

The Jews and the Muslims: A Study in the Similarity between “The Merchant of Venice” and an Islamic Story entitled “The Merchant and the Jew”

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Abstract— Cross cultural studies have attracted the attention of researchers for a long period of time. Literary works often reflect the culture, ideas and thoughts of their societies. The story of the “the Merchant and the Jew” appeared in a number of books; one of which is “AL-Bahlul Stories”. It has a great resemblance to the play “The Merchant of Venice” written by Shakespeare. The two stories have thematic similarity as they both deal with the relation between a non- Jewish merchant and a Jewish merchant. In this paper, we are trying to trace the similarities, and the differences between the two works. “ The Merchant and the Jew” is the same as the story we find in the play, which is mainly concerned with the relationship between Antonio, the Christian merchant and Shylock, the Jewish one. The similarity is also indicated in terms of the idea of usury which is clearly available in the two works, and in Shakespeare’s play, it has a striking similarity to one of Islamic hadiths in which usury is highly condemned. As for the differences, the character of the Christian merchant in the play is not available in the story of “The Merchant and the Jew”, but we have a Muslim merchant instead. Another difference is the place of the action which is Venice in the play but Baghdad in the story.

Keywords— culture, Jew, merchant, Muslim, usury.

The point of similarity between the play, “The Merchant of Venice” and one of the Islamic stories entitled “The Merchant and the Jew” is they both deal with the same theme of the relationship between the Jews and other merchants in the areas where they used to live. One of the stories in the play touches on the conflict between Shylock and Antonio, and the same theme also permeates the Islamic story. If we consider the two main characters in the two literary works, we notice a great deal of similarity between them. For instance, the Muslim merchant in the story is similar to Antonio of “The Merchant of Venice”. They both have the same characteristics as they are often described as being kind-hearted and honest. As a sign of their honesty and kindness, they used to help people by bringing the goods they needed, and simply selling them for low prices. Their similarity stems from the fact that they both are not on good terms with the Jew. (1)

As for the Jew, he was described as a merciless person; one who paid no attention to people and what they

needed. He only paid attention to his money and getting high profits for the money he lent to other merchants. In fact, this is not far from the social and economic problems people encountered in Baghdad and England in the past.(2)Historically speaking and due to economic factors, the Jews presented themselves as money lenders and this is quite clear in the play as Shylock is not merely a money lender but the usurer of the play.

In Islam and Christianity, usury is not legitimate, but some social and economic reasons explain why the Jewish character was interested in usury. Back in the years, economic problems gave the Jewish merchants the chance to make use of this situation by presenting themselves as money-lenders. This is true in the two literary works we are tackling in this paper. (3) The Jew would lend money to other merchants provided that the merchants accepted the conditions the Jew imposed. Without going further deep into the nature of those conditions, some books which were at Shakespeare’s fingertips mentioned such conditions like

cutting a pound of flesh. The reason why this same condition is used in the two works is not far from the fact that the writers were not in fact willing to show any sympathy towards the Jewish characters.(4)and no one can really forget the historical fact which was concerned with the conflict between Jewish and Christians on one hand, and Jewish and Muslims on the other

Speaking of the relation between Islam and Shakespeare, Tim Wallace Murphy argued in his book “What Islam did for us”, that Islam played a vital role in the making of the European culture. He in fact described that role as being “immense and immeasurable debt”. Such a debt is absolutely felt in some literary works and "The Merchant of Venice" is one of them. In line with what has been mentioned earlier, one of the acclaimed scholars argued that “without Islam there would be no Shakespeare”. In fact, such an idea might seem astonishing if not shocking for some who think that Shakespeare is an English icon, and far from any foreign influence.(5)

The influence of Islam can be attributed to the great ties between the Islamic culture and Europe. References to Islamic culture can often be noticed in a lot of things we find in the plays like goods, and other material of Islamic origin. The English houses were full of those things like silk, and Shakespeare knew about these and some of which are adopted in his plays. (6)

The story of “The Merchant and the Jew”, which was written many centuries before Shakespeare’s play, is largely centred around the relation between the Jew and the Muslim. Similarly, Shakespeare’s play is centred around the same idea, but instead of the Muslim character we have a Christian one. This is done by Shakespeare to match the historical events at that time, and the fact that the conflict between the Jews and the Christian was quite evident then. Having a Muslim character in the story and a Christian one in the play is mainly because these works were written for two different groups of audience. In spite of this, they maintained the same point of view concerning the hatred and resentment people used to have for the Jew.(7)

The Islamic world has its own definite role in the world of Shakespeare as some of the Shakespearean plays are similar to some stories found in the Arabic heritage like the stories of "the Arabian Nights". Some elements in "the Arabian Nights" seep into the plays. The use of the devil and magic which is apparent in "The Tempest" has its roots in the Arabian Nights. This similarity can be taken as an indication that Shakespeare was very close to the Arabic culture and

even knew about some countries like Iraq and Syria. Those countries were mentioned in "Antony and Cleopatra"(8)

The closeness between Shakespeare and Islam can be attributed to some historical facts. For instance, when Shakespeare started writing plays and poetry, the Islamic culture was quite popular in Europe, and this was because of the role of Andalusia in enriching England and other countries with outstanding examples of Islamic culture. Andalusia, or what is today known as Spain, had the Islamic aspects for not less than eight centuries. (9)Another factor for this nearness is the war of the Ottomans against some of the European countries which in addition to destruction resulted in the meeting of two cultures in the sense that such war resulted in some commercial activities and merchants from European countries would visit the North African countries. Those merchants were influenced by the Islamic culture and civilization, and they transferred those aspects to their European countries. For this reason, war and trade were very important factors in the process of bridging the gap between Islam and Shakespeare. (10)

The narrative approach used in the play is not similar to that used in the story because the structure of the play is not similar to that of the story. Generally, in the play we have more than one plotline. For instance, in “The Merchant of Venice”, a number of plots are threaded together to provide the reader with an idea about the final message which is mainly concerned with the conflict between the two main characters Shylock and Antonio. (11)As for the story, we don’t have several plotlines because everything is mainly centred on the principal idea of the conflict between the Muslim merchant and the Jewish one. The story we are dealing with is of religious nature, and the story teller made use of a person named Albahlul in order to solve the problem encountered by the Muslim merchant. In this way, Albahlul we have in the story is quite similar to Portia in the play. Just like Portia, Albahlul is often seen as an intelligent character, and this is attributed to the religious dimension the story tries to cover. Historically speaking, Albahlul is a religious person who lived in the Abbasid era, and was known for his ability to get rid of the complicated situations. (12)

The story teller is in line with the Muslim merchant’s point of view. He describes him as the one who deserves our sympathy and support. This idea of sympathy can be attributed to a number of reasons like the general atmosphere at that time. In the Abbasid era, the people looked at the Jew as a stranger; someone who did not belong to the society. At that time, there was a huge gap between the Jews and the society.(13)

In the story, the Jewish merchant thinks that the Muslim merchant's coming asking for money is a wonderful chance for him to belittle the Muslim merchant, and this is due to the great extent of disgust we notice between the Jew and the Muslim which was obvious because of the social problems. A good example of those problems was the terrible situations the Jews used to face then. They often experienced certain periods of deliberate isolation. They chose this isolation for themselves feeling that through this isolation they proved their identity. Some historians like Al-Youzbaki argued that the reason behind this is the fact that the Jews didn't have a remarkable figure in the scientific fields at that time. This made them feel that they had nothing to do in the society. In a way or another, this sort of feeling worked on bringing down the Jewish people ambition and lessening their role in establishing the society. (14) If they want to achieve their uniqueness, they have to do something incredibly important, and this was not possible without being valuable members in the society.

The chance to be important members in the society appeared when some Islamic rulers encouraged the Jews to live their life peacefully; consequently, they developed the sense of religious individualism, and through this, they were able to have their own identity in a society that didn't really belong to them. As a result of this, they seemed to be ambiguous and isolated. (15)

Sometimes reading the books of history can provide a trustworthy image about the psychological state of the Jewish people. The Jewish people suffered a great deal of discrimination. For instance, they were forced sometimes to wear different colours to be easily recognized from other people. Even the Jewish women were obliged to put iron collar on their necks. (16) Such things resulted in the hatred we notice between the Muslims and the Jews even in literary works. The Jewish character in the story is full of hatred for the Muslim merchant. So, the Jewish character is the outcome of social and psychological factors, and these factors helped in the making of the Jewish character in both the play and the Islamic story. In addition to what is mentioned earlier, the Jewish points of view concerning certain events like war made them face a time of swinging between stability and political unrest. (17)

In the Abbasid era, the time when the story was written, the Jews went through a period of political disorder and the reason behind that was the way the Jews used to look at the wars encountered by the Islamic state at that time. If their point of view was in line with the state's political view, they would definitely experience a period of

peace. Otherwise, they had nothing but unrest. (18) This feeling of unrest can even be attributed to the economic state the Jewish people faced at that time. Economy is the backbone of the Jewish life and character. In this regard, they were involved in a number of commercial activities. Before doing activities like money exchange, the Jews were satisfied with simple professions, and they thought that those low works were really cut out for them. (19)

However, in the process of time, some rulers encouraged them to quit the low level works, and to start new things of greater importance like lending money. This represents a remarkable shift in the making of the Jewish character. It is a shift from one who was satisfied with his life as it was to one who played an important role in the economy of the country. Such a role is seen in the Islamic story. Another historical fact we need to mention is the fact that the Arabs were not interested in trade, and this made Jews appear as the powerful side in the Islamic society. They were quite powerful to the extent that some rulers used to borrow money from them. (20)

In the story, the economic role given to the Jewish merchant is clear. When life went wrong with the Muslim merchant, he faced a terrible situation in which he was forced to ask the Jew for money. It is very well known that nothing lasts forever and life is a matter of ups and downs. Having this in mind, the Muslim merchant went to the Jew motivated by his current situation of lacking money. The Jewish merchant, on his part, thought that this was a good chance for him to punish and belittle the Muslim merchant. (21)

The Jew in the two works asked for a contract to be signed by the two parties and this can also be seen as a sign of the Jewish character. It means that the Jewish people were fond of economic matters in order to compensate their feeling of inferiority, and this is the reason why the Jewish merchant asked for the terrible condition of cutting a pound of flesh. In fact, the bad image given to the Jew in an Islamic community can be understood as the outcome of the long period of instability between the Muslim and the Jews. The same point of view was quite evident in England in the 16th century. At that time, the Jews were badly treated, and they were forced to live in separate houses. (22)

Due to the terrible and instable relation between the Jew and the Muslim in Baghdad, and that between the Jew and the Christian in England, the condition of cutting a pound of flesh is the outcome of greed and need. The Jewish merchant was motivated by his greed, which should not be viewed without considering the social implications that led to this attribute in the Jewish character. Other merchants in the

two literary works were motivated by their need. James Shapiro confirmed that any attempt to understand the role of the Jew in England must be in line with understanding the social, religious and political instability of that period. This situation was even evident before Shakespeare's birth. The religious problems were mainly concerned with the break with the Catholic Church, and later on establishing the Church of England. This point means that the English people had to have a shift in their religious conception. Such a shift resulted in a great deal of instability, and the Jews were not really far from this situation. The English people were taken by the idea of having their own identity. (23)

Friedlander, in his book, "Shakespeare and the Jew" highlighted the importance of the Jewish people for the economy in the sense that "the Jew was only tolerated as a source of revenue, and till almost his life-blood was drawn, it would be difficult to satisfy the inevitable demands of a needy and rapacious master"(24)

The image of the Jew was a matter of uncertainty. For a long period of time, the Jews were not permitted to come to England, and the Jewish character was often shrouded with ambiguity and uncertainty. This led to having stereotypical Jewish character. Shakespeare's knowledge of the Jewish character was basically through books. One of the sources used by Shakespeare is a story entitled "pound of flesh". In that story, "the blood-thirsty" character is a Christian.(25) In his play, Shakespeare made a noticeable change in the making of his characters, and this goes with the way people look at the Jew at that time.

In the light of this point of view, it is suggested that the play belittles the characters who are not Christians. For this reason, a character like Shylock is not as important as other characters. The culture flourished in England at that time preferred the English to the Jews. Jack D Amico argues that the play is written in such a way that the characters are required to make use of the fact of being marginalized. The dramatist made use of this by giving a character like Shylock the opportunity to do what he aspired to. In this case, social circumstances can be seen as a tool used by the dramatist in the making of his characters. Shylock is an important character in the play, and the play when it was first published, it was described as "the Jew of Venice".(26)

In our attempt to talk about the similarity between the two literary works, we are rather tempted to look at the city chosen by Shakespeare to be the setting of his action. That city is Venice. In the 16th century, the Jews there were forced to live in separate houses. In fact, they were locked in those houses at night, and they were allowed to leave those

places in the morning. Not only this, but as a sign of discrimination imposed against the Jews, they were forced to put red hats on their heads to be easily distinguished from the Christians.(27) The same thing was done against the Jew during some periods in the Abbasid Era as it was mentioned earlier. A fact like this gives us an indication about the huge gap between the Jewish merchants and the Christian one. It sheds light on the reason why Shylock paid no attention to anything save his financial success. Due to the social factors which are mainly concerned with widening the gap between the Christians and the Jews, the Jews thought that their life and success was largely motivated by their role as money lenders. Through this, they were able to prove their identity in the society.

As for the cultural aspects of the city, Venice, we can mention the fact that this city was highly under the influence of the Islamic world. The closeness between the Islamic world and the Venetians is seen through a number of factors like war between the Islamic world and Europe. This war provided the merchants with chances to trade with the Muslim merchants. Such commercial ties are good instruments of cultural exchange between Islamic east and Europe. The result of this is that a number of Arabic words are found in the Venetian dialect, and the Islamic influence is also seen in the Venetian house design. Deborah Howard made it clear that so many things in Venice are the result of the cultural exchange with Islam. Culture in any city is not only trade and buildings, though these constitute a large part of that culture. It also deals with texts and printed books. In line with this idea, starting from the 15th century, a number of the Islamic works in different fields like science and philosophy were available in Venice. The holy Quran was published in Venice in 1537. The city as a matter of fact is full to the brim with Islamic culture.(28)

As mentioned before, Venice had its economic position, and it remained of great importance in the world for a long period of time. The Jews in Venice made use of the economic situations, and they managed in presenting themselves as money-lenders. It is believed that "one of the conditions always imposed during the middle Ages upon the Jews in Venice was that of keeping banks for lending money". This is similar to what we have seen in some historical books dealing with the Jews in Baghdad during the Abbasid period.

When we look at the Jew in Europe, we notice that the religious and the economic aspects of the European societies gave the Jew their distinctive features. They were treated as an isolated minority, and were despised by the

society. The reason behind this point of view can be attributed to the difference in religion. As a sign of this difference, in the past the Catholic Church asked the people of England to stand against the Jews because they were described as the killers of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the religious aspect played a remarkable role in the making of the Jewish character. Not only this, but the economic life at that time made it easy for the Jews to introduce themselves as money-lenders. Accordingly, this brought the idea of usury which is one of the central points in Shakespeare's play, and in the story of "the Merchant and the Jew". (29)

Usury was not allowed in Europe, and the church did not give the people the chance to take part in any activity demanding usury. This fact of not allowing the people to be involved in such activities opened the door for the Jew to take part in usury; and definitely presenting themselves as outstanding figures in the process of establishing a thriving society. The Jews can provide money for the people and for the government as well. Because of the demands of having a prosperous society, what started as something forbidden turned out to be quite essential for the society.(30)

To elaborate the point of usury, we can start with the point of the contract. It is very well known that, in both Islam and Christianity, people are not permitted to make use of usury. Antonio accepted to pay Shylock three times the value mentioned in the contract. This made us look at him as someone who is not in line with the religious value. In the story, the idea of usury is also available. As a matter of fact, usury is a forbidden sort of behaviour. Although the Muslim merchant is presented as an honest man, and highly respected by the people of his city, Baghdad, the idea of usury is apparent in his character. It is known that the two persons; the one who gives and the one who receives the money are standing against the religious teachings. The Jewish character is pictured as a greedy one, who pays no attention to any moral aspect in his dealing with people. He is mainly interested in increasing his wealth. He is also described as a merciless character. This is not far from the social and economic problems the Jewish people used to encounter even before the time of Shakespeare. (31)

In addition to what we have already mentioned about usury, we can note that usury is different from lending money because lending money does not really mean paying benefits to the lender. What we have in the play is usury and in the light of this point, we can mention the link between usury and blood, which is also found in the play, and in Islamic religion as well. In one of his dreams, our prophet, Muhammed, PBUH, saw the usurer as a blood sucker

standing in a river of blood. The idea that Shylock is asking for a pound of flesh from Antonio's body makes the idea of blood and the link with Islam clear. (32)

Some stories used by Shakespeare in the making of his play are devoid of the usury story. This means that this episode was inserted by the playwright in order to make us look at the Jew as a bad person, who pays attention to his own benefits. However, reading about the idea of usury, or finding it in one of the books is not that far-fetched. The bad image given to the Jew is seen in the fact that the playwright did not show any sympathy towards Shylock. On the contrary, he kept on magnifying the bad attributes of the Jewish character. We notice that money for the Jew is more important than anything else. It seems that there was a tendency at that time that people should stand against the Jews, and the playwright did not want to stand against this idea or tendency.

In both the play and the story, the condition of cutting flesh is rather illogical, but sometimes terrible circumstances force us to accept the illogical as an outlet to rid ourselves of those unbearable circumstances. This is what is done by both the Muslim merchant in the story, and by Antonio in the play. They hoped that things would get better soon, and they could pay the Jew his money back on time. Unfortunately, time passed quickly, and they were not able to pay the money and its interests back.

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