

# The Jew as Racial “Villain”: a Historico-Generic Interpretation of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas as Victims of Racial Circumstances in Elizabethan Drama.

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## ABSTRACT

As an advocate of the dictum which states that a literary work is always part and parcel of the cultural background from which it was created and as part of my reading and teaching Elizabethan drama at tertiary level, I find the personalities of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas most fascinating and challenging but well situated and analyzed within the background of Renaissance studies. However, teaching Renaissance Literature and literary concepts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century raises pertinent questions as to the validity of application of today’s standards of morality to dramatic works produced from a Renaissance perspective with its attendant principles and concepts. I have, therefore, always been intrigued about an analysis of these characters from modern day concepts of good and evil. The culmination of my urge is this paper titled: The Jew as racial “Villain”: A historico-generic interpretation of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas as victims of circumstances in Elizabethan drama.” The paper attempts to look at these characters from a modern perspective and to see if they remain as villains in our minds today as they were conceived of in Elizabethan parlance. My findings are that the characters, if analyzed from modern day perspectives appear as complex characters whose actions are misunderstood and thus they can be seen simply as victims of racial circumstances whose punishment is unjustified. Quote: Fear is the most crippling of all the emotions and there are many things in life and in the world to make us afraid. We lack integrity because we are afraid to be ourselves Harold Winestone; The Jew is himself and refuses to be any other

## INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a compendium of material about Jews in English Literature (Allan Katz, 1961) most of which present diverse views about the character and disposition of the Jew in Literature. Katz observes, however, that despite this array of Literature on Jews in English Fiction, no one had bothered to examine or ask the questions.

- Why the picture of the Villainous Jew has remained constant from the medieval ballads about the murder of Hugh of Lincoln to the novels of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, why the conscious attempts to reject the stereotype have resulted in sub-literary propaganda, and why Jewish characters are now being moved from the periphery of the novel to be placed at its centre.

These are pertinent questions that must be addressed if the portrait of the Jew must be properly presented in modern day context as human beings and chosen people of God rather than villains or devil incarnates.

The problem is that the generally presented and often accepted portrait, right from the Elizabethan era, does not favor a realization of the Jew outside his villainous garb and this has continued to the modern era. The villainous garb has led Jana Dicosmo (2004) to examine the position of the Jew in the Renaissance vis-à-vis the backdrop of the biblical Promised Land as an “irony of the promised land”. According to Dicosmo, despite God’s promise to Abram, a Jew, in Genesis 12:7, in which God said to Abram “to your offspring I will give this land”, and so he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him”, Christians have repeatedly “offered and confiscated” this “Promised land”. And so from the Renaissance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews have suffered all forms of brutality in Europe and beyond. They were expelled from England in 1290 by Charles Anjou’s edict of expulsion and many other European countries followed namely France (1394); Spain (1492); Portugal (1497); and Southern Italy (1541). Jews were also subjected to genocidal torture and near extinction by Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany. But who really is the “Villainous Jew” or the “Villain”?

The villain is generally regarded as

- A person who, for a selfish end, willfully and deliberately violates the standards of morality sanctioned by the audience or reader. (Boyer 1964).

The villain is again described as

- A character who ignores society’s standards of morality and does something that is considered evil [by the society]. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Again the villain is

- An evil character in a novel, movie, play or other story especially one who is the main enemy of the hero.

---- Encarta Dictionary.

And finally the villain is

- An evil character in a story, whether a historical narrative or, especially, a work of fiction. The villain usually is the antagonist, the character who tends to have a negative effect on other characters.
- Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia.

The Jew according to James Shapiro (1996) is characterized in Barabbas' speech in Act 2 Sc. 3 where he says.

- I walk abroad o' nights;  
And kill sick people groaning under walls;  
Sometimes I go about and poison wells  
And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,  
I am content to lose some of my crowns,  
That I may, walking in my gallery,  
See 'em go pinioned along by my door.  
--- And in the wars 'twixt France and Germany under pretence of helping Charles the fifth,  
Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems.  
Then after than I was an usurer,  
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,  
And tricks belonging unto brokery  
I flid the jails with bankrupts in a year  
And with young orphans planted hospitals  
And every moon made some or other mad,  
And now and then one hangs himself for grief,  
How I with interest tormented him. (Marlowe: *The Jew of Malta*)

From this monologue, Martin D. Yaffe (1997) equates the Jew with villainy and argues that Barabbas's "villainous" criminality is indistinguishable from his Jewishness. (Yaffe P. 24).

The above quoted definitions of villainy seem to pitch the so called "Villainous" individual's behavior against his alien society's morality which he ignores as a result of racial differences thus de-emphasizing individual beliefs or moral standpoints that differ from the prescribing society's moral perception. From this perspective, it is difficult to have a universal concept of villain or villainy since not all races have the same standards of morality in defining what is good or evil and hence what should constitute villainy. This, perhaps, explains why in Aristotelian parlance, it was impossible for a villain to stimulate tragic pleasure i.e. pity or fear in the minds of the audience or readers. If this be the case, it follows that the villain cannot be hero, cannot arouse sympathy or cause the reader to identify with him and his cause. However, the characters of Iago, Shylock and Barabbas do, infact, solicit our sympathies instead of arousing totally detestable emotions in us as consummate villains that they are portrayed as. We see them as persons with motives even when we may differ in opinion with the motives or out-rightly reject the motives as insufficient to warrant their so called "villainous" actions.

### **CONCEPT OF THE JEW IN ELIZABETHAN ERA.**

The Jew, in Elizabethan society was conceived of and branded villain or revenger who was simply blood thirsty and acting against the established moral order of the society. Craig Harris (1994) posits that the Elizabethan villain, right from the start, is conceived of as "entirely self conscious and entirely black, a complete embodiment of evil". Incidentally, this was also the portrait of the Jew so the Jew becomes the villain, and the vengeful Jew, the total villain. In Elizabethan society, Jews were not Christians and since Christian theology disfavors revenge and emphasizes forgiveness, the Jew was automatically ostracized and dubbed a villain who operated in a moral vacuum as a result of his propensity for revenge. He was seen as neither responsible to God nor to humanity and man. His code of conduct was determined by his will which was often unbending but dictated by his desires for self satisfaction. But why this picture of the Jew? Is he really a villain and created as such or are there historical or social antecedents of cruelty and injustice perpetrated against the Jew that arouse his vengeful instinct. To properly see the Jew as a "natural" villain perhaps one should examine the modern concepts of good and evil in society.

### **THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF GOOD AND EVIL IN SOCIETY**

When one discusses the concept of villainy in Literature, one is really looking at the unpredictable power of evil over good in human nature or human society or within the individual human being. This evil force in human nature could rise to an uncontrollable level and become habitual or characteristic of an individual hence he becomes a villain. This same evil force is what literary artists, in different ages have created villainous characters to attempt to portray or to address or explicate (Sherr-Ziarko 2011).

However, as it pertains to human nature, the concept of evil or villainy which corresponds to the high propensity for evil has become difficult and complex thus engaging deep philosophical examination. The questions that philosophers, psychologists or psycho-analysts and even Literary artists have, for long, attempted to answer are whether evil is innate in man and specifically here, in the Jew, who, it was believed in Elizabethan era, was born evil or whether evil is extraneous to human nature and hence a function of environmental affectation; and finally, what really is the catalyst to the evil propensity. If according to psycho-analysts like Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud, evil is an ingrained component of human nature and Literary artists like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne tend to support this view, wherefore lies the Renaissance or Elizabethan labeling of the Jew as evil and villainous. Modern debate therefore makes the Elizabethan position contentious, as modernists tend to conceive of evil as a function of the environment or an innate or universal characteristic which is not peculiar to any race or culture. These are difficult and delicate issues about which debates are rife and unending. As his contribution to the debate on evil and villainy, Bernard Spivack (1958) makes the distinction between the “villain” and the “intelligible criminal”. To him the villain embraces evil as inherent in his nature, part and parcel of his life and action while the “intelligible criminal” only succumbs to evil as a result of societal pressures of evil surrounding him. If this is accepted, one can venture to add that given the circumstances under which they are accused of “villainy”, Shylock, Iago and Barabbas should be seen as “intelligible criminals” and victims of their circumstances rather than villains. To buttress this assertion against the background of the persistent reference to these characters as villains, one needs to go back into history and Literary perspectives on the Jew as well as an examination of the characters themselves in order to validate this perspective.

#### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE JEW**

HISTORICALLY, THE IMAGE OF THE Jew and his propensity for evil derived from and is moderated and shaped by historical antecedents in Jewish relationship with the Western world. One of such is the experience of one Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew, who, in 1592 was personal physician to Queen Elizabeth I. Through some complicity; Dr. Lopez was accused of treason, tried and executed for attempting to kill the Queen. The Lopez case, fired by anti-Jewish sentiment, certainly generated an expansive wave of anti-Semitism in the West. The unresolved question, however, remains whether he was suspected because of his Jewish relationship. Furthermore, in the annals of Christianity, Jews have been known to be anti-Christ. Jews, in their numbers, were not followers of Christ and so did not believe in Christianity which incidentally was the ultimate ruling power in Europe and the West from the medieval period to the Renaissance and through to the age of Reason and Enlightenment. The non-Christian Jew was automatically perceived of as a threat to the existing social order and as such was labeled the devil-incarnate and a villain. Jews themselves did not help matters through their quest for materialism. In Elizabethan parlance, therefore, the Jew was perceived to have been created by God to distort the natural order of things and bring about chaos which then threatened universal harmonious existence. The Jew was thus an undesirable element in society.

In Christendom, the Jews were known to have unanimously demanded the release of Barabbas, a confirmed Jewish thief and criminal as replacement for Jesus Christ whom they scourged and crucified. Professed Christians would naturally hate Jews and treat them with contempt or disdain leading to the stereotypical presentation of Jews as villains and killers. The West, or more specifically Europe, having imbibed Christianity jealously guided it and believed from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond that Christianity “was the only true religion, and that this social order was ordained by God”.--- (Harris 1994).

It is obvious that following from these antecedents, there was a rising wave of anti Semitic feeling in Europe which favored the growth of anti-Semitic stereotypes in social and literary circles in Europe. Anti-Semitism was an easy way in this era to characterize literary villains and anti Semitism was further fuelled in Christendom by the historical portrait of Judas the traitor who betrayed and sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, as well as Herod the “children slayer” who wanted to do away with Christ. All of these were Jews in history whose actions were fuelled by greed and avarice. These historical antecedents, it can be argued, fuelled or moderated the image of the Jew in the Literature of the Elizabethan period.

#### **LITERARY PERSPECTIVE ON THE JEW**

Literarily, the anti Semitic feeling rose so high in Europe that the entire literary gamut was suffused with portraits of Jews as villains notwithstanding the motives that fired these so called villainous actions. It appeared that the anti-Semitic portrait received biblical sanction or justification in Christendom particularly during the medieval mystery and morality plays when the dramatic presentations were derived from biblical stories. Edgar Rosenberg (1960) therefore observes that there are twin roles ascribed to the Jewish villain in Literature, (i) The Jew as a wicked killer and (ii) The Jew as a usurer or greedy businessman. The image of the Jew is also addressed by Emma Ariane SherrZiarko (2011) who argues that another important distinction lies between “the

villain who is primary to the plot and the one who is secondary". To Ziarko, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Edmund in *King Lear* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* "all have villainous qualities, but they do not dominate their plays as Richard and Iago do", therefore "Richard and Iago's dual identities as both villain and protagonist make the issue of evil primary in a way that the other characters do not". (Ziarko P.10) Sherr-Ziarko's position raises questions regarding the picture or personality of the villain which the audience or reader are made to see by the writer. The pertinent question here is whether this perception is the portrayal of the natural qualities of the literary character as villain or whether the dramatist is deliberately leading us to see or perceive of his character as such and in keeping with the dictates of society's expectations. Further, does the central characterization of an individual ascribe to him or her more heinous or villainous qualities or does this simply accentuate his crimes thus making us resent his personality. Sherr-Ziarko, however, points out that the positions of Richard and Iago as protagonists allows the "playwright [to] confront the morality of evil", but it does not ascribe evil to the characters as a natural or habitual instinct.

The anti-Semitic image of the Jew was not restricted to Western Literature. In the East, particularly in Russian Literature, the anti-Semitic feeling was also apparent as Maurice Friedberg (2008) observes the high anti-Semitic feeling in Russian Literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the stereo-typical presentation of Jews as "an incongruous combination of an ugly and repugnant Jewish father and his beautiful daughter". There were as well numerous hostile portrayals of Jews as traitors in Russian Literature. Says Friedberg:

- In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the unfriendly depiction of the Jew underwent yet another shift. Aristocratic contempt for the Jew had largely disappeared, but it was replaced by the hostile references of plebeian writers. Some of these, driven by chauvinism and religious intolerance, accused the Jews of plotting against Russia's traditional values and institutions, identifying them with revolutionary terrorists.

Modernism, however, attempted to moderate these unfavorable portrayals as they were countered in the latter part of the century. Friedberg again posits that:

- During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century other writers began to defend the Jews from their numerous enemies and to attack all forms of anti-Semitic persecution and discrimination ... outstanding among these was Nikolay Leskov... whose overall output constitutes a clever attack on Russian anti-Semitism.

## THE JEWISH POSITION IN LITERATURE

The Jewish position itself did not help in the elimination of these anti-Semitic stereotypes. The Jewish pattern of relentless material acquisition naturally pitched them against all other racial groups and even against themselves, many of whom became unfortunate victims of this quest for wealth. Shakespeare's Shylock and Marlowe's Barabbas achieve villainous status specifically as a result of this relentless tendency. As Friedberg puts it,

- The Jews, like all other ethnic groups, are really divided... into two warring nations in one – the exploiters and the exploited. The exploited and the poor of all nations are natural allies, as are the rich exploiters of the various ethnic groups. The former are to be portrayed with compassion and sympathy and the latter are to be shown as their villainous foes.

And so the wealth seeking Jew naturally becomes a villainous foe in his portrayal in Literature and otherwise. However, from the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century the general trend was reversed and the Jew moved to the centre of literary compositions in most societies where he was present, this time not as the detestable villain and scourge of the environment but as a human being contributing to societal growth. The question here is what was responsible for this positive change of attitude. Edgar Rosenberg supplies a possible answer when he observes that the patriotic god fatherism of some writers like Cumberland in his portrait of the Jew, Sheva, fails to redeem the already battered image of the Jewish race. However, the image of the Jew as villain was undergoing a natural metamorphosis owing to modern trends and modern psychological perspectives on the concept of villainy. To try to trace the evolution of this shift in the literary presentation of the Jew Sherr-Ziarko once again opines that:

- The villain was a product of a moral shift that had begun in the English morality plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The morality genre, along with the mystery plays and saints plays were originally initiated BY THE ENGLISH CHURCH (emphasis mine) as a means to instruct the laity in the life of Christ and Christian values, ... the moralities transformed from a purely religious to a secular genre and vestiges of this tradition are visible in the works of Marlowe, Shakespeare and their contemporaries... By examining the evolution of this form, we can detect a shift in theatrical and ethical values that resulted in Elizabethan drama and the confrontation of human evil through the figure of the villain (Sherr-Ziarko P.14)

The villain thus becomes a representative rather than a racial character. The origin of the villain and villainy as a tool for the confrontation of human evil can thus be traced to the English Christian church of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The concept of the villain may well have arisen and was nurtured by the Christians out of the



generic hatred for the Barabbas who sold Christ. However, aesthetic value and taste have since changed and modern day moral sensibility does not favor this kind of villainous creations anymore. Today, villainy is a product of environmental circumstances and so Shylock, Iago and Barabbas, though cast in villainous garb in Elizabethan parlance, still possess admirable qualities. Rosenberg, therefore, admires them because

- ... Marlowe's and Shakespeare's Jews assert themselves actively against their persecution and regard it as a source of terror. The point is that none of them can be sensibly appreciated without an awareness of the restrictions which prevent them from participating fully in the social world. There comes a point at which Barabbas, the professional poisoner, seizes to be a satanic figure and can lecture Ferneze on the conditions of injustice without immediately sounding ludicrously hypocritical...

### MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON THE JEW

Bryan Cheyette observes that "the figure of the Jew was, therefore, almost certainly not drawn from life but rather from imagination and popular tradition, the latter, a mixture of prejudice and idealization". (Cheyette 2008 P.3). There is, therefore, a new attitude seen as a noble and generous respect and affection for the Jew in later literary traditions, yet this new perspective continues to fluctuate. Twentieth century writers like T.S. Elliot, Graham Greene and G.K Chesterton return to the medieval and Elizabethan portrayal of the Jew as "the Dark Jew" or "the Devil incarnate". Despite this portrayal, one still feels that even though the "Jew-villain" is perceived to negate or ignore generally accepted societal standards of morality, and does things that are considered evil, he still possesses redeeming qualities in the sense that his actions are predicated upon perceived maltreatment and wrongs perpetrated upon his person by society. Shylock's, Iago's and Barabbas' vengeance are condemned by many as inappropriate for their perceived wrongs but this condemnation fails to take into account their natural feelings, sentiments or passions. These characters are acutely aware of the general anti-Semitic feeling against them reminiscent in the seizure of their property and threatened conversion to Christianity. They are like victims "tied to a stake but Bear-like, they must fight their course". Craig Harris (1994) therefore believes that

- Estrangement from God, man, and community enables the villain to view his own acts as if performed in a moral vacuum. Consequently, there is no limit of suffering and devastation he can inflict before the prick of conscience awakens him from his demonic trance.

The image of the Jew was therefore cast after the medieval "evil stereotype of the Jew [which] is clearly based on the Christian account of the crucifixion of Jesus including his betrayal by Judas... [and] the stage Jew looked rather like the devil in the old mystery plays" (Cheyette 2008 P.5). However, the redemption of this literary image of the Jew seems to have started with the positive image of the "wandering Jew", Ahasuerus, who, according to Cheyette (2008) "lives forever to testify to the salvation offered to the world. Ahasuerus' image is not that of an unsympathetic Jew but rather a symbol of universal wisdom and experience". Sherr-Ziarko (2011), though tending to the line of the general belief in the Jew as villain, observes that the transformation of the "Jew-Villain" from an individual fraught with evil to a "modern-villain" of society is a matter of

- ...Shifting aesthetics and... of growing reluctance to confront the question of human evil. The total acceptance of the Jew as the "Elizabethan villain" precludes the modern intellectual approach to villainy that situates villainy within historical, economic and social or even political conditions that define human actions.

From this perspective, evil becomes difficult to define and so the actions of purportedly "villainous" protagonists like Shylock, Iago and Barabbas can only be properly analyzed from the point of view of racial biases that were prevalent in Europe during the Elizabethan era. Contemporary attitude towards evil or villainy are certainly more liberal than medieval conceptions of such values, perhaps because we are all villains of some sort.

Furthermore, in attempting to redelineate the characters of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas, one may look back to an earlier seventeenth century concept of the "heroic villain" which equates the villain with a personality possessing "a greatness of soul". Marlies Danziger quotes Samuel Werenfels as the first to argue that "**great cruelty and great villainy can arouse admiration and are, therefore eminently suitable subjects for a grand or sublime style**". The "villainous" dispositions of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas can thus be viewed in terms of "exaggerated guilt [which] contributes to raise them to character[s] of heroism" (Danziger P. 38)

In Elizabethan terms, "exaggerated guilt" was defined from the perspective of the stereotypical Jew-villain which according to Ivona Misterova (2010) was seen as

- ... blood libel allegations and host desecration accusations [which] create a strong negative image of Jews as ritual murderers of Christians who must be punished severely and converted to Christianity.

To the Jew therefore, the threat of conversion from his traditional Judaism was enough to unleash a high degree of villainy on his perceived antagonist. Religion happens to be a deep seated factor in human identity and universal cosmic affiliation, which explains why Christians treated Jews the way they did in Elizabethan era.

Christian antagonism naturally aroused in the Jew anger and frustration resulting in their perceived “villainous or unfriendly disposition” but Jewish guilt is certainly exaggerated to the extent that it can be conceived of as the proverbial “give a dog a bad name in order to hang it”. This exaggeration favored the villainous attribute of the Jew but is hardly an inherent trait when the characters are viewed against the background of their persecution in the western world. Present day perspectives on the Jew as “Villain” have therefore been more tolerant and favorable and as Misterova again points out

- ... Shylock at first sight appears to function as an unscrupulous and blood-thirsty usurer attempting to take a Christians life and is finally granted “Christian Salvation”. On the contrary, Shylock is not depicted as a merely negative stereotypical Jew. Shylock is an eloquent speaker whose well aimed and “carefully weighed” words never miss the target... Shylock cannot be understood merely as a schematic villain and money lender; Shylock is a timeless figure allowing for a wide variety of directional attitudes and interpretations.

The portrait of the Jew now comes out not as a villain but as a hero and his personality becomes complex and ambiguous. The Jew is cast as Devil and Angel; Hero and Villain. The advocacy today is for the image of the Jew to be presented not from the Elizabethan world view but in relation to environmental, situational or circumstantial determinants. Let us now analyze the portrait of Shylock, Iago and Barabbas from contemporary environmental perspective in the bid to reposition or re-delineate their personalities in literary and historical perspective. This re-evaluation would be helpful in the light of modern day values which have shifted focus from the Jew as “villain” and brought him to the centre of, not just European, but universal literary traditions. Bryan Sheyette (2008) has argued that the German pogrom that led to the holocaust and its aftermath has provided a new dimension to the problem of Jewish existence in the birth of the state of Israel. Sheyette opines that

- ... These momentous events, shattering old illusions, in time created a new sense of tragedy and peril, in which the Jew became the focus of a universal situation. This feeling can be detected in several Anglo-Jewish writers, although none of them was as significant as such United States authors as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth.

In character portrayal, therefore, Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is described as the most note-worthy figure in the comedy though there is, as yet, no consensus as to whether he is a tyrannical villain or a tragic victim. Opinions vary as to his personality. While some people see him as a blood thirsty villain who is vengeful, materialistic and shrewd, others perceive of him as “an intelligent and eloquent speaker open to a wide variety of directional attitudes and interpretations” (Misterova 2010). Shylocks reply to Salerio as per what Antonio’s flesh would do to him if Antonio forfeits the bond should be analyzed from the perspective of Shylocks perceived wrongs. His reply is “If it would feed nothing else, it would feed my revenge. He had disgraced me, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, and scorned my nation”.

Shylock accepts, in one sentence, that he seeks revenge but for what? He outlines several reasons which we ignore because we must pillory the Jew from our preconceived notions of him. No one cares to consider Shylock’s national pride and the degradation to which he and his nation are exposed as a result of Antonio’s scornful and mocking advances on Shylock. In contemporary parlance, not many of us will brook insults to our personalities talk less of our National pride. Shylock cannot, therefore, strictly be blamed for his actions or attitude towards Antonio. Shylock has a realistic personality which he presents to us in act three, his most eloquent and realistic speech which goes thus

- ... Hath not a Jew eyes?  
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions;  
Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?  
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?  
... If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute... (Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*)

From this, it is obvious that the Christian it is who has taught the Jew villainy through his stereotypical racial disposition. In medieval Elizabethan society, evil was seen in terms of a system of values established by Christian ethics to determine relationships. Shylock was not a Christian so why do we judge him by Christian ethical standards. Shylock’s morality is only subject to Jewish ethical standards which permit wealth acquisition and revenge. Antonio, on the other hand, is bound by legal point of honor to keep to the terms of the agreement into which he entered willingly to spite Shylock because he knew Shylock would not be allowed to take a pound of flesh. Shylock is thus simply a victim of circumstances and racial discrimination along the lines of what

society called him and perceived of him i.e. “the dirty Jew”. Josh Lambert (2009) therefore observes that the term “dirty Jew”

- ... Cropped up in the popular literature of the era... encapsulating the abuses of repulsive villains patterned after Shakespeare’s Shylock, Marlowe’s Barabbas and Dicken’s Fagin – though none of these classic characters are referred to in the original texts as “dirty”.

This notwithstanding, Lambert posits that the usage of the terms denotes an insult and a mark of racial prejudice common to anti-Semitic writers. As a reversal of this trend, Lambert also notes that “In 1907, a Los Angeles man was awarded five dollars by a judge after being called a “dirty Jew”.

This was a good example of the hard fact that there was a gradual recognition of the unjust and unjustifiable treatment of the Jew as sub-human or villainous simply because he held contrary Religious or ethical views to the generally espoused ones by a particular society. In Shakespearean compendium, the most intriguing, most interesting and exciting or colorful characters are those of Shylock and Iago which underlies my choice of them along with Marlowe’s Barabbas, as complex and captivating Jewish characters worthy of our attention today. Shylock is, infact, further exonerated when one considers his daughters theft of his money and jewelry, her elopement with Lorenzo, a Christian rival and her defection to Christianity. Nicole Smith (2011), in her character analysis of Shylock, therefore, argues that

- ... Shylock has never been understood... and this complicates the readers relationship with his character and the subsequent punishment he receives because, although he is not likable, one cannot help but sympathize with his plight as an outcast.

He is thus more of a victim of circumstances beyond his control rather than an inherent villainous knave that he is portrayed as.

Shakespeare’s other intellectual, Iago in *Othello* is equally described by Sherr Ziarko (2011) as “an intimately cruel character”. Compared to Iago, Richard in *Richard the Third* is seen as a “good guy” since his villainy is motivated by his lust for power while it is argued, Iago’s villainy lacks motivation. William Taylor Coleridge therefore describes Iago’s villainy as “the motive hunting of a motiveless malignity (quoted from Sherr Ziarko (2011) p.81). But Iago has motives which we may find difficult to identify with because of our conditioned biases. He states unequivocally that his reasons for his actions are hatred. Like Shylock’s insistence, “I want what I am entitled to”, Iago, severally states, “I hate the Moor”. Shylock and Iago are therefore Jews who are intimately aware of their social status, who both hate Christians because of their discriminating attitude to Jews. Again, Iago’s conceived villainy against his wife is as a result of suspicion which is aroused because of sexual jealousy which is seen as a very strong emotion and Iago cannot therefore be called a villain simply because he is jealous. He should be seen instead as a subtle artful actor whose talent at persuasion is unparalleled. What we should be concerned with is why all the other characters, including Othello himself, are so naïve and gullible as to be easily manipulated by Iago. Why are they so malleable? The answer is that both Shylock and Iago are sublime and highly intellectual. Critics argue that Iago’s motives are selfish and self seeking but all humanity relishes in-dominance and Iago is no exception as he wishes to emotionally and psychologically dominate and rule over his compatriots. Iago’s intelligence and avowed honesty, ironically attested to by all his victims, aids his domineering and persuasive character and he should be admired for this. Underlying Iago’s hatred for Othello is the fact that Iago is regarded as a heathen which few people notice. Iago feels he is not given command of the army simply because he is not a Christian. Jews as heathens were conceived of as unfit for social responsibilities. Elizabethan England or Europe would not accept a Jew in any profession except money lending, which, of course, was against Christian ethics, and so left to “the Jew Villain”. Iago’s anger therefore mounts against Othello because he perceives this as betrayal of friendship trust which leaves Iago feeling that he had lost what belonged to him. When we label Shylock and Iago as villains, we unconsciously force Elizabethan or Christian ethical standards on them without allowing them an opportunity to live by their own racial or ethical dictates. They thus become victims of racial bias and of circumstances beyond their control. To see them as villains will be in keeping with the Restoration concept that what the individual believes in is a mere opinion but what society holds and cherishes is the truth. If this were so, then the rise of individualism as a philosophical tenet would be invalid. Iago’s individualism sways the entire action of the play and Fanny Ragland (2010) admires “the consummate skill with which [Iago] links together in one continuous chain his many plans for evil [which] is a striking mark of Iago’s genius”.

Iago’s ambiguity leaves one with the impression that the playwright, Shakespeare was only experimenting with the psychological potential of evil to take control of man when he is unguarded which explains why Iago so successfully arouses jealousy in Othello and why all the other characters, Brabantio, Cassio, and Roderigo are all easily deluded by Iago’s manipulations. That they leave themselves open for this manipulation is not Iago’s fault and cannot be interpreted as Iago’s villainy. It is their gullibility and susceptibility.

Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* is configured by Caregan (2003) as

- ... uncomfortable viewing today [as] its main protagonist is the ancient stereotype of Jewish villainy, an immoral and treacherous usurer who loves his money far more than even his daughter – Abigail.

Though Caregan concedes to the discomfort aroused in today's presentation of the stereotypical Jew as villain, he still falls prey to the description of Barabbas as an "immoral and treacherous usurer". However, his information that at the time of the creation of *The Jew of Malta*, Jews had historically been expelled from England in 1290, though few were unofficially tolerated but forced to practice their religion in secret, is very vital to our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the personality of Barabbas. Caregan thus observes that the play "revolves around a figure who would normally be consigned to the margins of society; a figure to be despised and mocked as he is, almost universally by other characters throughout the play". Barabbas rejects this consignment and his personality is a rather complex one as he is cast in several moulds or stereotypes; as a Jew, a devil, a dramatic persona i.e. a protagonist. Even though Barabbas's portrait is presented as a Jew villain occasioned by the anti-Semitic feeling of the Elizabethan society, the problem still remains that the other characters are not better than him, thus, making him realizable not as a detestable villain but simply as an anti-hero who controls an arena that is devoid of a hero to lead the moral rectification of the society. Like Shylock and Iago, Barabbas relishes in his purported villainy without apology because in a moral vacuum that Malta was, he saw himself as a refined Jew. Caregan does, infact, refer to Barabbas as "a plain dealing villain". This description is further reinforced by the fact that "these other characters are themselves revealed to be no better than Barabbas – they are selfish and self serving hypocrites with no morals, ethics or honor".

Barabbas's perceived crimes still leave him a memorable character because even as the cream of society suffer in his hands – Ferneze for making Barabbas lose his gold; Abigail for her defection and conversion to Christianity; they are not alone because Barabbas himself partakes in the losses including mental, physical and psychology torture which he goes through until he is finally brought low. If Marlowe's intention in *The Jew of Malta* was to test the Machiavellian doctrine of "the end justifies the means", then Barabbas is exonerated of his perceived villainy because he makes almost perfect success of the doctrine and is a complete epitome of Machiavellianism. As Caregan observes "it is only when Barabbas ignores key parts of Machiavellian doctrine that he fails". His Machiavellian tactics are only called into action because of the injustice metted out to him for protesting against the forced payment of tribute only by the Jewish community and the threat of forced conversion to Christianity. Barabbas only happens to be at the fore front of the protest against unjustified exploitation because he was an extremely rich man and so was bound to lose more than anyone else but his protests only meet with racial bias and total confiscation of his property by Ferneze act I scene II

- No, Jew; we take particularly thine,  
To save the ruin of a multitude.  
And better one want for a common good,  
Than many perish for a private man (Marlowe: *The Jew of Malta*)

Barabbas thus becomes a victim of circumstances beyond his control. What else does one in Barabbas's position require to activate a bestial self, and this from a Christian who loathes Jews is a loud echo of racism and anti-Semitism.

Viewed outside this anti-Semitic treatment to which they react adversely because they also feel and bleed, Barabbas, Iago and Shylock, and infact all other Jews are lovable characters. They certainly deserve our sympathy despite what we ascribe to them as villainous crimes against humanity which are indeed motivated by injustices done to them. What we should do is purge ourselves of excessive Christian morality or ethics and judge them from the perspective of their own ethical standards. Barabbas, Iago and Shylock are certainly more attractive and serve as big contrasts to Ferneze a supposed Christian who hides in Christian piety and pretentiousness to unleash crimes on humanity. Ferneze and his types are, infact, more dangerous villains than Barabbas, Iago or Shylock who pronounce their "villainy". Barabbas only fits into the general run of Maltese corruption, his only fault being that he is boastful and relishes in his perceived criminality and so directs our wrath onto himself. He, like Shylock and Iago is a victim of racial prejudice and circumstances whom we intimately follow throughout the duration of the play.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary society perceives of the world today as a global village and tolerance as the watch word in all human interactions because each race, irrespective of its particular idiosyncrasies, has what to offer to other races in terms of cultural development and fusion of universal humanity. Modernity should therefore stop the process or tendency to, as Allan Katz puts it, "vilifying the Jews and then guiltily meting them out a kind of justice". Shylock, Iago and Barabbas will certainly be seen in different light today and even in Western Literature and History because, as Katz again says, "the Jew has come to reflect increasingly, the problems and



pressures of Western man, [and] if he is still the outsider, he knows that he has been cast in a role that symbolically identifies him with a world of Ishmaels". Finally, as Leslie Fiedler (1960) asserts, "the Jew as symbol in literature has moved from the periphery to the centre – but by remaining, as ever, on the periphery of the active social and moral world". This is because as villain, the Jew still remains a peripheral character in the active social and moral universe but at this peripheral level, he occupies, in our modern consciousness, a most contentious position in our deliberations on the concepts of good and evil in human society. Shakespeare's and Marlowe's delineation of these characters therefore presents them as very complex personalities whose motives defy easy comprehension thus, leading us to read them simply as villains. However, their complexity and attractiveness is summed up by the following critics:-

Derek Traversi (1955) in his "Shakespeare: The Young Dramatist", observes that

- ...Shylock – it is a most significant thing about him – is one of the first of Shakespeare's characters to require from us, like so many of the later tragic heroes, a response in which different and even contradictory judgments are simultaneously evoked... the convention of the Jew as villain, inhuman and Machiavellian is undoubtedly still the Elizabethan foundation of the character.

About Iago's personality, J. C. Maxwell (1955) on his part observes that

- Possible criticism of Othello [as a character] are counteracted by [his] being associated with the discredited Iago, yet, Iago is a figure of vivid lifelikeness and individuality, but he is concentrated on a single function.

Maxwell thereby calls our attention to the need for us not to disregard the redeeming qualities of Iago as an accomplished soldier who had fought many battles with Othello. We reject Iago only because our minds are conditioned to perceive him simply as a villain thus playing down on his other qualities of profound intellect and bravery.

Of Barabbas in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, J.C. Maxwell (1955) again surmises that

- ...the guiding thread must always have been the overthrow of the rich Jew... followed by the cunning machinations and apparent triumph, in which, however, he overreaches himself and is overthrown by even more cunning villains than himself. He is, in the end, not enough of a hypocrite [and I would say not enough of a villain] to come out on top.

And so Barabbas's vulnerability is occasioned by his Jewish background which, in turn, sets the stage for actions on his part that open him up to accusations of villainy. These three perspectives present the characters, not as entirely villainous but as working from backgrounds that leave them with no options than to react the way they do. If we must therefore see them as villains, we should see them as "circumstantial villains", in defense of their race and their personalities, not as genetically villainous because they are Jews.

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