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SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*: TREASURED ILLUSTRATION OF TRAGICOMEDY

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Abstract:

William John Shakespeare's undisputable place in the literary world and his enormous contribution towards the literary sphere are imperative and eternal. Undoubtedly, his prodigious input in English drama and poetry, specifically in sonnets is not only rock-solid but also has inspired all streams of literature across the world. The variety of tragicomedy can be seen in his various writing, however, The Merchant of Venice, is an outstanding illustration of tragicomedy. The esteemed dramatist has been successful to make readers and audiences digest the fine fusion of comedy and tragedy in a one-fell swoop smoothly in the present piece of art. The binary opposition of characters, settings, ambience, theme etc. all contribute towards the great masterpiece.

Keywords: *Tragicomedy, Twofold Characters, Analogy, Antagonism, Deus ex machine, etc.*

To authorize any piece of literature, especially in the present scenario, a drama as a tragicomedy, comedy, or tragedy, one needs to take into consideration of the typical elements of drama to judge and finalize it. The gradual consideration will make the air clear. In pure comedies, love, laughter, and entertaining elements are the dominant traits. Herein, various suitable couples are created deliberately and through their romantic courtship and amusing conversation the story takes turns and twists to amuse audiences. The creation of foolish characters, the inclusion of a clown like cast and humorous dialogues were fixed attributes of comedies. A conventional comedy always ends with the union of lovers and their nuptial ceremonies. On the contrary, a pure tragedy is marked by a protagonist who is embedded with a tragic flaw which is Hamartia. The tragic hero of the play can be seen always busy battling with good and evil in his mind and brain. Ultimately, his tragic flaw leads him towards the downfall of his glorious career and life. Eventually, he surrenders to the tragic fate or destroys himself along with others. The protagonist can be termed as tragic waste, at the end of the drama, as despite his enormous, health, wealth, wit, love and power, he fails to compete with one tragic flaw inside him and make his life, his existence waste.

In the regard of tragicomedy genre of the drama, things are moderately poles apart. Fundamentally, it is an ancient literary mechanism widely utilized by writers in their respective fictional works. These pieces of literature are quite unique to encompass elements of tragedy along with the elements of comedy playwriting. Many times the writer, who is implementing the tragicomedy device mainly, intends to depict the twofold nature of reality, wherein dark shades of human nature along with grim realities of lives are presented to illustrate their co-existence in the world and in the nature of human persona. Consequently, the intertwining of tragic and comic components of life can be explicitly seen in the play. It is the general observation that tragicomedy is predominantly used in dramas and theatre. As per the history of English literature, the term is coined by the esteemed Roman dramatist Plautus in the 2nd century B.C. In a general way, the writer intends to make god and men his characters in the play. On the contrary, in tragicomedies, the characters play reverse roles. Beyond conventionally assigned roles and dialogues they appear in drama to create fun, burlesque and pun. Mostly, the characters in tragicomedy are exaggerated, and sometimes there might be a happy ending after a series of unfortunate events in a row. It is incorporated with facetious tales throughout the story, just to lighten the tone.

In the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare has created a constellation of characters to express various traits of life. To describe the bond of faith, compassion, and brotherhood he has created a friendship between Antonio and Bassanio. Both are good friends though both have contrary temperaments. Antonio is well-known for his true nature, wealthy background, and as a word of man. On the other hand, Bassanio is busy in merry making, courtships and touring. But out of true friendship and brotherhood, Antonio is ready to compromise his honour in front of Shylock, a Jewish money-lender. At the end of the drama, Antonio is prepared to sacrifice his life in the courtroom scene; this is a proof of their true friendship. Along with these male friendship duos, Shakespeare has depicted the friendship between Portia and Nerissa. Though Nerissa is acting foil for her lady Portia, their friendship and understanding are remarkable.

In analogous with comedy plays, in the present drama, Shakespeare has created various devotees of love. Bassanio is in love with Portia. Initially, Portia is indifferent towards Bassanio, but gradually Bassanio made her love him back. Secondly, Portia's maid cum friend Nerissa becomes the ladylove of Bassanio's faithful servant Gratiano. In the same line of love, Shakespeare has assigned one more pair who are in love with each other deeply, that is, Jessica, Shylock's only daughter with Lorenzo.

In the company of the insertion of pair of lovers, Shakespeare has conventionally created the character of Launcelot, in the present play. This character is described as a servant to Shylock. Through, the character of Launcelot and his father Gobbo, the audience can enjoy the spur of laughter in the play.

The casket episode of Act 3 Scene 2, is contributing to enriching romantic elements of the drama. Portia's deceased father created the Casket mystery to find a suitable boy for his only daughter Portia, who is utterly judicious and stunning along with mounds of wealth. Herein, the men who are interested and intended to marry Portia, are instructed to read and choose a casket out of three different caskets which hide permission to marry Portia. Bassanio chooses the right casket and affirms the love lock between them.

The ring episode adds more amusement to the storyline of the drama. During the trial scene, Portia in the disguise of the lawyer, demands the very ring given by her to him as a token of love during their wedlock ceremony, in return for remuneration to save Antonio from Shylock's terminal bond. The gizmo of mistaken identity, the stratagem of a lady in the disguise of a man is surely the trait of the Shakespearean comedy drama. In spite of the firm love between Portia and Bassanio, he fails to notice his wife in the guise of a lawyer present in the courtroom scene, which is an example of willing suspension of disbelief.

The conservative resilient traits of comedies like the signature tune of love, the theme tune of friendship, the note of happiness, hilarious dialogues, and joyous actions by varied characters, above and beyond the element of disguise and mistaken identities can be perceived evidently in the present drama. From primary conception, the present drama is a comedy. However, various other things offered by dramatists in the drama point out tragic tension too.

Throughout, the history of English literature, and specifically, in the realm of English drama, the character of Shylock has been considered a tragic hero alias anti-hero of the play. For any mediocre reader, his character appears as a villain. There are explicit reasons behind it. The very first thing is the bond story. In this subplot, Shylock offers help in the form of money to Antonio, as Antonio wants to give money to help his friend Bassanio, who is in need of money to go to Belmont, to court and marry his ladylove Portia. As Bassanio fails to build his credibility in the market of the Venice, to raise money for travel, he surrenders in front of Shylock. But already aware of Bassanio's reliability, in Act 1 Scene 3, Shylock prefers Antonio to be the guarantor for lending money to Bassanio. To legalize the deal and make it real, Shylock demands Antonio sign the fatal bond. According to the bond signed by Shylock and Antonio, in case of failure, Antonio is liable to give a pound of flesh of his body to Shylock. As a true friend, Bassanio disapproves the bond but Antonio is much more confident about his naval trade and his potential, and approves the idea of the bond. This fatal bond is the real trick of the drama. Upon which the other half of the drama is set and further actions take place progressing to the end of the drama. In the outer set, Shylock appears as a villain to the readers who demands flesh in return for money.

During the courtroom scene that is Act IV, scene 1, Shylock demands, a pound of flesh from Antonio's body as Antonio fails to return three thousand ducats in the given three months' timeframe to Shylock. This trial scene is epic in the present drama and the history of English drama as well. At first, as per laws of the Venice, the setting of the play is Venice city of Italy, and signed bond, Shylock's side is much more solid. Bassanio appears in the court to lend his friend's help and money to Shylock. But Shylock villainously refuses to take money from Bassanio. As per the sealed bond Shylock demands the flesh in the courtroom from Antonio's body, which makes all the other characters along with readers of the play think Shylock as an inhuman, cruel villain.

Additionally, Shylock is described as a penny pincher by the dramatist. His servant Launcelot is not happy with his miser master, who is making him slog a lot without worthy payments in return. So in Act 2 Scene 2, he decides to leave Shylock, and accepts Bassanio as his master.

Another tragic chapter is added to the story of Shylock, in the form of his offspring. His only daughter Jessica is also against him. She is an educated and commendable lady who is in love with amateur Lorenzo. Being a father Shylock is not happy with his daughter's choice as Lorenzo is a Christian lad. He strongly opposes his daughter's love relationship with the other boy. Without her father's appropriate consent, she elopes with Lorenzo in Act 2 Scene 6, besides snatching away her father's money and jewels from home. Other neighbourhood individuals deliberately inform him that his daughter has eloped with a Christian lover and she is spending his money haphazardly. This love relationship and elopement episode bring severe humiliation to the father and the whole family alongside the tragic taste in the play.

Religion is the major source of conflict in the drama. Shylock is a Jew while Antonio is a Christian. During the contemporary era, this conflict was high and made the lives of Jew people hell. Religion is the main reason for Shylock's disapproval of Lorenzo. Besides, Shylock's money lending policy of charging heavy interest on the loan is against the laws of Antonio's Christianity. Despite of love theme, the addition of this conflict theme between religions indicates a tragic note in the play.

Above mentioned incidents, things, and characters can easily make readers think and confirm Shylock as a true villain of the story. However, the dramatist has mixed and different opinions about him. The very proof is present in the courtroom dialogue of Shylock. Shylock is a tragic character; imprisoned by prejudice and determined for retribution by the treatment he obtains from others. By nature, he is not cruel and unpleasing. On the other hand, is as normal as any other man of his era, other Christian of his time. It is destiny and contemporary social evils that made this man a wicked fella of the play.

Shylock is the artifact of the extended unscrupulous battle between Christianity and Jewish culture. His inner feelings, strongly expressed in the trial scene finally make readers think about him differently. It is not in anyone's hands to take birth in a specific caste, category or religion. Above and beyond, all human beings have some or the other physical and mental agonies. By casting Shylock as Jew, the dramatist is expressing his views against the discrepancy present in contemporary society. The social clash between Christians and Jews is depicted in the drama through the bond story and courtroom mystery, eventually; it highlights tragic component in the drama.

Shylock is defeated by ingenious Portia, disguised as a lawyer Balthasar, in the court scene. When Shylock prepares to leave the courtroom, he gets a call back from the Duke. Eventually, he has sentenced to a penalty for threatening the life of a Venetian Christian citizen, Antonio. As per the verdict, he will be executed and all his goods and chattels will be distributed between Antonio and the state unless he requests the Duke for forgiveness. The Duke display clemency to Shylock and spares his life and reduces the forfeit too. However, Antonio returns his share of Shylock's properties on the condition that he transforms into Christianity and bestows his wealth on Jessica and her new husband, Lorenzo. As a tragic figure of the whole drama and left with no other option, Shylock reluctantly settles for the execution of his legacy and conversion of the religion and finally leaves the courtroom in grief. The sudden downfall makes Shylock the tragic hero of the play.

The outcome of the court scene is Antonio is protected, Bassanio is also safe but Shylock is seen as a solitary individual and underprivileged too. He is imposed to abandon his religion and dispense his property too. He was enforced to plea mercy.

At the end of the story, Act 5 Scene 2, the happy marriage of all the characters along with their respective return of treasures and profits indicates drama belongs to the romantic comic drama of Shakespearean canon. However, the character of Shylock and his mentioned and expressed predicament highlights the tragic elements present in the story. The social issue of Christians versus Jews furthermore complements the chapter on tragic tautness. The second reading of the drama, or a thoroughgoing reading and comprehension of all the elements of the drama, indicates that drama is also embedded with tragic components.

To sum up, a fine combination of tragic and comic elements in the guise of theme and characters make the drama a treasured illustration of the tragicomedy genre of the literary canon of Shakespeare. The dramatist has utilized various gizmos to achieve the fine effect to make the drama a fine piece of tragicomedy. The drama ends in the convention of comedy like a nuptial gala, but leaving behind the bitter taste of tragedies like the clash of religions with the downfall of the anti-hero.

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