



Representation of Race in Four Shakespearean Plays: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract:

The question of race is one of the many points of contention in Shakespeare's oeuvre. In Elizabethan England the word 'race' did not carry the overwhelming connotation of colour. Rather, issues of religion, commerce, gender and complexion were all interlinked.

In Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare reinforces racial stereotypes. Aaron's blackness is associated with evil, maliciousness and barbarity. The emerging anxiety in the Renaissance imagination about power structures outside Europe is seen in the figure of Tamora- queen of the Goths.

Othello, the title character of Shakespeare's celebrated play, reverses the trend to some extent. He is a black-skinned moor; yet his military skill takes him to the helm of Venetian society. Though he kills Desdemona at the end of the play, the moor manages to retain our sympathy to a large extent.

The 'triple turn'd whore' of popular imagination, Cleopatra, in Shakespeare's play, overturns some of the lasciviousness associated with her character. The queen of Egypt is a strongly individualised character, who does not conform to stereotypes of race, but commands her own feelings and emotions.

The economic concerns of The Merchant of Venice colour the portrait of the Jew, Shylock. The play, often seen as anti-Semitic, also asserts that the difference between the Jew and the Christian is merely superficial.

Thus, Shakespeare's idea of race presents an interesting development: it moves from the prejudiced picture of Aaron to a more sympathetic portrayal of the racial 'other' in the figures of Othello, Cleopatra and Shylock. The paper intends to trace this development,

and thus understand how the finer nuances of race serve to animate the world of Shakespearean drama.

Key words: Race, Colour, Commerce, Gender, Equations of Power.

The Renaissance that swept across Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries profoundly affected the imagination of the contemporary individual. The unprecedented advancement of learning led to the broadening of mental horizons, and the ideal Humanist looked both to the west and the east to make sense of the world around him. However, the state of affairs in England was not entirely happy. An explosion of population led to poverty, large-scale unemployment, and a fear of scarcity of space on the small island. In addition, there was a pressing need for newer markets for British products. These factors fuelled colonial ventures. The Age of Discovery, as the Renaissance was also known, saw explorers move westwards to America and beyond. This broadened the geographical expanse of the 'Known world'. In addition to these expeditions, the Europeans entered into commercial, diplomatic and social engagements with the Turks and Moors of the Muslim Empire. The non-Christian people of the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Mediterranean and Northern Africa forged sustained ties with the Britons. Experiences of interaction with other cultures gave rise to an anxiety in the English sensibility—the presence of power structures outside the purview of their known world. As Christian England attempted to 'shape' these 'other' people in their image, racism, as we understand the word today, was born. English constructions of 'Moor', 'Blackamoor' or 'Negro' refer not only to differentiations of race or religion but, more importantly, refer to constructions of power and colonization.

There was an important difference in European attempts to dominate over American Indians and those over the non-Christian races of east Europe and the Mediterranean

region. In North America, the Europeans were presented with, more or less, an easy task of colonization as there was no empire which could counter them from the point of view of military might. However, the dominance of the Ottoman Empire in east Europe and the Mediterranean region was absolute. It was precisely because Muslims were outside the purview of possible colonial domination that Europeans demonized the image of the Muslim. Nabil Matar suggests in his work *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* that the English were unable to situate the Muslims conveniently in their world of colonial enterprise. Unable to defeat them, as they had defeated the American Indian natives, the Englishmen borrowed discourses of difference from their encounter with the American Indians (Matar 1999, 15). In a frenzy of racism and bigotry that dominated the literature and culture of this period, the Turk and the Moor were constructed as racial 'others'. Plays and pageants reinforced the image of the Turk as cruel, tyrannical and deceitful. The Moor was seen as one possessing uncontrollable sexual lust and irrational emotional overdrives, vengeful in nature and of superstitious religious belief. The 'other' was, to put it differently, all that the 'self' was not. These constructions were usually independent of, and often ran contrary to, empirical evidence. The non-European non-Christian races were, thus, seen not in the light of experience, but in terms of prejudiced cultural moulds and imaginary constructions.

In her essay, 'Racial and Religious Difference', Ania Loomba suggests that the social injustice accompanying the belief in the inherent difference in human beings, has its origins in Spain (Loomba 2000, 208). The official expulsion of Jews and Moors from the country, respectively in 1492 and 1502, led to the grounding of this ideology in that country. Religious difference became an excuse for discrimination in political and economic life against the 'different' Jews and Moors. These prejudices struck such deep roots in the psyche of

the people that superficial differences were taken to be markers of inner essence of character. Thus, an ‘impurity’ of blood, that is, a belief in Judaism or Islam, stood for moral depravity and an inherently evil character. Loomba further suggests that the Spanish obsession with purity of blood was mirrored in Protestant England in an obsession with purity of faith. Even religious conversions to the ‘pure’ faith were viewed with askance, as these conversions were rather unstable. Characters like Jessica in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, who converts to Christianity as a result of her romantic engagement with a Christian man, suggest the possibility of such conversions.

Is ‘blackness’, then, only skin-deep? Or, is it an indelible, inherent character trait? It appears that the Renaissance imagination was tilted to the latter belief. Thomas More’s *Utopia* provides us with a notable example. In this well-known work, More applies the colonial discourse to the Indians of North America. He argues for colonizing, dispossessing and, ultimately, converting them. Nabil Matar, in his work *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* points out that as More awaited execution two decades after writing this work, his chief anxiety was not his imminent loss of life. Rather, it was about ‘the formidable success of the Turks in conquering Christian lands in Central Europe and, still more menacing, their success in converting the populations to Islam’ (Matar 1999, 8). Popular travelogues of the time, like Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* and Richard Eden’s *The History of Travayle in the West and East Indies*, popularized exotic pictures of faraway lands and people. The accounts were inaccurate, and often supplemented by the imagination of the authors. Expansions in the New World led to contacts with other civilizations. The savage races, widely different from the ideal entrusted in Humanist thought, were held in contempt. In fact, an inferior ‘other’ was essential in establishing the

superiority of the 'self'. The essence of 'Englishness' could be defined by defining what lay outside.

The older feudal structure in social hierarchy had broken down. Economic status, rather than birth, was becoming the dominant factor in determining social status. However, social hierarchisation was never completely eliminated. Rather, it found a new form of representation- racial prejudice. The non-members of the dominant white European group found places only in the lower rungs of society. This resulted in their association with the kinds of business that were considered too low for the landed gentry- for instance, money lending. Such vocations exerted tremendous influence on the mercantile economy. This, in a sense, increased their importance in society. All members of society, rich or poor, usually availed of the services of the money lender at some time or the other. So, figures like the usurer were both hated and necessary to hold the fabric of society together. The 'other' thus threatened to disturb established social order. Such dominance of the 'other' in the economic sphere only deepened the schisms between races. The influx of outsiders into the New Promised Land, set aside by God for Englishmen, rendered the land 'poorer'.

In the specific context of theatre, the premise of race is particularly interesting. Mystery, miracle and morality plays of the medieval stage were heavily dependent on allegory. In such settings, 'black' usually connoted associations of grotesqueness and evil. Again, all the roles were, obviously, assayed by white European actors. Thus, the 'insider' played the 'outsider'. Racial 'others' in Shakespeare like Shylock, Jessica, Othello or Cleopatra represented an alien culture on stage. Yet, they were impersonated by familiar actors.

In this paper the writer seeks to prove that Shakespeare's consciousness of race advanced along with his maturity as a dramatist. The playwright grew up in the social milieu of the Elizabethan Age, where the Jew, the Moor or any other non-white non-European race was seen as an aberration

of the Humanist ideal of the Renaissance. It is but natural that his early work should bear the stamp of this prejudiced outlook. We find evidence of this in his early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. The figure of the racial 'other' in this play, Aaron, has little to command the reader's sympathy on his side. Though we feel that the prejudice against him, based on the grounds of race per se, is unjustified; we also realize that he is a hardened criminal and the treatment that he receives is, in some sense, a just punishment. The queen of the Goths, Tamora, too cannot claim to be only a victim of racial prejudice. Shakespeare seems to attest that 'blackness' is, indeed, not merely skin-deep but an essential character trait. With greater exposure to the world around him, Shakespeare, slowly but surely, discarded this lopsided view of other races. He realized that differences of other racial groups from white Europeans were limited to non-essential physical attributes. In two representative plays from his later corpus, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*, we find a far more sympathetic view of the racial 'other'. The figures of Cleopatra and Othello are not limited to being the author's puppet, whose qualities and inadequacies are judged solely by the yardstick of their racial identity. Rather, the characterization is far more nuanced. Cleopatra and Othello transcend their Egyptian and Moorish identity, and appear in front of us as essentially human, with their fair share of virtues and vices. The reader is challenged to outgrow his conditioned response to racial difference (where he entirely rejects or wholly supports the prejudice) and analyze the subtleties of their human nature. The 'different' in these plays cannot be classified into water-tight compartmentalization of 'good' or 'bad'. The final play analyzed in this paper, *The Merchant of Venice*, helps us understand Shakespeare's position on race even better. In the figure of Shylock, the playwright seems to have entirely succeeded in discarding his earlier prejudiced outlook. While Shylock is a pitiless businessman with an eye for maximizing profit, we also acknowledge that he is more sinned against than

sinning. By the end of the play, the dichotomy of merciful Christian and heartless Jew collapses entirely. In the famous Trial Scene, the playwright exposes the hypocrisy of the Christian lot, who are far from practicing the virtue of mercy that they so earnestly preach. As discussed earlier, the context of theatrical performance adds a further dimension to the interplay of 'self' and 'other'. Yet, a closer look at the plays, one which this paper intends, proves to us that this interplay does not originate in performance, but is deep-seated within the schemes of the plays themselves.

Titus Andronicus represents Shakespeare's engagement with the issue of race in his early career. The play ostensibly deals with the life of the Roman hero Titus Andronicus and the rivalry between the Romans and the Goths surrounding him. Issues of race are implicit, primarily in the characterization of Aaron and Tamora.

Aaron, the moor, seems to typify black barbarism and malignity. Invectives against his skin colour litter the play. He is seen as a 'ravenous tiger' who, according to Lucius, is the 'chief instigator' of the tragedy (Act V, Scene iii). Interestingly, Aaron does not really attempt to defend himself against these allegations. In fact, he proudly puts forward a catalogue of crimes. There has not been a day when he has not indulged in crime,

"As kill a man, or else device his death;
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;
Accuse some innocent and forswear myself;
Set deadly enmity between two friends..."

(V. i. 128-131)

Ania Loomba in her book *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* argues that in the Renaissance consciousness, the Arab moors, having a lighter skin colour, were associated with some cultural and religious heritage. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africans are '...associated with a lack of religion and culture, and painted as low-born' (Loomba 2002, 81). This latter stereotype was in consonance with the fast-emerging slave

trade that was to sustain the Empire for centuries. Portraying the dark-skinned individual as barely human was necessary to provide some validation to the slave trade in the minds of the 'superior' whites.

Such stereotypes afflict Aaron as well. Without any cultural lineage, he must assert his identity only in terms of what the 'civilized' Romans take him for. As the above catalogue suggests, his bestiality is the only means by which he can define himself in the white society. Aaron's incorporation into the white society is also seen in the manner of his treatment of Lavinia. He instructs Chiron and Demetrius to rape her, and cut off her tongue and limbs. This reminds the reader of the Philomel myth. In Ovid's version, Philomel could still reveal the identity of her abuser in a tapestry. Aaron leaves nothing to chance, and decides that Lavinia must lose her hands as well. He not only understands the myth, but is able to adapt it to his own use. Yet, in the politics of race, he must be seen as an outsider in the Roman society.

Aaron is not really the 'chief instigator' of the numerous acts of violence in the play. His primary motive is not unqualified malignity, but a desire to rise above the station that the white society has reserved for him. His queen Tamora rises in prominence by marrying the Roman emperor Saturninus. Aaron must ensure his importance for Tamora in order to rise in society. The most certain means by which he can achieve this is by actively participating in her revenge on the Romans. This concern drives all the acts of violence that Aaron perpetrates. Further, the first instance of violence, which sets in motion the chain of massacre, is not devised by him, but by Titus and Lucius. Tamora's eldest son Alarbus is ritually mutilated in the memory of the Roman casualties of war. Tamora's maternal pleas are disregarded and the heinous murder is committed in front of her. Following this action, almost every character in the play participates in gory deeds, each of which exceeds the previous one in degrees of violence.

Roman assertions of civility stand in contrast to barbarity that is attributed to the Goths. Marcus entreats his brother Titus not to be 'barbarous', reminding him that he is a 'Roman'. Such oppositions, however, are dismantled by the play itself. Tamora reminds Titus that her sons participated in the battle for the sake of their country, just like his did. So, their actions should be seen as virtuous, and not cruel. Titus refuses to acknowledge this, as an assent to Tamora's point of view would imply a collapse of the civil-barbaric opposition that he seeks to maintain. Titus himself proves a worthy competitor to Aaron in terms of blood lust. He kills his own daughter Lavinia, murders her abusers Chiron and Demetrius and serves their flesh to their mother as baked pie. Though it can be argued that a strong motive of revenge is behind these actions (except for Lavinia's murder, which he commits to rid her of her shame), this is definitely not the code of civil behaviour. In another sense Titus's actions relate to Aaron's. His serving the flesh of the offspring as food to the parent recalls the action of Procne (who served Tereus the flesh of his own son in order to avenge the rape of her sister) in the Philomel myth. Earlier, Aaron's schemes for Lavinia were reminiscent of the same myth.

Shakespeare collapses the civil-barbarian dichotomy most effectively in the marriage of Tamora and Saturninus. The Goth marries the Roman and aligns herself with one Roman faction so as to revenge herself on the other faction. At the end we see a deep schism between one group of Goths and their erstwhile queen Tamora. These Goths align with Lucius and help him. The segregations of civil and barbarian are thus diffused.

Aaron is not entirely devoid of humane qualities. His defense of the child of his illicit liaison with Tamora humanizes him to some extent. The queen can think of infanticide for the sake of her honour, but he places the life of the child above his own. The rhetorical question that he puts ('Is black so base a

hue?’- IV. iii. 73) is not only for the sake of his child, but is also emblematic of a sense of pride in his black lineage.

Tamora poses a greater challenge than Aaron to the established Roman order of power. Firstly, she represents power and authority that lies ‘outside’. In addition, her sexuality threatens the male-dominated bastion of authority. The whiteness of her skin makes her a lesser racial heretic than Aaron. The inter-racial liaison of black man and white woman was the most feared model of romantic transgression. So, her affair with Aaron is universally criticized, both by Romans and Goths. In comparison, her marriage with Saturninus does not appear altogether improbable. As Loomba observes, this alliance is not inappropriate in terms of race, but because ‘it reveals Tamora’s ability to manipulate her way to power’ (Loomba 2002, 84).

Women were supposed to be under the control of fathers or husbands. Racial superiority of white over black was established in a number of ways. One method was to represent the ideal (white) household with a ‘chaste’ woman at its centre. So, female sexual transgressions were of special significance. These acts were not only morally reprehensible, but also challenged established social hierarchies. Tamora is sexually alluring both to Aaron and to Saturninus. She threatens Roman civility on multiple levels- she is a foreign power as well as a transgressing woman.

The play attempts to link moral depravity with blackness. The child that Tamora has with Aaron is black-skinned. The father’s skin colour has completely overshadowed the mother’s in the child. Here the playwright seems to suggest that the consequence of the moral transgression bears an indelible stamp of evil-it is, quite literally, ‘black’. The fact that the child is allowed to live after the brutal end of its parents does not imply racial tolerance. In fact, it is a reminder of the shame of miscegenation between black and white. Marcus displays the child to ensure popular support in favour of Lucius,

and to trigger universal revulsion for the transgressors. The fact that the play ends on this note perhaps suggests a stand on the part of the playwright against racial assimilation. Further, Shakespeare makes Aaron flaunt his habitual criminality. This functions substantially to exclude him from popular sympathy. As discussed earlier, Titus, the title character, is guilty of blood lust that is at least as bad as Aaron's, if not worse. However, nowhere in the play is his violence catalogued. In dying in the process of avenging his daughter's abuse, he achieves a sort of grandeur that is not due to him. Shakespeare's portraiture of Aaron and Tamora is prejudiced. It appears that the 'other' is legitimately thought of as evil.

Turning attention to *Othello*, we find that the understanding of race has evolved. Othello is a racial outsider, yet he is the title character of the play. In fact he is the only such protagonist among the four Great Tragedies.

Shakespeare renders the issue of Othello's skin colour complex. Unlike Aaron, who is explicitly called 'swart Cimmerian', references to Othello's skin colour are ambiguous. For instance, Brabantio refers to his 'sooty bosom' and Emilia calls him the 'blacker devil' (Act V, Sc ii, 140). In addition to literal blackness, it is possible to see these allegations metaphorically: Brabantio sees him as evil (so, 'black') for winning his daughter's favours against his will, Emilia sees him as the cause of Desdemona's death. We know for certain that he is a Moor, who, by the dint of his inherent merit, has risen to the heights of Venetian society. He possesses valour, great military ability and effective rhetorical skills. He compares himself to the Turk at the end of the play. This leads one to believe that he is tawny-skinned like the 'tawny Moor' in *The Merchant of Venice*. A lighter skin colour would facilitate his acceptance into the Venetian society and perhaps, aid his rise to prominence. We see that Othello's skin colour does not permit easy categorization. His external identity is not a literal factor, but a matter of social assertion and reaction. In terms of

religion, Othello represents the 'self' rather than the 'other'. He is a Christian soldier, who defends the Christian state against the Muslims. As he is needed to fight the Turks effectively, the Senate tolerates his racial identity and treats him as more 'fair' than 'black'. Here Shakespeare shows that both skin colour and religion connote a sense of power. One (like Othello) who can manipulate the avenues of power need not worry about the inappropriateness of his race or religion. Though Othello's Christian identity is acquired, he is more of a Christian than the nominal Christian Iago. The latter falls prey to jealousy and greed for power- both non-Christian vices. Yet, Iago reports to Brabantio that his daughter will soon be 'covered with a Barbary horse', and Brabantio, in turn, thinks of Desdemona's affair with Othello as an 'accident' (Act I, Sc i). Despite his merit, Othello must remain an outsider in Venetian society.

In spite of these impediments to his ascendancy, Othello proves his worth as an individual. In the manner of the Shakespearean tragic hero, his weakness coincides with his greatness. The ease with which he is lulled into jealousy proves his depth and profundity of feeling. A lesser individual would not have succumbed to the villainy of Iago because he would not have thought of love as perfect as Othello conceives it to be. This renders Othello's feelings vulnerable to destruction by the least imperfection or even an allegation of imperfection. The force of Othello's feeling comes out in the intensity of his jealousy and hatred. Blackness was stereotyped as beastly and uncivil in the European consciousness. We recognize that it is this very 'beastly' nature that gives Othello his peculiar strength of character. As Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri writes in *Infirm Glory*, his heroic power 'springs startlingly close to the sources of animal energy, the *feritas* in man' (Chaudhuri 1981, 164). Othello's sin is born out of an ignorance of worldly sin. His virtues far outweigh his vices. Once he discovers his error, he condemns himself to a violent death. His innate morality and dignity come to the foreground.

“Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme,”

(V. ii. 341-344)

Throughout the play, he seems to recognize his difference from those around him. He is willing to accept that he is different, but not inferior to the Venetian whites:

“Rude am I in speech
And little blessed with the soft phrase of speech”

(I. iii.83-84)

This humility defines him throughout the play, and it is hard to consider him a racially-inferior stereotype.

The control of women is an important step in setting up a cultural stereotype. The more ‘brutish’ people let their women experience a greater sense of freedom, while European societies upheld a stifling code of propriety for women. Desdemona justifies her transgression in terms of prevalent familial patterns. She points out that she must renounce ties with her father in order to set up a new home with her husband:

“My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband:
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.”

(I. iii.183-189)

In ordinary circumstances, this represents normal habitual occurrence. But as the moor is black-skinned, the transition from one man to another is complicated. Desdemona faces the wrath of her father for her new allegiance. Her passion for Othello represents the passion for the ‘unknown’ and ‘different’. The catalogue of events that Othello describes, and which enamours Desdemona, shows the allurement of the unknown. She knows that, within her codes of behaviour, she

can never hope to participate in the actions that he enumerates, and her curiosity draws her to him. Shakespeare debunks stereotypes of ‘wifely’ conduct in the character of Emily as well. She is a more forceful and vocal individual than Desdemona (the ‘proper wife’) is. Her only act of obedience to Iago actually serves to engineer the tragic catastrophe. On her husband’s insistence, she gives him Cassio’s handkerchief, which he uses to attest Othello’s suspicion of Desdemona’s illicit affair.

At the end of the play, when Othello discovers the injustice that he has meted out to Desdemona, he refers to himself as the ‘base Indian’. This reinforces the associations of race with innate bestiality and evilness. Again, Othello speaks to Desdemona of

“The cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagic, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders.”

(I. iii. 143-146)

These images corroborate to the highly romanticized, exotic view of the orient in the Western consciousness. Further, we must acknowledge that Iago’s villainy bears fruit only because Othello is conditioned to believing the inherent infidelity of women and the fragile nature of a white woman-black man marriage. He, in some way, propagates the racial misconceptions that he is himself a victim of.

In this play, Shakespeare’s portrait of racial difference has come a long way forward from that in *Titus Andronicus*. Here the racial ‘other’ is granted an opportunity to prove his mettle and rise against impediments. Yet, the prejudices are not entirely removed.

Antony and Cleopatra follows *Othello* closely in terms of chronology. Like in the earlier play, Shakespeare places a woman who, though devoted to the man she loves, ultimately becomes the cause of destruction for him. The parallel, though, seems to end here. Cleopatra is a stronger character than Desdemona, and her influence on Antony is far greater than

Desdemona's on Othello. The playwright corroborates this view by including her in the title of the play- the tragedy is as much Cleopatra's as it is Antony's. However, the conjunction in the title, while pointing out the unity of hero and heroine in enacting their tragedy, also suggests a 'difference': they must be designated separately as they are not the same but merely similar. It is here that the question of racial identity assumes paramount significance.

The playwright sets out the difference of race through the opposition of Egypt and Rome. The former represents the 'orient' in imperialist discourse, while the latter is the colonial power desirous of adding Egypt to the list of its dominions. These figurative locales dramatize a more nuanced conflict in the play. Shakespeare does not merely set West against East, but shows us that racial prejudices are consequences of ways of perceiving the other. Rome does not see Egypt in its own terms, but in the way it would like to represent Egypt. Similarly, Egypt's view of Rome is lopsided. So, we have the conflict of, not two, but four points of view: Egypt looking at itself, Rome looking at itself, Egypt looking at Rome, Rome looking at Egypt.

Early in the play, Antony's levity in Egypt is reported by Octavius:

“From Alexandria
This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes
The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike
Than Cleopatra; nor is the queen of Ptolomy
More womanly than he;”

(I. iv. 3-8)

In this passage, Octavius sets up the conflict in terms of the opposition of masculinity and femininity. Yet, it is clear that both 'masculine' and 'feminine' are Roman constructs. Octavius values this hierarchy and is loathe to accept the more porous gender divisions that Egypt represents. He also reprimands Antony for his indiscriminate social interactions (mixing with 'knives that smell of sweat'). His anxiety mimics

the colonizer's anxiety. A rigid social order must be maintained in one's own society so as to validate a domination of the 'other' by equating them to the lowest rung of the known social order.

The codes of behaviour celebrated in Rome are ridiculed in Egypt, and vice versa. James Hirsh in his essay 'Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in *Criticism of the Play*' (Hirsh 2005, 177) points out:

“What Rome sees as immaturity, Egypt sees as playfulness... What Rome regards as licentiousness and perversion Egypt regards as liberation from constricting gender roles and prudery.”

He further adds:

“What Rome sees as socially necessary discipline, Egypt sees as Rome sees as moderation Egypt sees as self denial. What Rome sees as gravity Egypt sees as leaden dullness.”

Shakespeare associates the ideas of discipline, rationality and temperance with Romans. In Egypt, these are seen as self-denying and constricting forms of artificial existence. Apparently, the playwright's stand seems to be in favour of Roman values. By conventional standards, Rome represents a rational, sustainable lifestyle while the Egyptian way of life, exemplified by the lust of the queen, is merely wanton. However, a closer look at the play reveals a collapsing of such segregations.

The conflict functions not just between Egyptians and Romans, but within individuals as well. In the context of the play, a simultaneous allegiance to both attitudes is seen as impossible. Antony, for instance, must choose between love and honour. The former is invested in the character of Cleopatra, while the latter in his duty as a husband to Octavia. Neither of the two value systems can displace the other. Octavius's triumph at the end may suggest an upper hand for the Roman code. However, such ideas are dissolved when we see 'Egyptian-like' behaviour in characters Roman by birth. For instance, Enobarbus's famous description of Cleopatra's barge:

“The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Burned on water; the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them, the oars were
silver
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes.”

(II. ii. 201-207)

The speech is characterized by exaggeration and excess-characteristics which are Egyptian in the scheme of the play. Similarly, Cleopatra, before committing suicide, adopts a Roman pose which stresses on constancy:

“I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine.”

(V. ii. 240-241)

Thus the interactions between Egypt and Rome are dynamic. Characters adopt a variety of attitudes towards the conflict in values. Some characters hold on to the Egyptian value system with unwavering earnestness. Some are uncompromisingly Roman, while some others seem to alter allegiances. This phenomenon explains the extent of the threat that Cleopatra, the ‘black’ queen, poses to the white race of Romans. Octavius is anxious because of the Egyptian tendencies in his fellow citizens, which will survive even after the queen is dead. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* explains that orientalism is not merely a discourse but a ‘system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness’ (Said 2001 p.6). Octavius, clearly, is party to such a system of thought. He is aware that the positional superiority of Rome over Egypt depends on various sets of relationships with the latter, without ever losing the relatively advantageous position. Cleopatra is a racial outsider who threatens this established status-quo. Octavius’s unquestioned dominance depends on his ability to define and establish the ‘difference’ of Roman virtues from Cleopatra’s system of values. He must defeat the unknown

outsider- either by assimilating her into the Roman scheme, or by destroying her and stamping out the ‘difference’. Like Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, Cleopatra provides a passionate resistance. The struggle is further intensified because she is not merely the ‘gipsy whore’ but an equally potent political force. She is not the passive conquest of Antony in Egypt. Rather, she threatens to ensnare him:

“My bended hook shall pierce...
Ah ha, you’re caught!”

(II. v. 12, 15)

She achieves some kind of victory over Rome in her influence on Antony. Aeneas, the great ancestor of Roman pride, could leave Dido and return to Rome, but Antony cannot. If there is at all a victory in the play, Shakespeare has definitely accorded it to Cleopatra. We also notice the prejudice that is involved in Roman descriptions of her. Though references to her insatiable sexual appetite and wanton nature are endless, her political acumen is entirely elided. Not once do we encounter an acknowledgement of the fact that she is a supremely powerful queen and perhaps the greatest political resistance to the imperial glory of Rome.

Implicitly, the Romans cannot but recognize her might. As discussed earlier, Octavius alleges that Antony has been effeminized in Egypt. This attests Cleopatra’s power in challenging the masculine-feminine dichotomy through which Octavius seeks to perpetuate Roman dominance. As Antony ‘goes native’ under her influence, we recognize the slippery ground on which constructions of race rest.

The porous nature of race constructions is proved further by Elizabethan conventions of stage performance. European monarchs were known to display goods, captured slaves and even defeated sovereigns as trophies of their victory. Cleopatra is staunchly averse to this idea. She especially protests against a Roman impersonating her:

“I shall see

Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'the posture of a whore.”

(V. ii. 216-219)

Her anxiety reflects the fact that the audience sees a white British male actor ‘impersonating’ Cleopatra. The more perfect the actor’s performance is, the more vindicated is the claim that racial divisions do not actually exist but are constructed to validate prejudices. Cleopatra within the play, and the actor who assays her role on stage, show us the interchangeability of ‘white’ and ‘black’.

Ania Loomba points out that such impersonation was also reassuring for contemporary Englishmen (Loomba 2002, 133). As the nature, extent and effect of these impersonations were entirely under the control of a (white) director, the audience was reassured that Englishmen could ‘go native’ on their own terms, and then regain their ‘Englishness’ whenever they chose to. In the playhouse, the actor could appear as himself once the play was over, thus proving that he was again an ‘Englishman’.

Cleopatra’s love for Antony does not signify that she will submit to Rome. Through this illicit love, she stresses the very image that Rome conceives of her. Again, even while she remains an Egyptian, she is ready to negotiate with Octavius. Prior to her suicide, she becomes the Roman wife of the dead Antony: she chooses an honourable death over devalued life. Thus, she can play out both the Roman construction of Egypt as well as her own understanding of the Roman code of honour. She lives her life on her own terms and even decides the manner of her death.

The play suggests that both the Egyptian and Roman ways of life need to be validated in terms of an established difference from the other. The roles cannot be taken up at will, but are conditioned by the cultural and political situation of the individual. The reader is urged to question whether ethnicity of race exists at all, or are we merely blind to the fact that racial

identities are fluid. Here Shakespeare exposes the contradiction that lies at the genesis of constructions of race.

The slippery grounds on which racial identification rests, is examined more closely in an earlier play, *The Merchant of Venice*. While the racial conflict in *Antony and Cleopatra* revolves around the ideas of love and honour, this play deals with supposed difference in the inherent nature of Christians and Jews. Issues of religion as well as of race came together in Elizabethan England to construct a prejudice against the Jews. This attitude derived, of course, from the New Testament. Judas, the deceiver of Christ, was seen as the type for all Jews. The similarity in the Scriptural origin of Judaism and Christianity further complicates the issue. So, in *The Merchant of Venice*, we see that Italians- residents of the papal kingdom and enemies to Protestant England- are treated as comrades against the non-Christian Shylock.

The racial prejudice that is seen in the characterization of Shylock has roots in the psyche of contemporary Britain. Knowledge about Jews was accumulated partly through direct interaction and partly from ideas disseminated in various travel writings. In her book *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism*, Loomba points out that several strange physical and moral traits were attributed to the Jews (Loomba 2002, 144). For instance, Jewish men were said to menstruate and suckle their children. They were accused of drinking Christian blood, cannibalism, and most importantly, cheating Christians through their money-lending business. Jews were also identified with blackness of skin. Jessica names Chus, supposed progenitor of all blacks, as one of Shylock's countrymen (Act III. Scene ii), and the black villain Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* has a Jewish name. As racism intensified, associations of evil were extended to the morally-reprehensible nature of the Jews. In popular imagination, they were evil as well as dark-skinned.

The most important motivating factor behind this prejudice was economic. In the Medieval Ages, money-lending

was not a religiously-exclusive field. Literary texts of the period, like Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, show that Christians could excel as merchants and businessmen. Yet, by Shakespeare's time, Christian merchants received tough competition from Jewish counterparts. Often enough, like in Italy, the business of money lending was entirely taken over by the Jews. Obviously, such usurpation of livelihood was not kindly received, and the Jew became a maligned 'outsider' in the popular imagination.

The Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753 (popularly called the 'Jew Bill') was a culmination of sorts of years of controversy regarding the position of Jews in Britain. *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the character of Shylock, was taken to lend credence to anti-Semitic thoughts of cultural exclusion. For instance, James Shapiro in his essay 'Shakespur and the Jewbill', draws our attention to an anonymous tract-'Seasonable Remarks on the Act Lately Passed'-where this play is used as proof to show that Jews are inherently different (Shapiro 2000, 132). Their old habits of circumcision and 'un-Christian' lust for wealth make it impossible to assimilate them into English society.

Jessica, in this play, represents the possibility of cultural exchange. In general, the ability of women to adapt to an alien cultural setup (or, at least, a new household) is an important marker to ensure the perpetuation of patriarchal social codes. Shakespeare uses this very idea to challenge the racial exclusivity of Christian Venice. Jessica is fairer than her father, which facilitates her assimilation into Christian society. Further, being a woman, her body does not carry the external mark of circumcision that marks out the Jew. Her romance with Lorenzo is hardly seen as a transgression in the context of the play. In fact, Shylock is shown as hard-hearted and unsympathetic because he opposes the match. In contrast, Lorenzo makes Launcelot aware that the latter's miscegenation is inappropriate because the lady he impregnates is black-

skinned. Jessica's marriage with Lorenzo points out that racial divides can be broken. Her assimilation into Christian society is necessary to prove her inherent difference with her father. Further, she is a woman whose marriage represents an exchange of power between two sets of opposed racial orders. Racial boundaries are, thus, not absolute and gender difference represents a divide within race. With certain appropriations, these boundaries can be breached.

Portia is the epitome of justice in the play. It is she who engineers the famous denouement of the plot. However, she is herself not free of unjustified and misplaced colour prejudice. In the first act of the play, when her serving-man reports the expected visit of the Prince of Morocco as a prospective suitor, she responds thus:

“If he have
the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I
had rather
he should shrive me than wive me.”

(I. ii. 106-108)

Again, in the second act, when the Prince fails to choose the right casket, Portia is relieved:

“A gentle riddance...
Let all of his complexion choose me so.”

(II. vii. 78-79)

The associations of commerce with the Jew are not exclusive either. All relations in the play are fraught on the basis of money. The friendship of Antonio and Bassanio is a notable instance. Antonio is one who is uncomfortable with his profession. His pose of causeless melancholy at the opening of the play is an aspiration to a higher social order. Melancholic nature was the habitual reserve of gentlemen. Bassanio understands, and exploits Antonio's position. He realizes that Antonio must prove himself the special friend of a nobleman so as to aid his social climb. This gives Bassanio the opportunity to keep asking for monetary favours. In the opening scene,

Antonio demands to be told Bassanio's secret, as, he thinks, this will lend him the place of a special friend:

“Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage.”

(I. ii. 119-120)

To this, Bassanio replies only in terms of his bankrupt economic state:

“Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate.”

(I. ii. 122-123)

Bassanio lays a monetary price on sharing his secret with Antonio, which, according to the latter, will validate their ‘friendship’. Again, Bassanio's first reference to his romantic interest Portia is with respect to her fortune- she is ‘a lady richly left’. The fact that she is ‘fair’ and ‘Of wondrous virtues’, appears later in his list of her qualifications. Thus, Shylock's infamous pronouncement on discovering that Jessica has eloped - ‘my daughter and my ducats’- is in no way a typically Jewish money-centred consciousness. The Christians share it as well. Shakespeare gives the most resounding ratification to this in the title of the play - the ‘merchant of Venice’ is, obviously, not the Jew, but the Christian Antonio.

The trial scene exposes the double standards of Venetian law. At the beginning of the trial, Portia urges Shylock to have mercy on Antonio. Mercy, she says:

“It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes”

(IV. i. 183)

Yet when Shylock is defeated by her ingenuity, we find no trace of mercy in her treatment of the Jew:

“Thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest.”

(IV. i. 312)

Not only is the bond turned against Shylock, he is also made to part with all his wealth. He is even forced to change his religion. As Shylock himself observes, the judgement is as good as one that pronounces his death. Unlike the laws that protect the life of a Christian, there is no law to protect a Jew

whose role is equally important for the sustenance of Venetian society. Antonio's desire to have Shylock converted to Christianity points to an attempt at cultural assimilation. Though the Jew agrees to sign the deed certifying that he will bestow his money on his daughter and son-in-law, he is silent on the question of conversion. The playwright perhaps shows a muted resistance in him against social power structures that decide patterns of assimilation.

An objective understanding of the play suggests that Shakespeare, in this play more than anywhere else, has succeeded in opening up boundaries of racial identity. There is no inherent quality to distinguish the Christian from the Jew. Indeed we are forced to ask after Portia:

“Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?”

(IV. i. 170)

In these four plays we thus see two basic kinds of racial consciousness. One kind, represented primarily by the Jew, deals with differences in behaviour and religion; the other, represented by the Moor, rests on more extrinsic qualities- skin colour and physical appearance. As discussed above, both forms are exposed in the plays as prejudiced and illogical. Shakespeare wrote for a white, European audience, and his outlook on issues of race was also conditioned by a Eurocentric point of view. Yet, a nuanced reading of the plays lays bare the follies that lie on both sides of the racial divide. As a result, the division itself is challenged.

Many of the ‘other’ characters in these plays display a deep sense of racial pride. Aaron's pride in his black-skinned child or Cleopatra's stubborn resistance to being exoticised in a parade on the streets of Rome, force the reader to acknowledge the plural and inclusive nature of the playwright's discourse on race. In his essay on ‘National Liberation and Culture’, Amilcar Cabral explains that foreign domination can only be maintained through an organized repression of the cultural life of the dominated people (Cabral 1973, 39). Aaron and Cleopatra, then,

do not simply assert their individual identity. Their passionate resistance to assimilation is an important means to ensure their sovereignty from the dominant racial entity. Race, thus, becomes a deciding factor in the power equations that take shape in the two plays. Shylock is indeed a heartless usurer, but it is also true that Portia deals with him mercilessly. Just like we cannot gloss over Othello's jealousy that emanates out of a racial consciousness, we can never forget that it is the 'pure' Venetian Iago who engineers the tragedy. Shakespeare thus preaches racial equality and inclusiveness, rather than exclusiveness. Shylock's memorable plea in *The Merchant of Venice* is symptomatic of his creator's consciousness:

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not
a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections,
passions? Fed
with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,
subject to the
same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed
and cooled by
the same winter and summer as a Christian is?”

(III. i. 46-50)

Five centuries separate us from the world of The Bard. Yet, in our times, questions of race are probably more relevant than ever before. Increased exchanges between people of various races, religions and ethnicities, greater cross-cultural contact, and, most importantly, relentless colonial enterprise on the part of the superpowers of the world, demand that we be sensitive to issues of race. One must admit that race is not the primary concern of these plays. *Titus Andronicus* is fraught in the world of revenge and counter-revenge. The relentless intensity of crime that drives the plot forward depends primarily on blood lust, and not on considerations of the victim's racial identity. *Antony and Cleopatra* dramatizes the opposing claims of love and honour on Antony, while *Othello* leads us to consider the dire consequences of sexual jealousy.

The primary concern in *The Merchant of Venice* is economic. Here, Shakespeare shows the reader the manner in which monetary concerns seem to over-ride all other considerations in the play. Class, friendship and even romantic love are subservient to the jingle of the coin. However, an attempt at understanding the racial politics of these plays is essential in enabling us to fully appreciate them. Placing the plays in the order that they have appeared in this paper, we discern a movement in the playwright's consciousness. Titus and Tamora seem to be deserving of their marginal position as they are indeed morally-depraved. Othello and Cleopatra deserve far greater sympathy. Though treated as racial inferiors, they embody many qualities which render them more humane than their supposed racial superiors. Finally, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare entirely breaks down racial boundaries. The reader is sensitized to the fact that we must seek to eliminate racial prejudices and not races.

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