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Anti-Semitism and Radford's *Shakespeare*: The Intertextuality

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Abstract:

In “Merchant of Venice” *Shakespeare* creates a polarity between Christians and the Jews. Christians are portrayed in terms of superiority and dominance and the Jews are shown through oppression and exploitation. The issue of pushing together of the Jews into ghetto which signifies urban pollution, corruption and exploitation is a clear example. Therefore, Harold Bloom suggests the presence of anti-Semitism in the play. This polarity between the Jews and the Christians are also reflected in recent cinematic adaptations. Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) updates *Shakespeare* and the deep division between the Christians and the Jews in a new perspective. It also portrays Shylock as a potential character who emerges from the shattered walls of ghetto which is controlled by the Christians to a space that questions the oppressive ideology of the Christians. The attempt of this paper is to address how Radford updates the Bard for a new audience in 21st century. It aims at exploring how the director historicizes *Shakespeare*'s Elizabethan England and the question of cultural interrogation that the Bard handles quite intricately hundreds of years back. The paper will also discuss how Radford imbibes Harold Bloom's concept of anti-Semitism in his attempt of making *Shakespeare* as a contemporary writer.

Keywords: Anti-Semitism, intolerance, cultural polarity, assimilation, anti-Christ, atrocities, usury.

Michael Radford's “The Merchant of Venice” historicizes *Shakespeare*'s Elizabethan England. In the process, the movie addresses the question of cultural interrogation that *Shakespeare* handles quite intricately hundreds of years back. Radford's attempt of reconstructing the bard's Elizabethan England however remains ambiguous because the social tensions and intolerance towards minorities especially the Jews and its justification remain elusive. Radford's attempt of reviving *Shakespeare* therefore revolves around the discourse of championing a meaning making project that explores Jewish social, cultural and political structure in Elizabethan England. At the same time Radford, portrays a society by creating a polarity between the dominant Christians and the oppressed Jews.

In creating such a polarity, Radford explores the notion of intolerance among the

Christians and the Jews which are driven by internal hatred and vengeance. Radford therefore captures a society where both the dominant and the oppressed are engaged in championing a chaotic society which is ruled by internal tensions, hatred and vengeance. This intolerant chaotic society appeals a strong sense of Anti-Semitism in the movie. Harold Bloom in his text *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* suggests the presence of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*. According to him, "one would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy "The Merchant of Venice" is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work". (Bloom, *Shakespeare The Invention of Human* p.(195) Radford in adapting *The Merchant of Venice* strictly follows *Shakespeare* and at the same time maintains his distance by making soft cuts and additions with different cinematic technologies. This paper therefore attempts to investigate Radford's adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* and his technique of "making it new" with special emphasis on anti-Semitism by keeping *Shakespeare* at the center.

Radford portrays Shylock as a potential character. His character is shown as a rich source of power and knowledge that challenges the dominant Christian society. Radford's Shylock provides a new space of interpretation which obscures the Jewish question in Shakespeare's Elizabethan England. The director explores a space which was employed by Shakespeare himself for examining the ethics of popular, dominant Christianity and its anxiety regarding moral incoherence, violation of Christianity and its basic tenets, mercy, forgiveness and justice. He therefore captures the hypocrisy in Christianity that Shakespeare experienced many years back.

I will begin my paper by analyzing Radford's design of portraying Jewish and English identities. His adaptation begins with the anti-Semitic realities of oppression, exploitation and suffering of the Jewish minorities. It is set in 1596 of Renaissance Venice and it begins with flash back images of violence and hatred. These flash back images reflect the social, political and cultural lives of the Jews under the restrictive and dominant discourse of the Christians. Radford's begins with

"By law the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or „Geto" area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians. In the day time any man leaving the city had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christians laws" (00:1:57.The Merchant of Venice, Radford)

In this montage, Radford's camera shows a priest who stands in a Venetian canal boat and preach to his Christian audience. The preaching reflects the admonitions of the Jews because of their Anti-Christian lives and practices. It also shows the burning of the scriptures of the Jews and their persecution. The priest incites his Christian audience, as a result, Jews are persecuted and thrown down from the Rialto Bridge. Among the midst of this violent Christians, Shylock sees Antonio and utter his name pleading his response as a friend. Antonio reacts at him by

splitting on his face. Shylock doesn't answer to his offensive response but reconcile himself by hiding his anger, pain and humiliation.

This turbulent beginning drives the whole plot of the movie. Shylock's humiliation, pain and suffering makes him a villain who aspires only for a barbaric revenge. Therefore the presence of anti-Semitism is shown with Radford's attempt of portraying Shylock, first as a sympathetic and then a tragic character at the end. This presence of anti-Semitism is also depicted in his creation of a verisimilitude of Venice of the 16th century. With this projection of historical Venice, he depicts the social, political and cultural lives of the 16th century Jewish lives. This portrayal of Shylock and the setting of the movie refuse to attain a comic resolution. This in turn confuses the genre of the movie as Shakespeare also did in his play. However Radford attempts to interpret the movie as a tragedy of Shylock by espousing Anti-Semitism. This interpretation provokes Shylock's failure to assimilate himself within the cultural, social and political lives of Christianity. He attempts to gain his assimilation to the dominant Christian society through friendship and love only to his own suffering and humiliation. His tragedy is therefore the tragedy of historical intolerance.

Stephen Greenbelt in his text, "Will in the World How Shakespeare Becomes Shakespeare" traces Jew's social, political and cultural lives in England.

".... in 1290, two hundred years before the momentous expulsion from Spain, the entire Jewish community of England had been expelled and forbidden on pain of death to return. The act of expulsion, in the reign of Edward I, was unprecedented; England was the first nation in medieval Christendom to rid itself by law of its entire Jewish population. There was no precipitating crisis, as far as is known, no state of emergency, not even any public explanation" (Greenbelt, Will in the World How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare P.15)

The Jews in England were tortured and brutalized by the atrocities of the Christians. They were spat as moneylenders. They were lynched and reviled as anti-Christ. They suffered from every kind of prejudices and hence they got expelled from English society. The Jews in England by the time of Shakespeare was almost an invisible figure. Their population got embedded within the fabric of time and memory. In *Shakespeare's* time, the Jews after their forced dismissal from English society, became a despised figure in stories and in everyday languages. The Bard in his earlier career uses Jew figures in his plays without any moral depth. They were used with an attempt of achieving comic intentions in his plays. Instances may be made of Benedick (Much Ado About Nothing), Lance (The Two Gentleman of Verona), Costard (Love's Labour Lost) etc. These Jews simply didn't appear on stages. They were not given any significance to their language. They were simply invisible figures who didn't have anything to claim for themselves to the reality of 16th century English society. However city like Venice allows Jews, and accepts their way of lives. They were allowed to reside and run their business and own properties.

“Certain cities Venice among them permitted Jews to reside relatively unmolested for extended periods of time, forbidding them, to be sure, to own land or practice most “honest” trades but allowing, even encouraging, them to lend money at interest” (Greenbelt, *Will in the World How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* P 157)

One must also remember that *Shakespeare* and *Marlowe* occupy themselves with a shifting power relation in their works. They do not follow the conventions of writing in their time. In their works the concept of an individual is given a space of power. The individual is concerned with a new force in its relationship to the state and dealt with the force of overturning any established order. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* can be a great example. Marlowe's antihero the Jew “Barabbas” takes pleasure in hatching murderous plans and in Christian deaths. His love of money and wealth is exceeded by his hatred for the Christians. His homicidal career occupies his character throughout the play. With this character portrayal, Marlowe portrayed a new Jew who has the power to challenge and question the dominant and established power structure in the society. This excites his audience and invites them to think about corruptions in Christianity and hypocrisy in his plays. Marlowe was already dead when Shakespeare started writing his play *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare revived Marlowian Jew in “The Merchant of Venice” with major influence from an Italian play by Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecarone*. Shakespeare used the whole plot from the Italian source and his art gives a new form to it. A rich merchant of Venice burrows money from a Jew moneylender for a friend accompanied by a terrible bond of a pound of flesh with its forfeiture, the wooing of a lady of Belmont, her disguised role as a lawyer in order to save the merchant from the terrible bond and the comic scene of ring episode are all taken from the Italian source. However his art gives the play a new form that excites his audience and attained a new status. With this new form, he examines his society by displaying the hypocrisies and the corruptions within the Christian society. It also invites his audience to a new interpretative space on Jewish question and the English identity.

Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* is loyal to the bard in portraying a corrupted Christian society. The beginning and the montage clearly shows unmerciful and unforgiving Christians who brutalize the oppressed Jews. Under the eyes of a Christian law the Jews suffer from every kind of prejudice and their ghetto lives and exploitation show them as an absent shadowy figure from the realities of 16th century Venice. They are shown only to achieve comic intentions who are mocked at and humiliated.

However the question of much importance is about dominant Christian merchant lending money from an oppressed Jew. Shylock's money and wealth mainly comes from his practice of usury. Although money lending is banned in English society, it takes one of the biggest role in the political economy of England. As it is made illegal in the eyes of God, the practice of money lending in the English banks during Shakespeare's time tried to reduce their interest rates at a marginal level. Therefore, Christians in some way or the other practice money lending. One must

also remember that without the practice of money lending the mercantile economy of the English society is not possible at all. Stephen Greenbelt in *Will in the World How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* clearly shows this

“ God had driven out the only people who were exempt, by reason of being Jews, from this prohibition, the realm’s mercantile economy could not function without the possibility of money lending. In the absence of a banking system, in our sense of the term, the English tried at least to hold lending rates down to 10 percent, and many individuals devised clever means, legal and illegal, to get around the official constraints. Even John Shakespeare’s robustly illegal dealings—interest rates of 20 and 25 percent—were fairly standard.

..... Christian usurers, even when they were not directly called by that name, occupied a position roughly comparable to the one held by the Jews: officially, they were despised, harassed, condemned from the pulpit and the stage, but they also played a key role, a role that could not be conveniently eliminated. It was possible for usurers to live more or less respectable lives, as Shakespeare’s father did.....” (Greenbelt, P: 164)

Therefore, money lending and developing economy of the Jews, are responsible for arousing anger and jealousy for the dominant Christians. In the movie, Bassanio and Antonio come to Shylock the oppressed ghetto Jew, to get their three thousand ducats for a loan. Both of them realize Shylock’s business and his prosperity as a threat to the Christian society because his class identity escalates in the social order by adopting practices which are illegal to the Christians eyes. This gives enough reason for the Christians to hate Shylock and his Jew community which got expelled from English society in 13th century. Therefore Antonio mocks and insults him while he ask for a loan. He doesn’t make any apology for his past deeds of spitting on Shylock’s face. Even he attempts to repeat back by spiting at him again. This starkly shows the presence of anti-Semitism in the movie. The plot is portrayed through Shylock’s humiliation and vengeance against the Christians.

Radford and his attempt of “making it new” therefore involve a process of making a historical authenticity of the setting and also the social, cultural and political lives of the Christians and the Jews in the 16th century Venice. While doing so he also creates a polarity between the Christians and the Jews as Shakespeare did in his play. Radford views a decadent Christian society in his adaptation. This can be shown from the projection of the Venetians as intolerant and hypocritical Christians. He questions the moral superiority that they claim on grounds of religiosity by showing recurrent scenes of bare breasted prostitutes. These prostitutes, who offer their flesh for money can also be an important tool to understand them against their hegemony.

Prostitution is a product of the society. Radford shows it is a product of the Venetian society which is corrupted and hypocritical. In the movie, every love relationship falls in the same ground. While prostitutes symbolized the sale of love for money, Basanio courts Portia for mending his lost fortune. Jessica elopes with Lorenzo by bringing the ducats and the jewellery

from her father. The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is homoerotic and this influence almost of the important incidents. The homoerotically charged relationship of Antonio and Bassanio makes Antonio's involvement in taking a loan from Shylock at his life's own risk. He therefore strengthens the homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. This homoerotic theme is introduced in the montage itself when Antonio cast a love sick Bassanio and calls his name as he passes through the gondola. Radford takes them to a bedroom by creating a space which is separated from the outside world. The scene closes when Bassanio kisses Antonio full on his lips. This relationship also poses a serious threat to the marital status of Bassanio and Portia at the latter part of the movie. Portia assumes herself as a rival against Bassanio's love which is shown in the ring episode clearly.

Jessica (Shylock's daughter) confuses the notion of anti-Semitism. This confusion is partly caused by "female body" and the notion of "male desire". Although Jessica is a Jew, she is not treated as an assimilated Jew. As mentioned earlier, one can always find a polarity between Christians and the Jew identities in the adaptation. But this notion of identity is confused by female body. A female body is accepted by the male Christians, although the Jews in general are hated and brutalized as anti-Christ and irrational. There is no single instance of humiliating female Jews in the movie. This made me to assume that Jew female identity (Jessica) exist only through its accessibility of the male desire for the dominant Christians. Jessica doesn't exist as a Jew identity, she is the "other" within her own community. When she eloped with Lorenzo she took all the ducats and the jewels that her father has. Lorenzo never asks her to bring these ducats and the jewels. She seems to hate her father because of his Jewish identity and his way of life. One must also know that they are not portrayed as the passionate lovers. They do not belong to the genre of Shakespeare's "star cross lovers" (Romeo and Juliet). Jessica, a Jew, hated her father because he is a Jew. It is worth to mention that she is shown at the closing part of the movie alone looking an early morning rising sun in the lagoon where small boats floats on the water with fisherman shooting fishes. Her sense of alienation from the Christian community is reflected at this scene. She touches her ring with her soft hands (her mother's ring) which is given to her by her father. The touch of the ring gives her a sense of belongingness which has been neglected. It is nothing but the regret of violating her father and her own community.

Therefore *Shakespeare's* art pounces on Jessica only to reflect a difference and produce an ambiguity. Her failure to understand Shylock and her own community might be a further extension of the theme of anti-Semitism. Again her sense of alienation which shows her failure of assimilation to the Christian community brings an ambiguity to her character.

Shylock, as a Jew is mirrored through his heinous vengeance against the Jews. He is shown through his monstrous ambition of taking revenge for his humiliation and oppression. However I would like to see him as a potential character. One must also remember that *Shakespeare* questions every established notions and conventions of his society. He portrays

Shylock as a powerful character who can question the oppressive ideology of the Christians. Here *Shakespeare* turns the social conventions upside down. He is a rich Jew from whom Antonio and Bassanio loans three thousand ducats with a bond of returning it in proper time. Shylock's strong hatred on the other hand is derived from the deeply rooted racial discriminations and exploitation of the Jews. This is clearly shown when he says...

He hath disgrace me
And hundred me half a million
Laugh at my losses, mocked at my gain
Scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains
Cooled my friends, heated mine enemies,
And what is his reason,
I am a Jew....(Radford, Michael movie 00:52;49)

Here, Shylock's shows the audience a new interpretative space of the Jewish oppression and their sufferings. In addition to his racial discrimination, he is also made as a victim of law as well. Therefore Radford in his adaptation of Shakespeare challenges this deep rooted racial hatred and discrimination of the Jews. The readers or the audience are alienated towards a certain degree that provokes sympathy for Shylock's sufferings in spite of his monstrous ambition of revenge. In fact he is a potential character and questions the established notions of racial hatred and oppression of the Jews while displaying Anti-Semitism at the same time.

Portia is also an important tool to understand the question of "Otherness" and "Racism" in the movie. Her suitors and the choice of a suitable husband are made totally on racial lines. The director captures her wooing scene with comic effects. Although her eligible husband is made on the condition of choosing the right casket from the three different boxes, the whole action is viewed as it is already planned by Portia. She conducted this scene by projecting her racial superiority. Her body language and excitement when Bassanio comes to woo her is different from the previous scene with the different suitors. Portia and her maid (Nerissa) observe the different suitors from a sense of racial superiority. The director portray each suitors (except Bassanio) with certain oddities in their gestures and body language which is reflected through the lenses of inferiority. The first suitor French lord. Monsieur Le Bon, is dismissed with "God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man" (The Merchant of Venice.1.2.56-57). The encounter with Morocco is also conducted on the same perspective. When Morocco holds her hand and kisses, her body language is indifferent. The exchange of her eye contact with Nerissa expresses a dismissive opinion of Morocco. His "I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes, In graces, and in qualities of breeding" (2.7.32-33) and the drawing of the swords by his man in air startles her and her maid comes to the front to protect her. And he is dismissed with his snake charming South African music. The prince of Aragon, who is accompanied by his Spanish guitar followers, is also dismissed with a similar perspectives of Otherness.

Portia also act as a tool which propagates racial indifference and hatred. In the courtroom scene, although she is seen as the voice of Christian mercy, she distorts Shylock's understanding of law. She, disguises as the young Doctor Balthazar who announces that the law can't deny his suit for a pound of flesh. She also sees Shylock as a villain who looks for revenge and hence an abominable Jew who needs to be saved from the dark world of barbarity. The concept of law that Portia adopted is subversive. Shylock fails to realize its subversive character. He sees only through its superfluous nature and remains as a victim of law. This victimization of Shylock is also fairly anti-Semitic because the construction of the law is made by the dominant and the upper class Christians. In this construction, the liberal and secular perspective that every humans are equal in the eyes of law is totally violated. Those who suffer are made to suffer more. The mechanism that law gives justice and equality to every human is undermined. Therefore he is bereaved of his ducats and other possessions as a verdict of the law. He is also compelled to convert himself into Christianity. His bereavement of property and his own identity as the verdict of the law is nothing but a result of cultural and moral prejudice that Christians have against the Jews. This doesn't mean that Shylock must be given his right of taking a pound of flesh according to the verdict of the suit. The law which saved Antonio from cutting a pound of flesh must be equally accessible for Shylock. His daughter abandons him then his possessions and ducats are usurped and finally his religious and cultural identity is destroyed. Therefore, law of the Christians fails to provide him basic human rights and his suffering is exceedingly portrayed. Moreover law that "no Christian blood is to shed" is a narrow construction which fairly signifies that it doesn't treat every human as equal. Those who think that Shylock is deserved to punish because of his villainous ambition miss a point. Shylock's ambition emerges from his deep rooted suffering and exploitation of being a Jew which is clearly reflected in his *I am a Jew speech*. One can't simply forget the deep rooted sufferings and the exploitation of the Jews which is clearly shown by Radford in the montage of the movie.

Therefore Radford's historization of the Elizabethan England in his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is anti-Semitic. The movie interrogates cultural and political identities of the Jews and the Christians in the 16th century racially plagued Venice. Shylock's character provides a new interpretative space which challenges the hegemony of the Christians and questions the subversive "law" which victimized him. Therefore Radford updates Shakespeare and provides a new interpretative space to the play.

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