

JEWISH STEREOTYPES IN HOWARD JACOBSON'S SHYLOCK IS MY NAME AND MERCHANT OF VENICE

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ABSTRACT

Jewish history is full of struggles and trauma. Their exclusion and wandering life is a testimony of the ordeals they have faced in order to survive in the hostile circumstances. That restricts them from getting a normal survival. They have faced verbal hatred and physical violence. Though they migrated to new nations and formed a diaspora space for themselves even then they have to adhere to the demand of the host nations. Anti-Semitism brings the trauma of marginalization and subjugation for Jews. Christian anti-Semitism projects hatred by abandoning the Jews and characterizing them as the murderer of God. They are criticized for their physical features, their cultural values and convictions. To counter the brutal criticism they adopt different ways like irrational behavior, trying to behave like the natives of that place and trying to assimilate the values of the host nations. Often, they struggle a lot to ascertain their purity which anti-Semites hardly accepts. The present paper analyzes the present situation of the Jews and their situation in the Elizabethan era. It also purposes to reconnoitre anti-Semitic predisposition and stereotypes against Jews. The impact hatred in the lives of Jews is analyzed in detail.

Keywords: Anti-Semitism, Jewishness, Stereotypes, Hatred.

Stereotype denotes to a universal notion about a thing or a person. Stereotypes symbolize the elements of people's doctrines about a community. Stereotypes help in understanding the historical ethos of a particular community. These are mainly opinions about groups. Stereotypes can also bring prejudice and can lead to mistaken value judgments. Stereotypes can be related to the negative expression, connotations about a given situation. There are universal stereotypes against Jews. The anti-Semitism against their religious values, their rituals, their dietary habits is prevalent in many countries. They are often mocked at for their cultural values. They often live away from the main population and they are criticized for creating "blood libel" and are charged for usury also.

Howard Jacobson in his book *Shylock is my name* depicts the tragedy of Jews based on age old stereotypes which primarily influence their survival. He also shows the changing scenario and the Jewish reaction when they challenge the societal stereotypes. The author tries to reframe all the negative stereotypes in this book through the central characters. The *Merchant of Venice* (1596 and 1598) by William Shakespeare is a masterpiece. This play truly projects the situation of Jews in that era. Shylock is etched in the memory of the readers as a greedy Jew representing the Jewish community. The author tries to portray the character of Shylock in the modern era in a different light. Shakespeare has highlighted the ethical problem of charging interest by a money lender and harsh conditions laid by him to claim the principal amount along with interest. The society's anti-Semitic behavior is the cause of bitterness in Shylock's behavior. Jacobson has created the modern day counterpart of Shylock as Strulovitch. He analyzes the meaning of Jewish identity through the character of Shylock and Strulovitch. So, he projects Shylock as a shadow of Strulovitch. Jacobson tries to show empathetic and generous sides of him. "His own marital record is poor. He and his first wife

made a little hell of their life together. Was that because she'd been a Christian? (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 06)". Strulovitch plays the central character of the novel but Shylock is also present in this novel as an old and wise man. "Shylock, with his air of dangerous ineffability, is less ethereal and could be taken for a banker or a lawyer. Just possibly he could be a Godfather (08)". Simon Strulovitch is defined as "a rich, furious, easily hurt philanthropist with on-again off-again enthusiasms, a distinguished collection of 20th-century Anglo-Jewish art and old Bibles, a passion for Shakespeare...and a daughter going off the rails (02)". The author has projected their identical pain in their first meeting in a Cheshire graveyard. "There are two men in the cemetery, occupied in duties of the heart (01)". Shylock, a gentleman with "A danday's hat, worn with a hint of frolicsome menace belied by the absence of any mark or memory of frolic on his face (08)". Primarily, Jacobson shows Shylock seeing all the stereotypes against the character- "About his daughter, the less said is better. He is not an occasional mourner like Strulovitch. He cannot leave and think of something else. Because he is not a forgetful and forgiving man, there never was or will be something else (03)". The Shylock of the modern era has the similar traits like in the classical drama he has. "Of course Shylock is here, among the dead. When hasn't he been? (04)". He empathizes with Strulovitch and becomes his guide and a regularly shares his issues.

Strulovitch looked long into his guest's fierce, melancholy eyes. His own were undistinguished, a pearly, uncertain grey, the colour of the North Sea on a blustery day. Shylock's were deep ponds of pitted umber, like old oil paint that had somehow — not by restoration, more by inadvertent rubbing — regained its sheen. They were dark with that Rembrandtian darkness that holds light. Ironical that when Strulovitch looked into them he felt as though he were in the crypt of a church. We are not the slightest bit alike, he thought, except in what we feel for our daughters. So what was it Gentiles saw that told them they were both Jews? (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 105)

Jacobson shows the existence of anti-Semitism in the society. Such hatred brings the collective Jewish existence by eliminating their individuality. Though, a Jew is a human, teacher, and a business man yet, considering a stereotypical notion a Jew is often considered as a collective whole. In this regard, the positive attributes of a Jew is often ignored and they are always treated as a collective cluster which is uncanny.

"I don't doubt," he said, "that you, personally, still have the power to terrify. I meant 'us' collectively." "I'm not sure that the distinction between 'I' and 'us' quite works. The individual Jew brings the collective Jew with him into any room. It's the collective Jew that Christians see. Person to person, I grant you, they can be very nice. I have received proposals of marriage from Christians sincerely wanting to make amends. I've had my portrait sympathetically painted. A German apologised to me in a cemetery once. But when I extended my hand he seemed afraid to take it. Why? Because at that moment it wasn't the individual Shylock's hands, it was the hand of the collective Jew. And collectively, we still connect to the uncanny." Strulovitch felt the surge of dark forgotten powers. The uncanny...If only. (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 67)

Jacobson depicts the presence of anti-Semitic hatred through many incidents like calling Jews as "moneybags or pig refuser" by D'Anton and his friends. "D'Anton wasn't sure. "Do we want to rile a man as vile as this?" he wondered. "The Jew?" "The wealthy Jew, yes." "The Hebrew?" "E'en him. The moneybags, who else?" They laughed. It was fun, even in worrying times, to play Jewepithets... "I asked how good an idea it was to rile the Jew (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 196-97)". They even call the Jews as dogs and express hatred in a rhetorical way.

“You mean the execrable dog”... Forgive me if the Jew’s daughter means a little less to me.” “... I won’t have her judged by that pig she calls a father.” “Pig refuser, surely.” “A pig can refuse a pig...” “Well he wasn’t an Israelite, a werewolf, a castrator and a bloodsucker, if that’s what you mean.” “I mean something along those lines, yes.” “But I love her despite her father the thick-lips — I assume he has thick lips, I haven’t seen him.” “Thick and wet.” ...Whereas hers are full and voluptuous... “Because the storm might not blow over, and I don’t want that hook-nose — I assume he has a hook nose: don’t answer — banging on my doors. (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 196-97)

Even, the antagonistic character Shylock feels that a Jew is also a human so; it is unreasonable to expect their behaviour as objects. “Jews are sentimental about themselves, and this Strulovitch, though he can’t decide if he’s a Jew or not, is no different. A Jew, by his understanding, is not capable of what non-Jews are capable of. A Jew does not take life. I am a hero to him by virtue of what I permitted to be done to me, not by what I did or might have done. Good Jew — kicked. Bad Jew — kicks (Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, 183)”. Shylock also opines that a Jew is not a murderer as the stereotypes against them prevails in the society. “If you prick us do we not bleed, but if we prick back do we not shed blood? — he would rather not know. These famous ethics of ours have landed us in a fine mess, Shylock would like to say to his wife. If we cannot accept that we might murder as other men murder, we are not enhanced, but diminished. Do you agree with me Leah, my love? (183)”. Even, to break the earlier established portrayal of Shylock in the current era he doesn’t show the moneylending business of Jews. The author also has converted the whole casket episode of Portia as Plurabelle scrutinizes her aficionado by offering them to select among “her three cars – a Merc, BMW or humble Beetle”. Jacobson has humorously explained the complete scenario of anti-Semitism and stereotypes in a humorous way.

“I’m not,” the footballer said, “before you ask, what you think I am.” “A Nazi?” “I’m not.” “So why did you bring it up?” “Because I know it’s what you’re thinking.” “Why do you think it’s what I’m thinking?” “Because it’s what everybody’s thinking.” “And why is everybody thinking it?” “Because I gave a Nazi salute.” “So easy to be misconstrued,” Strulovitch said with a sigh but, before he could say more, Beatrice interposed her presence between the two men. “Correction,” she said, tapping Howsome’s wrist, as though with an imaginary fan, “because you gave a parody of a Nazi salute.” “Right,” Howsome said. “Plus I didn’t know it was a Nazi salute.” “Then how,” Strulovitch patiently pursued, “could you have been parodying it?” Again Beatrice saw this as something she was better equipped to answer than her boyfriend. “Come on, Daddy,” she said, “you know as well as anyone how ironic referencing works.” (Jacobson, *Shylock is My Name*, 80)

CONCLUSION

Jacobson has used the demand of a “pound of flesh” in this novel also but it is entirely different from Shakespearean era. Here, the demand is for the process of circumcision or castration of Gratan. Strulovitch discusses with Shylock about the revenge to be taken from Gratan by asking him to go for circumcision. Since, circumcision is very important for Jewishness therefore, with this they want to shift Gratan’s identity also make them realize the pain which Jews suffer due to stereotypes associated with it. Further, Strulovitch is betrayed by D’Anton while making the agreement of circumcision. D’Anton submits his willingness to follow the process on behalf of Gratan, but he is already circumcised and can’t experience it twice.

“To whom it may concern,

I have today had the pleasure of examining this delightful patient (name supplied) with a

view to judging his fitness to undergo circumcision by the “Forceps Guided Method” and “am pleased to report that examination proved such a method, or indeed any method, supererogatory as the patient is already circumcised. The operation, as far as I can deduce and he recall, was performed when he was an infant, such procedures being common among families living in hot countries”.

Needless to say one cannot circumcise a person twice.

Yours very sincerely,

Pandhari Malik (Jacobson, *Shylock is My Name*, 174)”.

Similarly, Beatrice has realized reality of D’Anton and his friends who primarily pretends to be good and pleasant with her later, acts very offensively and shapes her to be as revengeful as Shylock used to be.

Before retiring, he called in on Kay and found Beatrice sitting with her. Neither woman made any demonstration of affection. “When did you get back?” he asked Beatrice. “Not long ago.” “Are you well?” She looked at her mother as though for confirmation. Was there a nod, a smile? This is hard on her, Strulovitch thought—meaning everything. This is too cruel. She’s a child. “You look well,” he lied. “I doubt that,” she said. “But thanks, anyway. I’m unharmed, if that’s what you mean. And unbetrothed, if that’s what you really want to know.” “It’s enough you’re here.” “It’s enough for me too.” It was enough she was here. It was everything she was here. But some unquiet, unappeasable sprite of fatherly fault-finding nudged aside the joy he wanted to express. “If you’d told me you were coming home today,” he said, “you’d have saved everybody a lot of trouble.” “Maybe I didn’t want to save everybody a lot of trouble.” In her stony unforgiveness she resembles Shylock, Strulovitch thought. Were he to ask her what she was thinking he had little doubt how she would answer. “I will be revenged on the whole pack of you”. (Jacobson, *Shylock is My Name*, 277)

Thus in this novel the author has depicted the role of stereotypes in the life of Jews. Since, stereotypes mainly brings negative meaning so, the usage of it to define and criticize a group often shatters from inside. Therefore, sometimes those people demand revenge the way Shylock and Strulovitch seek. But in the end Shylock’s speech on morality serves as a directive for everyone to adopt the golden value of forgiveness so that the humanity may not suffer on account of narrow concepts of ethnicity. Thus, the author gives us new image of Shylock different from the conventional image and projects him as a human being capable of feeling empathy even towards the persons of other religion.

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