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# Racial Proclivities in Shakespearean Works

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## ABSTRACT

*The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare speaks volumes about how his perception about race was. Othello has been criticised for being racially driven. Keeping these instances in mind, the paper will be glancing at Shakespeare from a different perspective than how most scholars put him in. Many of Shakespeare's works have shown signs and traces of this kind of discrimination, and the paper will aim to provide an account of these works, and how they have highlighted the issue. The papers deals with the objective to find the instances of racism that we have observed in Shakespearean plays like The Merchant of Venice and Othello among others, the climate with respect to racism in Tudor England that prompted Shakespeare to write in such a way and to know How these plays been looked at and critiqued by various scholars and interpreters?*

*The paper is divided into four broad headings, the second and the third culminating in the fourth. The first chapter deals with the introduction to Shakespeare and his plays, with reference to the atmosphere that prevailed when he was a literary mogul. Further, the second chapter analysis the concept of racism in The Merchant of Venice, and how it affects the characters and storyline of the play. The third chapter deals with the analysis of racism with reference to Othello, and how it manifested due to societal pressures and stereotypes. The fourth and final chapter deals with the comparison of the two plays, and the climate in which they were written. This will also contain final remarks about the topic..*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's 'behaviour' in many of his literary works is a candid example of the racial setup in Tudor England. The distinction made between the English and any other section or group from over the world is so frequent that authors and scholars have found it difficult to realise its real interpretation. In Merchant of Venice, there is still confusion as to whether the Christian characters in the play were glorified or criticised, highlighting their flaws.<sup>2</sup>

It is beneficial to observe that the practise is taken to such an extent in The Merchant of Venice that the Jewish counterparts, meant to be the 'infidels', end up becoming the victims

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<sup>2</sup>James O'Rourke, *Racism and Homophobia in "The Merchant of Venice"*, 70 ELH 375, 375 (2003)

of racism in the story. This stems from the fact that Shylock, the so-called antagonist, was reduced to a mere victim at the end of the play.

The Shakespearean era in itself is not a racism-ridden society. There was a general abomination towards the Jews or 'sodomites', which stemmed from several incidents that took place in England in that period, which were of a certain anti-Semitic nature. The Merchant of Venice has seen a constant condemnation of the Jew, its culture and its traditions. The city is divided into people not on the basis of local Venetians and foreigners, but most on grounds of religion, where the Christian becomes the legitimate citizen and the Jew the abomination.

Further, when it comes down to Othello, another one of Shakespeare's greatest works, we see a similar pattern of Othello being intellectually sound, brighter than most others. But the biggest force against him is all of intimate society.<sup>3</sup>(Hogan, 1998) And this leads him to act in a way that accords to the racist standards of the people around him. This, eventually, also leads to his suicide and demise in the play, in which instance, he remarks that he is a Judean, an Arabian tree, and a Turk. All these indicate racial differences and have been stamped on Othello's personality by all of society. This comparison brings him to his final death, which is symbolically one caused by his racial burden.

As a citizen, and that too a renowned one, Shakespeare could be blamed for developing and nourishing these racist tendencies that existed and were so intrinsic to Tudor England. Several other writers have depicted in their works, of the status accorded to skin colour, analogizing non-whites to animals, judging non-whites inferior to whites<sup>4</sup>, and so on.

Both of Shakespeare's works, namely The Merchant of Venice and Othello, fall in stark contrast to each other in the aspect of racism. In the Merchant of Venice, we see a great barrier between right and wrong, which was, more often than not, a competition between being a Christian and a Jew respectively. In Othello, however, Shakespeare makes the reader realise the elements of discrimination that stem from colour and race in the society, and how it shapes the actions of the protagonist. The recognition of the fact that such mindset exists in human society is crucial to note in the play.

While the Merchant of Venice focuses on the underlying conditions with respect to the heinous practise of racism, Othello brings to light the devastating effects of racism on a person's mind and mindset. It is noteworthy to realise that Shakespeare is a good,

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<sup>3</sup>Patrick C.Hogan, *Othello, Racism, and Despair*,41 CLA 431, 432 (1998)

<sup>4</sup>*Supra* note 1, at 383.

comfortable blend of both reality and drama. In some instances, we see abominable behaviour towards the Jewish community, but at the same time, we observe there is empathy towards the plight of a racially marginalised community too.

There is still much confusion as to how Shakespeare himself saw racism as. But he has managed to create masterpieces which depict a myriad range of issues, and racism is one worth looking at.

#### **(A) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research paper will be following a qualitative research methodology, where several acclaimed research articles, online articles have been referred to. A study of Shakespeare's selective works has also been made, especially *The Merchant of Venice*, for better clarity on the mindset of the author on the concerned issue.

#### **(B) LITERATURE REVIEW**

'The John Hopkins University Press' is the publication wing of the John Hopkins University and is one of the oldest and most respected running university press in the United States of America and the world. They have an electronic database for publishing journals, periodicals, and research papers.

'Cambridge University Press' is the running publication division of the University of Cambridge, and works with the mission of disseminating knowledge for educational and research purposes on an international level. It is an educational as well as academic publisher.

'College Language Association' is a publication that has been founded by a group of Black scholars and educators, and serves the purposes of academic and professional interests of the members of the association as well as their communities, and communities and learners all around the world.

'The Merchant of Venice' is a play by William Shakespeare, and is a literary classic published in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was first premiered in the Court of King James, and received great responses among the people for addressing a very prominent issue prevailing in the Elizabethan society.

'Journal of African American Men' is a collegiate journal that focuses on topics regarding social transformations with respect to civil rights movements in the continents of Africa and African nationals or people of African descent.

'Columbia University Press' is a university press that falls under the Columbia University and is based in New York City. It is an academic press and publishes several journals,

periodicals, and research articles on a plethora of topics.

## II. THE SHAKESPEAREAN SETUP

The engagement of the Englanders with people of different race, colloquially termed as ‘foreigners’ has been both at a material and spiritual level.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, the presence of foreigners signified travelling and voyages to far away countries including Africa, India, and the Americas. But as business with these foreigners increased, the idea of them being of a different race did not quite fit in the same way in the Elizabethan society.

Gradually, the treatment towards these ‘foreigners’ became a ‘material for caricature’ instead of a ‘material for character’ in a society that was as class apart as the Elizabethan England.<sup>6</sup> The foreigners became a scapegoat for the English to blame for the increasing vulgarisation of the culture that prevailed in England. This ‘vulgarisation’ was, very apparently, just a more aggressive term for the reforms and changes that a culturally poignant but homogenous England was going through.

Taking reference to Othello, this came at a point in the world where the English were constantly coming in contact with people of different nationalities, languages, and culture. They realised that establishing colonies in these new countries would be best done through the spread of their language and culture.<sup>7</sup>

This is where we also bring in the religious angle. The Jews and the Muslims come into picture because they formed a threat to the dominant religious culture of Christianity that prevailed in England. This extended to Jews especially, and they were looked down upon immediately. It so happened that when the Jew, or a ‘sodomite’, as they were referred to, came under the radar of the law as being a lawbreaker, their religious identity became a matter of consideration in determining the character of their guilt.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this environment that both these plays came to life. It can be said that they did create quite a stir in the audience, i.e., the people of Elizabethan England, and the plays received mixed responses due to their fluctuating stances and impressions of foreigners and the English themselves. But Shakespeare has maintained his depth of character, as he dove deeper into the world of anti-Semitism, and took it up in the Merchant.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Catherine M.S.Alexander, StanleyWells,*Shakespeare and Race*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS (2000)

<sup>6</sup>*Id.*

<sup>7</sup>RudolphShaw, Rudolph A.Shaw, “*Othello*” and Race Relations in Elizabethan England,1 JOURNAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN 83, 85 (1995)

<sup>8</sup>*Supra* note 1, at 383.

<sup>9</sup>Imtiaz Habib, *Racial Impersonation on the Elizabethan Stage: The Case of Shakespeare Playing Aaron*,20 ROSEMONT PUBLISHING AND PRINTING CORP 17, 20 (2007)

### III. RACIAL TENSIONS IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Keeping in the mind the atmosphere and attitude towards any sort of foreign culture, it is important to see the Merchant of Venice as a work that demonstrates the conflict between a Jew and a Gentile.<sup>10</sup> As discussed before, there is a great conflict between the interpretation of such a play, where both sides have been shown to have equal malice and imperfection in their character.

There are several instances in the story that exemplify this characteristic of racism and provide the readers with an opportunity to see through the delicate fabric that Elizabethan England had woven to project the Christians as superior.

At the early onset of the play, we see that Shylock and Antonio have a certain animosity towards each other, and this is, on the face of it, professional, but as we delve deeper into the narratives, we realise that it is racial as well, more often than not. Shylock is a Jew, and Antonio a Christian, which makes all the difference in the setup of the play. People despise Shylock due of his cunning, and blame his religion for such an attitude, thus not engaging in business with him.

Shylock's monologues have been indicative of his hatred for Christians due to their behaviour towards him and the continuous ridicule that he faces because of him. He talks about the hardships that he faces as a Jew, and tries to give an explanation of his ruthless behaviour. His monologue is a powerful one:

*“To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, 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? 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.”*

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<sup>10</sup>Supra note 1, at 375.

Several instances in the play have demonstrated this hostility. We see the word ‘Christian’ being used a greater number of times than in any other Shakespearean play, or for that matter, any play.<sup>11</sup> This same word has been used to describe every Venetian who is not a Jew, or a person of other religious affiliations. It held more meaning than just someone who is a follower of Christianity. It signified dignity, culture, civility, and was in contrast to the supposed ‘barbaric’ attitude that is the Jewish culture.

Further in the play, we see a small episode wherein Shylock’s Jewish daughter, Jessica, elopes with a Christian, Lorenzo, and becomes a ‘Christian’ after such a union. In this moment, Salerio makes a comment about Jessica’s and Shylock’s blood now being different, since she had been converted to a Christian. This was implied in a degrading sense to Shylock, and it could be said that Jessica’s Jewish blood had been ‘purified’ by Lorenzo’s Christianity. These instances create a certain scepticism towards the real evil that Shakespeare really wanted to demonstrate through the play.

The courtroom scene (Act IV, Scene 1) is the ultimate climax to the racist angle in Merchant of Venice. It brings together all the contentions, arguments, comments made on both the religious communities of Judaism and Christianity. The scene, several scholars have said, includes a series of several Biblical scenes. When it comes to the Christian history of things, the Jew becomes the villain in all cases; he is termed the predator, the sinner, the person of lower blood. This shows itself in the courtroom scene where the decision of the Duke is termed to be the deserved fate of Shylock, considering he is the Jew.<sup>12</sup>

The Duke himself believed that punishing a man such as Shylock would involve converting him to a Christian forcefully. This is probably one of the worst instances of anti-Semitism in the play, as it involves an officer of the law, a person who is supposed to be guarding the law of the land, keeping everyone at equal parity. This is where Shylock completely becomes the victim of a society that accepts little of people who follow a different god, or practise a different faith and culture.

Furthermore, the Duke termed this act as a ‘difference of their spirit’. This stems from yet another Christian-Jewish tradition that has established that Christians will punish to the harshest extent but not kill, while Jews have the intention to kill a person who has wronged.<sup>13</sup> As a result, that again puts the Jews in a bad light, branding them as murderers and barbarians, among other labels already in existence and mentioned previously.

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<sup>11</sup>*Supra* note 1, at 376.

<sup>12</sup>*Supra* note 1, at 385.

<sup>13</sup>*Supra* note 1, at 386.

Finally, Shylock becomes the scapegoat of a system that values its own culture above anything else. He is robbed of his fortunes and the one thing he holds dear: his faith. This, in turn, ensures that readers are left with a dilemma between guilt for the Jew, or the 'sodomite', and the qualities of a good Christian.

#### IV. RACISM IN OTHELLO

While *The Merchant of Venice* dealt with the Jew, *Othello* focuses on a race war that originates between people of a darker skin colour and the 'superior' white Englishers. The story of *Othello* focuses on forbidden love; in England, a love that crosses the boundaries of the reserved white skin colour. In other words, it gives the concept of love a broader interpretation as crossing into the zone of passion that knows no limitations or prejudice.<sup>14</sup>

The character of *Othello*, when looked at from the keyhole of a purely English perspective, is that of a black man but with white principles of nobility and civility. Shakespeare made an effort to try and instigate Elizabethan England in a way that would make them see the outdated religious principles that they were living with.

Again, in *Othello*, there are several instances where the protagonist is subjected to stereotypes and standards that have been affiliated with the African people. *Othello* is often termed as being associated with witchcraft due to his constitution being one of a darker, swarthier man. Several instances in the play itself show us that he is also referred to as the devil himself, sometimes as a grotesque beast. All this stems from the fact that he is a man of a different colour.

*Othello* is referred to as a 'lascivious Moor' by Roderigo (Act I, Scene 1), also directly attacking the sexual promiscuity of the Moor.<sup>15</sup> It is also important to note that although *Othello* faced racial segregation in several ways, he was still very socially active in Venice. He was always under scrutiny for his race, but he realised this much later. Despite the fact that he had achieved so much, he still felt inferior in the English setup.<sup>16</sup>

The play also addresses the possibility of such a man being accepted in the English society. We see that in the play *Barbantio* changes his attitude towards *Othello* as soon as it is revealed to him that he would now be the former's son-in-law. This stems from the mindset of considering people of another race only from a distance and not too intimately.<sup>17</sup> Thus, as a soldier, *Othello* is regarded with admiration and affection by *Barbantio*. But as soon as he

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<sup>14</sup>*Supra* note 6, at 85.

<sup>15</sup>*Supra* note 6, at 86.

<sup>16</sup>*Id.*

<sup>17</sup>*Supra* note 6, at 87.

enters into a more intimate relationship with him, he fears the proximity that he will be at with a person of different cultural affiliation.

The mindset in his case becomes more of a chance, implying that if he was charming and could woo a girl of 'higher blood', he must have done so by an act of witchcraft.

Iago as a character, and the antagonist in the play, is the major racial influence in the play. His mind is filled with a hatred for Othello due to his colour, and this jumps to a whole new level when Othello is made lieutenant, implying that Iago would be in a subordinate position. This feeling cannot wholly be described as jealousy but a mind filled with an ego, refusing to take orders from one who is inferior in terms of race.<sup>18</sup> It is useful to note that the play itself begins with a description of Othello by Iago, and that description is always the dominating driving force behind the plot.<sup>19</sup>

We know that Iago repeatedly, during the course of the play, keeps reminding Othello of his racial differences, and tries to make him see himself as a black, old, uncivilised Moor, as they were termed. In fact, in the whole play, the problem always arises when Othello sees himself in such a light and that is where the seeds of tragedy are sown. Othello's insecurities are played with to such an extent that his entire persona simply dissolves into nothing but a culmination of these thoughts itself. In the last scene, after he kills his wife, Desdemona, and realises his folly, he makes several remarks in such a tragedy, which indicate the hatred and negativity others attached to his colour.

*"All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.*

*'Tis gone.*

*Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!"*

Further, he also says this in the same regard:

*"Her name, that was as fresh*

*As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black*

*As mine own face."*

Desdemona has been Othello's lover and wife in the play, and we find slight traces of her take on Othello's skin colour as well. When Desdemona responds to accusations as to why she married a black man, she accepts that she cannot be impressed by his physical

<sup>18</sup>Kader Mutlu, *Racism in Othello*, 2 JOURNAL OF HISTORY, CULTURE AND ART RESEARCH 134, 138 (2013)

<sup>19</sup>Janet Adelman, *Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello*, 48 SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY 125, 127 (1997)

appearance.<sup>20</sup> She claims, “I saw Othello’s vision in his mind.”

Other characters, too, have blamed Othello’s mad rage when killing Desdemona to the colour of his skin and his race, indicating that men of darker colour are associated with savagery and barbarism.

*“O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!”*

People have accepted the character of Othello half-heartedly; the way in which one wouldn’t be treated if one was of a similar skin colour. This kind of discrimination exists in several other societies, where people view distinct-looking people with a certain level of scepticism and suspicion.

Othello’s last words are the final example of how trampled he has always been of his identity in a society that favours white skin and associates the colour white with all things pure and the colour black with things tainted and foul. This brings us to the realisation that Othello was never, in fact, accepted as a true member of the English society. He was always just professionally respected and recognised, but on a personal, more humane note, he was just about as much of an outsider as any of the other races, irrespective of his reputation or his skills.

This is the sad reality with which Othello ends. Shakespeare, as the creator of this character, has ruefully ended the story by showing the reality of how race destroys a person’s psyche and how it creates such terrible consequences in affecting a person’s surroundings and mind. Othello killed himself despite having all the qualities of being a good Christian, brought his death to himself because of the acts of the other ‘Christians’ around him, and due to his constant noble and naive nature.<sup>21</sup>–

## V. COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

Both the plays have culminated in sending through a very crucial message of the realities of Elizabethan England, very cosmopolitan and civilised but lagging in a certain level of acceptance towards people of different racial and religious backgrounds. Through both the plays, Shakespeare has very candidly showed us this reality.

A very crucial point of difference between the two plays is that it gives us a glimpse into the whole setup of racism from both the victim and the racist. Othello dives into the life of a man who has been ridiculed for his colour and race in all his spheres of life. It victimises the so-

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<sup>20</sup>*Supra* note 17, at 138.

<sup>21</sup>*Supra* note 2, at 450.

called “abomination” in the Christian society. While in the Merchant of Venice, we see a more Christian-centred outlook on people of a different race. Despite the ultimate loss of Shylock, the Christians in the play celebrate in their triumph. There is not an iota of remorse for the plight of a man who has lost his faith, money, and family. In such a way, both plays are in stark contrast and yet similar. One shows the oppressed, with the oppressors in the background, and the other shows the oppressors to be the saviours, and the oppressed the antagonist.

Considering the above, it is noteworthy to question whether Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic and racist. This debate has been going on for a long time now and scholars hold various opinions in this regard. The way in which these stories end shows that the writer has a certain level of understanding of the kind of unfair treatment meted out to the people of different races in England. But the stories generally end in the downfall of such a victim.

One of the reasons for this could be that Shakespeare was also keeping in mind the kind of audience he was dealing with while presenting these plays. There had to be a certain amount of awareness, but at the same time he had to ultimately ensure that he did not make villains out of his own audience. This is what might have driven him to write such endings to his plays.

Another reason, though unlikely in my opinion, could be that somewhere Shakespeare himself was wary of such ‘outsiders’. He regarded them with curiosity but also with suspicion. This attitude could have been one of the reasons why he decided to bring a tragic end to both Shylock and Othello at the end of the plays.

Whatever the reason might be, Shakespeare has successfully highlighted the plight of these minorities in the English society. Although it might be a little exaggerated due to the nature of the subject being a play, it still does not undermine the kind of atmosphere that must have existed in Elizabethan England, under the domination of the ‘superior’ Whites.

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