

Politics and Pain in Penning the Mis/Representation: Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*

Bhaskar Lama is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He was also associated with Siliguri College as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English. 'Identity' – formation and problem – has been the core of his research interest which he approaches through non-essentialist point of view. His areas of interest include Jewish American Writings, African American Literature, and Subjectivity.

Abstract

The politics behind Marlowe's mis/representation of 'the Jew', causing the latter to appear in a negative limelight, could have been induced by his own desire to juxtapose 'evil' with 'good', and then to forcibly posit the Elizabethan Age as a glorious era, although it was far from the picture of the Golden Age for various reasons. What was the need for Marlowe to situate a Jewish character in the distant setting of Malta staging it for the English audience during a regime which had tall claims of stability and peace? Or, was there some void in the Elizabethan regime which Marlowe was trying to hide through his stage intervention? By orchestrating characters like the Jew or Doctor Faustus, was Marlowe trying to divert the attention of the people from the immediate wrong to some distant myth? This paper tries to explore some of these vital questions and look at the subterranean glitches that have surreptitiously justified the surface serenity of Marlowe's Elizabethan Age. Furthermore, the paper looks at the possibilities of unraveling Marlowe's inner self – if he encounters the pain of mis/representation (of the Jews) in writing, and if writing itself (or form of mis/representation) becomes an act of pain for him – given the time frame he was living in.

Keywords: Elizabethan Age, Jew, Mis/representation, Pain, Stage

Christopher Marlowe wrote *The Jew of Malta* around 1589/90 and staged it evoking positive spectatorial response and, not to forget, inspiring other playwrights by feeding into the notion of a Jew. Even to generate a notion about certain entity one has to know something about the entity itself as it cannot be fathomed in the absence of a 'base', and in this context the Jewish background becomes the archetype for Marlowe. When a contextual argument is built on the given 'base', it becomes crucial to understand how further information which is dispensed, sprouted from the base itself (bringing in ideas of representation and misrepresentation through hermeneutics). In the case of mis/representation, the intentionality of dispensation about placing issues – Jewish entity by Marlowe in this case – is guided by factors, of the ruling ideology, that pronounce the course of action. Marlowe wrote in the Elizabethan Age, willy-nilly 'The Golden Age', where his characters did not have a dignified stance, be it Barabas, the Jew, or Doctor Faustus, or Tamburlaine, or Edward II. He exerted his cognitive bearing to dismount the 'evil' and bring it to its proper ending; but what could have guided his motive? Why was he so scathing in his treatment of his characters? Did the mis/representation of Marlowe's ignoble characters enable the ruling ideology of state power to strengthen itself through the stage mechanism? In other words, was Marlowe a stage-state mouthpiece of the ruling ideology/state power, trying to instantiate the myth of 'The Golden Age' of State by portraying a dystopic socio-political scene on stage? Was he a victim of the State to transpose his bearing/writing in a way suited to the State, himself 'being' susceptible to pain?

Are his writings an embodiment of his pain – the portrayal of negation and downfall of the protagonists – a metaphorical manifestation of what lies at the bottom of his heart?

The Jew of Malta (JM hence) opens with 'The Prologue Spoken at Court', in which Marlowe structures a homogeneous Jewish identity, ascribing perpetual certainty of villainy found in them:

"We pursue
The story of a rich and famous Jew
Who lived in Malta. You shall find him still,
In all his projects, a sound Machevill
And that's his character".¹ (JM 5-9)

Such orientation of authorial prejudice manoeuvred to fashion a preconceived notion about a case – which could have otherwise been seen and understood through 'alienation effect' providing a free space to audience – stifles the free space itself. But, providing free space to writing and staging plays would make literature and culture an apolitical entity, and this paper is not suggesting nor subscribing to a theory of drama which prescribes such neutrality in a space which has spawned politically. In other words, Christopher Marlowe writes in a space which does not allow an unhindered exercise of his 'free will'; rather his writing has to painfully undergo the State surveillance which monitors his work with closer scrutiny.

In an atmosphere of oppression, be it in terms of race or gender, democratic voice is an 'ideal' voice in the true sense of the word; therefore it remains distant from reality during the Elizabethan Age. E. L. Woodward writes in *A History of England*:

"Throughout Elizabeth's reign parliament was in session only for thirty-five months. Thus there could be no continuous criticism of the executive by an organised opposition. There was no organized 'ministerial' part. Privy Councillors with seats in Parliament would defend the executive; no other defence was needed, because in all questions of trade, diplomacy, or war the monarch was by tradition supreme".²

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^{8.898} The Queen was patriarchal in her outlook sustaining the paradox of an autocratic female head, where female liberty was the least important issue within the confines of the State. The resultant faith on Protestant Church over the tussle between the Church and the State by Henry VIII in England was maintained by Elizabeth I. The Reformation Movement, started by Martin Luther, which wanted to question the institution of Roman Catholic Church, and replicated in Elizabeth's regime was not adjudged through a healthy limelight of Rome. Therefore, to blindly accept that Elizabeth's reign was a peaceful one could be estimating 'good' beyond bounds as the radar of Roman suspicion never left England, and even Queen Elizabeth always indulged in stratagems against Spain or France or Netherlands.

¹ Marlowe, Christopher. *The Jew of Malta. Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*. Edited by David Bevington, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Oxford university press, 1998), 250.

² Woodward, E. L. *A History of England* (Kolkata: Booksway, 2012), 84.

Having talked about the loopholes of the ascribed/presumed 'always-already' Golden Age, the argument at this point necessitates a look at the Jewish history in England. This would enable a wider perspective of Marlowe's *raison d'être* of particular assumption about the Jewry. There have been a lot of stories of how and when Jews came to England—the migration of Jewish traders or Jewish colonists took place during the historical creation of the 'Diaspora'; they could have moved to Britain as a result of the Bar Kochba revolt (1325 CE) and so on. Robin R. Mundill writes in *The King's Jew* :

"Despite thin evidence for Jewish presence before 1066, it is unanimously agreed that the Norman Conquest gave a new impetus to the settlement of Jews in England. Some have suggested, with little foundation, that the transfer of Jews from Normandy was accomplished by a bribe being made to the Rouen Jewish community by William the Conqueror. Others have even stated that his invasion fleet had some Jewish financial backing".³

The Jews were always considered outsiders and accordingly their plight of insecurity rendered them vulnerable to attack through demonization by domineering sects for any ill-omen or calamity that befell England. The Jews mainly lived in a ghetto and formed many smaller communities, thriving in an economic zone, markets and town areas, gradually strengthening their community hold by purchasing a burial place and land for synagogue. They were constantly monitored and controlled by the King's own officials, tracking their business hike and methods of providing loans. Jewish lending promoted the theory of 'interest' or *inter est* ('that which is between'); their enterprise promoted risk and ultimately 'the concept of futures and derivatives were developed'.⁴ It was a system from which local entrepreneurs benefited, at the same time 'royal family took its share from the profits' in lieu of providing 'patronage and protection' for several Jewish financiers; a system which was labeled 'usury' to malign Jews.⁵ Ironically, this nurturing of credit was to be their 'downfall' as the Christians had once 'both benefited from Jewish credit and had started to understand the intricacies of this financial revolution then they wanted to recreate it for themselves'.⁶ However, in the context of money lending and exorbitant usury, Stephen Greenblatt makes a point that the Jews (Barabas or Shylock) were not even involved—they made their earnings through trade across the continent, and to portray them as usurers representatively stereotypes Jews; it is an 'anti-semitic stereotype and [uses] the conventional motif of villain-undone-by-his-villainy'.⁷

A change in the scene occurred after Italian banking firms made inroads to the English market where Jewish relevance as money lender or fund provider diminished and the English royalty took measures to curb their freedom. Some rules promulgated against Jews during Edward I specified:

³ Mundill, Robin R. *The King's Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 4.

⁴ Mundill, Robin, 29.

⁵ Mundill, Robin, 104.

⁶ Mundill, Robin, 97.

⁷ Greenblatt, Stephen. "Marlowe and the Will to Absolute Play." In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) 203.

...edict of 1279 set capital punishment upon Jewish blasphemy against the Christian religion. In 1280, the Jews were ordered to listen to the conversion sermons of the Dominicans. The Synod of Exeter, in 1281, gave force to the usual churchly enactments against the Jews. Jews were forbidden to employ Christian domestics, nor were they allowed to hold public office.⁸

The Jews were governed in their personal lives by Talmudic Law, but in the larger domain of nation they were left to the mercy of the laws of the land prescribed by the highest authorities. The pain of maintaining different roles— religious space in private and 'secular' space in public — was a challenge for Jews given their austerity in religious faith, which at times crossed the boundaries of the domestic/private space; this space-transgression, however, was also motivated at times by the prejudice of the society that prescribed stereotypical roles for them. Adding to all the harsh laws, a final law which shattered the Jewish existence in England was 'the first general expulsion to befall the Jews' which was issued in July 18, 1290. The Jews were ordered to leave the realm before All Saint's Day of the year. In the process, 'sixteen thousand Jews left England, about one-tenth going to Flanders, and others took refuge in France' altogether.⁹

Incidentally, in the light of the State handling of Jewry in England, it becomes relevant to talk about Marlowe's writing about Jews in his play, at this point, which would 're-present' and 'represent' the expelled people in a different setting (Malta); and his (Marlowe's) succinct biography would uncover his aloofness with Jews (in acquaintance) and adherence to state power. Christopher Marlowe lived at the time when Jews were not found in England. He was born in 1564 to the family of a shoemaker and 'professional bondsman' in Canterbury. After having completed his education in King's School, he went to Cambridge in 1580 with Matthew Parker's scholarship and got his BA in 1586. There was a little controversy regarding his MA degree which was conferred to him despite his 'prolonged absences' from the University. It's conjectured that he may have been serving in 'confidential government service', as the Privy Council letter of June 1587 recommended that he should get regular degree in view of having him sent to Rheims, 'in matter touching the benefit of his country'.¹⁰ Patrick Cheney analyzes this issue and writes thus:

...the archive leaves us with little but murky political ink...the Privy Council's exonerating letter to the authorities at Cambridge University, who tried to stop the young scholar from receiving his MA degree because he was rumoured to have gone to the Catholic seminary in Rheims, France: 'in all his actions he had behaved himself orderlie and discrete lie whereby he had done her Majestie good service, and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing'.¹¹

Marlowe was being celebrated as a successful playwright by late 1580s, enthusing upon later playwrights, like Shakespeare, 'passionate vitality' which rapidly moved them from 'apprenticeship to maturity'.¹² He was arrested for a 'fatal duet' and also later accused

⁸ Margolis, Max L. & Alexander Marx. *A History of the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1967), 390.

⁹ Margolis, Max, 391.

¹⁰ Marlowe, Christopher. *The Jew of Malta. Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*. Edited by David Bevington, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: OUP, 1998), vii.

¹¹ Cheney, Patrick, "Introduction: Marlowe in the twenty-first century." In *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*. Edited by Patrick Gerard Cheney (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 2004), 3-4.

¹² Nicoll, Allardyce. *English Drama: A Modern Viewpoint* (London: George G, Harrap & co, 1968), 41.

of religious heterodoxy and disloyalty to the Crown. His life ended 'suddenly and squalidly in a Deptford tavern brawl' at the hands of one Ingram Frizer in 1593. The short span of his life unfolded eventualities that framed his mind to perceive the world a little differently, be it his education or his friendship with Kid, or his approach to the state power. Such experiential encounters expressed through his writings, bear a tone that flickers with the pain of pessimism, precaution, and subtlety.

A question of pertinence may be contextually broached regarding Marlowe's taking up of a Jew for a character that too in Malta, in the limelight that Jews in England were expelled, and he could not have met one as a money lender. Marcus Arkin writes that 'the 'usurers' who advanced [the] sums were not Jews. The Jewish community had been expelled from England in the late thirteenth century, and English Jewry was not to be restored until the time of Cromwell'.¹³ What could have induced Marlowe to 're-present' and 'represent' the non-existent voiceless 'subaltern' in the Jew? Does his endeavour typify the 'un-Golden' Elizabethan Age as a 'Golden Age' in the history of England? Before that it becomes quite essential to understand why Marlowe has positioned Malta as a viable staging platform.

Marlowe is not in-authenticating his point by strategizing Jewish placement in Malta as he could not place Jews in England after the extermination law. However, positioning them in the distant *terra firma* of Malta – a secluded race of Jews, place-wise (foreign land), and in 'being' (Jewishness, all the evils that constitutes them) – endows him the orientalizing license. Hence, Marlowe becomes the mouthpiece who can speak of the 'subaltern' (Jew in this case), who is without a position to replicate his (and not 'her' because a female Jew is an invisible entity) own identity. For Marlowe, Barabas might have been a 'figment of imagination' just as Shylock, writes Cecil Roth, was 'a sheer figment of Shakespeare's imagination....[who] acquired an objective reality more vital than that of most creatures of flesh and blood'.¹⁴ To readily objectify the other through 'imagination' takes off some part of innocence, and Marlowe not just places the Jew for vilification, but portrays the Jew as metonymical evil.

Irrespective of derivatives, it is of importance to note that Marlowe to his best has projected a facsimile of truth in replication of Jewish economic exploitation by the regimes in Europe, regardless of the country. The historical persecution of Jews helped the rulers to find another victim in them who could be further victimized without inviting much trouble – this also does not distant Marlowe in his intention, as a mainstream playwright he could choose his characters in his discretion. In *Jew of Malta*, he maintains the status quo and replicates the system wherein the Jews were levied huge taxes on flimsy grounds by rulers. Marlowe's assumption that Jews should surrender their hard earned property to the altar of the nation for a 'greater good' of the latter is questionable. The accruing pain of loss can be replicated through writing in an objective junction, till the 'imaginative' Barabas is a distant Jew, the position which Marlowe himself would not want to swap as he knows the pain that emanates in 'being' one. Barabas does not want to part with his wealth because his heart does not consent; nonetheless, hailing from a marginalized community he cannot voice against the ruling hegemony, and when he

¹³ Arkin, Marcus. 1975. *Aspects of Jewish Economic History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication of America, 1975), 105.

¹⁴ Roth, Cecil. "The Background of Shylock". As quoted in Bhaskar Lama, "Epitomizing Shakespeare in the Replication of Marginal Characters: Shylock, Caliban and Othello." *Third Front Journal* 1, no.1 (2013): 17-31.

tries to do so the voice itself becomes the harbinger of his 'downfall'. Jews had to bear the burden of the nation for no fault of their own, they were taxed exorbitantly and often taxed in high percentages of their income, saying 'no' to which called for severe results – they were either asked to convert to Christianity or expelled from the country or killed.

Marlowe tries his best to pull together two extremes of Jews – positive and negative – however in synthesis we get the predominant 'evil' remnants of the Jews. Marlowe's Barabas speaks of Jewish predicament where they have prospered from all the hardship and hatred cast upon them:

"They say we are the scattered nation;
I cannot tell, but we have scrambled up
More wealth by far than those that brag of faith" (I.I.119-121).

Paradoxically, there is a lot of feeding and internalizing of Jewish possibilities of vengeance from within the community and from outside. For instance, Katherine tells her son Mathias while the latter talks to Barabas: 'Converse not with him; he is cast off from heaven' (2.3.159). Even Barabas epitomizes a representational evil Jew as he speaks to his slave, Ithamore:

"As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights
And kill sick people groaning under walls;
Sometimes I go about and poison wells" (2.3.175-177).

Marlowe subtly has Barabas opine his variegated shades of negativity through proud confession of his villainy to Ithamore, 'we are villains both' (2.3.215), and asking his daughter, Abigail, to act like a 'cunning Jew' with her beloved (2.3.236). A stereotyped Jewish entity is created through Barabas when he slyly divulges himself in a self-denigrating manner and his existence shown only for material profits:

"And he from whom my modest advantage comes
Shall be my friend.
This is the life we Jews are used to lead,
And reason, too, for Christian do the like". (5.2.113-116)

Marlowe also insinuates the traditional idea that Jews are Christian haters, a reason due to which hundreds of Jews were killed across Europe (a stark example is that in 1221 some ninety-six Jews were slain at Erfurt for a murdered Christian body, without proper findings done). Revelation of Marlowe's own prejudice towards the Jews, having not met them, shows the human frailty that troubles them which they bring out through modes they are gifted in, at the same time also leaves the tinge of their own 'guilt' in place. Marlowe, perhaps, also brings out his frailty and pain of that guilt in his randomly schemed Jewish portrayal.

One main device to rid Jews of their Jewishness (coeval of 'evil') was through conversion. Jews were encouraged to proselytize to Christianity by heads of State, and there were times they were coerced to do so. One of the orders of January 31, 1253 in England was, 'no Jew might prevent another Jew from embracing Christianity'. Marlowe has also tactically aroused Christian conscience in Abigail (daughter to Barabas) who volunteers to convert to Christianity

by renouncing Judaism—ideological encoding of repressive act mediated by staging of the state policy. Barabas forbids his daughter from loving a Christian:

“You’ll make them friends?
Are there not Jews enough in Malta
But thou must dote upon a Christian?” (2.3.360-62)

After having felt religiously ‘betrayed’ by his daughter, Barabas perceives a trace of himself in Ithamore, his newly bought slave, and loves his presence. Seeing his own replica in Ithamore, Barabas enjoys the villainy that the slave provides: ‘My trusty servant, nay, my second self’ (3.4.15), and later ‘O trusty Ithamore, no servant, but my friend!/I here adopt thee for mine only heir’ (3.4.42-43). The last line unveils the deepest desire of Barabas to perpetuate his existence through his successive ‘heir’, who complies with his injunctions, unlike his daughter who he plans to kill for her disloyalty—‘Now shalt thou see the death of Abigail’ (3.4.63).

With such projection Marlowe has fed the notion of Jews as being not away from homogeneity of like-minded-ness to each other—thereby stereotyping the identity and subjectivity of Jewry with set standards. Such an act provides the means to ‘otherize’, to stigmatize and then to demonize; strategically providing oneself the license to exorcize the demon by having created one in the first place.

If one were to keep the stereotyped Jew apart from Barabas, even as a human being he is harsh and self-centered, as Abigail says, ‘Hard-hearted father, unkind Barabas’ (3.3.36). He does not care even for his daughter’s death ‘... I grieve because she lived so long’ (4.1.19), and the very character of an individual becomes a paradigm for Marlowe to orchestrate as if Jews had an inherent evil in them. His title which becomes a common denomination for ‘the Jew’ has itself taken a definite ground against Jews in entirety. For an individual, with all positive and negative sides, Marlowe could have named in singularity/individuality ‘Barabas’ as he did with his other plays.

Other Jewish characters in the play are loyal to the State, genuflect to the state power, abide by rules and regulation, and loves Christians. Marlowe does not take them into consideration for portrayal of Jews in their entirety, rather the emphasis is laid upon the stereotyped Jew, Barabas, doing which Marlowe ‘subjects’ his own writing to tarnish the reputation of Jewry by homogenization. Such subjection cannot be discounted as a device aloof from the author. In other words, subjecting one’s writing in a fashion to mis/represent others cannot happen without subjecting oneself to such belief system. Orienting a belief-system also entails the pain to churn ones present belief system by crisscrossing the existing one, debating it over and finally subverting and replacing them. Hence, writing cannot be an outcome sans pain of having to undergo the trajectory of the process.

Moreover, presence of Ithamore makes the case of Jew more interesting as there is someone who can supersede the latter in his villainy, and the audience/reader is made to feel that the Jew being ill-treated by his servant is a comeuppance of his own misdoings. One does not try to understand the subjective formation of Jew, rather there is blatant superimposition of what is considered as unethical and preconceived understanding of him. In the Elizabethan

Age, Marlowe could have wended his way with not much difficulty in portraying the Jew, but the personal pain which anguishes the writer to re-present and represent the character ‘authentically’, with less ‘aestheticization’, to validate oneself can be discerned in his portrayal of characters—Jews—positive and negative, and his injustice in their positioning.

At this juncture, it becomes befitting to analyze Marlowe’s intention (of broaching Jewish subject), streamlining the major points placed above into formulating arguments, that would unveil the State and stage as mechanism operative in instantiating the ruling ideology. In the above discussion, there have been attempts made to showcase the fractured Elizabethan Age (un-Golden-ness), and to present a smooth flow in administration the state power had to surreptitiously assure its people of an efficient functioning of the State. Showcasing thus, the State considers it necessary to solicit or coerce subjects’ subjugation towards the greater good of the State so that the latter can wield ample administrative power. The process of subjugation could be used prospectively to disseminate belief among people of the Elizabethan ‘Golden Age’ myth by propagation of this ideology through various State Ideological Apparatuses, and during the then Elizabethan Age theatre also enacted as an ideology dispensing mechanism. Theatre, at that time, like in the contemporary times, was under the state scrutiny which held the string of outlet—what and how much is to be orchestrated. Hence, this ideological mechanism is operated, at times manipulated, by the state power to hegemonically instantiate its own discourse through efficient stagecraft.

Given such vigilance within which a writer brings out his work to the outside world, there are innumerable odds which daunt and haunt the ontology of the corpus of work, conditioning the writer to bring out with circumspect rendition. Moreover, Marlowe at times had worked as a state agent himself as has been discussed above, his providing ‘her Majestie good service’ and his MA degree being conferred to him despite his absence from the curriculum. Hence, he was conditioned by circumstances which made him loyal to the State, but for the pain that his writing underwent to bring out vision that went to negate other than what pleased the then Elizabethan time could be fathomed in his negative protagonists through and through.

In order to create a positive discourse in a non-positive environment, ‘otherizing’ and ‘inferiorizing’ the other would automatically give an edge to the ‘self’. In other words, state power in Elizabethan England had to find instances to feed public cognition about regimes and people who comparatively were worst than the existing Elizabethan regime. Marlowe created ‘undignified’ characters like Dr. Faustus and Barabas, unworthy kings like Mycetes (in *Tamburlaine*) and Edward II, so that when they are pitted against the Elizabethan reign, the latter would outshine in its spark of glory. For Marlowe, a Jewish re-presentation and representation severed at least two purposes. First, in the then time, Jewish representation in the Elizabethan Age, mainly in bad faith, would go unquestioned as Jews were already suffering the status of having a marginal entity, bearing much of the wrath for who they were. Secondly, re-presentation of Jews would present a complacent Christian environment where ‘believers’ lived with the hope of deliverance one day, and could cling on to their support for the state power for any change to come. To these purposes the pain was inflicted in the re-presentation and mis/presentation, both to the characters (Jews in the context) and to the author (Marlowe), former for being not able to determine their ‘being’ and getting stereotyped, latter for orienting the writing to the disposal of what is expected. Consequently, the shackles of mis/presentation engulf both the helpless Jew and the not-so-autotelic playwright.