

Jews – Victims of Racial Anti-Semitism: A Comparison of Shakespeare’s ‘Shylock’ and Esther David’s ‘Reuben David’

S. Karthik

Teaching cum Research Assistant
Department of English School of social Sciences
VIT University
Vellore-14, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract: Racial anti-Semitism is the preconception against Jews as an indigenous group that is known to exist since the medieval times. This prejudice is reflected in creative literature as well. Are the Jews really prototypes like ‘Shylock’ or victims of racial anti-Semitism? An exhaustive reading of literary genres reveals that the Jews have been projected negatively for centuries together. Taking this into account, the present paper attempts to compare the two Jewish characters – Shylock and Reuben David to argue that the Jews are not what literature or specific class of people portrays them to be but are in fact victims of racial anti-Semitism. And to achieve this feat, two prominent literary works – The Merchant of Venice and My Father’s Zoo have been analyzed using the deconstruction theory. The analysis shatters the preconceived notion about the Jewish community and brings to the vanguard the reasons behind the preconception and proves to a great extent them being ‘victims’ of racial anti-Semitism.

Keywords - Anti-Judaism, Racial anti-Semitism, Deconstruction, Binary opposition, Stereotype.

I. INTRODUCTION

Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist, was the one who coined the term “anti-Semitism” in the year 1879. The meaning of anti-Semitism is intolerance or hatred towards the Jews. David Nirenberg in his book “Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition” discusses the difference between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism. He states that the only difference between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism is Anti-Semitism aims at persecuting the Jews whereas Anti-Judaism tries to kill the very idea of Judaism. The holocaust in history stands as a perfect example for anti-Semitism, where the European Jews were murdered by the Nazis in Germany, which took place between 1933 and 1945. The two terms ‘Anti-Judaism’ and ‘Racial anti-Semitism’ were in vogue interchangeably till the end of the Second World War. But most of the works after 1945 have treated these two terms separately. While ‘anti-Judaism’ refers to the Christian aversion to the Jewish religion, the term ‘racial anti-Semitism’ denotes the aversion towards the Jews as a racial or ethnic group. Anti-Semitism, according to Léon Poliakov (1996), was “the ineradicable feelings and resentments of the Christian West were to be expressed thereafter in a new vocabulary” (194). Guillaumin ([1972] 2002) too agrees with the views of Poliakov and states that “Anti-Semitism succeeds to anti-Judaism, race succeeds to religion. A difference in race is assumed in lieu of the constatation of a religious difference” (10). So, we see that though there is a debacle over the terms, yet the underlying meaning is almost the same in them. For our research purpose, we would not treat these two terms separately since we would mostly deal with how the Jews have been projected in literary works as well as in real life. Rather we would use these two terms without segregation to validate our objective.

II. RACIAL ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism was first coined in the 1879 and was compounded with ‘racial’ anti-Semitism and refers to all types of historical and contemporary hatred of the Jews mostly by the Christian world. It is also known by the terms Judenhass or Judaeophobia. This hatred can be noticed ever since the dawn of Christianity because the Christians held the Jews responsible for the death of Jesus. Since then the Jews have become stereotypes and individual Jews were not judged on their merits or nature but were seen on the whole as greedy, money-grubbing, lazy, devilish, quarrelsome and over-sexed. We notice this Jew stereotype in Shakespeare’s Shylock where Jew-hatred is visibly noticed.

Taking into consideration the above terminologies and views regarding the Jewish race, the present paper attempts to make a comparative study between two literary characters – ‘Shylock’ from William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice and ‘Esther David’ from My Father’s Zoo.

III. JEWISH REFERENCES IN INDIAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH

Meera Mahadevan, is the first Indian Bene Israel Writer in the Indian English Literature. She projected the Jewish Community through her novel Shulamith published in 1975. Esther David is also a contemporary Indian Bene Israel Jewish writer. She resides in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Her father Reuben David built a zoo in Ahmedabad, Hill Garden Zoo. Later it was

altered as Kamala Nehru Zoological Garden. Her mother Sarah worked as a school teacher. She graduated in Fine Arts and Art History in Maharaja Sayajirao, University of Baroda. She became skilled at sculpting and Art history from Sankho Chaudhary, a sculptor. She has experience in different fields such as a Professor, Art Critic, Columnist, and an Editor. Her works on literature range from genres like novels to short stories. Her novels portray the lives of Bene Israel Jews who are residing in Ahmedabad. She was honored with Sahitya Academy Award for her novel *The Book of Rachel* in the year 2010.

The other work that has been taken for comparison with the novel *My Father's Zoo* is *The Merchant of Venice* where there is a negative portrayal of the Jews through the character of Shylock. It is said that the great playwright William Shakespeare wrote the play *The Merchant of Venice* around the 16th Century. This play falls under the category of early life of his writing career. Shakespeare's critics' point out that the play would have been written by the author between 1595 and 1596. Some scholars comment that the play would have been written after *Romeo Juliet* and before *Henry IV: Part II*.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims at deconstructing a strongly held stereotypical, pessimistic and characteristic feature of Jews represented through the literary character of Shylock and comparing it with a positively portrayed literary Jewish character of Reuben David.

V. BACKGROUND

Elizabethans of Shakespeare's age were tremendously Anti-Semitic. This was the reason Shakespeare used a plot where it had Anti-Semitism as the crux of the play which had great appeal and seized the audience's attention and response.

The play *The Merchant of Venice* was woven by Shakespeare with two different sources. Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* was the first source where the author portrayed Jews as monsters. The second source, he obtained from real life incident of Dr. Lopez. Dr. Lopez was the physician of Queen Elizabeth. He was blamed that he endeavored to poison the Queen. This occurrence adjoined to the Elizabethans' Semitism. After this confrontation, Elizabethans were not pleased or kind towards the Jews. Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* projected the Elizabethans' hatred for the Jewish people. The word 'Lopez' means wolf in Spanish. Shakespeare has painted the Jews as dogs in the play. The 16th century audience never considered abuse of language against a sect of people as immoral and Shakespeare intentionally uses abusive language to satisfy the proletariat audience. But in 21st century the perspective of the people changed because of the World War II. Nazis and Adolph Hitler treated the Jewish people in incredible, merciless and intolerable ways. Many Jewish people were killed by them.

On the other hand, Esther David has portrayed her father as a main character in the novel *My Father's Zoo*. She has acknowledged in her novel that Mala Deal has inspired her to write the novel and edit it. She dedicates this book to her father Reuben David and her mother Sarah. She belongs to Bene Israel Jewish community. She has written many novels about her community. Most of her novels dealt the way how the Bene Israel people are treated in the country and the way how they overcome from the problems. Everyone has the interest to read the stories of birds and animals in their childhood. In the same way, Esther David too had love for wildlife; birds and animals were part of her life because her father had a zoo in Ahmedabad. Before he constructed the zoo, he was very much acquainted with animals at home. Because of the exposure to animal and wildlife from her childhood she understood the animals and bird's behavior and their affection towards her father. She has written the novel on the basis of her memories of her father and his affection towards the animals and birds. Esther David's father Reuben David was awarded the Padmashree in the year 1975 by the government of India.

VI. STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATION OF JEWISH CHARACTERS IN DIFFERENT LITERARY WORKS

Jews have been given an impression for long in some of the early literary texts as toxic, demonic, cruel and beastly in character. This prejudiced portrayal of Jews has become perpetual and stereotyped in society. As a result, this clichéd and long held views about Jews have ruined their original identity. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Prioress character tells a story that a Christian devoted child has been murdered by the Jews. Similarly, in Charles Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*, Fagin is tagged as a "villain Jew" by the author.

VII. DECONSTRUCTION

"rules for reading, interpretation, and writing."
– Jacques Derrida. (Dobie 149)

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is the developer of the concept of Deconstruction in the field of Literary Criticism through his lecture on "Structure, Sign and Play in Human Sciences" at John Hopkin University. This lecture laid the foundation and principles for Deconstruction by highlighting the short coming in Structuralism. In 1967, his work "Of Grammatology" put forward the concepts of Deconstruction. The literary perspective of Deconstruction calls for destructing the long held stereotypical ideas, signs or concepts in the literary texts. Deconstruction puts forward the unstable nature of language, meaning and any strong stereotypical assumptions of the literary texts. Deconstruction from seventeenth century has overturned the principles or centers that have been providing basic beliefs, truths and meaning.

VIII. BINARY OPPOSITION

Binary Opposition is one of the key terms in Deconstruction. Binary Opposition can be defined as “Paired opposites” in which the first named is the dominant figure—e.g., male/female, white/black, making the dichotomy an evaluative hierarchy. Such opposing elements are always unstable, however, because they can be inverted. The term is important to structuralists and deconstructionists.” (Dobie 347). Jacques Derrida defines Binary Opposition as “violent hierarchy where one of the two terms governs the other” (Derrida 41). It shows how the difference make meaning through examining the opposite of a term or word and not only that, it extends to the reversal of negative/opposite term of the positive to become as center to draw different meanings and bring objectivity in interpretation and deconstructing the center in a text/word/concept/meaning. The Binary Opposition is also called Dyadic pairs which are paired opposites for example, white/black and good/bad.

In this study, the binary opposition is employed to break the cliché of Jews as destructive, sinner, ruffian and fiend. This generalization and under-privileging of Jews is compared and contrasted between two literary Jewish characters to break the label of Jews as wicked and merciless. In the play *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, Antonio is portrayed as positive and a good Christian whereas Shylock is portrayed as a loan shark, greedy and a jealous Jew. This strongly held stereotyped belief about Jews as very orthodox, greedy and jealous has been reversed and deconstructed by us by contrasting it with Reuben David a Jewish character in *My Father's Zoo* where Reuben David is projected as kind, compassionate and generous to the animals and human beings.

Abbreviations Used:

MTZ My Father's Zoo
MV The Merchant of Venice

(1) Shakespeare's Shylock character

Shakespeare has portrayed Shylock as the vengeful and 'inhuman' character in his play *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare represents Shylock as a Jew and Antonio as a Christian. Shylock is a money lender. He lends money to the poor people with high interest, whereas Antonio lends money to the poor people with zero interest. Shylock holds vengeance against Antonio because of the latter's constant interruption in his business as it brings loss to his business. At this juncture, Antonio's friend Basanio needs money to woo his lady Portia and win her hand in marriage. Antonio borrows money from the loan shark Shylock. Shylock uses this situation to trap Antonio and take cruel vengeance upon Antonio. He lays down a condition that if Antonio fails to repay his debt to Shylock he will extract a pound of the latter's flesh. Shakespeare describes the character of Shylock, the Jew as cruel and greedy because of the political and social belief of people that prevailed at that time. The historical, political and economic situation of the then Jews made them greedy for money because they had no stable place or land to stay in those days. They roamed from one place to another to survive. In the following quote the author clearly portrays Shylock as a greedy person,

If you repay me not on such day a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me. (MV 17)

Antonio fails to repay his debt to Shylock. So, Shylock sues Antonio in the court for justice in Venice. His motivate to take revenge was strong. The Duke asked Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio but Shylock spoke emotionally and did not accept the Duke's advice. He was strong and determined in his opinion of taking a pound of flesh from Antonio. Shylock says:

Why sweat they under burthens? Let their beds
Be made as soft as yours and let their palates
Be season'd with such viands: You will answer
The slaves are ours. So do I answer you.
The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,
Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.
If you deny me, fie upon your law,
There is no force in the decrees of Venice;
I stand for judgment: answer. Shall I have it? (MV 64)

This speech showed shylock's personal motive for revenge. It embodied a strong displeasure with the anti-Semitism of the time.

Shakespeare proved that Shylock was a cruel figure in this play. Shylock refused to get the double repayment and was bent upon extracting a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio also was ready to pay the double payment. This incident clearly shows that the dramatist was strongly influenced by the stoutly held perspective of Jews being cruel, cunning, greedy and merciless

people and the dramatist has portrayed Shylock in such a way that could please his European audience who shared the same perspective.

To deconstruct this negative stereotype of Jew, the researcher has interpreted and compared the character of Reuben David who is kind, generous, humanly and loving.

(2) Esther David's 'Reuben David' Character

Esther David has portrayed the Jews as kind, affectionate and warm human beings. Esther David points out that her father was a kind and handsome person. Reuben David worked with animals in his home before creating the zoo. "He had kennels at his home where he kept dogs. He was also a veterinary doctor and people brought their sick dogs to him. It is said that if a sick dog came to him, he always cured it, unless it was near to death" (MFZ 1). Reuben's mother realized that her son had a way with the dogs when he was thirteen years old. Prince was a bull-terrier. His mother noticed that whenever he was at home, Prince was like his shadow. He was very sensitive towards his father's moods. They were devoted to each other. Every morning Prince wanted to follow him to school but he stopped him. Prince was at the door waiting for him if he came late in the afternoon but refused to greet him. He then spoke to him lovingly and apologized for being late. Prince slept at his feet at night. He noticed that Prince was fifteen years old and he was not as quick as before but ate well. One summer afternoon he fell sick; he did not eat. He realized that Prince was dying of Rabies. Prince did not want to enter the house because he did not like to harm others. The same night Prince died. Father took him to the house and laid him on his pillow. The entire family surrounded him and cried.

When Reuben grew up his interest had changed. He became interested in body building and guns. He continued to care for the birds and animals at home. Once he heard the news that a panther was in the nearby forest. He planned to shoot it from a machan, but it did not appear. One early morning he was walking in the forest. Suddenly he felt that a big animal was stalking him. He was afraid at that time. Then he saw the panther standing near to him. He looked at its eyes and he imitated the panther's roar. The panther was confused. It looked at her father's eyes and again went back to the forest. That magic of communication came to an end when he heard a shot. The next moment he saw that the same panther lying dead at his feet. Esther David quoted, "Father was sad because when he had looked into the panther's eyes, a certain understanding had been established between him and the animal. He did not want kill the animal" (MFZ 6). One of his friend's shot him because he misunderstood that the panther was about to attack him. Reuben said, "I strongly believe that we are outgrowing the balance of nature and in time to come, we will be left to eat one another" (MFZ 7). This shows the character of Reuben David, though he is a Jew, he is not cruel but understands that man has interrupted and devastated the cycle of nature and it's going to bring destruction to mankind.

Montu, a lion was growing up at a rapid pace in the hill garden zoo. One day he rushed to greet his master but at that time he fell down. He got angry and took a stick and spanked him. The lion took the punishment silently. The lion knew the master's mind completely. His master apologized to him immediately. He felt bad about the lion because he lost his normal instincts. To pacify his master, he sat down near to him and licked his head instead of saying sorry. Reuben cried for punishing that lion and he did not know how to say sorry to Montu. He pointed, "When man Hunts animals, he calls it sport. But, when animals hunt men, we call it ferocity and brand the animal as a man-eater." (MFZ 108) Here we see that Reuben David corrects his mistakes of treating a lion badly it shows that even Jews can be kind and reflective by nature.

Reuben David lost his voice at the age of fifty-seven after a throat operation. Then he used electric-larynx voice machine to communicate with others. In that machine, his voice seemed to be soft. The animals communicated with him easily because they loved him.

X. CONCLUSION

The study has emphasized and portrayed the projection of two different perspectives or portrayal of Jewish characters in literature. The pre-ordained roles or stereotype of the Jewish character as rude, cruel and greedy is broken down by contrasting the Jewish character of Reuben David in a positive light as compared to Shylock's in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. This study has deconstructed the long-held prejudice about Jews and their nature as projected by the aristocratic and bureaucratic population. It has also proved to a great extent of them being 'victims' of racial anti-Semitism.

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