



Analyzing Commodification in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*

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ABSTRACT:

This article aims at analyzing Marlow's play *The Jew of Malta* in the light of Karl Marx's theory of commodification. For a capitalist, everything is sellable and being dealt in terms of money whether it is country, religion, human life, love or blood relation. Barabas, the money lender and main protagonist of the play is a true reflection of this capitalistic approach. He is devoid of human passions and does not follow any morality. He is ready to sacrifice his daughter Abigail for materialistic gains and he uses her just as a tool for his beneficial moves. In this regard, he does not spare even his loved ones. Such things as friendship, love, country, religion, and human beings are being dealt by him only in terms of monetary value. This study explores how this process of commodification occurs throughout the play which ends with the death of many important characters including Barabas himself. This play *The Jew of Malta* depicts the cruel and selfish approach of capitalists who have just artificial and fickle relations with other people. Barabas's character presents modern man's true picture that prefers his wealth and gold to human life, and other passions like love, patriotism, and faith etc. He uses them just as a commodity when needed, in order to secure his mundane and temporal objectives. This is qualitative research. Moreover, it is thematic analysis of the text *The Jew of Malta*.

Key Words: Christopher Marlow, *The Jew of Malta*, Commodification

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1. Introduction

Marxism generally deals with the issue of exploitation of the poor at the hands of the capitalist class. Karl Marx unveils this process of exploitation by exposing different tools used by a capitalist to accomplish his materialistic objectives. One such tool is the cruel process of commodification through which goods, services, ideas, sacred relations and people are transformed into commodities or objects of trade. But the victims of this commodification do not raise their voice against this corrupt capital system which is the real cause of their sufferings. Irrespective of their colour, caste, creed, culture, religion, and blood relation, the sufferers have to bear irreparable losses. A capitalist has main concern with his material gains, and he tries to secure them at the cost of country, religion, and even human life. Commodification reveals the height of cruelty and callousness of the capitalists.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is really an eye opener in this regard. Keeping in mind Karl Marx's theory of commodification, we can judge the ugly faces of Barabas and Martin Del Bosco who are capitalists and take human life just as a commodity. Barabas, the protagonist of the story, is a self-seeker and just an opportunist. He is a true follower of Machiavellian philosophy. When Barabas comes to know about Turkish attack over his country, he expresses his opportunistic approach in following words, 'Nay, let'em combat, conquer, and kill all. So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth'. Sacred institutions or beliefs fail to find any value in his eyes. He is ready to sacrifice all these things in order to secure his wealth. Being capitalist, Barabas does not follow any morality. He confesses it before his daughter when he vows to take revenge on Christians. He says to Abigail, 'for in extremity, we ought to make bar of no policy'. He does not feel any shame or remorse for using his daughter's love as commodity. He deceives Lodowick and Mathias (her daughter's lovers) and kills both of them through a fake duel. Abigail's love for Mathias has no worth in her father's eyes. He himself says, 'He loves my daughter, and she holds him dear; But I have sworn to frustrate both their hopes'. Instead of feeling any repentance over her daughter and other nuns' murder through poison, he enjoys himself of their death. Barabas is responsible for so many deaths. He has no concern and sympathy for other people. This commodification takes place throughout the play at all stages and covers almost all the characters, regardless of their close relations with the





capitalist, Barabas. He does not hesitate to cheat or deceive even his closest friends and loved ones. He is not sincere to anyone. Even a sacred institution like religion is just commodity in his eyes and he uses it for his personal gains. Barabas deceives people in such a way that the victims fail to realize that they are being used as a commodity. They suffer at the hands of Barabas; the exploited remain unaware of their true exploiter. Similarly Del Bosco, a vice admiral to the Spanish king, sells human beings as goods. When he comes to meet the governor of Malta, he tells him, 'Our fraught is Grecians, Turks, and Afric Moors'. This shows that human beings are just commodity in his eyes. As the play is enriched with such examples, incidents, and characters that show element of commodification so it can be easily analyzed in the light of Marx's theory of commodification.

2. Literature Review

This paper focuses on the study of play *The Jew of Malta* from the specific perspective of commodification. The following literature review is based on research articles of different researchers. It throws ample light on Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* and the theory of commodification.

Stacy Balkan (2012) in an article titled as '*Murdering the Innocents' The Dystopian City and the Circus as Corollary in Charles Dickens' Hard times and Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* makes scathing commentary on 19th century conceptions of leisure and industry. Dickens 'description of Coke town, nay Preston is a living proof of utilitarian approach of capital class. It highlights the commodification of workers in post-industrial England. Through the depiction of those men of 'facts and calculations' –mean Jeremy Bentham and Adam Smith, a community is offered by Dickens in which 'hands' are covered in soot toiling under the vulgar Bounder by. It is whimsical cast of Mr. Sleary's circus to counterpoise against these labourers. He uses circus as a corollary in the dystopian city. Similarly, Angela Carter's Neo-Victorian romp is anticipated in London, St. Petersburg, and Siberia. When circus is being held in the cities, the characters of Nights offer an antidote to the oppressive prescriptions for economic prosperity.

Thaddeus Paige Wakefield (2001) points out the damaging effects of capitalism and commodification on American society in an article titled as *the commodification of the American*





family: An analysis of twentieth century American drama. This researcher shows how economy plays vital role in shaping or demolishing the lives of people and how their relationships in American society are affected as a result of commodification. He analyzes the effect of commodity culture on marital, paternal and maternal roles in shaping families. This researcher examines fourteen plays which represent American families and shows effect of commodification on these families through these plays. He observes the ways through which protagonists struggle for social and economic prosperity of their families. This article also highlights an overwhelming tussle between middle class to which the protagonists belong and the higher class that treats them just as commodity.

Tobias Werler (2015) in his review named as *Commodification of teacher professionalism* informs about commodification of teachers' professionalism. He says that education of a teacher is commoditized in European Welfare states. It happens due to governmental policies. The relationship between teacher professionalism and welfare State shows commodification. This paper presents that teacher education is used as an economic instrument by capitalists. Not only teacher education but also students learning outcomes have been commoditized in the existing world. Werler also highlights that teacher education is mimetic construction of buying and selling especially in Europe.

Zaiter (2020) examines the negative view of Jews on Elizabethan stage through his article named as *The Representation of the Jews and Others in Marlowe's the Jew of Malta and Shakespeare's the Merchant of Venice on the Elizabethan Stage.* They have been portrayed in negative way in these plays. They have materialistic approach and try to blackmail and exploit others. They propagate hatred towards those who inflict physical or psychological pain over them. Another important objective of presentation of Jews, Turks and Christians on the stage was entertainment and instruction. In this way, we can understand this play in its proper context.

Andrew Bozio (2015) says in his article *Speak 'em fair; Discourse and dissembling in the Jew of Malta* that the title character of Marlow's tragedy is Barabas. This character is an embodiment of contradictions under Christian norms and tradition in order to maintain his Jewish identity while at the same instant, his antics make very monster of medieval legend. So, the question arises that Jewish Barabas is a skillful rebellion enough to deconstruct the anti-Semitism and his actions





merely present Jewish stereotype. The Jewish protagonist Barabas is vilified, put down as well as destroyed by pitiless Christian Gentile while his daughter Abigail was in love with Gentile. Abigail's certain characteristics isolated her from her father as well as stereotypical Jewishness. The character Barabas has been encountered hatred against his Jewish religion.

Shalghin (2014) in his article *Power Relations in Marlowe's the Jew of Malta* informs us about the power relations in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and guides people to remain away from the world of illusions. This illusionary world sometimes ruins their whole life and deprives them of their basic pleasures of life. Barabas, the central figure in Marlowe's play reflects Machiavellian approach throughout the play. The play exposes the deceptive, murderous and callous character of Barabas.

Beskin (2007) in an article titled as *From Jew to Nun: Abigail in Marlowe's the Jew of Malta* explores Abigail's journey from Jew to nun and analyses the effect of father-daughter relationship through which Abigail succeeds to win our sympathies in *The Jew of Malta*. Marlowe highlights the issues of anti-Semitism, Christian presumption and socially constructed gender roles in the play. The play centers on a rich, Jewish protagonist Barabas and his daughter Abigail. Barabas is defamed and is destroyed by merciless Gentile society while Abigail who is in love with a Gentile, is appropriated into the Christian community. Abigail's positive characteristics separate her from her father and specific type of Jewishness. She is unable to adjust in the society which believes in the hyperbolic representation of Judaism. She is merciful, kind, and devoted, first to her father, then to her lover and finally to God. Abigail is good-natured and possesses the saintly traits of femininity. Thus Barabas comes before us as an anamorphic character that simultaneously evokes feelings of pity and disgust.

Howard S Babb (1957) analyzes in his article named *Policy in Marlowe's the Jew of Malta* that this play is infested with problems, hurdles, and troublesome. The problems arise from the tonal reform and change which follow two acts seriousness and convention. This makes readers to think about protagonist Barabas when he suddenly transforms himself into plotter. The other two characters Bellamira and Pilia Borza present their crudities. The horror of the Jewish's revenge seems to be very absurd as well as quick. Most of the critics disagree with the limits of





Marlow's authorship to the hand of another ascribing the third, fourth and the part of the fifth act.

In short, above mentioned reviews, taken from different sources provide sufficient ground to study Marlow's play *The Jew of Malta* from Karl Marx' view of commodification. Study of this play from this perspective reveals the true nature of the capital class and everlasting effects of commodification over people.

3. Thesis Statement

Even a cursory scan over the play *The Jew of Malta* creates a strong impression that this play is quite suitable for the application of capitalistic theory of commodification. In the light of this theory, we can see the ugly face of capitalism. This play exposes the reality of fickleness of relations of capital class with other human beings and things. Each and everything is commodity for a capitalist and he is ready to sacrifice all these things for the sake of money. No morality is followed in the world of capitalism and everything is viewed in terms of money.

4. Research Questions

1. How and where does commodification take place in the play *The Jew of Malta*?
2. What are disastrous effects of commodification over the victims and the victimizers?
3. Does commodification as a capitalistic tool leave any particle of human passions?

5. Theoretical Framework

This study aims to analyze Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* in the light of Karl Marx's theory of commodification. This theory was presented by him in his famous book *Das Capital* in 1867. The present study is qualitative research. The mode of inquiry is explanatory/thematic analysis. Great German philosopher and economist Marx (1867) presents his complex idea of commodity. According to him, commodification is a process by which exchange value comes to dominate use value. Within a capitalist economic system, it is the transformation of things such as goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information, people or animals into objects of trade or commodities. His book is a critical analysis of capitalism, its economic practices and





the theories like commodification. Marx affirms the universal commodification in the world of capitalism. He presents the new understanding of social relations of capital class with other people in terms of money. A capitalist sees each and every object just as a commodity. There is no place for human emotions and moral values in the materialistic world of capitalism. He can cross any limit of humanity for materialistic gains.

We can see the reflection of this destructive and inhuman approach in Barabas' character who is Jewish money lender and protagonist of the play under study. Marx says that the capitalistic class has superficial and artificial relations with its country, religion and human beings. Even the blood relations have no importance for a capitalist, and they are being used as commodity to his secure financial gains. Human beings are being easily deceived by the superficiality of these relations and are used as tools by a capitalist. Marx's theory of commodification makes us conscious about the true nature of these relations through which they are being exploited and meet their tragic end at the hands of a capitalist.

6. Data Analysis

Commodification takes place throughout the play *The Jew of Malta*. Barabas is main protagonist of the play. He is famous money-lender Jew. Being a capitalist, he uses each and everything as a commodity. He does not spare even his own daughter and uses her as commodity when needed. He sacrifices all precious objects and assets in order to secure his financial benefits. For him, everything has a price and is sellable in the market. He measures each and everything in terms of money. In this case, he does not differentiate between humans and non-humans. When Ithamore, Bellamira and Pilia Borza become danger for him, he kills them through poisonous flowers, just to save his money. In the same way, Barabas uses carpenters as commodity. He finalizes his plan to throw Calymath in the cauldron with the help of carpenters. After using them as tool to complete his evil scheme, he kills them with poisonous wine. We see that he uses religion as a commodity as well. For him, religion is a childish thing as Machevill says in the start of the play, 'I count religion but a childish toy'. He plans to use religion as a commodity when he says to Abigail, 'Ay, daughter; for religion hides many mischiefs from suspicion'. He again says to her, 'Be so exact in simulation that they may think that you have become a Christian due to piety'.





Using religion as commodity, he advises her, ‘and pose as if your sins were great, so that they are obliged to admit you’. So here he does not consider it a sin to cheat Christians in the name of religion. He wants to get his wealth, gold and jewels back which are hidden under the wooden board that lies across the floor of the upper room. Although Barabas himself suggests Abigail for conversion in order to get his wealth back but then pretends to be angry with her for her conversion so that she may win the trust of the Christian priests. In this way, he gets his wealth back through the commodification of religion and uses his own daughter as a tool to fulfill this scheme. At that time, Abigail was also part of her father’s scheme so she also uses religion as a commodity by following her father’s instructions. She succeeds in winning the trust of friars through fake conversion. Similarly, when friars Barnardine and Jacomo threat Barabas to reveal his secret of murdering Lodowick and Mathias, he pretends before them that he wants to become a Christian. He blackmails them by offering all his wealth to the respective monastery which he joins. In this way, he creates breach between them and ultimately takes the life of both friars through a trick. Barabas is a staunch Jew and hates Christianity from the core of his heart but he cheats both the friars in the name of religion. In this way, he uses religion as commodity for his own purpose. i.e., to secure his life and wealth. Abigail also uses love as commodity when she deceives Lodowick under the influence of her father and exploits his feelings of love by showing fake love towards him.

And this is height of Barabas’ greed and selfishness that he even uses his country as a commodity. Patriotism has no value in his eyes. When three Jews tell him about the arrival of Turkish fleet in their land, he says in his aside dialogue that it makes no difference to him whether they fight, win and kill others if only they spare him, his daughter and wealth. It clearly shows that Barabas is not sincere to anyone not even to his own country. He does not care whether Turkey occupies Malta or not as patriotism has no value in his eyes. He only wants to secure his daughter, wealth and his own life. He becomes a traitor and spy to help the enemy. He helps Calymath to enter the town and kill everybody, set the churches on fire, pull down the houses. Malta is defeated at the hands of Turks and Governor is being made slave by them. He deceives Governor of Malta and conspires against his own country by joining hands with Calymath. He does so to take revenge on Governor and to secure his wealth. In this way, he





plays key role in the defeat of Malta by telling enemy about the secret way of entry into the town. As a result, whole Malta is ruined and loss being done to it is irreparable. Only Barabas is responsible for it. His selfish and callous approach comes before us again in the last act when he says, 'for so I live, perish may the entire world'. Later on, he is being made Governor of Malta as a reward by Calymath. So he uses patriotism as a commodity for his personal gains.

He also breaks the trust of Calymath in order to gain huge amount of money from Ferneze, the Governor of Malta. It shows that he is neither sincere to Maltese nor to the Turkish. He is only self-seeker and his own well-wisher. At the last moment, he himself becomes victim of his evil planning and falls into the hot cauldron prepared by him for Calymath and his companions.

This commodification can also be seen on the part of Martin Del Bosco, the Vice Admiral to the Catholic king of Spain. He sells human beings as slaves and earns money through this inhuman trade of human beings. So these human beings are just a commodity for him. He sells Greek, Turkish and African Moors as goods and inanimate objects. Human beings are presented as show pieces in the market to be sold. Price of every slave is written on his back and they are sold as commodities. Proper bargaining is being made during their sale. The price of slaves is being reduced or increased on the base of their race, appearance, age, health, and other qualities of mind and heart. After sale, slaves are being stamped with hot iron bar for recognition. So they are being sold just as commodities and this is great shame for humanity.

The disastrous effects of commodification are felt by the victims and the victimizers. Main disastrous and fatal effect of this commodification over capitalist is that he becomes devoid of human passions. Other people are just social beings for him. If we analyze this fact from the angle of Marxism, Barabas' life is true example of this capitalistic approach. He does not have anything in his life except wealth i.e. neither love nor peace of mind. He does not have any friend, relative or companion. His life is just like a prison where there is only loneliness. There is no homeliness at all. These are disastrous and fatal effects of commodification on the life of the capitalist. Same kind of bitter and unpleasant effects can be seen on the victims of capitalism. Most of the innocent characters like Lodowick, Mathias, Abigail, Friars, nuns, and soldiers of Turkish army lose their lives as a result of this commodification. Barabas does not hesitate for a single second to take their lives of these innocent rather he enjoys their death. He feels satisfied





by taking revenge on them and appreciates himself for these heinous acts of deceiving and killing others. But he himself is not safe from its disastrous effects and loses his own life as a result of this commodification.

There is no place for human emotions in the world of capitalism. So, valuable passions of love, honour, sympathy, and kindness do not have any value in the eyes of Barabas. He reaches the height of selfishness when he uses his own daughter as a tool in order to get his money back. If the secret of Abigail's false conversion is revealed, she may lose her life. But Barabas has no concern for her life. He only wants to get his money back even at the cost of his daughter's life. Then, he uses Abigail and her love as a commodity in order to deceive and destroy Lodowick and Mathias. There is no value of blood relations for Barabas so he does not care for his daughter's positive feelings for Mathias. Similarly Mathias' true and sincere feelings of love for Abigail have no significance for Barabas. Mathias truly loves Abigail and wants to marry her. Abigail also loves him and clearly tells her father, 'I will have Don Mathias; he is my love'. But he does not give any importance to her lovely emotions for Mathias. Although, Barabas claims in the start of the play that he loves his daughter but he also says that he loves her as Agamemnon loved his daughter Iphigenia. It means that he can sacrifice her life at the time of trial. When Abigail becomes angry with him for taking the lives of innocent young men Mathias and Lodowick and goes to the nunnery house to be converted into Christianity, he does not feel any guilt over her conversion. He says, 'I shall be no more grieved by her disgrace'. He disinherits her at once and shuts his home for her forever. He is ready to lose his daughter just to save his wealth.

Barabas sends Ithamore towards a nunnery with poisoned rice porridge on the occasion of a religious festival known as St. Jacques Eve. In this way, he poisons his own daughter and other innocent nuns with the help of Ithamore. He is so stone-hearted that he does not hesitate for a single second to take his daughter's life in order to secure his wealth. Even he curses her for a bad death. He says, 'I hate her from the depths of my soul'. While, on the other hand, she is so sincere to her father that during confession, she requests friar Barnardine, not to disclose her father's crime of conspiracy in murder of Mathias and Lodowick. She requests him to keep it secret and also asks him to convert him to Christianity to save his soul. But he is so cruel that he





says, 'How sweet is the sound of a bell singing at the death of nuns'. Ithamore asks him, 'Are you not sorry for your daughter's death? Barabas replies, 'No, I am rather sorry that she lived so long'. This is the height of cruelty and selfishness on his part.

Even Barabas is not sincere with his faithful servant Ithamore and makes a false claim to give him half of his wealth. He falsely announces him his heir after his death. Secretly he says, 'He can only hope to be rich'. He does so just to win his trust so that he may use him as a tool to kill Abigail. He has no sympathy for him and immediately takes his life along with Bellamira and Pilia Borza with poisoned flowers when he considers him a danger for him. There is no value of Ithamore's services in his eyes. He does not feel any guilty conscience over committing such hideous crimes and murders. Main objective of his life is to enhance his wealth. Any one whom he considers dangerous for him, kills him at once without any feelings of remorse or repentance.

Findings

This researcher has found that a capitalist uses each and every thing as a commodity whether it is his religion, country or human beings. Through this commodification, he materializes his financial gains and objectives. In this regard, he doesn't spare even his loved ones and persons having blood relations with him. He does not follow any morality and shows extreme selfishness in this matter. Capital class is completely devoid of human passions. A capitalist does not follow any morality in this regard. He has totally materialistic approach and his only concern is to secure his wealth. So everything and person becomes commodity for him and he uses them as tool for his own advantage. Everyone who is directly or indirectly linked to the capitalist has to suffer at his hands. He has to pay a heavy price for it. It shows the superficiality of relations of the capital class with other people. This class never shows any sympathy towards other people and breaks all laws of morality in using them as commodity. As a result of this commodification, they have to meet their tragic end. Capitalist too, has to suffer for it. Barabas himself cannot keep himself safe from harmful effects of this commodification. There is no homeliness and peace of mind in Barabas' life. Even he has to lose his own life at the end. As a result of this commodification, damages are done to both the victimizer and the victimized.





Conclusion

The present study reveals the dark effect of commodification which occurs at each level. Relations of capital class with other people are based on superficiality. They are being deceived, exploited and even destroyed through these fake and superficial relations. The damage done to their life and personality is irreparable. The poor need to be disillusioned about the artificiality of these relations and the disastrous effects of this commodification. They need to be aware of the true nature of capitalist's materialistic relations with his country, religion, and human beings. In this way, they may save themselves by the apparent beauty of these relations. The capitalist should also keep in mind about the reverse and adverse effects of this commodification over himself. Tragic story of the play *The Jew of Malta* gives us great message in this regard. Karl Marx through his theory of commodification wants to make people aware of this ugly face of the capital class who exploits others in every way and makes their lives miserable, through this invisible but fickle relation.

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