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G. Jeyalakshmi

Associate Professor

Govindammal Aditanar College for Women

Tiruchendur, Tamil Nadu, India

mmxerox362@gmail.com

### Postcolonialism In Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*

#### Abstract

This study analyses the aspects of postcolonialism in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In this play Shakespeare has given equal respect to the powerful and the powerless like a postcolonial writer. In his view the authoritative and the criminal are both humanbeings. The authoritative has no rights to treat the criminal as a subaltern because he himself has faults like others. Hence no man can be a perfect judge. The powerful men holding high official positions have their symbols of authority but their mercy towards others gives more grace to them than their symbols of authority. Angelo stands for the strict legality of the Old Testament contrasted with Isabella who stands for mercy espoused by the New Testament. The Duke shows his magnanimity by forgiving almost all the criminals in the play. Thus the message of the play does not contain in Old Testament's measure for measure but in New Testament's plea for mercy.

Postcolonialism like other post-isms does not mark an end of that which it contains (i.e., colonialism), but rather a beginning of a field of investigation and understanding following a period of relative closure. There seems to be a great deal of uncertainty as to what the expression 'postcolonial' denotes. The term gained currency with the publication of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft,

Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in 1989. The hyphenated term 'post-colonialism' means the end of colonialism but the unhyphenated term 'postcolonialism' means a study or theory which represents a struggle within one's own self, a conflict through which the 'subaltern' tries to obliterate his colonial self, the institutionalised Western ideology and moves towards his own past, history, culture and heritage.

The postcolonial critics mainly aim at demolishing the western myths of superiority. In order to justify the conquest and to establish systematic administration the Europeans promoted a binary opposition between themselves and the non-European other. European whites were projected as being civilized, rational and hardworking. In contrast, the non-whites were presented as being barbaric, irrational, lazy and sensuous. The postcolonial critics reject these claims of European whites. They foreground questions of cultural difference and examine their treatment in literary works. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak and others attempt to negate the prior European negation of the culture of the colonized people. They argue that reclaiming the past of the colonized and dismantling the colonialist ideology are the main steps for the colonized people to find an identity. In the world of inequalities, postcolonialism attempts at articulation of the voice of the silenced subalterns as Robert J.C. Young says: "Post colonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well being".(2)

Some plays of Shakespeare can be interpreted in the light of postcolonialism. The master-servant relationship between Prospero and Caliban in *The Tempest* resembles the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In *Antony and Cleopatra* and in *Othello*, a person of black complexion has been treated as the other (Cleopatra and Othello) and there is female subalternity in both the plays. In *Twelfth Night* and in *The Merchant of Venice*, the us-and-them binary exists between two religious groups. Though equality, the

main aspect of postcolonialism, is analyzed in *Measure for Measure* and in *King Lear*, it is more seriously discussed in the former.

Man of authority behaves like a colonizer. If he is in a position to give judgement or punishment he fails to look at the criminals as human beings. He is not able to judge others as he judges himself. The measurement he uses for others is different from that he uses for himself. In *Measure for Measure* Angelo, the Duke's deputy accuses Claudio, the brother of Isabella of the crime of fornication. But he himself commits the same crime. Hence Claudio is not guiltier in the eye of the law than Angelo himself who sentences Claudio to death. Just because Angelo has the power in his hand, he thinks that he is superior to others, especially the people for whom he has to give the verdict. This is like the colonizer's exertion of power over the colonized.

Just like a postcolonial critic, Shakespeare wants to give equal respect to the subaltern, irrespective of his rank or status in the society. Through the argument of the Duke, Shakespeare expresses his anger towards men in authority (like Angelo) who behaves like a demi-god with a symbol of stern justice towards the criminals, without using the same symbol of stern justice for themselves. He tries to prove that authoritative men are not gods. He thinks that the god-like authoritarian must be brought to the human plane. He feels that the holders of authority have faults like other men though they treat their authority to be in itself an extenuating circumstance, which covers their vices without curing them. In Shakespeare's view a man of authority must knock at his own bosom and look into his heart to find out if there is really any natural guiltiness within him.

Shakespeare has tried his best to temper justice with mercy. He feels that no man can be a perfect judge as he is an imperfect human being. Hence a man serving as a judge must avoid sentencing a fellow man to death. Moreover, the purpose of punishment is to reform and a dead person cannot hope to reform himself. That divine justice would be meted out to

all without regard to rank or station is as much an accepted doctrine as the belief in divine redemption.

Shakespeare is more humane than the postcolonial critics. If postcolonialism is in favour of equality and justice, Shakespeare goes a step further and wants to consider equality with human consideration and justice with mercy. Isabella in the play says that, though powerful men holding high official positions have their symbols of authority, their showing mercy towards others gives more grace to them than their symbols of authority. The king wears a crown which is the symbol of his authority; a mayor holds the sword of Justice, and this sword is a symbol of his authority; a military commander has a baton as a mark of his authority; and a judge's robe is the symbol of the judge's authority. But none of these symbols suits these men so well as the noble quality of mercy would. Isabella, while talking to Angelo, speaks of mercy in high terms. She reminds him that all men had been forfeit to hell because of the original sin of Adam and that only the mercy of Christ had redeemed mankind. She puts this in personal terms by asking Angelo how he will stand up to the last Judgement without Christ's mercy. The play shows the triumph of mercy over Justice through the words of Isabella, Escalus and the Duke.

Thus Shakespeare is against the binary oppositions of centre, periphery, master / slave, colonizer / colonized, civilization / slavery and the powerful / the powerless. As all these binaries merge into a single new form, syncreticism in postcolonial theory, Shakespeare wants to merge the authoritative and the unauthoritative or the judge and the criminal. In his view there is no difference between them as both of them are human beings in spite of their ranks and status.

Angelo stands for the strict legality of the Old Testament contrasted with Isabella who stands for mercy espoused by the New Testament. The ethical attitude of Shakespeare is identical with Jesus Christ. The Duke shows his magnanimity by forgiving almost all the

criminals in the play. By rejecting conventional morality, the Duke is able to show sympathy with human beings of every level and degree. Throughout the play there is an inexhaustible stream of joy in the Christian message of forgiveness. Regardless of the status of human beings all are treated equally by the Duke with the same kindness. He orders a death punishment for Angelo after he married Mariana. Thus Shakespeare sues for mercy while postcolonialism demands only justice and equality.

Pronouncing his judgement, the Duke says that Angelo is found guilty of the same crime for which he gave death punishment to Claudio. Therefore, law demands like punishment for like offence. He says: "An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!" (V, I, 112). He tells all those present that haste always pays haste and leisure always leisure. Like does requite like. In other words measure is needed for measure or like for like. Here the Duke recommends the Old Testament's eye-for-an-eye justice. Mercy, however, tempers justice. The severe penalty against the Deputy is revoked by the pleading of both Mariana and Isabella. Thus the message of the play does not contain in Old Testament's measure for measure but in the New Testament's plea for Mercy:

Judge not, that ye be not judged,  
For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be  
Judged; and with what Measure ye mete, it  
Shall be measured to you again (Mathew 7: 1-2)

Shakespeare's view of the treatment of criminals as equal and not inferior to the authoritative men parallels the view of postcolonial critics who treat the powerful and the powerless alike rejecting all the binary oppositions.

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