon Shylock's Jewish gaberdine because Shylock used his own money to make profit. Shylock adds that Antonio spat on his beard and kicked him as he would kick a stray dog away from his threshold and then Antonio was asking for money from him (MV. 1.3.107-115). The wrongs inflicted on a long-suffering race that have been wandering up and down in quest of peace for centuries, have found expression in his protest. Although on a few occasions Shylock is seen coming to terms with all the treatment meted out to him by the proud representative of the Christian religion and accepting it saying that Shylock had endured it all with patience and a shrug, because Jews are known for their ability to endure (MV. 1.3.106), yet he is seen emerging as a terrific fighter backed by a fanatical love for his religion when he voices out- Does a Jew not have eyes? Does a Jew not have hands, organs, senses, affections, passions? Are the Jews not fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, affected by the same diseases, healed by the same medicines, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as Christians? If Christians stab them, would not they bleed? If Christians tickle Jews, would not the Jews laugh? If Christians poison Jews, would not they die? And if Christians wrong Jews, should the Jews not take revenge? If Jews are like Christians in all the other ways, Jews would resemble Christians in terms of revenge, too. If a Jew wrongs a Christian, what does he do? He takes revenge (MV .3.1.58-72) Notwithstanding all attempts of rebellion, the voices of these revolts get suppressed when Antonio the supposedly superior flagbearer of goodness asserts that he would call Shylock such names again, spit on him again, and spurn him, too. (MV. 1.3.126)

In context of exploring the traces of racial ideologies in the plays, what cannot be overlooked is the common setting of both the plays- the city of Venice that was supposedly the epitome of liberalism, the very



flagbearer of an equality that ought not to have allowed any scope of racial or ethnic discrimination between the foreigners and the natives. Yet, the super imposition of alienation and subjugation on the minorities was far from being prevented. So contemptuous was Shylock of the race that cost him his survival, that while he ran on the streets of Venice mad at his daughter's treachery he was confused about what exactly to mourn for: whether the betrayal of his daughter that has caused him greater grief or the fact that she has fled with a Christian with his ducats- "O my ducats, O my daughter! /Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! / Justice !, the law !". (MV. 2.8.15-17) Shylock exhibited immense faith on the legal system of Venice in his deep rooted belief that the city of law and civilisation wouldn't deny him justice when he cried out during the court proceedings, "If you deny it, let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom". (MV. 4.1.38-39) But what we see is the complete destruction of his belief system when the tables turn on him, shattering the very bedrocks of his existence. Justice denied to him, also he was robbed of all his means of sustenance without the slightest scope of the right to question the unreasonable jurisdiction of a lawyer who possessed no experience of law. As a setting, Venice serves Shakespeare's needs of a place where a non-European, and potentially non-Christian, man could both hold significant authority but still be distrusted. This particular setting in context of Othello is apt to depict the visual and the cultural isolation of The African descendent. Despite the faith entrusted in Othello, it is due to this setting that we can still see the possibility of distrust in the hearts of the native characters like Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio. In the end, the 'multicultural' city of Venice which boasted of a great diversity of ethnicities and religions and was supposed to be the pinnacle of modernity and openness to liberal ideas, couldn't break through the shackles imposed by the stereotypical beliefs that Shakespeare's England was based on and therefore wasn't able to rescue either The Jew or The Moor. Caliban, a half-human, half-beast creature who is enslaved by Prospero and treated as inferior, representing a common theme of colonialism where the indigenous population is subjugated by the colonizer. Prospero landed on the island and claimed it as his own, despite Caliban being the only native inhabitant, effectively enslaving Caliban and taking control of the island through his magical powers. Nobody wanted justice for Shylock or Caliban, people witnessed they were wronged but no one came to their rescue. Prospero called Caliban "born devil" whereas "Hell is empty and the devils are here", Prospero being one of the devils himself. Just like the colonisers felt the need to civilize us- the colonized ones by looting us blatantly so we became "White man's burden". Caliban was marginalized in his native place by Prospero since the binary worked like Prospero- Caliban, East India Company- Indians. Just like Simone de Beauvoir's SECOND SEX, Caliban and we Indians became the second class citizens in our own terrains. Lady Macbeth was labelled as the fourth witch but Macbeth was never called a wizard. Witches have been disenfranchised and burned alive. Lady Macbeth immersed herself in serving Macbeth, since the beginning, readers do not witness her words/exchanges or dialogues but she was seen reading a letter by Macbeth. Macbeth did not even bother to ask his "dearest partner of greatness" how she was in the letter, very selfishly the letter began about the prophecies of the witches which catered to his vested interests so when she could wake up the sleeping and unuttered ambitions of her husband she was EVIL. The three weird sisters- the witches were neither given feminine features nor a place in the mainstream, Shakespeare's ruthless epoch never allowed them to come out in proper daylight but if they were so evil how could having a little bit of Vitamin D be detrimental ? They were torched alive so they were quite habituated to the energy of the ball of fire- SUN. Macbeth never asked his wife to be a co-ruler with him but he took her suggestions which proves that women alone are capable of running civilizations. Men had to meddle in or else they would have been marginalized like it happens in the feminist utopias.

People embrace their premature nemesis when they contemplate revenge. Of course Shylock had his reasons but contemplating a revenge that is excessively gory to the extent of plotting someone's death cannot really be a fair justification of anger. Frank Sinatra and Confucius's maxim "seek revenge and you should dig two graves" holds true when we think of the plight of the unfortunate, Shylock. The cultural and racial injustices inflicted on Othello and Shylock were in no way justified but what cannot be overlooked is the fact that



neither of them was flawless. On the other hand, Othello's extreme jealousy and insecurity led to both his and Desdemona's doom. In the words of Freud, jealousy is not a "rational emotion" for it robs us of our prudent self. Othello ought to have trusted his wife and their love just like Shylock should have taken the huge amount offered by Bassanio initially and then their futures could have been different and better. Shakespeare portrays the follies and the vices of men and women, their passions and sins, their misfortunes and sorrows, their strength as well as their weaknesses, treacherous friends and open enemies and the cruel fate that overtakes and destroys them completely. In the words of Sir Walter Raleigh, in Shakespeare's plays, "there is always a centre of interest. Some of the characters are kept in the full light of this area of perfect vision. Others moving in the outer field of vision have no value, save in the relation to the centre." Both Shylock and Othello were the unfortunate sufferers belonging to two disparaged sections marked by their racial and ethnic differentiation that was guiltlessly imposed by a so-called progressive Nation, with no escape from the doom. Shakespeare imparts his own beliefs through his characters. He, being a keen observer of human life, reports his observations through the interaction of his characters. The binaries have been blurred in both the plays to depict how the stiff definitions of self and the other are nothing but grave misconceptions.

Literature Review

- 1) Movie- Omkara (2006) by Vishal Bhardwaj Adapted from Shakespeare's Othello, where the protagonist Ajay Devgn has been compared to Othello and Kareena Kapoor Khan as Desdemona. Like the tragedy, here Devgn's low caste has been portrayed and like any stereotypical Bollywood portrayal, the intersectionality is at work- his complexion is dark while Kareena like Desdemona is fair and from a high caste.
- 2) Judith Lanzendorfof College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, English Department, University of Findlay. Here she expresses that how Caliban was verbally abused and called a "devil" whereas he was just like us
- 3) Shakespeare's Violent Women: A Feminist Analysis of Lady Macbeth by Camila Reyes (Department of English) & Amy Kenny (Department of Psychology) University of Sussex.

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