

## Louise Althusser' S Theory of Interpellation in the Merchant of Venice

**Muhammad Arslan Sadiq**

Department of English  
Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.  
ZarminaArshad  
MPhil Literature Student

**Muhammad Jahangir Shafi**

Lahore College Women University, Lahore  
Department of Biotechnology  
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijelt.13/vol11n37986>

Published July 3, 2023

---

**Citation:** Sadiq M.A. and Shafi M.J. (2023) Louise Althusser' S Theory of Interpellation in The Merchant of Venice, *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, Vol.11, No.3, pp.,79-86

---

**ABSTRACT:** *The research is a qualitative textual analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy, disguised as the comedy. The Merchant of Venice, through Louis Althusser's theory of Interpellation. Althusser defines ideology as a system of representation through discourse and language which control our existence. So, this research paper aims to analyze the play's language associated with the character's power, identity, and ideology. Moreover, this research also highlights how the play The Merchant of Venice depicts the relationship between Christians and Jews and their unyielding disdain for each other's cultures. In addition, it reflects Venetian' society's psyche through Shylock. Also, it gives an account of a society filled with capitalism and its anxieties, class stratification, religious extremism, hypocrisy, racism, homophobia, and human alienation. Althusser argues that self-consciousness is painted through "contrast differentiation," and language is a way to create ideology and its fixation. Meanwhile, ideology is unable to function beyond language, which is called Interpellation. Althusser also substantiates that individual and collective human behaviors rise through the underlying structures of society as reflected through Christian's ingrained prejudices against Jews and Jew's behavior by absurd stereotypes. Althusser also addresses that material actions are incorporated through quantifiable practices governed by material ideological apparatus. Further, he elaborates that an individual has no intrinsic signification; instead, he is merely a subject in social divisions designated by hierarchical ideology, as Shylock is treated as "other" under the preeminent doctrine of Christianity. Furthermore, he sheds light on the hegemony of powerful discourse through which superiors keep subservient to the level of conformity and dehumanization. Thus, by depicting the ideology of societal conditioning and reinforcement, capitalism, colonialism, racism, anti-Semitism, and patriarchy, this paper delves deep into Althusser's "Repressive or Ideological State Apparatuses and its functions both by violence and ideology highlighted in The Merchant of Venice.*

**KEYWORDS:** anti- semitism, interpellation, ingrained mentality, racism, repressive, ideological state apparatuses, *the merchant of Venice*

---

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Play and its Controversies

The masterpiece *The Merchant of Venice* by none other than Shakespeare is one of the tricky and questionable plays due to the controversial issue of anti-Semitism and the mistreatment of Shylock. Antonio's friend Bassanio needs money to marry Portia, a wealthy inheritor living in Belmont. Antonio is incapable of providing him a loan due to his investment in trade ships. They ask for money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, who gives them three thousand ducats. Sadly, they are unable to bring him back the money because Antonio's ships have lost, and Shylock asks for Antonio's pound of flesh. To solve their troublesome matter, Portia conceals herself as a man of law. While inspecting the contract, Portia highlights that the contract is not entitled him to any blood. Shylock admits to taking Bassanio's money instead of Antonio's flesh. In the courtroom, Portia indicates, "Who is the Merchant here? And "Who is Jew?" reflects her correspondence with a complex cluster of social identification markers. Thus, the play revolves around the theme of the property, as Antonio, due to his friendship, uses his flesh to save a loan. The play interrogates the worth of life and its fickleness. Material objects like rings and caskets are used to depict abstract attributes of love and loyalty. It depicts how the value of love and human life is downscaled to commercial transactions. The play is tragicomic with dark and bleak satire, raising questions on human existence's worth. Who am I? and reflects identity crises and the scars of being nowhere. Venice is connected with business, commerce, and wealth, a trade center, and is considered an attractive setting for dislocated Jews. The superficiality and covetousness of people treat others only in terms of their monetary worth, and Shylock manifests this cold-blooded-ness and materialism in the extreme.

### Analysis

#### Harold Bloom's View on Anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*

In addition, An American literary critic, Harold Bloom, in his decisive book *Shakespeare: The Invention of The Human*, advocates that *The Merchant of Venice* is an incredible example of anti-Semitic play and Shylock is a "comic villain," not a condoling one. Due to his Jewish religion and usury with interests, Shylock endures social alienation from Venetian society, as Jews are supposed to live in a "ghetto." Characters like Antonio treat him with dehumanization and bestialize him; that's why the human and civil rights of Shylock are violated. He is instructed to leave his religion and its rituals which are also anti-Semitic. Jews are still facing racism, anti-Semitism, and mass murder, such as Holocaust in Germany. Antonio classifies Shylock as a "dog" and refers to his cruelty and cold behavior with his Jewish identity, which reflects absurd stereotypes of society and its conditioning. Shylock also has prejudices against Christians as his daughter Jessica elopes and marries a Christian man. Specific derogatory terms that Shylock referred to throughout the play are "cruel devil" (Shakespeare 118), "damned execrable dog" (115), "inhuman wretch," and "stony adversary" (110), which reveals institutionalized racist slurs and prejudices against Judaism and oppressed minorities.

### **The Socio-Political and Religious Context of Venice**

By revealing the social, political, economic, and religious state of Venice in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century era in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare highlights the clash between Christians and Jews, racism, and anti-Semitism. Jews, after their banishment from England, start living in Venice, a center of Europe and a cluster of markets and trades. Sadly, due to the growing disgust between two religious practitioners, Jews are prohibited from taking any land or doing any job. That's why their only way of survival is to trade with interests. Jews in the ghetto are supposed to follow the rules during the curfew that are set by powerful forces, as gates are supposed to be locked at night, and even, they are forbidden to use wells because of the danger that Jews might contaminate or harm the public water supply. The same is the case with Shylock, who is restricted from following the instructions of Venetian society and their scorn. The ideology of colonialism and its devastating effects are also explored in this play as Shylock represents the subaltern section of society due to his race and religion, so he is excluded from hegemonic socio-economic power structures.

### **Louis Althusser's Theory of Ideology and its Manifestation**

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) is a French theorist who provides the idea of “Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses”. He highlights that literature depicts the myths and fictional-real social relations that compose ideology but also interpellates. Further, he suggests that an individual is merely a subject under the dominant ideology and substantiates that any dogma or ideology is not an individual task. Instead, it is a social construct, and a cause of societal reinforcement, and human beings are its entrapments. Despite all goodness, generosity, and friendship that Antonio is associated with in the play, due to his upbringing and cultural mode of production, his intrinsic nature is to defame and vilify Shylock and his community (88). In addition, Jessica highlights that “no mercy for me in heaven, am a Jew’s daughter and no good member of the commonwealth” (Shakespeare 96). So, the play depicts distorted identities and the severe actualities of situations that might appear ordinary.

### **The Portrayal of Gender and Marriage**

Jessica elopes with her lover Lorenzo to get freedom from traditional rigidity and her father's authoritative power over her as “Lorenzo is invoked not as the solution to the problem of Jessica’s erotic desire but as the solution to the problem of being her father’s daughter” (Adelman 71). Moreover, Adelman also highlights the strict patriarchal role of Shylock to exert his influence on Jessica being a male figure, “until she collapses” (Adelman 71), as Jessica also indicates, “Our house is hell” (Jessica, Act 2, Scene 3). These lines reflect her loneliness under strict patriarchy. She wants to marry a Christian to be free from her racial heritage and get a position and acceptance in life lost because of her Jewish identity. It also accentuates human ideology in the choice of marriage according to the class and hierarchical racial designation. Besides it, Bassanio claims his love for Portia. Still, he believes that if he gets a chance to marry her, he will pay all debts and become rich, which depicts men's ideology of marrying a wealthy woman to uplift their financial

standards. In Act I Scene 1, he describes Portia as "In Belmont is a Lady richly left..." (164). So, he wants Portia due to her beauty, power, and social status so that he would get Portia's sign-exchange value (Guerin et al., p. 125) as Bassanio comments:

*"And She is fair, and, fairer, Of wondrous virtues...  
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,  
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks  
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;"*  
(Act I. Scene 1.165-6)

### **The Themes of Rebellion and Conversion**

In addition, Jessica rebels against patriarchy and modes of social identification as she meets Lorenzo at midnight at her father's frontage house and steals Shylock's money and the ring that her dead mother Leah gave them. Thus, the play also treats the ideology of conversion reflected through Jessica's adoption of Christianity to get emancipation from repressed life and through Shylock's forced conversion into Christianity. Shylock turns into a bloodthirsty Jew because of the mistreatment of being a minority and an outcast (Stelling, 2009) well elaborated through heart rendering speech by Shylock:

*Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.*  
(Shylock, Act 3, Scene1)

### **Theme of Cross-Culture**

The play also represents the complexity of cross-cultural exchange because the ingrained ideology of cultural antagonism and cultural differences due to the usage of usury in Judaism turn the events into tragic ends. Through the play, Shakespeare represents the pessimistic view of conservative justice for minorities to deal with trade disputes and criticizes capitalism by describing the two professions with surplus risk and surplus value, "merchant" and "moneylender."

### **The Hierarchy of Majority and Language: Significance of the Title**

Additionally, the title *The Merchant of Venice* also portrays the hierarchy of majority even though the play mainly focuses on the moneylender Shylock. Antonio should have the idea beforehand that the bond of flesh in exchange for money is something thrilling and dangerous. Still, it can be suggested that he knows being belonged to the majority and that justice will be in his favor. No one will hear the pledge of Shylock as Althusser also delineates that the ruling class dominates lower ones in every walk of life. Shylock should resist these power tactics, but he subjugates as he is supposed to be acted accordingly in such a bourgeois world (1360). Shylock is unaware that

powerful authorities may distort reality and the language of bond, which reflects language's role in imposing hierarchy and identity. Moreover, it is generally believed that, in such a class structure society with binary oppositions like rich and poor, good and evil, Shylock should deviate from this hegemonic ideology and finds independence from such Venetian economic patterns as Harold C. Goddard highlights that Shylock is “first Jew to speak for himself, to argue his case, to reveal his humanity” (102). On the other hand, Althusser defines the state as an instrument of suppression, which permits the hierarchies to assure their supremacy over the lower ones (1339), so one is unable to resist due to the fear of going against hegemonic racial hierarchies, as Shylock loses his religion, money, and daughter at the end.

### **Play's Reflection of Human Ideology**

The textual evidence:

*“If your miseries were in the  
Same abundance as your good  
Fortunes are. And yet, for aught I  
See, they are as sick that surfeit  
With too much as they starve  
With nothing.”  
(Nerissa, Act 1, Scene 2)*

It represents the insight of Nerissa, an intellectual or well-aware character, about society and human nature with all its conflicts. When Portia indicates that she is tired in such a world, Nerissa declares that people with abundant happiness and resources are unhappy like those with nothing or little. It again reflects human ideology incredibly the rich who are unable to get peace after having such an idealistic life with affluence of resources.

### **Shylock's Intentions: Theme of Revenge**

Shylock states,

*“If I can catch him once upon the  
Hip, I will feed fat the ancient  
Grudge I bear him.  
(Shylock, Act 1, Scene 3)*

Here, Shylock reveals his intention to take revenge on Antonio due to his insults, verbal torture, and damage to his business by Antonio. Shylock's prejudice against Christians results from the prejudice he encounters as a Jew. Shylock is limited to moneylending and trade with usury because other professions are prohibited for him as Jew. These restrictions and contemptuousness create anger and resentment that cause him to hit Christians.

## Contempt towards Shylock and the Complex Structure of Economy

*“My daughter, O my  
Ducats, O my daughter! /Fled with  
A Christian! Ducats! /Justice, the law, my  
Ducats, and my daughter.”  
(Solanio, Act 2, Scene 8)*

Here, Solanio mimics and ridicules Shylock’s response to searching for eloped Jessica and his money. Still, Solanio's parody reveals Christians' contempt against Shylock and reveals the inherited ideology of Jews’ stereotypical greed. Shylock admires his daughter the same as he cherishes his ducats or money. He feels sorrow for missing both his property and his daughter. He articulates her name right after his money which reflects that Jessica is like a commodity or a mere object for him. Thus, the play revolves around the complex structure of the economy that the characters are struggling to achieve.

### Shylock's Complaint and the Depiction of Ideology

In addition, another textual reference that depicts Shylock pleading:

*“He hath disgraced me  
Laughed at my losses, mocked at  
My gains scorned my nation,  
Thwarted my bargains,  
What’s his reason? I am a Jew.”  
(Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1)*

When Solanio and Salarino demand the reason for taking Antonio’s flesh from Shylock, in this textual evidence, he expresses his complaints. He sheds light on the disdain and abuse of Antonio. In short, the play *The Merchant of Venice* highlights class consciousness in the capitalist world with class politics and class struggle to get higher positions, ideological oppression and domination, social inequality and discrimination to depict alienation, hierarchical racial abuse, corruption, manipulation, and commodification of the lower strata. The aristocratic class established false consciousness and assumed ideologies according to their interest; then, they ingrained these deceptive dogmas in human psychology to follow them as institutionalized and universal phenomena. Terry Eagleton also indicates that “the function of ideology is to ‘naturalize’ social reality, to make it unchangeable by converting culture into nature” (Eagleton 117). Thus, this research paper depicts Louis Althusser's construction of ideology through violence, discourse conditioning, and language by analyzing Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*.

## CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* presents a complex portrayal of the capitalist world with its class politics, struggles, and ideologies. The play highlights the issues of class consciousness, ideological oppression, and social inequality that are still prevalent in our society today. The characters in the play represent different social classes and their conflicts with each other, revealing the struggles for power and status in a capitalist system. The play also touches upon the themes of racial discrimination and the commodification of individuals based on their social status.

*The Merchant of Venice* serves as an exemplary critique of the capitalist society and its inherent flaws. The play exposes the complex structures of the economy and the struggles of individuals to gain power and status. By analyzing the play through the lens of Louis Althusser's Theory of Interpellation, this research paper has demonstrated how the play portrays the struggles of individuals to resist the dominant ideologies imposed on them. Shakespeare's play remains relevant today, as we continue to grapple with issues of class consciousness, ideological oppression, and social inequality in our society.

## REFERENCES

- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*, Wordsworth Editions, 2000.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus: Notes towards an Investigation", *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, La Pensee Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Secondary Resources:**
- Adelman, Janet. "Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*." *The University of Chicago Press*, 2008.
- Allen, Anita L. and Michael R. Seidl. "Cross-Cultural Commerce in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*." *American University International Law Review*, vol.10, no. 2,1995, pp 837-859.
- Althusser, Louis. "The State." *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch. *New York: Norton*, 2010: 1333-1375. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. *United States: the University of Minnesota Press*. 2008.
- Geisler, Brian. Character. "Constructs and Classism in *The Merchant of Venice*," 2015.
- Parment, Joseph Ross. "Shylock's Demon and The Ideology of Capitalism," *University of Colorado*, 2012.
- Guerin, W. L., Labor, E., Morgan, L., Reesman, J. C., and Willingham, J. R. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. *New York: Oxford University Press*, 2011.

Royanian, Shamsoddin. Elham Omrani, "Class Oppression and Commodification in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*," *World Scientific News*, 2016, pp. 186-196.

Ştefan, Elena Ancuţa." Trails of Cultural Memory: Rediscovering Shylock as a Father Figure in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", *Metacritic Journal*, 2021.

Stelling, Lieke. "Wheeling Strangers of Here and Everywhere. Present Issues of Integration and the Early Modern Crisis of Conversion", *Hal Open Science*, 2019.

---