
Racism in Shakespeare's Plays: The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and The Tempest

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Abstract: This research paper critically explores the representation of racism in William Shakespeare's plays *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, focusing on how racial bias and othering are ingrained in the texts' social, cultural, and linguistic context. Through a postcolonial lens and the perspective of a third-world literature student, the research investigates how Shakespeare navigates racial difference in the framework of Elizabethan ideals, discreetly endorsing or challenging the prevailing discourse of his period. The study investigates how characters such as Shylock, Othello, and Caliban are formed in ways that reflect larger social preconceptions about race, religion, and colonial identity. These people frequently function as outsiders or "others," strengthening the dichotomies of Christian versus Jew, white versus Black, and colonizer versus colonized. By examining the textual intricacies and sociopolitical undercurrents in these plays, the study illustrates how Shakespeare's works continue to connect with modern issues about race and representation. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which Shakespeare was a product of his day rather than a visionary who questioned the norm. The study also discusses how Shakespeare's writing was influenced by the Elizabethan worldview and how current readers, particularly those from formerly colonial countries, might understand his works with new critical insight. Finally, the research intends to broaden our knowledge of racial dynamics in early modern English theatre and highlight the importance of postcolonial critique in Shakespearean studies.

Keywords: Racism; Postcolonial lens; Third World; William Shakespeare; Elizabethan worldview

Introduction: William Shakespeare, the one who, whatever he wrote, became universal, was the playwright for whom opposing racism was not possible during the Elizabethan age in which he wrote. Racism in his works is one of the main points of contention. Race was not

only an issue related to colour, but the issues of religion, commerce, gender, and complexion were all interlinked. Racism in Shakespeare's works is different from that in the works of other writers. Thorough influence of the Elizabethan Age is seen in his works, as he usually wrote to please the colonizers.

As a literature student belonging to a third-world country and looking at racism in Shakespeare's plays from a postcolonial perspective, I argue that Shakespeare has expressed racism through different parameters in his plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare has expressed racism by highlighting the negative stereotypes against the Jews; in *Othello*, through the negative portrayal of an African, heathen lover; and in *The Tempest*, through the portrayal of Caliban as a savage.

Shakespeare's racism is expressed in *The Merchant of Venice* through highlighting the negative European stereotypes against the Jews: *The Merchant of Venice* is a play set to vilify Shylock. Shylock and his vengeful attitude are at the center of the play, yet his character is based on stereotypical ideas of Jews in England at the time. Both Shakespeare and his audience had a set of preconceptions regarding the nature of Jews, which determined not only how Shylock was defined, but also the outcome of his actions, and eventually his fate. Shylock is portrayed as a villain based solely upon his religion and according to the portrayal of Jews in England at the time. This fact prevents the play from being faithful to the true nature of its characters. "Shylock is humiliated, mocked and forced to renounce his religion." (Poulas). This type of portrayal of Shylock makes him the de facto villain of the play and, in turn, makes Antonio the hero. Thus, if Shylock is indeed the villain, it was the Christians who made him. (Poulas)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare adhered to the stereotypical notions of treating Jews on the basis of discrimination. The discrimination of Jews in the play is mirrored perfectly by the audience when they side with Antonio, despite him exhibiting the same villainous traits as Shylock. Shylock is made to represent the Jews, facing the stereotypical notions of the Christians in treating the former. He is referred to as "the Jew" several times in the play and is repeatedly associated with the devil in one form or another. According to John Lyly's *Euphues*, by the time of Shakespeare, the word "Jew" had become such a curse word that it was thought particularly hateful to call another man a Jew. With the portrayal of Shylock having villainous qualities, Shakespeare desired his audience to see Shylock as a typical Jew. Thus, as per Bronstein's view, "Shylock became a term of disapproval," which ultimately explained the discrimination faced by the Jews. (Bronstein) In a way, Shakespeare affirmed some of the Elizabethan Age stereotypes against the Jews without mentioning them. Shakespeare did not choose to write about racism on his own, but it was the scenario during the Elizabethan Age that made him opt for such works. It is believed that there were very few Jews in England, and Shakespeare had probably never met one. During that time, stereotypes were the only way to learn about Jewish people. Mostly, Jews were moneylenders and were seen as greedy. They were also perceived as hateful people. Thus, with all these biases, Shakespeare sketched the character of a stereotypical Jew

in Shylock and indirectly affirmed the stereotypical notions and negative image of the Jews through *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shakespeare, being the representative of the center, wrote a narrative in opposition to the Jews, including the consciousness of the upper class, making the play an antisemitic piece of literature. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a play with colonial colour. In this play, the Jewish community, of which Shylock is the most significant representative, is termed as subaltern. "The Tudor audience was certainly 'used to' antisemitism, and that prejudice is initially aroused both by Shylock's self-caricaturing statement that he will avoid the smell of pork and by his first aside to the audience, where his willingness to charge interest seems to mark an essential moral difference between the Jews and Christians." (Rourke 375) During the time period and location in which this play took place, Jews were not in any way treated the same as Christian citizens. With this, Shakespeare is accused of being unjust to the subaltern or the marginalized in the play. Thus, according to Harold Bloom, "One would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, is nevertheless a profoundly antisemitic work." (Frank)

Shakespeare's racism is expressed in *Othello* through the racial treatment of the titular character, a Black man: *Othello* is a play in which the main character, Othello, a Black man, is the victim of racism. Though the audience may be deceived into believing the play to be against racism because it features a Black man as a successful military general, in reality, it ultimately reinforces racial prejudices. Othello is treated as a savage who cannot control his emotions. From beginning to end, the protagonist is referred to with various racial slurs. He is shown as an outsider, someone different from the white community. "I hate the Moor," "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe," and "your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" (Shakespeare, *Othello*) are some of the statements that Iago uses to describe Othello. Iago constantly uses animalistic metaphors to degrade Othello. Although Othello is shown to have achieved a high rank in a white-dominated society, he is still discriminated against and viewed as inferior. This shows that even the highest level of accomplishment cannot erase racial prejudices. Othello is valued for his utility in war, but he is not accepted as an equal in society.

In the play, Shakespeare portrays Othello as being noble and well-spoken in the beginning. However, as the play progresses, Othello becomes more irrational and emotional, fitting into the racial stereotypes associated with Black men. He is shown to be easily manipulated by Iago and eventually becomes violent and jealous, murdering his innocent wife, Desdemona. This transformation plays into the stereotype of the dangerous and uncontrollable Black man. Therefore, rather than challenging the racist attitudes of the time, Shakespeare reinforces them by showing that Othello's racial identity ultimately leads to his downfall.

Moreover, Othello is never allowed to fully integrate into Venetian society. Despite his service and loyalty, he is always the “other.” The characters around him, especially Iago and Brabantio, never see him as an equal. They view his relationship with Desdemona as unnatural because of his race. Even Desdemona’s father believes that she could not have fallen in love with Othello without being bewitched. These ideas reflect the racist mindset of the Elizabethan era, which could not accept a Black man as a romantic or noble figure.

Shakespeare’s representation of Othello can be seen as a reflection of the racial anxieties of his time. While some may argue that Shakespeare gives Othello dignity and depth, the overall narrative arc confirms the stereotype that a Black man cannot function within a civilized, white society. He is brought down not just by Iago’s deceit, but by his inability to rise above the racial identity imposed on him. In this sense, the play ultimately affirms the racist worldview it seems to critique.

Shakespeare’s racism is expressed in *The Tempest* through the portrayal of Caliban as a savage: Shakespeare portrays Caliban as a representative of the class of slaves, describing their condition as being suppressed. Caliban is considered or referred to as “other” by many critics. He is the slave of Prospero, and thus through Prospero’s ownership, Shakespeare views Caliban as a lesser being. Caliban has become a cultural icon, a means and touchstone of the culture from which he derives and of those cultures which have appropriated him. Caliban is the slave of Prospero, who treats him as per his own desires and convenience. In this play, slaves are treated as dirt, which shows the upper-class mentality of treating the oppressed. Slavery is considered as the outcome of racial difference, which is shown in the play through the portrayal of Caliban, where he, being the deformed child of Sycorax, is treated as a slave.

Shakespeare portrays Caliban as a savage beast in need of being civilized. Caliban envisions the way Western civilization pictured the Caribbean at the time. It is a play about colonialism that deals with the relation between the colonizer and the colonized. Prospero is sketched as the one representing the colonizer that made Caliban the victim of colonial rule and exploitation. Caliban, being considered a savage and always belonging to the oppressed class, tries to come out of the margins. He learns the language from Prospero, which shows his desire to stand beside the civilized. Being a postcolonial reader, the colonizing characters of the play are observed as committing “epistemic violence” (Spivak), projecting Eurocentric knowledge on Caliban, who can be seen as an embodiment of the third world countries. Thus, in the eyes of the colonizers, the native inhabitants are always barbarians.

Caliban stands as a force that strikes back at the colonizer in order to resist the suppression. He is the darkness that contrasts sharply with Prospero, who represents the light of civilization. After he learns how to use the language, he says that the advantage of it is that he knows how to curse the colonizer. He uses the weapon given by Prospero to rebuke and curse him for what he has done to Caliban and his mother. His attempt to rape Miranda

can also be understood in the same way. Thus, Caliban represents the colonized, who at the same time counters the colonizers with what has been given to the colonized.

Caliban also resists Prospero's attempt to make him more docile. If Prospero represents the colonizer from the civilized world, Caliban is seen as a savage beast, becoming the victim of colonial rule and exploitation. Prospero came to the island where Caliban and his mother were dwelling and forcefully took them. He teaches Caliban his language because those "others" are much needed to define the "self" of the colonizer. Caliban remains pure-natured, not corrupted by the influence of civilization. He resists becoming more docile and thus opposes the civilized way of converting "others" for one's own sake.

Conclusion: Among all the plays of Shakespeare that are discussed, one can observe that racial despair becomes a secular descendant of spiritual despair for the characters, namely Shylock portraying the Jews, Othello, and Caliban. They are treated as "the other" by their oppressors. Decisions for them are taken by those who are at the center, and because of this, they are merely portrayed as puppets. Race is, and has always been, a highly volatile question, and one's view of it depends at least partly on which aspect has been important to one in his or her own life and work.

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