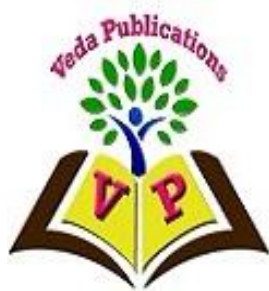


**CULTURAL ASPECTS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *MERCHANT OF VENICE***

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It is desirable to know the cultural context of any given text to understand it better. It is more so when the text is distanced in terms of space and time. Likewise to understand the famous Shakespearean comedy, *Merchant of Venice*, we need to understand the cultural background of society in which the play was created. So the present paper takes it as a task to explain the cultural aspects in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

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**LOVE**

Love is the key theme in the book. There are many loving relationships in this play and not all are the type that involved the love that a man has for a woman, or vice-versa. Bassanio and Portia, Jessica and Lorenzo and Gratiano and Nerissa are all types of love that involve a man and a woman, which are of course relevant to today's society. Love in the *Merchant of Venice* comes in a variety of forms. There is love between family members, between friends, and of course, between lovers. A look into the Elizabethan times would help a clear understanding of the themes.

Women seem happy to give love, but they do so with a shred of cynicism. The strongest bonds of the play are those uncomplicated by romance. Well, for the most part Shylock presumably loves his daughter Jessica, but she betrays that bond of unconditional love by deserting him for a Christian

husband. Similarly, Antonio clearly loves Bassanio (whether in a romantic manner or not) and he ultimately must subordinate his love for Bassanio to Portia's more formal marriage with him. Love is regulated, sacrificed, betrayed, and generally built on rocky foundations in the play. Gratiano and Nerissa got married after knowing each other for only several hours and Bassanio and Portia got married before they go to know each other (but you can't fault Portia for this, for strict policies were ordered onto her). Portia does not love Bassanio. Based on her usage of the Hercules myth, we know she knows he was using her to get to her money, in a certain way. Because she's a practical woman, she is convinced herself to love him.

**MALE POWER – PATRIARCHY**

Men are the powerful figures in the family and in society, which is why Queen Elizabeth is so unusual. We see many examples of the restriction of



women in this play. Portia and Nerissa are confined to Belmont – we never see women in Venice. When Portia and Nerissa leave they have to dress up as men. Venice, and by association the business world, is a male world. Portia is restricted by her father's will - when she marries all her land goes to Bassanio. Jessica is restricted by Shylock. Similarly Jessica has to dress up as a man to break free from Shylock but in so doing she simply puts herself in the control of another man - Lorenzo

### THE DOWRY OR MARRIAGE PORTION

Elizabethan women were expected to bring a dowry to the marriage. A dowry was an amount of money, goods, and property that the bride would bring to the marriage. It was also referred to as her marriage portion. After marriage Elizabethan women were expected to provide children. The law gave a husband full rights over his wife. She effectively became his property. Portia is thoroughly aware of all these things and takes every decision according to the tradition, keeping her happiness in view. The reason for Jessica's violation of these factors lies in her Jewish origin.

### JEWS

Although we are not sure of Shakespeare being an anti-Semite, we might think that he is so in accordance with his times. Shakespeare portrays Shylock as a cold-hearted man, who only has one true love, his money. He would sacrifice anything for money (even his own daughter). In fact in the play we can observe that Jessica is loved by her father Shylock even though he is too gruff to express it. When she deserts him, leaving him entirely alone in the world he is transformed from a mildly grumpy guy into an actively malicious one. The reasons for Shakespeare not knowing the character of his own creation are rooted in his cultural and societal background.

The two major religions in Elizabethan England were the Catholics and Protestant religions. The convictions and beliefs in these different religions were so strong that they led to the executions of many adherents to both of these Elizabethan religions. Jews were totally outsiders in the society. There were few Jews in England. Most Elizabethans would never have had even met one Jew. All that was known about Jews and their religion

and customs were from vague rumour and reputation mixed with horrifying wives tales about the Jews being responsible for spreading the Bubonic Plague. Anti-Semitism was rife in Elizabethan England. Theatre audiences expected Jews to be portrayed according to the Jewish stereotype. The dramatists of the Elizabethan era gave their audiences what they expected to see. Shylock was also depicted as the stereotype Jew who was also a money lender.

By their very absence from daily life Jews were a handy scapegoat in literature and for telling tales to scare children and parishioners in Church. Despite what another answer suggested, there were a few Jews in England in Elizabethan times. One was most likely to encounter them in the port cities, especially London and Edinburgh, where many Jews were from the Netherlands and travelled back and forth as banker-merchants, but for the most part were seen as unbelievers, cruel, despotic, greedy and since they were so scarce in England, as exotic. In many accounts Jews were lumped with Gypsies, exotics to be feared.

There were a small number of Jews in Elizabethan England. Jews had long been restricted to only two occupations— money lending and as peddlers. Elizabethan Jews would have had to outwardly conform to the Christian Protestant religion. Any adherence to the Jewish religion would have been undertaken in utmost secrecy. Jews were known to circumcise the men of their race. In the plot Shylock agrees to lend the hero 3,000 ducats, and as forfeit would have to return a pound of flesh if the debt was not repaid. Elizabethan men would have been horrified to see this as a connection to the Jewish ritual of Circumcision.

The Venetians in *The Merchant of Venice* almost uniformly express extreme intolerance of Shylock and the other Jews in Venice. In fact, the exclusion of these "others" seems to be a fundamental part of the social bounds that cement the Venetian Christian together. In the play for Jessica as well as for Shylock conforming to the Christianity is the only way of getting rid of their oddity which is almost equalled to sin. In the eyes of the Christian audience Jessica is doing only the right thing in defying her father (a Jew)'s authority. The



final conversion of the Jew into Christianity is also a happy reunion in the same lines of thought.

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