

Unit: 28: Shakespeare and Race

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The race is more than a question of colour. Shakespeare is read and performed all across the world and he is used widely in the discourses of race, primarily because of his treatment of the racial others like Othello, Aaron, Prince of Morocco, the Indian boy, Cleopatra, and others in the white conceptual background. He is also re-read in the context of white superiority. In the multicultural modern discourses, the race is not so much a natural biological division as it is a social division. But, it is seen as if it is natural or biological in Shakespeare, reflecting the early formulation of the idea of race.

This unit introduces you to:

1. Race: the concept
2. Race in Shakespeare's time
3. Race in Shakespeare's plays
4. Portrayal of race in Shakespeare adaptations, and
5. The use of Shakespeare in discourses of race

Race: the concept

The word 'race' was first used in English in 1508 by William Dunbar: "And backbiters of sundry races" (Dunbar, 1819, p. 87) in the sense 'groups'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines race as "a group, especially of people, with particular similar physical characteristics, who are considered as belonging to the same type, or the fact of belonging to such a group". Racism refers to the notion that members of a race have common features, capabilities, and qualities that distinguish them and hierarchically place their race concerning other races.

The race is a grouping based on physical or social qualities, say common language or national affiliation. In the 17th century, it began to mean phenotypical (physical) traits. Today, we treat it as an arbitrary social construct. The race is held to be based on physical similarities. But the conception of these similarities, and therefore of racial groups, have varied over time. Popular conceptions of the quintessential traits of a race vary with time. Racial differences are delicate and are mutable through sexual intermingling and therefore, science does not regard biological essentialism, physical features, or behavioural traits as the basis of race.

In a sense, all humans belong to the same species, Homo Sapiens, and therefore, to one race. Conventionally it refers to the major divisions of humankind based on distinct physical characteristics as ethnic groups. When grouping is made on shared culture, history, language, etc., it also excludes some as not belonging to the group. However, there are always subspecies with distinctive traits within every grouping. An ethnic group, racial type, caste, breed, or generation, or relationship-wise grouping based on a common ancestor, family, lineage, house, dynasty, blood, clan, tribe etc. all have subgroups within them.

Even more, is in the case groupings based on observable essentialist behavioural traits. As the use of the word 'race' in the sense used by Scientific Racism is very, problematic, modern discourses used more politically correct words like populations, peoples, ethnic groups, or communities. However, this legitimises the use of race in more contexts than mere biological marking. Now it is extended to faith,

nationality, gender, sexuality, class, colour, colonisation etc. and therefore, a cultural category, say, the religious groups like Hindu, Muslim and Christian became possible.

As racism narrows down from cultural to biological it becomes increasingly inflexible. If racial thinking expresses prejudices towards people who are not like oneself, such prejudices are not mere ignorance or bad faith; rather tools to legitimize the structures of power which systematically deprive some people of their social, material, sexual and intellectual rights (Loomba SRC 39). Even the early formulation of race as genetic lineage had some cultural and social agenda. As multicultural modern discourses interrogate the claimed superiority of white race is now seen less of a natural biological division than a social construct. Now, the word 'race' implies more than colour.

The race is a confusing term and does not carry a precise set of meaning. It is more an umbrella term for diverse combinations of ethnic, geographic, cultural, class, and religious differences. The ambiguity in the use is evident in the following cases in which each of the different victims feels that they are racial.

- Colour History of US and slavery
- Religion Arab-Israel issue;
- Culture European anti-Semitism
- Race Rwandan Tutsi-Hutu conflict
- Caste India
- Class Feudal societies
- Geography North-South divide; East-West divide

Race in Shakespeare's time

Shakespeare contemporaries were concerned with race. William Camden's *Britannica* (1586) and Richard Verstagens's *Restitution of the Decayed Intelligence* (1605) refer to the British as a people with common heritage bloodline and faith. John Florio's Italian English dictionary *A World of Words* (1598) defines 'razza' as a 'race' or 'the kind of crude, a blood, a stock, a pedigree' suggesting lineage. Montaigne uses 'race' in the same sense of 'family' when he stated in his essay 'On Glory'. Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) uses 'race' in the same sense of 'family' when he stated in his essay 'On Glory': "I have no name that is sufficiently my own. Of two I have, one is common to my whole race, and indeed to others also. There is a family in Paris and other in Montepellier named the Montaigne".

Shakespeare also uses race in the sense of root: "buy a race or two of ginger" (WT 4.3.46). Race signified both the whole people as in "the whole race of mankind" (Tim. 4.1.40), and also a subset of the population: "race of youthful and unhandled colts" (MV 5.1.71-72), and "the minions of their race (Mac. 2.4.15).

The religious implication of race starts with the Crusades. Although both the crusaders and the jihadists had different people among them, Crusaders considered all of them as 'the race of Christ', people re-born through baptism as the "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession" (I Pet. 2:9). Although this expression was meant for the Jews, Pauline interpretation made this applicable to all Christians, by making them a distinct race of people, making Christians consider themselves into a distinct group or 'race of Christ' irrespective of bloodlines, but spiritual affiliation into the family of Christ. This proposition distinguishes the bloodline of heredity by evoking the Christian-Muslim difference. It recalls the Jew-Muslim tension claim for Abraham's 'lawful' heritage. The grand narrative in all the three Abrahamic religions revolves around the claim of the inheritance

of the land promised by God to Abraham and his progeny. While Jews and Christians think that it belongs to Isaac, the lawful son of Sarah (Gen. 25:5–8), Muslims believe it to belong to Ishmael, born in Sarah's maid Hagar.

The Elizabethan idea of race was based on the notions of the skin colour, religious affiliation and community membership. Their cross-cultural encounters with foreigners during the Crusades and the Renaissance altered the European beliefs and notions of otherness. As Europe became more identity conscious, they began to treat neighbouring peoples like the Irish and foreign-origin citizens living with them — Moors, Jews, Turks, and Gypsies — also as outsiders. This otherness was also determined by gender, class and nationality.

Before Elizabeth, England was an insecure and insular English nation “who do not much use to travel”. Still, Black Africans were not strange in Shakespeare's England. The court had Black musicians and the queen had a Black maidservant. Wary about the large diasporic presence of “Negars and Blackamoors” who had “crept into” England, Elizabeth issued two edicts—in 1599 and 1601 against them and wrote to the mayors of cities in 1596 about the “divers blackmoores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie...”. Their ideas about foreign races came from travelogues and theatres like the Globe presented such received ideas/images of foreignness, creating stereotypes about Indians, Gypsies, Jews, Ethiopians, Moroccans, Turks, wild Irish uncivil Tartars etc. based on differences.

The gap between the vocabulary of Shakespeare and the reality of the modern world in race discourses reveal the operation of the concurrent opening and closing of the European mind which started in the Renaissance period. And modern theories reinterpret Shakespeare today, what we see is just as Shakespeare in discourses helped in shaping the views of his theatre audience, his modern reader across cultures use Shakespeare to reread the question of race in terms of their proposed colonial understanding and reality.

However, when the successful colonisation of foreign lands made it feel superior, it became more insular. This simultaneous opening and closing of European mind created binaries like “the people of God” and “the race of Christ” / heathens and non-believers, Christians / Muslims, etc. as religious identity superseded national identity. Even as *Othello* was being written, the European categorisation of themselves as baptised race as opposed to the circumcised race of turbaned Turks. Following the European conquest of the Americas, American Indians became Calibans who need to be civilised. Their political and economic dominance increased their racial distance and for them the Black Africans became apes; the Semitic especially the Muslims became beastly and unnatural; and the Indians became effeminate.

This was no so in the past. In *Parzival*, the Arthurian white Christian knight Gahmuret and the black non-Christian Moorish queen separate not because of colour, but because of faith. Eventually, she gives birth to the knight's illegitimate son Feirefeiz who eventually meets the knight's legitimate son Parzival as enemies during the crusade, but get united as brothers. Feirefeiz falls in love with Repanse de Schoye, the bearer of the Holy Grail, becomes a Christian, marry her and go to India to gives birth to Prester John, the legendary Christian ruler of India and Ethiopia.

Race in Shakespeare's plays

But by the sixteenth century, by Shakespeare's time, the interracial child became a disqualification, as "the boy of royal blood" born to Aaron and Tamora cannot occupy the throne and has become a 'tawny slave' because of his colour.

'Peace, tawny slave, half me and half thy dam!
Did not thy hue bewray whose brat thou art,
Had nature lent thee but thy mother's look,
Villain, thou mightst have been an emperor:
But where the bull and cow are both milk-white,
They never do beget a coal-black calf. (*Tit.* 5.1.)

By Shakespeare's time, interracial "the boy of royal blood", born to Aaron and Tamora, cannot occupy the throne and is a 'tawny slave' because of his colour (*Tit.* 5.1). Shakespeare's Antony uses 'race' in the sense of hierarchy of bloodlines. His love for Cleopatra stops him from begetting 'a lawful race' with his wife:

Antony: Have I my pillow left unpress'd in Rome,
Forborne the getting of a lawful race,
And by a gem of women, to be abused
By one that looks on feeders? (*Ant.* 3.13)

Royal succession demands lawful lineage. It is a theme in Shakespeare's major and minor tetralogies. People did not accept Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke of Lancaster) because he was not from the royal line. However, his son, Prince Hal (Henry V) was lawful on the throne because he was the son of a king and was hailed as the 'ideal king'.

Elizabethan England even exhibited people to prove how anatomy proves the difference in races. The case of Saartje Baartman, the 25-year-old Khoikhoian woman, displayed all over Europe in the first decade of the 19th century pejoratively called "Hottentot Venus". Her genitals and buttocks were displayed to demonstrate the pathological difference from those of the white women. This was not new. *The Tempest* refers to the display of "the dead Indian". The Eskimo couple captured by Martin Frobisher's voyage (1577) were treated like animals.

Shakespeare was influenced by Edward Topsells's *The Historie of Four-Footed Beasts and Snakes* (1607) which compare apes and Blacks as if both belonged to the same race and refers to race in the sense of breeding. Shakespeare also uses race in the sense of root: "buy a race or two of ginger" (*WT* 4.3.46), the whole: "the whole race of mankind" (*Tim.* 4.1.40) and a subset: "race of youthful and unhandled colts" (*MV* 5.1.71-72), or "the minions of their race" (*Mac.* 2.4.15).

Although Shakespeare uses the word 'race' only a handful of times in the First Folio, he also uses other words and expressions to communicate the differences in religion, nationality, colour, and ethnicity.

- Live, and beget a happy race of kings! (*3R* 5.3)
- And never of the Nevils' noble race. (*6H2*:3.2.)
- Forborne the getting of a lawful race, (*Ant.* 3.13)
- No longer exercise Upon a valiant race thy harsh and potent injuries (*Cym.* 5.4)
- Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race, (*Mac.*2.4)
- That pupils lacks she none of noble race, (*Per.* 5.6)

- To the whole race of mankind, high and low! Amen. (*Tim.* 4.1)
- But thy vile race, which no print of goodness take (*Tmp.* 1.2)
- But thy vile race, ... that in't which good natures Could not abide to be with (*Tmp.* 1.2)
- By bud of nobler race: (*WT.* 4.4)

Blacks were said to engage in homosexuality and bestiality. Mendeville's *Travels* speak how the devils of hell couple with Babylonian women to produce monsters. Iago evokes these fears when he refers to the old black ram tugging the white ewe of Brabantio, who thinks that the union of Othello and Desdemona is an "err / Against all natural rules" (Oth.1.3) and for Iago Desdemona has "a will most to rank / Foul disproportion is, thoughts unnatural!" (Oth.3.3). In *Titus Andronicus*, the union of white Tamora with black Aaron produce 'a devil'. It is the only interracial child to appear in the early modern English stage.

Elizabeth I received a Moroccan ambassador of Abdul Malik al Ouahed bin Masoud bin Muhamad Anoun, the Emperor of Morocco. In August 1600, a year before Othello. The embassy came and stayed in London for six months, negotiating the possibility of an anti-Spanish military alliance. A contemporary portrait depicts the well-dressed and somewhat stern figure with a neatly tied white turban and a splendid scimitar. The portrait seems to be the first of a Muslim by an English artist. He was, possibly, Shakespeare's model for Othello.

Race in Shakespeare adaptations

Shakespeare was first translated into other languages at a time when the world was becoming convinced in positivist ideas. It classified race as the Caucasoid, the Mongoloid, the Negroid, and the Dravidian etc. Caucasians were the Aryans, Semites, and Hamites. The Aryans were subdivided into European and Indo-Aryans / Indo-Iranians". The Mongoloid has wide geographic distribution and cover the Americas, North Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, the Arctic, Central Asia and the Pacific Islands. The Negroid were primarily in Africa and South Asia. The Dravidians are found mostly in the Indian subcontinent. The *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon* (1885-90) represents the western understanding of race during the height of western colonisation.

Shakespeare uses 'race' in the sense of lineage and heredity in terms of nation and as religion. He also uses 'tribe' not to refer to the Jews. His ambivalence about race is seen in Shylock. Venice sees the Jew alien because of his racial identity. *The Merchant of Venice* uses 'race' to mean 'breed':

Lorenzo: For do but note a wild and wanton herd,
Or race of youthful and unhandled colts,
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
Which is the hot condition of their blood. (MV. 5.1)

Elizabethan plays discuss how social life is conditioned by the question of race and how outsiders occupy central positions in society. Shakespeare generally speaks directly about race. His *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* are examples. Minor characters like Aaron (*Tit.*), "the Tawny Moor" Prince of Morocco (MV), and the shadowy presence of the Indian boy (*MND*), and the Ethiope (*Ado*) are examples. A racial slur is also found in Shakespeare: "Thy love! out, tawny Tartar, out! (MND 3.2).

Sexual contact across races was scandalous in Elizabethan times. The European fear of miscegenation is found in Shakespeare's treatment of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona (*Oth*), Cleopatra and Antony (*Ant.*), Taliban and Miranda and the King of Tunis and Claribel (*Tmp.*), the King

of Morocco and Portia (*MV*), and Aaron and Tamora (*Tit.*). Shakespeare refers to such incidents by referring to the Negro woman impregnated by Lancelot in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Lorenzo: I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than
you can the getting up of the negro's belly: the
Moor is with child by you, Launcelot.

Launcelot: It is much that the Moor should be more than reason:
but if she be less than an honest woman, she is
indeed more than I took her for. (*MV* 3.5.36),

Other writers like Ben Jonson. Also refers to this. For example, in his *Volpone*, he portrays Volpone as having coupled with "Gypsies and Jews and black moors" and produced three monstrous children — a dwarf, a fool, and a eunuch. Shakespeare.

Shakespeare in Discourses of Race

Shakespeare's lines, characters, themes and story are widely used to justify contrary ends. For example, Octavio Mannoni uses Caliban's sense of inferiority in *The Tempest* to speak about the inherent disparity between humans and therefore a justification for colonialism. On the contrary, Aime Cesaire portrays him as the embodiment of the miseries of colonial oppression. Similarly, Shakespeare's ideas about a woman are also used to portray women as a race.

Shakespeare's contemporary Edmund Spenser spoke of women as a group: "boundless race/of womankind":

That mortall men her glory should admyre;
In gentle ladies breste, and bounteous race
Of woman-kind, it fayrest flowre doth spyre,
And bearest fruit of honour and all chast desyre. (*Fairy Queen Book III. Canto LII*)

Shakespeare also expresses the racial difference in terms of gender and sexuality. Both of them seem to have followed Herodotus who in Scythia regarded the Amazons as a nation and a race. The idea continued in *Palace of Pleasure* of William Painter who described the people of distant parts of Europe and Asia, in the *Travels of Marco Polo* when he speaks about the Africans, and in Walter Raleigh when he describes the Americans. It is more an expression of racial difference in terms of gender and sexuality. It is a tool to construct the image of unruly foreign women like Cleopatra who threatened European patriarchal structure, Joan of Arc (*6H1*: 1.2), the French women who take up arms (*KJ* 5.2), Queen Margaret (*6H3*: 1.4; 4.1), and Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons (*MND* 2.1) in terms of their different 'race'.

He also equates desirable women as land. Henry VIII's queen is "all the Indies" (4.1.45); Sir Toby sees Maria as "my metal of India" (TN 2.5.12); Troilus is a "merchant" yearning for Cressida whose "bed is India" (TC 1.1.100); For Falstaff, a woman is "a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty" (MWW1.4.59); Dromio of Syracuse describes Luce's body parts in terms of Ireland, Scotland, Armenia and Indies (CE 3.2.118-41). The two "Indies" are identified as female body parts in literary and travel narratives. In Donne's "Love's progress" the lover sails to his mistresses 'India'; for Columbus, the Earth was breast with the Indies as its nipple; for Walter, Raleigh Guiana is a land that has yet her maidenhead (Whitehead, 1997, p. 196).

Elizabethans expressed ideas about differences of race, religion, and geography in anatomical terms of difference. They described the cannibalistic and naked American bodies; cruel domestic male bodies of the Middle East, and confined female bodies of the East. In the description of Cleopatra manning Antony, they regarded foreign lands and people's deviant in gender and sexual roles; and Muslims and Africans as hypersexual and homosexual; and Africans and Asians as effeminate (Peter Heyleyn. *Microcosmus*). On the other hand, they expressed European Christian as masculine and superior in terms of penetration, rape and mastering feminised races.

Scientific racism has influenced the reading of Shakespeare. One can see his Trinculo speaking about the display of dead Indians in England (*Tmp.* 2.2). Records of the display of the 25-year-old Khoikhoian woman Saartje Baartman (1789? -1816) known as the 'Hottentot Venus', dead Indians, captured Eskimo couple, pictures of American men with the tail (Cesare Vecelli's *Costume Book*), the recommendation of using the huge breasts of Khoikhoin, Khosian and Irish women as pouches etc. have also conditioned the English imagination of racial otherness. Medical writers and painters represented Christian purity by whiteness and marked Islam and the Saracens with blackness. They regarded love across boundaries as threatening to the divisions.

Did Shakespeare foresee British colonialism—which started with Britain setting up imperial outposts abroad during his time—is a difficult question? *The Tempest* shows colonialism as something as old as human society itself. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* argues that cultural domination of the West's view about the East predates the setting up of colonies. It appears that Shakespeare could understand, and articulate both colonial and postcolonial viewpoints and positions.

The Shakespearean idea of race is a colonial discourse: a binarist conception of the civilized, rational, masculine and moral West as opposed to savage, emotional, feminine and immoral east. The discourse of race is a strategy for survival in transnational and translational contexts.