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|----|---|-----|----|
| 1. | Influence of Tea on Corrosion Resistance of Orthodontic Brackets in Presence of Artificial Saliva | ... | 1 |
| | <i>A. Christy Catherine Mary, S. Rajendran and J. Jeyasundari</i> | | |
| 2. | Inhibitive action of Pippali Dye-Zn²⁺ system of carbon steel in Sea water | ... | 13 |
| | <i>Johnsirani V., Sathiyabama J. and Hemalatha M.</i> | | |
| 3. | Spectroscopic Studies on the Interaction of Copper Nanoparticles and Copper Nanocomposites with Bovine Serum Albumin | ... | 23 |
| | <i>S. Sujarani and A. Ramu</i> | | |
| 4. | Studies of corrosion inhibition by Trisodium Poly Phosphate | ... | 35 |
| | <i>R. Kalaivani, P. Thillai Arasu and S. Rajendran</i> | | |
| 5. | Template Synthesis and Characterization of Transition Metal Complexes Containing ... | ... | 43 |

Jews in English Literature: Forever the Other

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Abstract

Anti-Semitism is without doubt the longest running and most irrational hatred in the history of mankind and the Jews, one of the most persecuted, hated and dispersed race in the whole world. Down the ages, based on various misconceptions, the Jews have been hated, persecuted and scattered. Though they have been the intellectual and financial backbone of the nations they have settled it, till recently, they hardly found recognition in the society and a favourable representation in literature. This paper takes a quick glimpse into the portrayal of the Jew in English Literature, attempting to prove that either vilified or glorified, a Jew ever remained the other.

From antiquity, the Jews were hated by the world owing to the fact that they were singular in many aspects. To begin with, they were followers of Judaism, a monotheistic religion in a pagan world and this made others suspicious of them. They were groundlessly accused of poisoning wells, blood libels, starting wars and were accused of greed, materialism and malice. After the crucifixion of Christ, Jews were additionally castigated as "Christ-killers".

In England, as T. S. Eliot has rightly pointed out, the idea of a Christian society had been the inspiration for the mainstream English literature and its poetry. Many of the greatest writers like John Donne, Herbert, Swift and Hopkins were clergymen and others like Milton, Johnson and Eliot were devoted to pious Christian themes. English literature had been predominantly Christian and it is not an exaggeration that Jews did not have much place in English Literature and whatever was given is usually the reflection of the hoariest anti-semitic stereotypes of blood libels, hooked noses, Christ-killers and the greedy,

blood sucking moneylenders. Most of the time the Jew was no more than a foil contrived to let the true-born Englishmen admire their own fine features.

In Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews, The Jew's Body, and Inscribing the Other*, we find theorized and documented the Otherness of "the Jew" in the West, with particular attention to Germany. Gilman's anatomy of anti-Semitism helps to explain why images of Jews resisted sympathetic responses. If, as the stereotypes held, Jews were ugly and alien, they did not deserve objects of comradeship:

Eighteenth-century aestheticians refused to ascribe a sense of beauty to any group believed to be marginal. Whether black or Jew, the outsider was perceived as inherently unable to sense, and therefore to produce, the beautiful. The sense of the beautiful became one of the major touchstones distinguishing the civilized from the barbaric (*Self-Hatred* 119).

Like Mary Shelley's creature, Jews were considered "monstrous" and "filthy," difficult to integrate into "civilized" society. Even a distinct smell was attributed to the Jews. "The smell of the Jews, the *foetor judaicus*, is the medieval mephitic odour always associated with the other" (*Self-Hatred*, 174). Jewish values were considered as in tune with Machiavellism and the first known version of a story about a Jew as a moneylender was found in the *Cursor Mundi* which dates from the end of the thirteenth century.

The character of the Jew was an important constituent of the Elizabethan drama. The treatment of the Jew in Elizabethan literature was the result of Elizabethan's reaction to the Jews not only in England but in the whole of Europe, intensified by historical sketches and references to the Jews in the past and coloured by mythological exaggerations and generalisations. This seems to have attracted the attention of great dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare, who tried in their own ways to transform the common imagination and obsession into dramatic art.

Both in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the racial hatred between the Jews and the Christians acted as the

backdrop for the plot. As far as the sources of the two plays, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* are concerned, there are no documentary evidences to pin down the characters and events upon which the dramatists had based their plays. Both Shylock and Barabbas were portrayed as rich merchants who lend money at an exorbitant rate of interest and the main action of both the plays was triggered by the hatred between Jews and the Christians. Shylock suffered from a consciousness that he was hated by the Christians and consequently developed a vindictive attitude towards Christians. He told Antonio:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft

In the Rialto you have rated me

About my money and my usances:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug?

For suffering is the badge of all our tribe.

You called me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,

And spet upon my Jewish garberdine,

And all for use of which is mine own (*Merchant of Venice* 1.3)

What Shylock said about him reveals equally about the nation that despised him. While the vengeance between Shylock and Antonio was triggered off by a personal, economic necessity of Antonio's, the hatred between Barabbas and Ferneze was occasioned by political emergency involving partial or total loss of Barabbas' wealth. Ferneze made no bones about the Christian hatred for the Jews:

No, Jew, like infidels;

For through our sufferance of your hateful lives,

Who stands accused in the sight of heaven

These taxes and afflictions are befallen,

And there for thus we are determined (*The Jew of Malta* 1.2)

He ordered that the tribute money of the Turks should be levied among the Jews and that each one of them had to pay one-half of his estate. He further ordered that he, who refused to pay, should become a Christian or lose his entire wealth.

From thirteenth century to the middle of 17th century, Jews functioned in literature largely as an alien species or myth or bogey with the particular use of putting the fear of God in children. If they had any role in English literature at all, it has been this role which didn't change even as late as Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. The anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jew as Devil, the smelly, money-minded Jew, The Jew as Christ-killer, the Wandering Jew with something to peddle, the knife-whetting Shylock, the hypocrite, the rich Jew who buys out the country and the Jew as the eater of Christian children lingered as the moulds into which characters were framed.

Romanticism saw the glorification of the weak and the marginalised and even then, much of the writings on Jews in the Romantic period staggered under the dilemma of sympathetic imagination and the age-old prejudice and hatred. *Table Talk* recorded Coleridge as saying on April 14, 1830, "the Jews of the lower orders are the very lowest of mankind: they have not a principle of honesty in them; to grasp and be getting money forever is their single and exclusive occupation".

Again, in his *Table Talk*, July 7, 1830, he said:

The other day I was *floored* by a Jew. He passed me several times, crying for old clothes, in the most nasal and extraordinary tone that I ever heard. At last, I was so provoked that I said to him, "Pray, why can't you say, 'old clothes' in a plain way, as I do now?" The Jew stopped and looking very gravely at me, said in a clear and even fine accent, "Sir, I can say 'old clothes' as well as you can; but if you had to say it ten times a minute, for an hour together, you would say *oghcloas* I do now"; and so, he marched off. I was so confounded with the justice of his retort, that I followed and gave him a shilling, the only one I had. (*Collected Works*, 2:74)

Coleridge's anecdote described the conflict between a complete lack of sympathy and the desire to understand the other. What started as contempt for strangeness, ended with a spontaneous act of generosity? Wordsworth's poem, "A Jewish Family" revealed both his desire to engage with the family, to feel for their plight, and his inability to do so fully.

Even in authors of the Romantic Age, who wanted to represent Jews sympathetically in order to inspire sympathy in their audience or readers, could not fully escape the negative images that haunted the history of the West. In the "Dedicatory Epistle to the Rev. Dr. Dryasdust, F. A. S." in *Ivanhoe*, Scott's fictional author Laurence Templeton echoed the words of Shakespeare and sympathised thus:

Our ancestors were not more distinct from us, surely, than Jews are from Christians; they had "eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions"; were "fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer," as ourselves. The tenor, therefore, of their affections and feelings must have borne the same general proportions to our own. (529)

But one finds in Scott's personal writings, the various code words for Jewish financial deceit on all levels of society, including London Shylocks, vagabond Stock-jobbing Jews, and pickpockets. He said,

After all it is hard that the vagabond Stock-jobbing Jews should for their purposes make such a shake of credit as now exists in London and menage the credit of men trading on sure funds....It is just like a set of pickpockets who raise a mob in which honest folks are knocked down and plundered that they may pillage safely in the midst of the confusion they have excited. (*Journal* 25, November 1815)

William Blake's anti-Judaism was evident in angry eruptions in his poetry, letters, and annotations, most notoriously in his *Annotations to Watson*. Blake's idea of Jews and Judaism fed on the false dichotomy between Law and Love based on mythology and imagination. Whereas Blake's anti-Judaism was theologically based, Byron harboured a deep distrust of what he perceived to be Jewish influence, money, and power. Like Scott, his personal financial situation influenced his attitude. Byron was angry about his own personal debts to Jewish lenders and resented being held responsible. N. I. Matar documents this anger, as well as the many instances in Byron's poetry that include hostile comments about Jews, particularly regarding families such as the Rothschilds, whose

financial power he deeply resented: "On Shylock's shore, behold them stand afresh, / To cut from Nation's heart their 'pound of flesh'" (228).

Charles Lamb's essay "Imperfect Sympathies," first published in *London Magazine* in 1821, covered the ground of certain "nationalities," including in the same general category a motley group of others: Scots, Jews, blacks, and Quakers. Lamb's super-category of otherness implied a sameness and ease of dividing up the world into categories, yet his portrait of Jews stood out in several significant ways:

I confess that I have not the nerve to enter their synagogues. Old prejudices cling about me. I cannot shake off the story of Hugh of Lincoln. Centuries of injury, contempt, and hate, on the one side, —of cloaked revenge, dissimulation, and hate, on the other, between our and their fathers, must, and ought to affect the blood of the children. (72)

As is the case with Scott's Rebecca from *Ivanhoe*, Elia thought of this representative Jewish woman as exotic, mysterious, and dangerous in her beauty. Such representation of Jewish women set them apart by their Jewishness and their gender. In his autobiography, Leigh Hunt commented on the nasal tone of the Jews, attributing its source the shrewdness and cunning.

Politically radical Romantics such as Hazlitt moved the ideal of sympathy past imaginative identification and even ethical imperative into the realm of political advocacy—for example, for the emancipation of the Jews. Hazlitt's "Emancipation of the Jews" was the most impressive piece of writing in the Romantic period to bring this concept of sympathy to bear on the political situation of the Jews in Britain, and the most eloquent argument for religious freedom and respect. Hazlitt went on to expose the economic, theological, and psychosocial sources of anti-Semitism, taking on powerful adversaries as well as evoking like-minded thinkers.

The modernists, as in the Romantic Age, viewed Jews with the same split sympathy, especially in the works of writers like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and Jean Rhys. The women characters of these writers identified with the victimhood of the Jew but their sympathy was limited to that

ictimhood. The negative images of Jews in the writings of Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and T.S. Eliot were far from incidental to their work. Eliot's image in "Gerontion" of a Jew squatting on the window sill, for instance, represented a general state of decay or squalor. "The Jew" was Eliot's name for all that threatened European order. Joyce, Woolf and Richardson had used the metaphorical Jew to explore the issues and questions presented by modernity. In his *Ulysses*, Joyce created through the Jew, a template within which the reader can mitigate their own isolation. In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the Jew provided a means for her to negotiate the ambivalence about private imagination and public awareness. In her criticism, the common references to her "exile in her own country" drew on this tenacious metaphorical Jewishness. The left-leaning inheritors of Matthew Arnold like Wells and Shaw, appropriated the Jew as a convenient, all-purpose sign of discourses that satisfied a deeply felt need for order and boundaries- at the expense of actual Jewish differences and the complexity of things.

The figure of the ubiquitous Jew in such a wide range of modernist writing explains why Jews could serve as powerful metaphorical vehicles for Modernist writers: through the long domination of Christianity in Europe and the new hegemony of race science, Jews were accrued malleable, multi-layered associations; and their increasing visibility as subjects and objects in contemporary culture provided content for the flexible "conceptual Jew" already created by racial discourses. The Jew, thus down the centuries in English literature, has been portrayed as the villain in the archetype of Shylock or approached with uneasy, imperfect sympathy but has always been assigned the permanent place of ever being the outsider.

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