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The Clash between Christians and Jews in ‘Merchant of Venice’

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Abstract

The clash between Jews and Christians was presented in 16th century. Shakespeare wrote ‘The Merchant of Venice’ around 1598. This clash between the two religions is relevant in society of that time. The problem presented in the play has a universal appeal. It will be unjust to consider the problem of this play a problem between a Jew and Christian only. The main plot of the play is the bond story. In the Trial scene great injustice is done to Shylock. Half of his property is confiscated and he is compelled to become a Christian. Thus the Christian mercy proves more terrible than the Jewish revenge. Shylock angrily tries to state that Jews also bleed if hurt physically and laugh at being tickled in the same way as Christians. Christians think themselves superiors so; they take it granted to disrespect or insult the people who belong to other religion like Jews. But being human, we all are children of one God and we must love and respect all religion because religion is only a way to reach God.

Key words: clash, injustice, confiscated, revenge, granted.

Religion is always a sensitive subject in literature as well as in real life. The clash between Jews and Christians was presented in 16th century. Shakespeare wrote ‘The Merchant of Venice’ around 1598. This clash between the two religions is relevant in society of that time. The problem presented in the play has a universal appeal. It will be unjust to consider the problem of this play a problem between a Jew and Christian only. Apparently, the tension seems to be presenting between Antonio and Shylock because they belong to two religions and have a dislike for each other. But a closer look at the plot shows that it is also a legal issue, whether to go on the written word or to interpret a bond, signed between the two parties, on humanitarian grounds. The main plot of the play is the bond story. As the play opens, we find Antonio in a sad mood. He says:

*“I hold the world but as the world, Gaius;
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one” (Act 1, Scene 1)*

His melancholy seems to convey to us a forecast of his impending tragedy because of his sadness he has lack of interest in life. Antonio is a passive character .He himself does nothing .He is the same at the end as he was in the beginning .So we can call him static character.

Antonio is a highly respected merchant of Venice. All the characters speak highly to him.Gratiano refers to him as “the royal merchant, good Antonio.” Solanio and Salerio think that there is not a kinder gentleman upon the earth than Antonio. Antonio and Shylock are two rich men of Venice. Shylock is a miserly and cruel Jew. Both of them hate each other. Shylock says:

*“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.”* (Act 1, Scene 1)

Antonio has a friend named Bassanio. He has a deep affection for Bassanio. He has always been willing to help his friend with money. Solanio says to Salarino:

*“I think he only loves the world for him.
I pray thee, let us go and find him out.”* (Act 2, Scene 8)

Bassanio loves Portia; a rich lady of Belmont. He wants to go to Belmont to try his luck at winning her hand. But he needs money for that purpose .He comes to Antonio for help. He asks Antonio to lend him three thousand ducats. But Antonio has no cash at that time. All his money is locked up in goods in ships. So Antonio approaches Shylock for a loan of three thousand ducats. Shylock says: “Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio will guarantee it.....” He reminds Antonio and Bassanio that they are the same people who used to call him a dog and now they have come to take a loan from him. They disrespect and humiliate him for being a Jew. But when they are in need they come to him for help even though, they bully upon him because they are Christian. Antonio says:

*“I am as like to call thee so again’
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.”*(Act 1, Scene 3)

Shylock sees this to be an opportunity to take revenge. He lends the money but gets a bond signed by Antonio. According to the bond if Antonio did not return the money by the due date, Shylock will cut one pound of flesh from his body. He says:

*“Be nominated for an equal pound
of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.”*(Act 1, Scene 3)

The signing of the cruel bond deepens the tragic element in the play. Bassanio offers to Shylock to dine with them .But Shylock says that he cannot eat with them .He says that I will buy and sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, but I don’t eat or drink with you, nor pray with you. This shows the caste and untouchability system that was prevalent in the

society in 16th century London. We can see the same in Indian villages even after seventy years of independence. We allow the lower caste to work in our houses but do not allow them to enter in our kitchen. It shows that we believe in untouchability because untouchability and caste system are joined together. This thing was realized by Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedker and he wrote an article on this under title 'Untouchability and Caste System' and he made rule in Indian Constitution and bend untouchability and caste system in India in 1950.

The play has two plots. Let's move to the second plot here we can also see the clash between these two religions. Jessica is Shylock's daughter. She does not like the cruel ways of her father. She feels that her house is like a hell for her. Jessica says to Launcelot: "Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil," (Act 2, Scene 3) She loves a young Christian named Lorenzo. One day she takes a lot of her father's money and runs away with Lorenzo who is a Christian gay. Jessica says:

*"Farewell; and if my fortune be not crost,
I have a father, you a daughter, lost."*(Act 2, Scene 5)

When Shylock comes to know of this, he cries wildly for his daughter and his money. Solanio says to Salarino about shylock,

*"My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the low! my ducats, and my daughter!"*(Act 2, Scene 8)

Shylock is a Jew and a Jewish father wants to marry his daughter with a Jew. Even in real life we see in society that parents want their children to marry within their caste. At one place Shylock says:

*These be the Christian husbands. I have a daughter.
Would any of the stock of Barabbas
Had been her husband, rather than a Christian!* (Act 4, Scene 1)

In the meantime Bassanio reaches Belmont. According to the will of Portia's father, her husband has to be chosen by the choice of caskets. She says to Nerissa:

*"O me, the world
'Choose!' I may neither choose whom I would
Nor refuse whom I dislike ;"* (Act 1, Scene 2)

She will have to marry the man who, out of three caskets of gold, silver and lead, chooses the right casket containing Portia's picture. Other suitors fail to make the right choice. But Bassano chooses the right casket. He wins Portia's hand. At the same time Gratiano marries Nerissa. Gratiano says:

*My eyes, my lord, can look as swift as yours.
You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid.
You loved, I loved."* (Act 3, Sec.2)

In the Fourth Act, the sense of tragedy becomes deeper. Antonio ships are reported wrecked and Shylock demands his pound of flesh. This means a certain death. Now it is his time to take revenge from Antonio because he is Christian. But Antonio does not feel depressed as he is dying for his friend. He says:

*"But little. I am armed and well prepared-
Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well.
Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you,"* (Act 4, Scene 1)

Shylock has filed the case in the Duke's court for justice. The Duke appeals to him to take mercy on Antonio. But the Jew is unmoved. Shylock has reasons for becoming what he has become. His "hath not a Jew eyes" speech in Act 3, Scene 1, presents him as a human who has been so wronged and ill-treated that he has lost faith in all human values. Then Portia, in the guise of a young lawyer, appeals to him passionately. She says:

*"The quality of mercy is not strained. It
Droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed: it
Blesses him that gives and him that takes."* (Act 4, Scene 1)

But even Portia's appeal has no effect on him. As Shylock is sure the judgment will be in his favors, he gets ready with the knife. The judge orders Antonio to bare his chest. This is indeed very tragic. Antonio's speech to Bassanio, which is supposed to be his last speech, is also tragic. He says:

*"But little. I am armed and well prepared-
Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well.
Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you,"* (Act 4, Scene 1)

Portia shows exceptional caliber, to pale even the best of the lawyers in real life. Her tactfulness and smartness are best on display in her role as a lawyer. She realises that Shylock is adamant on executing the bond and that it was in the larger interest of the society that justice should be delivered. Portia through her intelligence solves this riddle. She reads the bond between the lines and catches Shylock in the web of his words that he was so proudly and arrogantly using against Antonio. Portia very patiently states that Shylock has the right to a pound of flesh, and not even an ounce more or less and that not a single drop of blood be dropped. Portia thus traps Shylock in the very wording of the bond. However, because of the wisdom of Portia, Antonio is saved from the clutches of Shylock. The trial scene leaves an intensely tragic impression.

No doubt, Antonio is a kind – hearted, generous, and unselfish. But he suffers from two faults. One is his melancholy; though this cannot really be called a fault. His melancholy is a natural handicap. His real fault is his religious fanaticism. At the end of the trial, when he is given the authority to suggest a punishment for Shylock, he demands that Shylock should become a Christian. He hates Shylock because he is a Jew. Antonio shows deep respect towards the law and expects Duke to be transparent and just because the course of law

should treat all as equals. In the Trial scene great injustice is done to Shylock. Half of his property is confiscated and he is compelled to become a Christian. Thus the Christian mercy proves more terrible than the Jewish revenge. These are the points that present Shylock in a complete human light and make us understand his state of mind even when he is making the most illogical demand of seeking a pound of flesh .Shylock and Portia are two ends of the spectrum but two are equally justifiable human being.

In the end, Shylock gets very angry and retorts on why Christians think that Jews are lesser human beings than them. He is upset because Jews are Differentiated against on racial grounds and he is deeply hurt by this .He says that Jews are humans in the same sense as Christians are human. They have the same body parts like eyes, hands and organs and the same abstract human values like senses etc. so in physical and metaphysical build both are identical.

Shylock angrily tries to state that Jews also bleed if hurt physically and laugh at being tickled in the same way as Christians. Like Christians, Jews will also die if someone gives them poison and so if the Jews are ill-treated by Christians then they will take their revenge against them because when the Jews are like the Christians, the Jews will follow them in taking revenge as well. In practical terms, Shylock is justifying his hatred and revenge through the execution of the bond that he plans to use against Antonio. In conclusion, we can say that stronger or superior tries to suppress weaker and inferior the same thing we see in case of religion. Christians think themselves superiors so; they take it granted to disrespect or insult the people who belong to other religion like Jews. But being human, we all are children of one God and we must love and respect all religion because religion is only a way to reach God.

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