



THE VIRTUES OF KARMA IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*: A TIMELESS TALE OF PEDAGOGICAL EXPLORATION

Priyanka Loni (Research Scholar)*
 Karnataka State Akkamahadevi Women's University,
 Jnana Shakti Campus, Torvi, Vijayapura- 586108

Abstract

In civilised society traders and their trade practices are there in market since ages, throughout the world, irrespective of race, religion, caste, and creed. Here Shakespeare barely decipher the surface level of trade practices in renaissance period based on the surrounding vicinity where he dwells and puts forth along with fantacised fictional character in the play. This paper ponders on those intertwined trade practices (modus operandi) and tried to show that some characters which are antagonist and protagonist based on the situation the character stands in the play. Being an avid reader feels like spilled beans in between the play, So understanding in layman terms that Shakespeare putforth all perplex things in a small nut shell and feels easy to grasp, and a puzzle to understand deep mystery pandora box simultaneously. This play sometimes looks like linear and nonlinear in nature, due to juxtaposition. Karma in the play is like Newtons third law, which is well reflected based on the characters deed. There is not any spoiler in between play.

Keywords: Trade, Decipher, Intertwined, Spilled beans, Karma, and Deed.

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*Corresponding Author:

Priyanka Loni

Email: priyankaloni2016@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

About Author: Sir William Shakespeare was born on 23rd April 1564 at stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire in England. He is widely regarded as legendary writer in history of English literature till date. He wrote thirty-nine plays, 154 sonnets, three long narrative poems and few verses throughout his life span, he is one among in 8 honoured National Poets of his country. He is oftenly monikered as "Bard of Avon" or simply Bard. His father was a glove-maker by profession, Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He is married to Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 A.D. and moved to London, where

he became an actor and playwright and became immediately successful. Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by 'King James' as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

Background Story of Play: Like much of the rest of Europe, England severely restricted the rights of Jews. In fact, Jews were banished completely from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and were not officially allowed to return until 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to return. This exile was technically in effect during Shakespeare's time, but scholars believe that a few hundred Jews still

lived around London in the guise of Christians. One of the reasons Renaissance Christians disliked Jews was the Jews' willingness to practice usury, the practice of charging interest on borrowed money. There was a long tradition in Classical and Christian moral thinking against usury.

Plot: Bassanio a nobleman from Venice, who is a kinsman, close friend, and longtime debtor of the merchant, Antonio, because he wants to woo the noble Portia, but he can't himself afford to do so, Bassanio borrows three thousand ducats from Shylock, with Antonio as his guarantor. Antonio could not repay the loan after stipulated time. As per terms and condition of Shylock, he demands a pound of flesh from Antonio's chest. In Climax heiress Portia, came to know about this situation dresses as a lawyer(pretending), and successfully defends Antonio in court. Later she marries Bassanio.

Important Character's in the Play:

Shylock – A Jewish moneylender in Venice who has not been friendly to Venetians, because years of abuse at the hands of Venetian Christians and Antonio, the merchant, in particular.

Antonio – A successful Venetian merchant, liked and admired by his fellow daily passerby.

Portia – A beautiful, shrewd, and wealthy noblewoman who lives in the country estate of Belmont, outside Venice.

Bassanio – A gentleman from Venice, who is a kinsman, close friend, and longtime debtor of the merchant, Antonio.

Gratiano – A notorious vulgar Venetian and a friend of Bassanio.

Jessica – Shylock's daughter, who moves from merely contemning her father to actually robbing him, eloping with a Christian Venetian, Lorenzo, and converting to Christianity.

Lorenzo – A Venetian and friend of Bassanio and Antonio, who is in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica. Lorenzo elopes with Jessica, taking money

and precious items that she has stolen from her father.

Nerissa – Portia's noble maid, Nerissa ultimately marries Bassanio's companion, Gratiano.

Prince of Morocco – A Moroccan prince who came to impress Portia at Belmont. He asks Portia not to judge him by the color of his skin, but incorrectly picks the gold casket.

Prince of Aragon – A Spanish nobleman who woos Portia at Belmont. He who picks the wrong casket, as it was full of silver.

Duke of Venice – Presides over the trial of Antonio. Although the Duke attempts to persuade Shylock to show Antonio pity, he knows that Venice's commercial interests depend on a consistent application of its laws, so he can't make an exception to help Antonio.

Brief saga:

In Venice, Bassanio, a not so wealthy nobleman, asks to lend money from his dear friend and rich merchant Antonio, in order to have the funds to win the heart of Portia, a wealthy noblewoman. Although Antonio doesn't have cash in hand, because all of his ships were at sea for trade, he allows Bassanio to borrow as much as money he needs on his credit.

Meanwhile, at her nearby country castle of Belmont, Portia express grief's to her serving maid Nerissa about her father's wish, which explains that any man who wants to marry Portia must answer a riddle by choosing one of three 'Caskets'. Casket is the chest made up of Gold, Silver, and Lead. Only the man who chooses correctly can become Portia's husband. Portia has been disgusted with all of her suitors so far. Still, Nerissa reminds Portia of a fine Venetian marriage prospect with Bassanio.

Bassanio asks the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, to lend him three thousand ducats. After much hesitation, Shylock agrees – Antonio will guarantee the loan with his property as collateral. However, when Antonio himself arrives and begins insulting Shylock for committing usury (charging interest on

his loans), Shylock proposes a strange alternate option, By not charging Bassanio any interest for three months. However, if Antonio fails to repay, Shylock will be entitled to cut one pound of flesh from Antonio's chest near to the heart(Orthodox Jewish practice), he was very much confident that his ships will return to the Venice, well before Shylock's deadline, Antonio accepts.

At Belmont, the Prince of Morocco arrives to try his luck at the puzzle of the caskets. He chooses incorrect one(Gold), and fails the riddle. Meanwhile, in Venice, Lorenzo, a friend of Bassanio's, has fallen in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. One night, when Shylock goes out, Jessica steals a large sum of money from her father and escape as planned with Lorenzo. Both, along with many others, then travel with Bassanio to Portia's estate.

The Prince of Aragon is the next of Portia's suitors to try to solve the puzzle of the caskets. After much attempt, he chooses silver, which was incorrect. As the Prince of Aragon depart, Bassanio arrives with plenty of gifts for Portia.

A few weeks pass, and news arrives in Venice that Antonio's ships has been lost at deep sea sail. Though Shylock had been unable to locate Jessica, he sympathies himself that he will take his revenge in the form of the pound of flesh, which was vow to him in the contract with Antonio.

Back at Belmont, Portia and Bassanio, who have spent all this time together and both fallen in love. Portia urge Bassanio to wait before facing the riddle, because she fears the thought of losing him, if he guesses wrong. But he insists on, and goes ahead and decipher the casket puzzle. To their joy, he chooses the right casket (lead). To seal their wedlock, Portia gives him a wedding ring, instructing him never to lose it or give it away. Then Nerissa and Bassanio's crude friend Gratiano disclose of intend to wed. However, just then, a letter arrives from Antonio, with news of his lost ships and ill will of Shylock's to collect his pound of flesh. Everyone was spilled beans, Portia gives Bassanio surplus money so that he can repay the loan. As Bassanio hurries off to Venice, Portia had another plan of her own to save Antonio.

In the court of Venice, the Duke is presiding over Antonio's trial. Shylock as per his requests that Duke should show pity on him and insists on pursuing his '*pound of flesh*' as per his contract, knowing the fact that Bassanio has already offered him nine thousand ducats, thrice the original loan. Nerissa and Portia arrive on the scene, disguised as a law clerk and a lawyer, respectively.

Portia upholds the contract and says shylock doesn't hold the right to take any blood from Antonio, and if Shylock persists sheds even a drop of blood while cutting Antonio's flesh that all of Shylock's wealth will be seized by the kingdom. She further finds Shylock guilty of conspiring to kill a Venetian citizen, and therefore he must hand over half of his wealth to Antonio and the other half to the kingdom. Antonio and the Duke decide to show pity; however, Shylock must only give half his wealth to Antonio, and promise to leave the other half of his wealth to Jessica and Lorenzo (Son in Law) after his death. In addition, Shylock must convert to Christianity. Alas, Shylock had to accept it finally in court.

As Portia is leaving, Bassanio (who still thinks she is Balthazar, the lawyer) tries to reward her money in return for her favourable judgment. She refuses , asking for the ring that he is wearing instead. Thinking of his vow never to part with it, Bassanio hesitates and realises finally she was Portia. But after some chit chat from Antonio, he gives in, Gratiano also gives his ring to Nerissa.

Back at Belmont, Lorenzo and Jessica have been enjoying romantic evening. Shortly before daylight, Portia and Nerissa arrive, soon followed by Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio. The women feign indignation that their husbands lost their rings. However, they soon end the game and confess their role in the court scene. The couples are reconciled, and news arrives that Antonio's lost ships have returned safely to port, bearing great riches.

Karma – A Conceptual Framework: Karma, a *Sanskrit* term, refers to the idea that an individual's actions have consequences that affect their future. In the context of *The Merchant of Venice*, karma can be understood as the moral and ethical repercussions of the characters choices. It is

believed that everyone has karma in themselves. That our unconscious leads us to do good, but that sometimes we choose not to listen and do wrong. In a world full of hate, malice, jealousy and unfairness, it is reassuring to believe in some kind of an outer force who can just be fair. A force that can reward you or put you back in place for what you've done. But sometimes it just doesn't seem to exist, it doesn't seem to work. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, sometimes we can't explain it and sometimes they don't deserve it. Since it is a familiar subject a lot of writers decide to incorporate karma, fate, destiny, in their stories, for example, William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Virtues of Karma for three prime characters can be seen below: -

1. **Shylock's Karma:** Shylock's relentless pursuit of revenge against Antonio ultimately leads to his own downfall. His insistence on the '*pound of flesh*' clause in the bond contract serves as a form of karma, highlighting the destructive nature of his own hatred.
2. **Antonio's Karma:** Antonio's kindness and generosity towards Bassanio are rewarded when Portia, disguised as the young lawyer Balthazar, saves him from Shylock's knife. Antonio's karma is one of redemption and forgiveness.
3. **Bassanio's Karma:** Bassanio's desire for wealth and love leads him to take risks and make sacrifices. His karma is one of growth and transformation, as he learns to appreciate the value of true friendship and love.

The Merchant of Venice explores the theme of karma, not in a literal religious sense, but as a concept of actions having consequences, often manifested as a balance of justice and mercy. Shylock's relentless pursuit of his legal right to Antonio's flesh is a direct response to the injustices he's faced from the Christian community, particularly Antonio's insults and perceived unfairness in their business dealings. However, his insistence on justice, without mercy, ultimately leads to his own downfall, as the legal loophole discovered by Portia (disguised as a lawyer) prevents him from

taking Antonio's flesh and he is forced to convert to Christianity and lose half his wealth.

Shylock's Actions as a Form of Karma: Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh is seen as a form of "karma" in that it's a direct response to the perceived injustices he has endured from the Christian community, especially from Antonio. Antonio's insults and refusal to pay interest on loans, combined with the public humiliation he inflicts upon Shylock, drive Shylock's desire for revenge and his insistence on the contract's strict enforcement.

The Role of Justice and Mercy: The play explores the tension between justice and mercy. Shylock firmly believes in upholding the letter of the law, arguing for justice in his own right to take Antonio's flesh. Portia, through her disguise and the "quality of mercy" speech, advocates for a more humane approach, suggesting that mercy transcends strict legal rules.

The Consequences of Actions: The play illustrates that even actions rooted in perceived injustice can have unintended and significant consequences. Shylock's pursuit of strict justice ultimately leads to his downfall, while Portia's demonstration of mercy, while initially seemingly in favor of Antonio, eventually leads to a balance that affects all involved.

Antonio's Actions and Their Impact: While Antonio's actions contribute to Shylock's desire for revenge, he also shows a degree of generosity and compassion towards his friend, Bassanio. His willingness to risk his own life for Bassanio and his support for the romantic pursuits of his friends are juxtaposed with his disdain for Shylock. The play suggests that even noble intentions can have complex and far-reaching consequences, just like Shylock's desire for justice.

The Nature of Karma: In the context of *The Merchant of Venice*, karma is less about a cosmic retribution and more about the chain of reactions and consequences that arise from human choices and actions. Shylock's relentless pursuit of justice, stemming from years of mistreatment, leads to a series of events that ultimately undermine his own

well-being and lead to a more balanced, though perhaps harsh, resolution.

Some other virtues in the play

Human and Animal: Closely related to the theme of prejudice and intolerance is the theme of humanity and the inhumanity of which various characters accuse one another. In insulting and abusing Shylock, the Venetians frequently criticise him as an animal or devil. Shylock, in turn, seeks to reduce his debtor Antonio to the status of an animal whose body can be bought or sold.

Law, Mercy, and Revenge: Both the central action of Shylock's attempt to revenge himself on the Christian Antonio, and the romantic subplot between Bassanio and Portia explore the relationship between law, mercy, and revenge.

Hatred towards each other Race and Religion: During the start of the play, it is shown that Jews were abandoned, and later part shows how Shylock (Jew) took revenge to Antonio (Christian).

Love and Friendship: True love is shown between Portia and Bassanio, for best friendship it is shown between Antonio and Bassanio.

Greed and Generosity: Greed of Usury (interest on loans) by Shylock and True unbiased generosity is shown by Antonio towards Bassanio for helping him to woo noble Portia.

Shylock's famous quote, "*Hath not a Jew eyes?*" is a powerful statement about human nature and the **concept of karma**. It directly addresses the theme of revenge and how it can be fueled by perceived injustice and mistreatment. The speech emphasises the idea that the laws of cause and effect apply to everyone, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. It suggests that if you cause someone, you will experience similar harm in return and vice versa. [*The Merchant of Venice*, **Act 3, Scene 1**, pp. 190-192]

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? This powerful statement, spoken by Shylock, highlights the inherent human need for reciprocation, suggesting that wrongs will

inevitably lead to repercussions, mirroring the concept of karma. [*The Merchant of Venice*, **Act 3, Scene 1**, pp. 190-192]

The line "*And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?*" appears in Shylock's famous speech where he argues that if one wrongs another, they can expect a response in kind, suggesting a natural law of retribution or the karma. [*The Merchant of Venice*, **Act 3, Scene 1**, pp. 190-192]

Conclusion: Honey and Wine have golden antique values (priceless) as it ages, similarly, are the works of Shakespeare which have unique Magnum Opus Aura, perception of every reader on his works is researched till date and there is no end to it. *The Merchant of Venice* offers a rich tapestry for exploring the concept of karma. By examining the characters' motivations, actions, and consequences, Academicians can gain a deeper understanding of the moral and ethical implications of karma. This pedagogical approach encourages critical thinking, character analysis, and thematic exploration, providing a comprehensive learning experience.

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