

ISSN 2071 - 1964

**Revue interafricaine de littérature,
linguistique et philosophie**

Particip'Action

**Revue semestrielle. Volume 13, N°1 – Janvier 2021
Lomé – Togo**

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© Juillet 2020

ISSN 2071 – 1964

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**SHAKESPEARE ON INTEGRATION: TOWARDS A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF
OTHELLO AND THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.**

Biava Kodjo KLOUTSE*

Abstract

Shakespeare is referred to as one of the world's greatest dramatists of all times for the relevance of the themes discussed in his works. These themes are verily centred on ideals related to societal life. This study analyses Shakespeare's approach to the interactions of people whence the notion of integration which is depicted through multicultural dramatis personae in both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. It is in fact, an exercise that consists in scrutinising the position of the dramatist and that of his contemporaries upon the phenomenon of alterity. In order to achieve this goal, the article considers two key ideas namely the setting and characterisation through which Shakespeare dramatises integration challenges inside both plays. It helps grasping the progress of the notion of integration since Shakespearean era to the current challenges related to otherness and integration.

Keywords: integration, multiculturalism, otherness, love, tolerance.

Résumé

Shakespeare est une icône mondiale du théâtre. Il doit cette renommée à la pertinence des thèmes abordés dans ses œuvres. Les thèmes de Shakespeare sont généralement imbus de l'idéal de la vie et surtout de la vie en société. Cet article s'articule autour de la vision de Shakespeare sur l'intégration à travers la mise sur scène des personnages d'origines diverses et par ricochet de pratique culturelles variées dans *Othello* et *The Merchant of Venice*. Il s'agit ici, de comprendre la position de l'auteur et de celle de ses contemporains sur le phénomène de l'altérité. Pour ce faire, le présent article s'intéresse aux interactions des personnages dans leurs chronotopes dans les deux pièces théâtrales afin de saisir l'évolution de la question

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de l'intégration et les défis relatifs à l'altérité depuis l'ère shakespearienne à l'ère contemporaine.

Mots-clés : intégration, multiculturalisme, altérité, amour, tolérance.

Introduction

Multiculturalism and integration are two notions that call for tolerance and mutual acceptance. Since the first migrations into the British Isles, settlements have been subjected to the law of the strongest over the weak.

The abundance of natural resources in the seas around the British Isles has attracted sailors and immigrants all over the world to Britain. In addition, the British Isles offer refuge and safety to outlaws from other part of Europe. As a result, many people in quest for peace and safety have been moving there along with marauders and invaders since time immemorial. In sum, the geographical location of the British Isles in Europe has attracted many waves of immigrants. But it has not been such easy for settlers from various origins to live together in the same land. Some sentiments such as jealousy and xenophobia have been developed by some groups against others. The minorities such as the Jews and the Blacks suffered insecurity and discrimination in the British Isles and other European states.

The purpose of this study is to highlight how through the setting and characterisation Shakespeare has been able to depict the challenges of multiculturalism and integration in the European history before the contemporary waves of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. To achieve this purpose, the semiotic approach is used to highlight clues that offer information on the issues of multiculturalism and integration for K. Green & J. LeBihan, (1996, p. 77) hold that:

Semioticians were in the forefront of attempts to break down the divisions between serious critical consideration of 'high art' and passive consumption of popular culture, arguing the latter has so much influence on contemporary imaginations that it cannot be allowed to go unscrutinised.

The essay is structured around two main points. The first one scrutinises multiculturalism in both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* and the second point discusses integration therein.

1. Multiculturalism in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*

The issue of multiculturalism is associated to people's origins. Each population has its' ways of life which do not necessary match with others. This situation of singularity of cultures raises the question of alterity and identity. Yet, the dynamism of populations goes against the desire of isolationism and autarchy. People for vital reasons need to interact with other ethnic groups and communities. Trade is one of the main reasons that connect people and make them live in harmony. In the same perspective, Montesquieu (1995, p.219) holds that:

L'effet naturel du commerce est de porter à la paix. Deux nations qui négocient ensemble se rendent réciproquement dépendantes: si l'une a intérêt d'acheter, l'autre a intérêt de vendre; et toutes les unions sont fondées sur des besoins mutuels. Mais, si l'esprit de commerce unit les nations, il n'unit pas de même les particuliers. Nous voyons que, dans les pays où l'on n'est affecté que de l'esprit de commerce, on trafique de toutes les actions humaines, et de toutes les vertus morales: les plus petites choses, celles que l'humanité demande, s'y font ou s'y donnent pour de l'argent.

In the light of Montesquieu's statement, mutual needs are the sources of peace which is built on tolerance and mutual acceptance. Montesquieu's illustration of peace is largely visible in many cosmopolitan states like Britain and Rome. Rome was the greatest capital town of the world within (753 BC- 476 AD). During that period, the roman army led by famous generals conquered a great part

of the world subjugating people of different origins to the control of the ruler of Rome. These exploits made Rome to become the capital city of the world. J.L. Harris (1988, p.13) Puts:

The Romans were also great soldiers. By 146 B.C. all lands bordering on the Mediterranean were conquered and ruled by Rome. Rome became a wealthy world capital, the focus of Western civilization. The wealthy and the educated of many lands were drawn to Rome. Thus it was that the scientists of other countries travelled to Rome, and Rome benefited.

The Roman Empire grew from the Western Europe to North Africa and Eastern Asia. Subsequently, Italy became the centre of the world welcoming various groups of people of different cultures who interrelate in various ways such as trade and science. Setting the play in such a society offers many opportunities to the playwright to address issue of importance to the British Isles and the rest of Europe.

Othello is indubitably one of Shakespeare's famous tragedies. It is set in the cosmopolitan environment of Italy where African, Europeans, Asians interrelate constantly despite their differences. In *Othello*, Shakespeare has not only portrayed an African but he has also given him a great role. Indeed, Othello, the Moor, has played the role of saviour in a community of white people. This audacity that consists in valuing Africans before a European audience can be viewed as Shakespeare's profound rejection of slavers thought which held African for inferior people during the Atlantic slave trade from the 16th century to the 19th century as raised by N. Gayibor (2011, p.37-38).

Against all expectations Shakespeare has shed light on the virtue and strength of an African man through Othello into whose hands he gives the salvation of Venice as the ultimate saviour of the

State. Being unable to defend their territory from the invasion of a Turkish fleet, Venetians hired the services of Othello and appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the army of Venice sent to wage war against the fiery Turkish fleet on the island of Cyprus owned by the Venetians. In the course of his mission Othello has simply interrelated with Venetians in many domains such as state administration, politics, army and the matrimonial.

In the context of administration, Othello has to govern and organise Cyprus Island. Politically he was called to the senate and has been appointed by the Duke of Venice. Militarily, he holds the whole expedition under his control as the Commander-in-Chief while matrimonially, he married the daughter of a noble Venetian.

Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is set in Italy and more specifically in Venice. His starting point is an issue of religion. He sheds light upon the challenge of the communal life of the Jews who after being dispossessed of their land, are banished from the rest of the place and become wanderers all over the world. Christians in Italy consider themselves the pillar of the Christian faith because of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church along with the Roman Empire. In sum, the two plays put on stage anti-Semitism and xenophobia nourished by a complex of superiority based on religion and origin.

In both plays, the strangers are systematically nicknamed based on their origins. Othello is called in private discussions the "Moor" in *Othello* while in *The Merchant of Venice*, the good Shylock is referred to as "Dog".

Venice stands as a trade centre in Italy that attracted many traders all over the world from the Byzantine Empire to the Mediterranean trade centres. This openness to the rest of the world of the city of Venice has made it become a referential place for trade and tourism as a result of its geographical location and climate that is appreciated by Africans. One can understand why the Prince of Morocco is counted amongst the suitors of Portia, the wealthy heiress in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Putting on stage a Prince of Morocco alongside European princes and noble men such as the Prince of Arragon, the Duke of Saxony's nephew, the Barron of England, Neapolitan Prince, and the noble men of Venice highlighted the cosmopolitan status of the city of Venice. Even though the Prince of Morocco is not able to marry Portia, there is every evidence that Africans were part of the community of Venice and as a result part of the European sphere in the days of the playwright.

The Prince of Morocco who looks a little different from the rest of the Europeans has this to say: "Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun, / To whom I am neighbour, and near bred." ⁸ This speech comes as an evidence that the Prince of Morocco despite his complexion that visibly differs from that of the other suitors enjoys consideration amongst his fellow competitors and pleads for impartiality. Definitely, as other suitors, he is made to go through the same test that he nearly passed. Venice and especially the harbour of Rialto remain a cosmopolitan centre described as follow:

⁸ - William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II, i, 1-3. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay, and preceded by TMV.

Dans le port du Rialto, à la fin du moyen-âge, les réseaux de commerçants étrangers sont nombreux. Ils viennent chercher du travail et des perspectives de s'enrichir. L'économie à l'échelle mondiale apparaît et Venise joue un rôle de premier plan grâce aux grands marchands-entrepreneurs mais aussi grâce aux petits artisans et aux hommes de peine. Tout le monde a du travail à Venise y compris celui venu d'ailleurs. Cette tolérance, à la fois politique, sociale et religieuse est un fait unique dans l'histoire européenne de l'époque. Bien sûr, la concurrence entre les Vénitiens et les étrangers étaient fréquent.⁹

In nutshell, Shakespeare has successfully sketched through *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* a cohabitation involving many ethnic groups in the cosmopolitan city of Venice. This representation raises the question of mutual acceptance or integration.

2. Integration in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*

Integration is a notion that takes into account both cultural and racial issues. Whence one generally refers to cultural integration and racial integration. In the same vein, A. S. Hornby (2015, p.817), states that integration is: “the process of mixing people who have previously been separated, usually because of colour, race, religion etc.” In other words, integration can be viewed as the process of admitting immigrants into a local group without prejudice.

Countries like the United States of America have experienced this policy since the very settlement by the first pilgrims. American realities were from the standpoint of the notion *Salad Bowl* for M. Berray (2019, p. 142) and to that of *Melting Pot*¹⁰ according to H. M.

⁹ -Venise au XVe et XVIe - La Crise des Consciences, at 8h11' <http://jeanjaures.over-blog.fr/article-venise-au-xve-et-xvie-76248527.html> 15-02-2020

¹⁰- Food metaphors like the Melting Pot and the Salad Bowl theories have illustrated different approaches to integration by explaining the political and power dynamics between dominant and minority groups.

Alarian (2011, p.6). These policies are generally backed by laws such the Race Relations Acts¹¹ in Britain.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the fact that no comment is made upon the elocution of the Prince of Morocco can be taken as an evidence that either he speaks well the language of the Venetians or the Venetians speak fluently his language. This deduction proceeds from the fact that both Prince Morocco and Portia has conducted their conversations easily. If this hypothesis stands, it can be explained by the geographical proximity between Morocco and Italy in one hand and also by the great conquests of the Roman Empire which imposed the Roman language as the lingua franca of the empire in the other hand. Morocco being part of the vast Empire, noble Moroccans could not help mastering the language of the Master. His ability to speak the common language made him to be treated fairly, which is not the case of another suitor referred to as the young baron of England. When Nerissa, (TMV I, ii, 65), mentioned him saying: “What say you then to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?” Portia puts:

You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Latin, French nor Italian; and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in the English. He is a proper man's picture; but, alas! Who can converse with a dumb show? (TMV, I, ii, 67-76).

Through that statement, it can be inferred that Portia is a polyglot as she speaks Latin, Italian and French and she does not have preferences as far as the origin of her husband is concerned. She is ready to marry the right person no matter his status and origin provided that he is honest in his love and wins the contest.

¹¹-The Race Relations Acts referred to a series of laws enacted by the parliament of the United Kingdom to address racial discrimination since 1965.

In *Othello*, Othello the Moor, is spoken to without the assistance of an interpreter by the Duke of Venice. It can be said then that there is no language barrier between him and the authorities of Venice. His virtue and the authority is not denied. He is even appointed to lead the expedition fleet of Venice against the Turks on Cyprus Island. Even though his fellows, especially Iago keep on calling him 'Moor', this does not affect the recognition of the authority he is given. Othello was able to marry the daughter of the noble Senator Brabantio much against his will. But this was in accordance with the practices of the Venetians that value the consent of the bride over that of the parents.

The racial integration is clearly admitted but what about the cultural one that takes into account religion? The issue of religion is in fact, much visible between the Jews and the Christians. In *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is a bondholder in the proper name of the business. His job is to give loans to people in need who will pay them back with interest. Shylock appears to be a Jew that does not cope with the feeding habits of the Venetians especially when it comes to eating pork. When he was invited in (TMV, I, iii, 32) to diner by Bassanio a friend of Antonio a wealthy merchant on these words: "if it please you to dine with us (...)" He answers:

Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet, the Nazarite, conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you. (TMV, I, iii, 33-38).

Following the abovementioned statement by Shylock, the Jew financier, one can see that integration is possible with some strict limitations that should not be overlooked. Especially praying together

with the Christians and sharing food or drink with them. This limits constitute cultural barriers that cannot favour integration. For difference will always exist by all means according to T. Paine (1983, p.16). These differences will endanger the living together of both Christians and Jewish communities. As immigrants, the Jews have been underestimated. They are called 'Dogs' and Shylock puts up a narrative of the treatment he has been subjected to by his fellow Christians mainly Antonio who has come to him for a bond.

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft, /In the Rialto, you have rated me,/ About my moneys and my usances:/Still have I borne it with patient shrug;/ For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe./ you call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And split upon my jewish gaberline,/ and all for use of that which is mine own./ Well then, it now appears you need my help: Go to then; you come to me, and you say, 'Shylock, we would have moneys.' You say so;/ You, that did void your rheum upon my beard/ And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur/Over your threshold: moneys is your suit. /What should I say to you? Should I not say,/ 'Hath a dog money? Is it possible (...)' (TMV, I, iii, 104-120).

This account explains clearly why Shylock in (TMV, I, iii, 40-41) whispers at the sight of Antonio "how like a fawning publican he looks! I hate him or he is Christian:" This shows how it is really challenging to remain faithful to one's religion amongst Venetians who claim to be good Christians. All these pressures are meant to help them convert, whether they like it or not, Jews into Christians. Integration according to the Venetians is synonymous with common culture. Yet, the pressures have been so huge on the daughter of Shylock who at last was compelled to marry a Christian according to the practices of the Venetians that were totally in contradiction with the culture she brought up in.

Jessica the daughter of Shylock, moved by the love for Lorenzo declares,

I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so./ Our house is a hell;/
(..) Alack, what heinous sin is it in me/ To be ashamed to be my
father's child!/but though I am a daughter to his blood,/ I am
not to his manners. O Lorenzo!/ If thou keep promise, I shall
end this strife,/ Become a Christian and thy loving wife.
(TMV, II, iii, 16-22).

Love made Jessica leave her father's house with a great deal of fortune to join her lover. Through this marriage, integration has been given chance for the lady and even for the father who at the end of the day will have a Christian in-law and Christian grand-children if they happen to beget children. Integration is then more plausible through women and especially through marriage. Marriage stands as the true basis for cultural integration.

The marriage between the Moor and the beautiful Desdemona got the approval of the law and practice of the Venetians. And the law holders and makers do not push aside the principle of that law because one of their fellows was injured by the application of the law. They hold on to the letter and the spirit of the law. Which shows that Venetians' legislature has dealt with the issue of integration and set impersonal laws for the right of every citizen without personal consideration. Otherwise the law would have been revisited for the sake of Brabantio the Father of Desdemona.

Before the Court, Shylock the Jew has also been listened to and treated fairly by the Duke. The Duke does not play the game in favour of Antonio. But ordered the expertise of a doctor of law to settle the matter between Antonio and Shylock in conformity with the respect of the equality of both citizens before the law of Venice as prescribed by

the principle of equality advocated in W. Laqueur & R. Barry (2002, p. 93) who hold that equality is an innate right that should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

The question of integration heavily depends on multiculturalism. The current waves of migrations towards Europe especially gives solid reason to this study. In the light of this study it has been clear that evolution or development calls for openness to diversity. As for the industry, the search for raw materials and that for markets for manufactured products require cooperation between nations. This is why it is in some extent economically challenging to close one's frontiers to immigration. This call for the open doors policy is just like what was proclaimed by Queen Victoria during her ruling of the United Kingdom illustrated in L.P. Gartner (2001, p.7).

Because of its closeness to the Mediterranean world, Italy has been for long a special place for people of the Near East and the Northern Africa.

To achieve integration one can deduce through the study of Shakespeare's works that women remain the real stakeholders on whom governments can rely. For through marriage, women easily open up with other cultures much more than men. As they are in charge of a great deal children's education. Women are able to manage integration principles and hand them down to their children according to M. Kandji (2014, p. 25). While men remain so rigid with their principles for they are tied to their origins more than women who can easily change and adapt. In this perspective governments have to

revisit their laws related to marriage in order to facilitate interracial and intercultural unions for a better integration.

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