

## **A Postcolonial View on *the Merchant of Venice* in Indonesian Classroom**

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**Abstract:** One way to get Indonesian students to relate to English literature reading materials discussed in the classroom is by guiding them to see how the issues presented in the works have any significance with their being Indonesians. In the classroom, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* gives students an understanding on the significance of colonial history in Indonesia, particularly during the rise of trading companies in the 17th century, innovated by the Dutch (Ferguson, 2008). A postcolonial view on the play helps in raising awareness that deals with reasoning the significance of being part of colonial history of the world. This essay takes a look at how this is tackled in a course subject called 'Survey of Contemporary Literature in English' at the English Studies Program Universitas Padjadjaran. Pedagogically speaking, this essay argues that *The Merchant of Venice* apparently offers more than just the fate of a Jewish loan shark. It also shows how world economy is built and how it affects the fate of the natives in European colonies around the globe, particularly in the Dutch East Indies. In the end, we can see that Shylock's pound of flesh backfires and causes a great fall to the Jewish antagonist. This, alternatively, can be seen as a representation of assertion of power to the minority, which is also something that Indonesian students can relate to.

**Key Words:** postcolonial, *The Merchant of Venice*, colonial history, trading companies, Shylock.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Habitually, Shakespeare's works are discussed in the classroom of the English education system because they have "[i]nimitable poetry, universal themes, empathy for the human condition, and profound influence on language and culture" (Colarusso: 216). One of the challenges faced as lecturer of English literature to students of non-English cultural background is to explicate why reading Shakespeare's works matters. I have come across students in my classroom who have the impression that discussing Shakespeare is simply because it is in the curriculum because they are in the English major, and therefore they have to go along with it. Many a time I emphasized that it is in fact far more than that. In a course that I teach (Survey of Contemporary Literature in English), which deals with English literary works from modern to contemporary eras, I showed my students how Shakespeare's play—*The Merchant of Venice*—contributes to our understanding as Indonesians, particularly on the relevance between the practice of mercantilism shown in the play with one of history's monumental inventions, the Company, which was founded in Batavia (former name of today's Jakarta). This can be seen as a type of self-reflexivity mode of reading (as, for instance, practiced by Downing, 2002) with the aim so that students relate to the story presented in Shakespeare's plays with their own experience. Postcolonial studies provides a way to make this possible, as it enables us who are subjects of colonial aftermath to perceive the development in world's history as a development of the impact of colonialism.

This essay ultimately shows how a postcolonial view on *The Merchant of Venice* gives significant to the reading of Shakespeare to Indonesian students. Indonesia's colonial history gives rise to one Dutch trading company, the VOC (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) in the 17th century, which, to Ferguson's (2009) argument, marked an evolutionary phase in financial world history. In a pedagogical point of view, this essay argues that *The Merchant of Venice* offers more than just the fate of a Jewish loan shark. The backfire of Shylock's pound of flesh which causes a great fall to the Jewish antagonist can also be seen as a representation of assertion of power to the minority, which is also something that Indonesian students can relate to. The discussion of the play eventually leads to a conclusive view on how world economy is built and how it affects the fate of the natives in European colonies around the globe, particularly in the Dutch East Indies.

### **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As one of the world's most classic literary works, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* has obviously been researched extensively. Boyce (1990), for instance, focuses on the role of the city of Venice as one of the

world's greatest commercial center. Different from Boyce, Parvini (2012) takes a closer look at the play and Shakespeare's other plays in general from a historicism's point of view. Researches on the play in the field of education range from the play's position in the English education system (Colarusso, 2017) to reading Shakespeare's play as students' self-reflexivity mode (Downing, 2002). In the field of literature, particularly the ones focusing on Shylock, the Jewish loan shark in the play, researches have conducted on sacramental usury (Colston, 2016), Shylock's usury (Goldstein, 2014), castrating Shylock the creditor (Penuel, 2004), deconstructing the Christian merchant (Rosenshield, 2002), and the golden casket's theme in the play (Stone, 2009).

As both a continuation and an elaboration of the previously mentioned researches, this essay offers a different approach, amalgamating the point of views of literary studies, education, and postcolonial studies. With this, one of this essay's aims is to see the relevance between the three point of views on the significance of studying *The Merchant of Venice* for Indonesian students.

### III. METHODOLOGY

By taking a look at *The Merchant of Venice* using postcolonial view, the discussion in this essay refers to Ashcroft et al. (1989), Gandhi (1998), and Ferguson (2009). Methodologically speaking, readings on Ashcroft help to determine the array of scope of European colonialism in the world, and readings on Gandhi helps to see that postcolonialism is a global situation. Readings on Ferguson, more importantly, helps to see traces of the history of global trade in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which is relevant to the history of colonialism in Indonesia, which is part of the global trade expansion during the 17th century. Ferguson highlights the fact that the Dutch East Indies, which is also the former name of the present Indonesia in colonial times, helps give birth to the world's first company, the United East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC*). The very being of *VOC* is relevant with merchantilism practiced during Elizabethan era in a sense that this mode of trading was then evolved into capitalist practices through the rise of enterprises. These enterprises formed a company, which was initially the so-called *VOC*. The link between the presence of *VOC* in Indonesia's colonial history and the practice of merchantilism in *The Merchant of Venice* helps Indonesian student see the significance of studying the play. It helps the students to see themselves in a bigger picture, as individuals who are historically linked with the rest of the world in terms of colonial circumstances.

### IV. DISCUSSION

One postcolonial view referred to in this essay clings on Gandhi's (1998) postulation that "[p]ostcolonialism approaches such questions of epistemology and agency universally; that is to say, as questions which are relevant to a generalized 'human condition' or a 'global situation'" (Gandhi, 168). Postcolonial studies in this sense enable a closer view on global situation shaped by the impact of colonialism. In looking at European colonialism as a way to organize the experience of basically more than three-quarters of world's population (Ashcroft, 1989), postcolonial studies then becomes a lens that helps to see more critically on what makes the people of today the people that we know today. In his documentary, *The Ascent of Money* (2009), which was adapted from a book of the same title, Ferguson gives an example on how such a view is applied. He offers a way of looking at the world through financial evolution of the world, most of which is impacted by the history of colonialism. The building of colonies and European settlements made the Western world's assertion of authority global. Authority is built by the advancement of technology, which was made possible due to the capital that certain people own. 17th century economy surged mostly because the circulation of money and the founding of profitable enterprise were at their peak in this era, and it sparked the founding of one utterly successful Dutch trading company, *VOC* (Ferguson, 2009).

16th century mercantilism bases the idea of the greatest Dutch invention, the United East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC*) which was set up in the Netherlands in 1602, with Batavia (now known as Jakarta) as its local trading post (Tyacke: 40). The formation of the *VOC* marked a significant turning point in Dutch policy, as it produced provisions laid down in the *octrooi* (charter), which "provided the legal foundations for a policy of aggression that was significantly directed at the commercial and colonial/strategic interests of Spain and Portugal across Asia" (Borschberg: 37). In other words, it was a commercial enterprise and an instrument of war to operate in the East Indies. The *VOC* was initially established to help traders in the Dutch Republic work together to find and supply spices across the world. The *VOC* was described as the world's first multinational, with trading posts in Africa and Asia, looking for anything that could make a profit, not just in Europe but between ports in the region (Broomhall: 350).

Seeds of colonialism in the East spread globally as early as the 16th century. Produced in the mid-16th century, *The Merchant of Venice* offers a view on mercantilism through economic transaction between Antonio and Shylock. Historicism in the field of literary studies can be applied to investigate this transactional relation to see the bigger issue presented in the play. The formula applied by historicism is that since "societies produce individuals who write texts; therefore, in order to understand a text we need to understand the society from

which its author came in all its cultural and ideological [sic] complexity. And in order to understand the society from which an author comes we need to understand the history of that society” (Parvini: 75). Seen in this way, *The Merchant of Venice* cannot simply be perceived as a play about a Jew loan shark getting punished for what he does. The complex and trying world in the background is in fact the factor that causes such transactional relation, which at the same time may justify Shylock’s conduct. As a “great commercial centre,” (Boyce: 686), the city of Venice “represents this emerging capitalistic economy, an economy, moreover, that causes textual anxiety” (Colston: 107), where it is presented in Elizabethan literature “as a symbol for a hypercommercial society” with its “commercial connections to the remote and glamorous East” (Boyce: 686). This justifies the reason why Venice is an important setting in the play. Other than regarded as a place of commerce, it is also the hub between the Western and the Eastern worlds.

The love-hate relationship between the West and the East is also the element observed in postcolonial criticism. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the fleet Antonio is planning to send depends on Shylock’s generous gesture in lending him a sum of money. As a Jewish loan shark, Shylock sparks the association of Jew with trade, as with usury (Rosenshiel: 30). In a slightly similar tone, Shylock is also perceived as a usurper whose wealth “comes from money breeding money” (Colston: 104). Through Shylock and Antonio, the play also presents the distinction between a Jew and a Christian, between usurer and merchant, in which Shakespeare toys with the idea of a self-sacrificing merchant-Christian (Rosenshiel: 31). As a Jew, Shylock also “[dominates] critical and popular discourse, whether portrayed as devil or victim” (Stone: 35). The act of lending money at interest, in Ferguson’s (2009) observation, is another phase of the evolution of the use of money as means of exchange. Jews were tolerated in Venice, but for a price. They were there to act as the backbone of Venice’s economic development, as they were able to facilitate the Christians with financial aid. Lending money at interest enabled the Jews to gain profit, and the amount of money gained from this profit was then lent to another Christian merchant. Ferguson argues that this is possibly what sparked anti-semitism; Jews’ association with wealth. The practice of usury is articulately explained as “an economic practice that excludes genuine material growth in favor of stagnant fiscal repetition” (Penuel: 256).

As a discriminated Jew, Shylock represents a marginalized individual in a predominantly non-Jewish society. The way Shylock is presented at the beginning of the play, to some, invokes a sense of sentiment, even hatred. Him being a loan shark who is without heart and mercy who asserts his authority to Antonio the Christian is the perfect ingredients to provoke controversy. Also, on the one hand, the punishment Shylock has to receive, to some, can potentially invoke sympathy, particularly when Shylock is perceived as a character representing a provider to Christian merchants. Shylock’s role as a loan shark is paradoxically a necessity, given the circumstances in that era. Without the help of Shylock, economic development in Venice would have been stagnant. The irony presented in the play through the way Shylock is treated and how his fate ends up, opens up a question on what is right and what is wrong, what can be perceived as acceptable, and what can be perceived as unacceptable.

## V. CONCLUSION

Shylock’s pound of flesh may have backfired and caused a great fall to the Jewish antagonist, but his presence in Shakespeare’s play in particular, and in Elizabethan literature in general, further gives an insight on humanities in a materialist and capitalistic world. Students in Indonesian classroom can relate to the play by seeing a bigger picture, a more global bird’s-eye view of the economic and financial background of the world on that era. As part of more than three-quarters of world’s population with colonial history, my Indonesian students are ultimately able to see themselves as part of the chains that shape the world we are living in today.

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