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Discrimination and Racism in *The Merchant of Venice*- A journey from 16th Century

discrimination to the 21st Century discrimination.

Racism and discrimination are concepts that are embodied into William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. And through a thorough evaluation of the play, we can explore different heights of oppression and communal divisions in the form of verbal aggression and hostility, revenge in the form of violence that arises out of hatred and finally draw parallels with the racism and discrimination faced in today's modern society. Despite the play being set in the 16th century, it acts as an apparatus to question whether we have really changed our approach towards differences in social class, religion and race.

The Merchant of Venice revolves around a Jewish moneylender Shylock, and a Christian Antonio who seal a bond whereby if Antonio fails to repay the loan, he would be forfeited to pay the loan in the form of an equal pound of Antonio's flesh. Though this may sound cruel and inhumane, on deeper analysis, we can understand that in Antonio's financial situation where all his valuables, ventures and investments are at sea, there is very little financial security that Shylock has in exchange for the hefty sum of 3000 venetian ducats that he is lending with no interest. The only security he has in this case is the fear that he can instill into Antonio for the money he is lending. However, as the play progresses, we see that Antonio has not lost but rather Shylock, as we shall explore through the rest of the critical review.

In Act 1 Scene 3 of the play, we come to the realization of the extent of violence and hatred that has been directed towards Shylock, the Jew. He has been rated about his “usances [sic]”, been “spit upon [his] Jewish gabardine”, and been called “cut-throat dog” (Shakespeare 25), among many other things. The play is full of such shrewd anti-Semitism directed towards Shylock by Antonio and the other venetians.

It seems traditional and accepted by Venetian Christians to criticize, physically and mentally abuse Jews. Moreover, Shylock is throughout referred to as ‘the Jew’ or ‘Jew’, rather than by his name throughout the play, and nowhere is it suggested that he has done other than borne it ‘with a patient shrug’ adding that “suff’rance [sic] is the badge of all [his] tribe” (Shakespeare 25).

This kind of verbal and non-verbal hostility are the first steps towards racial hatred and agitation, also known to be intentional, and explicit forms of discrimination. Verbal abuse as iterated in the above paragraphs are extremely reliable indicators of high degree discrimination. And according to research on ‘racism and discrimination’, such hostility is often followed by societal segregation in the form of denial of freedom of speech, employment and other basic rights (Dovidio et al.; Fiske; Talaska et al.)

Similarly, there is racial and colour prejudice (another form of hostility) directed by Portia at the Prince of Morocco (a suitor) by relating his skin colour to the “complexion of a devil” and saying that she would rather “shrive [him] than wive [him]” (Shakespeare 19). A form of discrimination on the basis of skin color also known as colorism or shadeism, which were concepts relatively common during the 16th century and the British monarchy.

These kinds of harsh remarks show the ‘verbal antagonism’ and intolerance displayed by the Christians in the play towards people of different religions, countries, social class and race, which is something consistent throughout the play.

In the book *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, sociologist Joe R. Feagin reflects upon how prolonged racism and discrimination in society over a period of time could become so immense that it could turn into a deeply engrained institution in itself, influencing employment, labour wages, education standards, infant mortality and so on (216-326). In the play as well, the audience is exposed to the differences in the treatment of the Jews and Christians and how the Jews seemed to be rather alienated in a society dominated by Christians.

Alienation also results due to a constant communal division and separation in the 16th century Venetian society based on religious differences. As can be noticed in the play, Jews lived in separate colonies, were assigned specific duties and rather they weren't allowed to indulge in a lot of the activities, meant only for the Christians...

The communal separation between the Jews and Christians, is on the lines of the Dalit untouchability situation in India itself. The untouchability phenomena in India has been brought to stage by several Dalit authors and journalists who have showcased the extent of racism and discrimination people face even today- a so called 'modern thinking and forward moving' India. Dalits have been classified as the untouchables because of their traditionally assigned jobs of being rag-pickers and cleaners, despite them being employed in various other jobs today. They would be forced to live in separate colonies with specific boundaries and were not allowed to eat at places where other people ate (Gidla 105-115).

A prolonged separation of any phenomena or attribute contributes to deeper agitation and hatred with any person towards the other who is instigating the separation in the first place. Shylock in the play becomes more and more committed to his plan of fulfilling the bond as Antonio cannot pay the debts, the same idea of intense hatred and vengeance is repeated. He is applying what years of abuse have taught him. In Act 3 Scene 1, when Solarino asks Shylock what would he do with the pound of flesh, he replies "If a Christian

wrong a Jew, what would 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” (Shakespeare 77). Shylock is firm on feeding his revenge. This is something that can draw parallels with the Hindu-Muslim agitation, quarrels and violence.

One example of such violence were the Gujarat riots in 1992 and 2002. The timeline of events from the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindus in the northern city of Ayodhya in 1992 to the believed to be ‘Muslim Planned’ fire of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in 2002 shows a cycle of revenge and destruction in the form of serious violence.

What do the religious groups get out of riots and attacks? Only revenge and the satisfaction from the inter-religious discrimination and hatred they have been facing from so many years and this is something that is constantly influencing the acts of Shylock and the Christians in the play as well. An example of such hatred is the Shylock’s temptation to cut the pound of Christian flesh in the first place, while the Christians attempt to demean and shatter him in every possible way, as we can see in the below paragraphs of the essay.

Racism can become so intense that it can be engraved within law and court decisions as we can see in the court scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. At the end of the play, Shylock’s bond criteria is rather smartly over turned by the lawyer (Portia dressed as a lawyer) as Shylock is asked to take Antonio’s flesh but spill no blood-is really an identification of a ‘loophole’ in the law rather than a brilliant piece of legal reasoning. Antonio having won the trial, demands that, on top of all the other punishments that include fines on half of Shylock’s goods and the transfer of inheritance to Shylock’s now son in law Lorenzo, Shylock must convert to Christianity. Shylock has effectively lost financially, emotionally and religiously. He can no longer practice his faith as he used to. Shylock is condemned to endure a life of living death from now on. His humble request to be excused from the court because he is

unwell proves that he can no longer fight the consistent prejudice towards him and the prejudice itself throughout the play has forced him into submission.

. Even today, wage gaps and unfair court decisions are prevailing in cases involving Americans and other race such as the Hispanic, and African American in the United States.

The way Shylock has been overturned and demeaned to almost a negligible figure of humanity as Shylock's role almost disappears in the final scenes, shows how the system of 'racism' played a role in throwing 'The Jew Shylock' out of the lives of the Christians with an almost clinical precision.

Anti-Semitism as a concept has existed an extremely long time and is known to have reached its peak when Jews had lost their public functions, and their influence in politics, law and public opinion (Arendt). They were almost dehumanized by the acts performed onto them.

The holocaust in one sense is foreshadowed in *The Merchant of Venice* itself. Moreover, in the court scene of The Merchant of Venice, Shylock was given very little opportunity to express himself, which re-ascertains the lack of public opinion opportunities that were given to Shylock when present in front of the public. Once again signifying oppression by a higher power as the rest of the court including most of the public were entirely Christian and thus greater support towards Antonio than Shylock.

Why? Because Shylock a Jew and Antonio, a Christian.

The types of behavior and the severity of the acts of anti-Semitism clearly shows the extent of how deep and intense discrimination can become, if not controlled or deterred. Harold Bloom, a prolific and highly acclaimed critic of Shakespeare plays has often commented that "One would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (Desmet 248).

In conclusion, I would like to end this review with a quote from the book *Either Civilized or Phobic*- “Discriminations suit animals, not humans. And yet, the unfortunate reality is, it is the humans that discriminate each other on the grounds of imaginary labels, not the animals. This way, animals are more civilized than humans.” (Naskar).

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This essay is a strange mish-mash of a reading of The Merchant of Venice through a filter of racism, where you make some very interesting points, and present-day examples garnished with moralising. In the process, this essay has overshot the word

limit, and become loose. You would have had a better grade with a tighter, focussed piece.