

The Renaissance and Shakespeare
Department Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 05
William Shakespeare the Merchant of Venice Panel Discussion

Hello friends. In the last few modules you watched a performance of the trials scene from the Merchant of Venice. In this module we will move on to a panel discussion where the students and teachers from Jesus and Marry College University of Delhi will talk about their experience of performing the Shakespearean play. The challenges they faced, and some of the important issues that the play raises. The Merchant of Venice was probably written around 1597, 98.

Initially classified as a comedy, because of it is technically happy ending as you know Antonio's life is saved and the lovers come together. The play status as a comedy has increasingly come under question. The main reason for this is the fact that the play is unable to address and resolve the questions raised by Shylock the Jewish character. In fact, the play continues to resonate with meaning even in the 21st century as we are still struggling to overcome prejudices based on gender, race, religion class etcetera.

We are a team from Jesus and marry college. We have all been associated with the extract from the trial scene of the merchant of the Venice which you have just seen. My name is Harriet Raghunathan from the English department of the college. I had a hand in directing the play. On my left is Arunima Sen, also from the English department. And we have 4 students with us who will introduce themselves.

Student: my name is Viba Percival and I am the vice president of the English dramatic society. I have been an audience to the play as well as the part of the production. I hand over to Prashamsa.

Student: My name is Prashamsa Taneja. I am a first year English under graduate. And I play it Portia in the play.

Student: My name is Adrena Anne Thomas and I played a Shylock in the Merchant of Venice.

Student: My name is Kiziana Joseph. I played the role of the Duke in the Merchant of

Venice.

Tell me was a little bit about board and adventure, because we had not put on such large production as this before. In fact, (Refer Time: 02:33) one Shakespeare played before. And I feel that the girls were a little tentative at the beginning by the way it can actually put this off. And I want you to ask the girls how they felt when they first saw the lines with they had to learn. And how they gradually developed your sense of what their character was. Who would like to start here, Prashamsa?

Student: Yes, I my audition I said out the mercy speech which is very famous, but I said it in a very amateurish manner, but then Harriet ma'am corrected me and ask me to work on it. So, I went home, and I looked at a couple of productions on YouTube. And sort of you know instead of saying it in a very poetic and poetic manner, I tried saying it as a lady who was trying to defend her husband's friend in the court would. Lady dresses a man. So, yes I to be down from there.

I reigned you a new 2 Shakespeare out together; did you find it difficult to get into the character? Or did you soon set what it was about?

Student: Well, it was not that difficult for me. Because during my school time I done Julius Caesar where I played as mark Antony. So, but this is all the new thing for me. So, little bit I was with it.

(Refer Time: 04:07) between.

Student: It was a very wonderful experience for me it was very different from the other drama is we did in college. Other dramas you can change the words according to your wish if you forget the line. But when you are doing Shakespeare, you have to do all the words and all the poetic form. If you do it in the best way you can otherwise you will change which Shakespeare did.

How did you see your role as you? What did you think was coming across in this particular scene we chose?

Student: Well, I as a Duke I did not feel that I was being, that I was, I did not feel that I was doing the role of a Duke, who which a Duke should do. I was being very partial to the Jew, and I wanted what I wanted in the whole play was I wanted the Christians to

win. And I did not care about anything else. So, it was more about the Christians winning and about law happening.

So, why then did you feel? So, so helpless, why do said you say I may dismiss this court, while he not handle the case himself he runs out against the (Refer Time: 05:16) why is that if he so powerful?

Student: The Duke was powerful, but he said he would dismiss the court, because he did not feel that the Christians were winning. If he knew the he could handle in the Christians winning, he could have managed in the whole keys by himself. But because he knew that the Christians would not win, if we did the whole keys on his own, that is why he wanted someone else to come in and rescue the Christians in a way.

I (Refer Time: 05:46) play Shylock did you feel that your character viewed the court as biased?

Student: well in the beginning before the dressy was and all, I was like I was not that much into my character, but when I put on my whole Jewish cloth, I mean the whole garment come. I was like I felt that in the court scene itself how they how much the Christians were partial towards me.

Against to (Refer Time: 06:18).

Student: They then.

How much that (Refer Time: 06:23) in the production? Did you feel in the trail in the production to show something about Shylocks position in Venice from the way we constructed the stage?

Student: Yes, we are actually trying to show the position with Jewish. In that when in Venice at that point of time and they well show into be very inferior compare comparative to the Christians, and was very evident from the entire play. This from the beginning of the play till the end and act of imparssionist was there, but it was not, but at the same time this always there was a kind of minority feeling to was a Jewish that we are superior to them.

The (Refer Time: 07:03) that come out that can you seen.

Student: It was Benjunes.

Student: In the beginning of the scene itself.

You feel that he is he is deliberately trying to take Benjunes against the state.

Student: Because, since the beginning of the play itself the Jewish people were abused by the Christian community in the whole society. The Jewish community were being abused. And if we look towards the end also towards the trial scene where Shylock was being converted into a Christian, there also he was banished from his own Jewish community and what we.

So, the work what was important to his identity being a Jew following his religion, making the money in a way he did he felt that that was being deliberately taken away from him by his state?

Student: Is it the Jew Shylock represents a Jew of that place in Venice. Then we see that he was strict off humiliated, if it if it is court scene itself it is like he tries to make us stand of himself as a Jew in the court. That I you take slaves I am trying to do something it is a mirror of what you are doing, and trying to reciprocate in the same way in a as a sympathy it is a fact of sympathy that we gave in the end of the play as we move ahead with the play we think may be Shylock need sympathy, because of the kind of the way he is being treated or may be if we know that he is being humiliated and trashed out before the entire trial.

Production that you could not show the earlier scenes were Antonio is reported to having.

Jewish cap teen and that kind of prejudice we could not show. So, was it able to come out in the scene that we did (Refer Time: 08:45) what did you think?

I thought ask someone who is audience to the play, I mean I thought that I the kind of stage you know, we had where you put the Jew on one side and other Christian fellows on the other side. And then the kind of bias we are trying to address through a production that that kind of bias got translated into physical action. Because you have even though he was sharpening his knife and he was being called a dog on the court, you could by the end of the production by the end of the little trial scene that we did in you could understand that what kind of humiliation he is going through. Because he is in the hands

and the mercy of these Christian very high hamlet us superior you know merchants of Venice. And then law you know the law is right in front of the law is; obviously, manipulating itself. And you know that the whole idea of how courtier right comes in an just by trips in into his own body even though he show that he is

(Refer Time: 09:43) giving he is using the bond as a kind of test of Venice. Because he says let the danger light upon your kingdom your law, and he keep referring to your Venice and your law as if he is testing Venice. By bringing this bond to see it when he is will be impartial and uphold his bond or not.

Yes no, but exactly the problem that Venice is now caught in it is own law is something which Shylock is enjoying and the beginning of the play before Portia cleverly manipulates the whole thing. He is certain that he certain that he is going to win on this no way the Duke has going to be able to turn the tight right; and through Portia rhetoric and clever manipulation when the deist is turned against him like he is defeated in the end when he exists as a lone fellow.

Student: We can see in helpless.

He is helplessness. And I think, we by the placing of our characters we happily able to express a certain idea about how you know Shakespeare is dealing with. The charact the figure of the Jew during the (Refer Time: 10:44).

What about what I wanted to do and I manage to do with her costume was to have Shylock in very dark colors and stand out differently from the rest of the characters and I ask them to make that costumes as bright as possible. Because I think that there is a class difference that the Christians are gentlemen that they have a superiorus or. So, position to Shylock and this would also come out if we could contrast the costumes.

Student: And Nandini telling Christians wore brighter clothes compared to Shylock. And Shylock become completely flat and (Refer Time: 11:14) say this

So, tell me something about your costume Dukes, since you are representing law

Student: Well, I was representing law and the Christian community, so it both where it merged in the costume that I wore, because I represented the Christian community because there was a cross on the robe that I wore. So, when I wore the robe I felt the

power of the Duke, but sadly because I could not manage the code on my own. I had to call another lawyer who had to do it. And what I felt is all throughout the play even though the law had a main importance in the play, but even the Duke even the whole court was playing with the law. Because Portia was in these guys as a lawyer and she was a man in the court. I was thinking if there was another scene another act to the whole play Shylock could come again to the court and ask the Duke, you played with the law and you played with the whole law of Venice and you made a lady come into the court acting like a man.

Which is illegal

Student: Which is illegal; so I mean there was not any everyone was with the Christians, there was no one with the Jew so the whole.

Portia tell me about how you felt your part did you have a sense of playing with the lawyer or manipulating the situation when you are acting that role.

Student: Yes I did, I felt that it must have been good fun for Portia to come dressed up as a man and defend her husband's friend in the court. And she also manipulated the law. She found a loop whole which very obvious, but which nobody had notice that he asks her asks her for a pan of flesh. There is no jot of blood involved. And also the fact that she turns it upon the Jew and she just talk about mercy, but at the end we do feel that it comes to nothing, because nobody is merciful to the Jew.

Yes that lesson of mercy is not heard by Christians for them.

Student: Yes.

Which the whole speech was mentally only directed only to Shylock to make him combine with what they Christians wanted. And the Christians themselves neither seem to criticize their own actions nobody reviews specially (Refer Time: 13:48) for his reviews and nobody reminds Antonio (Refer Time: 13:51) there is no introspection or self examination by the Christians at all. So, is this mercy somewhat disturbing you think about it because it is flip service too it does not show.

Yes.

Student: Does it show Christian are have been hipocripts you know, because when they always speech mercy and peace and when they preach things like that. So, does it really show that is actually what?

It was if we if Portia is enjoying trapping the Jew in an unexpected way in the matter of the document has involve which relying upon this then what is merciful about that.

Yes.

And in another thing is when the second clause she comes up with legally is that she could catch him for being an area.

Yes.

And so, that you are still left with the end of the scene, with the sense of this resist bias against Shylock.

She he is an using the fact that he is (Refer Time: 14:46).

Student: And she is completely alienated by the end. Because we also come to know that the laws were aliens are different. And perhaps if Christian had a committed the same crime he would not be punished as severely as Shylock was.

See the term alien itself is quite interesting, because what you are definitely talking about is the fact that he is not included.

Yes.

And he is not protected under the same law which protects the Christians. And because he is an alien his property is confiscated, I mean his sustenance is confiscated. And he is at the end he is like you have taken away my pride, my identity, an identity which you was wore that you are this you are the Jew you are wearing the Jewish kind you have taken away my identity. And then you take away my property. So, you take away everything which you had allowed for me to have when you are very privileged Christian state right.

So, Anne did you feel that speech was affecting the audience when you said it you take away with the means away by and so on that speech?

Student: Yes ma'am, because I was stripped out of all my honor in that speech. It clearly showed how much injustice was being done towards me, and.

Student: If this same we speak in the Indian context also. Like the minority can be clearly shown if see the Jewish character. We can actually correlated to what happens in a state having minority. So, where stripping off the entire identity is the purpose to bring out their pride being down and show then the inferior to what the majority or the superior class is.

And also the sense of homogenization right how now the Jews are Christian, but not never a Christian.

Yes.

Not really.

He is first to change his religion, but he is not a simulated and welcomed into the community.

Absolutely.

Student: Even after he became a Christian gratiano was jeering at him.

Yes.

Student: He was still jeering at the Jew.

Yes.

And clearing the justice which are needs go with his life yes he goes and counted the gallowses and look at the Duke's final sentence which humbleness. They want Shylock to admit his humiliation and subrogation to them and before they were allow him to escape with his life.

Student: This is very sarcastic from the poet of view, like from the Duke.

Student: And also when rasiona says, I would rather you die than go to heaven as a Christian humilous.

And I do not think that the Christians can have the excuse that we are rescuing Shylock soul from hell by way converting him for the sake of his own soul that does not come across at all the fact what comes across is the theme of money exactly.

Yes I have money finds us way into the legal system. I mean because look at Bassanio he is shaking those Duke it is in front of the court, say take it take it take it and what Portia is ensuring is the fact that Shylock does not get away with the money. Because if you know one of the outcomes of the trail could also have been that Shylock being paid what is just he is right. He did not handle the money to Bassanio when he.

He said give me the prince and let me go.

Yeah.

One of his possible outcomes could have been that he you know got the money, but he is delight of that entire you know.

And since, they were talked about weft and stealing especially in the context of the Christians or angels feeling Jessica from the Jew. If the Jew not entitled to pay more felt is going on under the government of justice, in the final scene of the play, because he looses his principle. And then even his inheritance has to go forcibly into Christian hands.

Yes.

(Refer Time: 18:25) Jessica he is do not which Antonio comes in a 2 things more.

Yes very sparkly.

It shows talk about the property.

Yes.

And therefore, how the whole idea of the play being called Merchant of Venice and the Jew who is an ambulation to this entire Christian merchant cycle at circle sorry, and you know how he is continuously he is; obviously, look at it Antonio and Bassanio approach him for the money when they do not have it. So, he is; obviously, the man with the money. And the only charge Antonio has against Shylock is the fact that he is too

aggressive about taking interest.

Student: Definitely I think Antonio was always man called it, like the very sad kind giving up kind. Suddenly when he wants some money he comes forward and says 2 things very interestingly. The entire act that is very suddenly comes up and Franklin says it, because to in the entire play is not giving up and he said you know take I am the flock and. So, that is how Antonio is been portrayed.

What theme of the play might be that you are suppose to value value we love and friendship in human relationships higher than monitory things and material goods, but in a way there is something in this scene which contradicts that. And the exposure that Shylock gives when he says you have a (Refer Time: 19:57) many approach slave. They are cheating other human beings as a commodity and it is very clear that the Christians expect those slave to sweat under burdens to the inferior to them to in different food and so on. So, that the so much message that we are suppose to pick up about love and friendship being good values and money not is under cut and that is not answer you know the questions which Shylock has raised are not satisfactory be covered up. Shakespeare cannot manage to bring the play back together I think it is problem type.

Yeah.

You know it is build as a comity because there is not much which is very amusing in this scene. And he questions also disturbing they contradiction in people's character, the way the Christians characters it is very disturbing. So, you it revokes thought.

It also addresses a certain kind of opposition to the kind of systems which existed during renessa you know it only that the Jew is not allowed. So, you know the kind of professional liberty Christian is and the professions that he is allowed to enter. He is he somehow he is the villain that goes into the imagination of the Jews somehow always already implicated in it as a money lender you know. So, he is a villain he does not have a soul he is a hardened character.

So, they need him they need his loans and financing system they need the credit to.

Exactly.

But they were trying to.

As powerless as possible in this state because it is also about power and having a voice right, having rights which he does not have because; obviously, his property at is the you know at the mercy of the Christians right. So, the moment he wash up proves it that he is been plotting against the Christian citizen brought his confiscator act so it.

Student: Mainly character Shylock I think, inst it that Venice people Venice is made him into what he is.

Exactly, and then punishing him for.

Student: And then punishing him for what it is (Refer Time: 21:58).

What about gender which is one scene which is definitely there in a play not necessarily particularly highlighted in the extract we did. And of course, we have the disadvantage of not having different success playing the 2 hampered as a little bit. Did you feel that scene of liberation of Portia was a able to come across?

Student: Yes, I think the fact that she was able to, she traveled by the night and she went you know to save Antonio's life, it gave her chance of self actualization.

Student: Because for a lady whose been who is lived with her father, and who has not has had a chance to you know do good in the world or you know let her money flow. And she is a very wealthy and wealthy lady. And I think this gives her a chance to go and speak and save a man's life, but then it becomes problematic and we think. So, what happens to Shylock, because even the Antonio's life is saved Shylock at the end still.

Demolished.

Student: Yes.

So, it is act the (Refer Time: 23:13) of Shylock, but she gains a kind of liberating status. What is our relationship with Bassanio; because Bassanio is almost comically ineffective.

Yes.

I think Portia's liberation under the lawyers robe, you know it does you know raise some critical issues in terms of gender that of course, she is empower with the kind of

exposure she has in the court. And she is manipulating people and bit. It somehow it I think Bassanio's presence in that scene is actually a funny, because you realize that even when he is the Lord of Belmont he is not really of any effect in that Portia is after all control with him within Belmont and without Belmont.

And in the public places when is in the (Refer Time: 24:05).

Public place and therefore, it kind of you which is why comically. It is subverting a kind of main stream idea of the public's fear, during the renaissance which was which excluded women.

She is taken it over she is completely uncontrollable.

Yes exactly.

And she did not you know Duke have her own husband, but (Refer Time: 24:26) something to say if she heard you.

Student: And also the fact it when we says here is the money she tells in that you know this is not a.

(Refer Time: 24:34).

Student: The lord is not allow with this you can not and he tells with you to Duke too, you know let Antonio go and change the law for this particular case she says that many (Refer Time: 24:43) same example will rush on to this state this cannot be (Refer Time: 24:46)

So, she prevents Bassanio from being a here with (Refer Time: 24:49) he is the young handsome man who gets the (Refer Time: 24:51), but that is the he is allowed to do he is not allowed to do anything here. Which is quite amusing in a (Refer Time: 24:46) So, bitter of sense right.

Student: And also telling the husband works what the law allows what it does not allow if others knew if she were woman that would have been scandalous. Telling her own husband what is in the law and what is not.

Yeah.

20 minutes is all too short time for us to have covered every issue of the play. Just our extract was not able to in compress everything. But I think that several issues race, class, gender, the role of the law, the minority communities within a state and how they view the law. These kinds of things we tried to bring up. So, we enjoyed our self very much a hope you too.

Yes.