



## MORE HUMANE THAN HUMANS: SHYLOCK

### ABSTRACT

*Human rights are entitled to all human beings regardless of nation, location language, religion or ethnic origin, Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice exemplifies the violation of human rights. Shylock is morally, verbally, and psychologically abused by those more than him. Yet it is Shylock, who turns out to be real Human Being, He is the most Humane in this sense.*

**KEY WORDS** : *Human Rights, Human Beings, Humane, Shylock*

The history of human civilization shows how some humans are more equal than others. And unfortunately there some who are less equal than animals. The demand for liberty, equality and fraternity is a Utopian ideal, yet the need to implement them at the national and international levels is the need of the hour. History bears testimony to the violation of basic human rights. There are a number of literary examples in world literature that voice the agony, the hurt and tears of the suppressed souls. There are instances of exploitation, humiliation and condemnation of the marginalized at the hands of powerful —the ways and means used to violate the human rights of individuals.

Shylock in The Merchant Of Venice has been a victim of exploitation and discrimination that has denied him a life of dignity. The manner in which Shylock is treated in the play clearly shows that Shakespeare wanted to paint the attitude of Christians towards the Jews — of hatred and enmity. The play attempts to evoke sympathy of the audience by showing how Shylock has been unfairly and even illegally robbed of his dues of the bond as well as of his property.

Shylock has inherited from his forefathers his trade of usury. Like others in the business of money-lending, he too has the right to earn money in the market. This has been challenged by Antonio. Antonio hates Shylock not because he is a Jew. but because he is a usurer who charges heavy interest on loans. Shylock too bears a grudge against Antonio as he lends money without charging any interest due to which Shylock has had to bear heavy losses in his money-lending business.

Infact he mocks at Antonio when he conies asking him to lend three thousand ducats.

Shylock reminds Antonio,

Well then, your bond: and let me see...  
 Me thoughts you said, you neither lend nor borrow  
 Upon advantage.

(Act I, Sc III)

Shylock's slyness is exhibited when he traps Antonio with the bond and assures Antonio at the same time that the bond is just a 'merry bond' and not a serious contract. Through Shylock Shakespeare expresses what injuries and insults have been inflicted upon him by Antonio in particular and by Christians in general. The play according to A W Verity is a plea for toleration. Shakespeare holds up the mirror up to truth and reality of his limes when intolerance, persecution and prejudices for the Jews was widespread in the contemporary Elizabethan society.

Shylock's right for equality has also been repeatedly violated. Throughout the play he has been called a devil, or a dog or a cur. Antonio has abused him in public calling him a dog and spitting on his beard and his Jewish dress. Even as he begs a loan from Shylock his intolerance flares up:

I am as like to call thee a dog so  
again. To spit on thee again, to  
spurn thee too.

(Act I Sc III)

The Christians are in no doubt that Shylock is a thorough villain; nine times he is called a devil and it is this hatred which leads him to kill like an animal. Even when Shylock is sharpening his knife to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh, Gratiano rebukes him,

O. be thou damn'd inexorable dog! For thy  
desires Are wolfish, bloody, starved and  
ravenous.

(Act IV Sc I)

Shylock demands for freedom to express his thoughts and ideas, to be treated in the same way as others is evident in his cry against discrimination:

I am Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs. Dimensions, passions?...  
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?

(Act III Sc I)

Shylock had been blamed for being strongly avaricious and revengeful but seems justified as he has been provoked either for his malice or for his greed. Shylock is the shrewdest man who being a Jew his end is "his bargain and well-won thrift". Being a Jew he demands only what by law-is his. He is able to see through the deeds of "Christian men".

Even one's right to follow religious preferences is questioned by the dominant Christian community. Shylock is literally outraged by being forcibly converted into a Christian particularly when he knows that a Shylock is an orthodox Jew and is a great hater of Christians. It is important to note that Antonio is passive everywhere except when he has to express his personal hatred for Shylock. He openly declares his hatred for Shylock and for the Jewish race.

In fact, Antonio proposes in the open court that Shylock should be converted into Christian. He even suggests that half of Shylock's property should be given to himself and the other half should go to Jessica and Lorenzo after Shylock's death. Antonio's verdict seems to outrage the common sense of justice and defies the sacred faith of a human being who should have the liberty to follow any faith that he wants. There are many incidents in the play which reveal the strained relationship between the Christian and the Jewish communities. For example, Jessica eloping with a Christian Lorenzo. though she knows very well her father's hatred for the Christians. Moreover, Lorenzo feels responsible for the elopement and conspires with Jessica to rob Shylock of all his jewels and gold.

Even in the court of law, Portia's interpretation of law and application of the terms of the bond and the final judgement of the Duke all these not only negate Shylock's right for a fair trial but also are unfavorable to him as a human being. Antonio is being favored simply because he is a Christian. The court of law enforces wrong arguments, biased interpretations and prejudiced judgements for the cause of Antonio.

The trial scene of The Merchant Of Venice stands for injustice, selfishness and self-conceit of the Christian community. The trial scene rejects Shylock's right to be protected by law, instead it becomes a humiliating and painful experience for the Jewish community. Shylock lights his own case in the court which consists of all Christians, including the judge and the lawyer. When Shylock demands the forfeiture of the bond against Christians, we realize the justice denied to him and the penalties heaped upon him. He

is guilty because he is a Jew and in the hands of Christians for the sake of Antonio — he becomes a martyr.

Though Shylock is the wronged man, he has remained humane under inhuman circumstances and is ready to give up his rightful bond that Antonio owes him. Looking from a modern perspective, Shylock can be considered to be the voice of the individuals whose fundamental human rights have been taken away.

Thus we can say that Shakespeare's desire to absolve himself of being labelled as anti-semitic, a common medieval and Renaissance theme, has been changed the perspective towards Shylock being a mere villain. The final triumph of the spirit of the mercy, forgiveness and sympathy is embodied in the prayer with earnest petition —

**Forgive us our debts as we. Forgive our debtors.**

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