



**RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN THE QURANIC  
STORY OF ASHAB AL-KAHF AND SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY  
*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

Racism, in all its forms, has always been a prevailing theme in many works over the decades. This study aimed to compare and analyse aspects of religious discrimination in the Qur'anic story of Ashab Al-Kahf and in Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition, this study examines the psychological effects on characters due to this phenomenon and the ways they either coped with or resisted it. The approach employed here was qualitative, and the study was conducted from Bhabha's postcolonial perspective. The findings showed that both Ashab Al-Kahf and Shylock experienced identity crises related to religious discrimination, which they resisted through hybridisation and withdrawal subsequently. Not only would this study be beneficial to researchers in literature, but it would also be so to others in sociology, psychology, and forensic studies. However, this study is limited to one theory of analysis, and the sample was insufficient, especially on the part of the story of Ashab Al-Kahf. This study recommends a reading of the story of Ashab Al-Kahf and Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* from psychoanalytic perspectives.

**Keywords:** *Quran*, Ashab Al-Kahf, religious discrimination, Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

**1. Introduction**

Literature reflects a lot about the human experience, but at the same time, it may be biased in favour of certain stereotypes and take part in propaganda. Literary texts, to some extent, may falsify facts, defend ideologies, and glorify the most powerful at the expense of marginalised minorities. This study will trace and uncover aspects of religious discrimination in the story of Ashab Al-Kahf and Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* and see to what extent they psychologically affect the characters and their actions.

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Religious discrimination is a form of unfair treatment and prejudice directed at an individual or group based on their religion. It can take the form of religious intolerance, defined as an intense or violent dislike or fear of another's religion; a dislike so strong that others are feared, hated, mistrusted, or shunned. Religious intolerance is often manifested in bigotry, persecution, and violence towards those who are believed to follow a different set of beliefs. Religious discrimination is often the cause of many forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and the like.

In modern times, religious discrimination refers to state-sanctioned or state-initiated actions designed to punish, control, or otherwise diminish the religious freedoms of specific religions of people due to their beliefs. In this form, it is usually considered a violation of human rights and a form of religious persecution.

The story of Ashab Al-Kahf represents a vivid model of oppression and sacrifice. Likewise, Shakespeare has gained much interest from researchers of different disciplines and critics over the centuries. His works depict human nature and interaction with its surroundings. They have mirrored the inner struggle, weakness, and victory. They have intelligently brought to the surface the dark human facet embedded in people's illegal conduct; amongst these, we can find religious discrimination against minorities. *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's best sources for this phenomenon.

In the Discussion Section, an analysis mainly based on Homi Bhabha's theoretical perspectives will be introduced, amongst which concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and identity crisis are most explored. We shall see how characters exert and experience religious racism and what strategies are employed to cope with that. The Conclusion section will summarise the common features between both works regarding religious discrimination and its effects on characters, viz., Ashab Al-Kahf and Shylock. Moreover, a presentation of this study's limitations, suggestions, and recommendations will be provided.

## 2. Methodology

The postcolonial movement was an intellectual response to the European domination of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Postcolonialists analyse culture in terms of differences between backgrounds. These thinkers question how meaning is constructed and understood on both sides of power hierarchies, including those created by colonialism or oppression against minorities that they still encounter today in dealing with racial stereotypes and racism.

Postcolonialist theory is a reaction to how Westerners approached exotica and culture in the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, in his work "Civilization and Its Discontents", Sigmund Freud states that sexual repression is essential to civilisation itself. Jacques Lacan used psychoanalysis to analyse the difference between subjectivity and objects (including art) in film. The phenomenon of post-colonialism is not new, but it has been newly theorised by thinkers who have been exposed to Western culture. In this way, postcolonial thought is a dialogue that has been re-examined in light of the

imperialist/colonial experience. These scholars explore the role of history and culture in creating false binaries and stereotypes that continue to be reflected in daily life.

In "Culture and Imperialism", Edward Said defines the attitudes held by Westerners towards those they have dominated as "Orientalism". He argues that Orientalism was created by European scholars who studied the Orient as a separate entity, inferior to them. This inferiorization gave rise to false binaries, such as the idea that the Orient was "desert" and therefore uncivilised, while Europe was "green" and therefore civilised. This way of thinking about Eastern people created the divide between Western and Eastern cultures. Said argued that valuations of the East by the West are based on a whole series of oppositions between low and high, old and new, weak and strong, dirty and clean.

This study is a comparative account that will tackle the topic of religious discrimination in the Quranic story of Ashab Al-Kahf and Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. It follows a quantitative approach involving description and analysis through a reading of the previously mentioned texts from postcolonial perspectives, as stated by Hamza (2022), to express colonial discourse from the perspective of the oppressed and silenced. According to Sasani (2015), Bhabha's theory can be extended to texts where one party is treated as the "Other" because of class, country, ethnicity, or gender rather than the white-and-black dichotomy (p. 25).

### 3. Discussion

On the one hand, the setting of the story of Ashab Al-Kahf is debatable. It is for historians either Syria, Iraq, or Palestine, and that before Christianity during the reign of king Diqyanus. On the other hand, the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* took place, as its title indicates, in Venice in the sixteenth century. Shakespeare chose Venice as a setting for his play because it was a cosmopolitan city, the most fertile place for multiculturalism and thus more possibilities for religious discrimination and identity crises. The Jews were immigrants, I suppose, in Venice and, in the best situation, third-class citizens. They experienced (religious) racism, marginalisation, and a loss of identity.

Many critics have widely discussed the topic of discrimination in Shakespearean literature. One of the most recent researchers concerned with such a topic is Shaul Bassi, who wrote an article this year (2022) in which he explored the different representations of Jewish anger in different emotional communities and their relevance for interpreting our play under study. Moreover, Sun (2022) argued that the Medieval Ages were full of conflicts and contradictions and that the best work to reflect society during those times is Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The latter is the story of a Jewish man named Shylock who, due to anti-Semitism in 16th century Venice and Italy, has been persecuted for his religion and stripped of his rights as an individual.

In this play, Shakespeare criticises the anti-Semitic views of society by introducing a Jewish main character who struggles to maintain his dignity. For starters, the title of our play is *The Merchant of Venice*. This title poses the question that immediately comes to mind: Who is the Merchant? Is it Shylock or is it Antonio? In our opinion, Shakespeare's title works on two levels. First, we could read "merchant" as synonymous with "businessman," associating it with Antonio. A businessman is someone who works and takes risks to make money. For example, Antonio makes a deal with Shylock, borrows three thousand ducats from him, and promises to pay back the amount within three months with an additional interest rate of ten per cent. Second, we could also read "merchant" as synonymous with Shylock.

There are many reasons why a playwright would want his audience to think of the main character when they hear the word merchant. Perhaps the most important reason is that it immediately sets the stage for our play. Every play starts with a "down-to-earth" image so that we can feel comfortable with the story and want to continue reading/watching it. However, we think we need to challenge this idea as soon as we hear the word "merchant" in this title because it conjures up negative connotations and stereotypes of Jews. If a Jew was called a merchant during Shakespeare's time, it probably had an unpleasant tone. To fully understand why this is the case, we will have to explore other contexts first.

In 1594, Shakespeare was a relatively young man whose career was on the rise. He had written about a dozen plays and earned himself enough money for the future, but he was not very famous or well-known because he was still a beginner in his field. As such, he wrote for almost every aspect of life in London and did some acting.

In 1598, Shakespeare wrote a play called *The Merchant of Venice*, which was also the first time he had written a play with a Jewish main character. Many people have misinterpreted this fact since it has gone down in history as one of the most famous plays. These people think that Shylock was the protagonist of this play and that Shakespeare made him into a villain. This is completely untrue. Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* with an anti-Semitic main character in mind, but Shylock's role was only to be the antagonist in Act 1. In Act 2, Shakespeare turns Shylock into a newly redeemed protagonist through Proteus and his dialogue. We believe Shakespeare wanted to show that even though Shylock may have been a bad person at the beginning, but he was not an evil person who deserved to die. Shylock did not deserve the money that Antonio and his other friends were charging him, because he did nothing wrong.

Shakespeare was opposed to anti-Semitism in a lot of his plays. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare had a Jewish main character. He was not trying to give the audience the impression that all Jews were wealthy. Instead, he tried to show them that Shylock was not as rich as some people thought because of society's bias against him. The Venetian city-state was suing Shylock because he had defaulted on a debt he owed to the state. Even though he knew why he was being charged and his money-lending contract with Antonio was unfair, Shylock was still treated as a villain. Besides,

in Shakespeare's time, Jews were thought to be untrustworthy people who would not be able to survive in society.

The story of Ashab Al-Kahf, who "*were youths who believed in their Lord*" (Al-Kahf: 13), presents a good example of discrimination on the ground of belief. High-class young individuals find themselves persecuted by their tyrant, King Diqyanus, simply because they confessed with courage and confidence that, "*Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth.*" *Never will we invoke besides Him any deity. We would have certainly spoken, then, an excessive transgression*" (Al-Kahf: 14). They were courageous enough to challenge their society and disregard its traditional religious system. They would have been convinced of the truthfulness of their belief and would have rejected the established religion; then, they would have refused to be deceived by its religious beliefs. They would have not renounced the wise saying, "*The weak is not spared from oppression*" (Al-Kahf: 15).

King Diqyanus, strong, armed, and encouraged by his followers, felt superior over Ashab Al-Kahf, the oppressed and weak minority at that time. In Surah Al-Kahf, Allah informs us about those young men who left their homes to rid themselves of oppression just for their religion. As a result, they escaped, seeking shelter in a mountainous cave where they concealed themselves from their people. When they reached the cave, they prayed to Allah to grant them mercy and goodwill.

Similarly, Antonio, the protagonist character in *The Merchant of Venice*, represents the dominant Christian religious, political, and social system of his time, and Shylock, the Jew, symbolises the oppressed. Rubenstein (2022) claims that *The Merchant of Venice* "*as a play most famous for its portrayal of the Jewish moneylender Shylock, the debate over whether the Merchant qualifies as an anti-Semitic play or a play about antisemitism has spanned centuries*" (p. 1). This dichotomy of superiority-inferiority produced discrimination, and strength-weakness led to oppression.

Noticeably, Shakespeare opens Act 1, Scene 3 with "*Enter Bassanio with Shylock the Jew*" (MV, 1.3). Here, the title used by Shakespeare to address Shylock is "*Shylock the Jew.*" This is, I guess, racist, "anti-Semitic," and "*hypocritical*" (Moghari, pp. 38.39). He is portrayed in the play as a bloodthirsty and merciless moneylender. That attitude was not merely specific to Shakespeare, since other authors of his time also took part in the prejudice, such as Christopher Marlowe in his play *The Jew of Malta*. Religious discrimination against minorities in England has a long history, even before Shakespeare. It was rare in Shakespeare's England to meet practising Jews because they were deported so long before Shakespeare was born and could not return to the country until well after his death.

Now let us examine how Shakespeare portrayed such a religious conflict in the play. He managed to do this through Antonio, the protagonist, who implicitly presents a sharp Christian racial stereotype in the play, and to some extent through Portia as well. The way Antonio deals with Shylock reflects a sense of hatred and disgust. It is more than a personal dispute, a business affair, or madness. It is a religious conflict and a deep-rooted moral clash. Antonio shows his prejudice against Shylock, a sign of challenging

ideology, via a series of offences such as insulting and spitting, as it is well-expressed in the following lines:

*"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart:  
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!"* (MV 1.3.97-101)

Antonio compares the Jews to the devil (Rubenstein, 2022, p. 3) and harasses them. He calls Shylock a dog and a misbeliever because he believes that any religion other than Christianity is fake. He dares to spit at his uniform, which signifies Jewish religion, culture, and identity. In other words, Antonio undermines Judaism.

Antonio (MN 1.3.447-448):  
*"You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,  
And spet upon my Jewish gabardine"*

Antonio (MV 1.3.462-465):  
*"Say this: "Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday  
last;  
You spurned me such a day; another time  
You called me 'dog'; and for these courtesies  
I'll lend you thus much moneys"?"*

Shylock (MV 1.3.374-375):  
*"He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,  
Even there where merchants most do congregate"*

Antonio (MV 1.3.466-467):  
*"I am as like to call thee so again,  
To spet on thee again, to spurn thee, too."*

On the other hand, Shylock also expresses his hatred and plans for revenge against Antonio. Religious hatred is, for the most part, a mutual relationship and trans-religious prejudice. Shylock lives almost in isolation: a stranger in a Christian society. He understands that he will never be able to fit into that society. He is constantly verbally and physically abused by Venetian Christians, who clearly despise him because he is Jewish. To put it another way, Shylock and Antonio's animosity toward each other serves as a metaphor for the conflict between Christianity and Judaism (Clemente Garcia, 2020).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the word "Jew" and its derivations are repeated many times. This is a technique Shakespeare employed in this play and others to draw the audience's attention to a special meaning, a hidden message, on purpose.

Shylock (MV 1.3.363-373):  
*"How like a fawning publican he looks!  
I hate him for he is a Christian,  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.  
If I can catch him once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."*

Shylock (MV 1.3.374-378):  
*"On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,  
Which he calls "interest." Cursèd be my tribe  
If I forgive him."*

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare depicted the Christian values and the religious morality of his era, which discriminated against Jews (Sun, 2022, p.78). According to Moghari (2021), those prejudices were implicitly supported when he did not denounce the harsh treatment of Jews in his works (pp.38.39). For Clemente Garcia (2020), Shylock is often compared to the Devil because he is only concerned with his interests. At the same time, he is the complete opposite of Antonio, the character in the play who is willing to die for others and show Christian hospitality.

Imagine how difficult it is when one forcibly leaves their family, estate, and everything meaningful in their lives. How painful withdrawal is! This is exactly what happened to and was experienced by Ashab Al-Kahf. This produced an identity crisis and a psychological dilemma in them, especially when they awoke from their long sleep and discovered that many generations had passed away. An identity crisis can be caused by a traumatic experience, changes in self-perception, or personal conflict. It may not necessarily be related to mental health issues. One of the friends, disguised, was sent to buy them food, and when he arrived in the city, he was astonished because everything around him was different (Saheeh, p.15).

At the end of their story, Ashab Al-Kahf showed a sense of absolute refusal and rejection of their being members of a society to which they did not feel belonging to the extent that death for them signified the best option.

They went back to sleep again, and Allah snatched them away. However, we don't know this for sure, and Allah knows best (Saheeh, p.15).

In comparison, in *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock represents the group of Jews who chose to stay in Venice, despite being oppressed and discriminated against for their refusal to adapt to the metropolitan culture or be integrated and immersed in it. The

second option, i.e., integration, requires what Bhabha calls mimicry and hybridity as strategies to cope with alienation and escape discrimination to a certain degree.

While mimicry is the copying of another member or group, hybridity is the adaptation of something to suit a new environment. The latter is a term that can be defined in many ways. It refers to a mix of two or more cultures and traditions, or the merging of seemingly incompatible things. More critically, though, postcolonialists predominantly use hybridity to describe society and its cultural diversity. It is about coming into contact with the hybridity of others, i.e., the experience of encountering something that is more than one thing and less than all things, which has been expressed as a state between being another and being one's self. To decide on whether Shylock has mimicked or not, we need to examine the following lines:

*"And spet upon my Jewish gabardine"* (MV 1.3.447-448)

*"For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe."* (MN 1.3.107)

The expressions "my Jewish gabardine" and "badge of all our tribe" indicate that Shylock usually wears uniforms following his own culture and not the culture of others. Moreover, the language Shylock speaks denotes that he does not imitate the one used amongst the Christians in those times. Thus, Shylock has not resorted to mimicry as a means of resistance to religious discrimination against him.

It is then inevitable that Shylock finds himself caught in an identity crisis. In this regard, Hamza (2022) states, *"Identity crisis, consequently, is the direct result of the conflict between the native culture [...] and the foreign culture [...]."* *"It is a psychological condition emerging from the state of alienation and confusion in cultural identities"* (p.389).

According to DeCoste (2019), Shylock is an outsider who experiences alienation and tension in his relationship with society due to oppression and silencing in Christian Venice. Similarly, Jessica, Shylock's daughter, undergoes an identity crisis that leads her to convert to Christianity as a means, she thinks, to get involved in and accepted by society. She mimics the dominating Christian culture, and even her marriage to Lorenzo, a Christian, also signifies some sort of mimicry.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This comparative analysis shed light on religious discrimination and highlighted possible strategies to resist oppression. The story of Ashab Al-Kahf calls for a true struggle for the true faith. Ashab Al-Kahf and Shylock both suffered from identity crises resulting principally from the sharp religious discrimination they experienced at different levels and under various circumstances. When they returned home after a long time of sleep, Ashab Al-Kahf found it difficult to integrate again into a society where they missed all their relatives.



As far as resistance strategies are concerned, Ashab Al-Kahf and Shylock both resisted discrimination through hybridisation and withdrawal subsequently. On the one hand, Shylock preferred not to leave in order not to lose his business. He lived a hybrid life, a mix of two cultures. On the other hand, Ashab Al-Kahf preferred true faith to money and personal pleasure. They longed for permanent life and God's satisfaction. Although they were young, full of ambitions and great expectations like their peers, they abandoned life and embraced true faith.

However, this study is limited in theory as it mainly used Bhabha's perspective, which revolves around mimicry, hybrid identity, and identity crisis. I wish other studies on the same topic would apply other theories and tackle them from different perspectives. It is also limited in that very little is known about Ashab Al-Kahf and their story compared to Shylock.

Although Ashab Al-Kahf felt lost and out of place, they were able to pull themselves together and find their way. They eventually re-established their identities as Muslims through the remembrance of Allah and by doing righteous deeds. In a psychological sense, this is considered a defence mechanism (covering up one's feelings with material objects or activities). In this context, it is important to note that psychological defence mechanisms are not necessarily bad because, in order to be able to live in any society, humans must develop some of these skills in order to help them cope with the pressures and demands of that society. Thus, this study recommends a reading of the story of Ashab Al-Kahf and Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* from psychoanalytic perspectives.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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