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The Merchant of Venice

*The Merchant of Venice* is a Shakespearian comedy and like his other comedy plays, it creates amusement and comic relief nonetheless. However, this comedy is full of dark humor as well and Shakespeare has tried to give serious messages to the readers as literature or fiction share proximity with reality. Besides, it is a mockery of men and their social relations with one another. It is also a social satire against the lack of morality and hegemony directed at certain groups. This essay views the play as an antisemitic play because Shakespeare has highlighted the religious and racial politics against the Jews in the late 16th century.

In the play Shylock may appear as a villain because of his brutality on Antonio, however, after the close inspection of social and historical context, he is clearly a victim of racial politics. Shylock represents Jews and Shakespeare has portrayed Antonio and Portia as representatives of Christian faith. In the court when the duke summons Shylock, he speaks about his sufferings as a Jew and reveals how he has been discriminated against on the basis of racial discrimination. “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?” (The Merchant of Venice Act 3, Scene 1, lines 1-5).This dialogue signifies the sufferings of the Jewish nation collectively, they were shown a discriminatory attitude by the Christians on the basis of their different faith. Moreover, the disdain replicated by Shylock towards Antonio is suggestive of the former’s anguish over the years when he refuses to eat and pray with Antonio because his faith is threatened by the followers of Christianity and he does not want to talk outside business with them. In the play, he is repeatedly addressed as "Jew" and at the end of the play, when he agrees to convert to Christianity, it symbolizes the irony about the religious exclusivism, practiced in the Elizabethan era. This scenario also shows the lack of religious tolerance for the people belonging to the Jewish faith.

The racial politics against Jews in *The Merchant of Venice* is another significant theme. In the play, Antonio goes to Shylock and borrows money, when he fails to return it, Shylock takes him to the court in hope of getting legal justice. However, when he views that the system is in favor of Antonio because of his religion, he devises his own condition that he wants a “pound of flesh” from the former’s body (Shakespeare, race, and colonialism). This demand presents him as a villain but in reality, he is the victim and he proclaims in the court that they have been unjustly treated for years and he along with his fellow Jews, possesses an equal right of getting justice as well. “Therefore, Jew, Though justice be thy plea, consider this: That in the course of justice none of us/ Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, /And that same prayer doth teach us all to render/ The deeds of mercy” (The Merchant of Venice Act IV, scene I, lines 164–396). In her speech, Portia pinpoints the lack of mercy shown by Shylock and tells him that mercy is a virtue bestowed by God. However, this speech is ironic in nature because the Jewish race is denied mercy by Christians and the latter snubs their rights by shunning them and doing their racial profiling. It can be seen in the speech that she has used the word "Jew" to address him, it also amplifies her discriminatory attitude towards the Jewish race. She reminds the court that the unjust term of "pound of flesh" is set against a resident of the Vatican. This evokes the anti-Semitic practice of Christians in 16th century England. When Antonio goes to Shylock for borrowing money, it suggests that Christians are interested in a bargain with the Jews but they still want to maintain their central position (Holmer and Ozark 56).

*The Merchant of Venice* is based on anti-Semitism and Shakespeare has employed the character of Shylock, to unmask the injustices done to Jews because of their different religious beliefs. Moreover, being a different race than the Christians, they are racially profiled in the play and they are clearly the victims of sectarian violence as Shylock's court speech testifies this account.

Work Cited

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