



“Not now, sweet Desdemona” - Re-reading Othello as a double edged tragedy of both the colonizer and the colonized

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ABSTRACT

The present paper re-examines the play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) as a double-edged tragedy of both the colonizer and the colonized. While exposing the suffering of Othello as an archetype of dichotomous ‘the other,’ the play also discloses the ugliness of the racial othering or the objectification executed by the colonial societies. Applying the postcolonial concepts of ‘orientalism,’ ‘mimicry’ and ‘ambivalence’ of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, the present paper argues Othello’s internalization of racial other to be an equally important personality flaw to sexual jealousy and credulity. The language used in the play will also be examined to understand how the vilifications of the white characters ironically expose their own tragedy and the influence of the language on the internalization of racial discrimination of Othello. *Othello* edited by Norman Sanders (Cambridge UP, 2005) is used as the primary source, whereas research articles, web publications, books, journals, etc., are the secondary sources used. The present research intends to contribute to the English literary studies giving a novel perspective to the reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) *Othello, the Moor of Venice* is basically about the downfall of Othello, a valiant Moorish general in the Venetian army. He, who is always wanted in the security emergencies of Venice and highly regarded for his 'fair' values despite his physical 'blackness,' ultimately kills himself in utter grief for murdering his devoted wife, being fooled by the hallucinated narrations of his perfidious ensign, Iago.

The present paper re-examines this play, as a postcolonial piece of work arguing the play to be a tragedy of both the colonizer and the colonized. It is a tragedy of the colonizer as it exposes the ugliness of the racial discrimination over the 'other' making the white audience feel disappointed over the so-called white supremacy and it is also a tragedy of the colonized as Othello's tragedy at the end represents the fate of all the colonized.

Even if it is not primarily categorized as a postcolonial play, many aspects of it, such as the character of 'black' Othello, the attitudes of the white characters that surround him and the identity alterations of Othello throughout the play justify a postcolonial discussion on it. Identity has always been a key issue for those who have located themselves in another country or a society other than their home-country as they are compelled to adapt themselves to the new environment to which they do not belong. Their identity becomes troublesome when they can neither claim to belong to their mother culture nor to the host-culture, making them aliens in both cultures. This 'otherness' can be experienced in terms of language, culture, values, beliefs, etc., of the new culture, and such people are caught in ambivalent situations which cause constant alterations in their identities. Throughout the play, the playwright makes Othello's identity change primarily due to the treatment of the white society around him, showing how the identities of the 'other' are susceptible to change and unstable in the colonized societies. Othello depicts how this hybridity disqualifies him to establish a fixed identity in the alien society leading him to be a failure at the end.

While demonstrating the tragedy of the 'other', the play interestingly and ironically challenges the Elizabethan perspective on the racial 'other' by depicting the "other" to possess similar vices of the so-called 'superior' white Europeans. By making a 'white' Christian, the villain of the play, who pushes the noble 'black' towards evil, Shakespeare suggests that the black is 'more sinned against than sinning'. In such a perspective, *Othello* is more a tragedy of the white supremacy over the black and their xenophobic ideologies than a tragedy of its protagonist Othello.

2. Research Problem and the Objectives

The present paper seeks to answer the question whether Shakespeare is taking the side of the colonized while criticizing the colonial audience condemning the racial othering of the colonized. With the view that Shakespeare's *Othello* could be considered a postcolonial play, the study proves that colonial audience is more criticized in the play than the colonized, and the colonized has been used as a tool to present the hypocrisy of the colonial masters. The paper intends to find out,

- the references to Othello highlighting his otherness
- how language of the play has been used as a tool to present the racial otherness of Othello
- how Shakespeare is slightly levelling the criticism against the colonial agenda of othering

3. Methodology

The present qualitative research explores the language of the play *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare to identify the postcolonial characteristics of the play, especially in terms of racial antagonism displayed in the play against Othello. The original play was used as the primary source whereas the journal articles, web articles, books, and academic papers were used as the secondary sources. The postcolonial concepts of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha are applied in analyzing the play.

4. Discussion

4.1 Exposing the hypocrisy of the White Supremacy

4.1.1. *Altering Identity of Othello*

In looking at how Othello's personality breaks down with the vilifications of Iago, it is important to look at how his identity is presented in the play. Language and identity are so closely intertwined that words are etched with ideological meanings. Thus, language, expresses as well as constructs identities. The language used in *Othello* likewise helps the identity formation of both Othello and the rest of the characters who contribute to set the plot in action. Othello's position in the Venetian society, and his struggle to be a part of it, and the attitudes of other Venetians towards Othello all contribute to build up Othello's identity.

The eponymous hero is introduced to the audience with the despising remarks on him by Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio. Shakespeare does not name him, yet he is associated with all the vulgarity covered by racist identifications. On the contrary, Othello expresses his identity through the clear and direct speech he always projects, and his authority is always present in his lines. He starts to unveil his character, with all its dignity and beauty when he says his services to the signiory would 'out-tongue' Brabantio's complaints against him (1:2: 17- 18), when knows 'boasting is an honour' he shall 'promulgate' his royal lineage, and merits (1:2:20-23), and refuses to hide on Brabantio's arrival seeking him saying that his good qualities, title and his 'perfect soul' may reveal him correctly (1:2:31-32). These lines suggest the value, heroism, pride and most of all how he is perceived by the others. The beauty blended with authority in the lines that he speaks is evidenced when he asks Brabantio to keep the 'bright swords' to himself 'for the dew will rust them' to 'command with years' than with his weapons (1:2:59-60). In a number of places, Othello's bravery and his good nature are referred to by his close associates. Iago, his worst enemy acknowledges him to be of 'free and open nature - that thinks men honest that but seem to be so' (2:1: 397-398), Desdemona confirms that Othello is devoid of jealousy and says 'the sun where he was born - Drew all such humours from him' (3:4: 29-30), and Montano confesses that he 'commands - Like a full soldier' (2:1:36-7). These noble and impressive character traits obviously do not comply with the stereotyping of the black people, but Shakespeare makes him to be in command even of the Whites. Thus, the playwright achieves his purpose in making a black Moor his protagonist and builds up his character quite contrary to the colonial stereotyping. It is also interesting to bring out the character of Bianca in this context, who is presented as a courtesan. She is a White woman, and her character traits do not go with the stereotyping of the Whites: pure, virgin, good, etc. Thus, Shakespeare makes his White audience aware of the hollowness of the binary oppositions promoted by the colonial literature, and deconstructs them making the greatest villain of Shakespeare to be a White Christian.

Othello's identity is altered by the Whites according to their preference in the play. At the beginning of the play, Othello is accepted in the Venetian society as a military leader who can make his own decisions even in appointing officers. Iago says, Othello did not listen to the 'great ones in the city' even if they 'Off-capped to him' (1:1 8-9) requesting to make Iago his lieutenant. Moreover, he asserts power in the Venetian court through the eloquence of his speech, and he does not only prove that Desdemona wooed him, but he also proves him to be a suitable match to Desdemona. Moreover, he confesses that his stories (use of language) were the only witchcraft he used (Shakespeare 1997 1:3: 168). When Brabantio is accusing him that he 'wrought upon' Desdemona, using 'some mixtures powerful over the blood or with some dram conjured to his effect' (Shakespeare 1997 1:3: 105-106), he is referring to Othello's oriental origins. It is Othello's language that raises him above to a state that even the Duke says Othello's speech would win even his daughter. This is validated when Othello says, Desdemona listened to him 'with a greedy ear, devour up my discourse;' (Shakespeare 1997 1:3: 148-9). Thus, Othello is neither an alienated nor an assimilated subject, but a hybrid of the two cultures.

The colonial mission was so ambivalent that '...the success of the empire depended on the production of the 'mimic man' who was 'whitewashed' by Western culture, and yet excluded from its full entitlements' (Orlin 1936: 177). Homi K. Bhabha points out how the feeling of superiority of the colonial masters felt by the colonial subjects, make them feel inferior about themselves inevitably instituting the belief that the West is always 'educated', 'civilized', 'reformed', 'disciplined' and 'knowledgeable' while the East is illiterate, barbaric, primitive and ignorant (Bhabha 1994, p. 86). Popularizing the concept, 'mimicry' in postcolonial criticism, he says '...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost

the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994, p. 86). Mimicry, according to Bhabha is a condition of the native's divided subjectivity and self-alienation as well as a means of resistance. It is this self-same personality of a 'mimic' that Shakespeare portrays through Othello. He appears in front of the Venetian lords with a less confidence for being an outsider, clearly an 'other' to the Venetian white society. More than just being an 'other', despite his 'royal siege' (1:2 22), Othello speaks of being sold to slavery (Shakespeare 1997 1.3.137) which is associated with being uneducated, low social standards and connections making him feel inferior among all the high ranking white Venetians that surround him there. He talks of,

the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders (Shakespeare 1997 1:3: 142- 44)

Here, Shakespeare is connecting the colonial stereotypes of the colonized, especially of the Negros. The stereotyping discourse partly manifests how the colonized have been interpreted in colonial societies in order to justify them being controlled and civilized. Watson (2006), argues in his Masters dissertation, *Encountering Cannibalism: A Cultural History*,

European discursive construction of the cannibal as savage allows explorers and conquerors to justify their oppressive treatment of the indigenous and to see them as non-human/inhuman, mythical beings, indeed as monsters. This is precisely the incomplete European history that reveals the flaws and gaps in knowledge and provides a means of interrogating the cannibal.

Here, through Othello, Shakespeare is presenting this European knowledge ironically showcasing the so-called 'civilized' Othello amidst the White community. To the surprise of the audience, he speaks the most beautiful and most convincing lines that may even impress the Duke's daughter (1:3: 172) as proof of his winning over Desdemona's heart. The similar beauty and dignity inscribed in Desdemona's defense over her elopement with the Moor, the playwright asserts Othello's upbringing that makes him a well-match for Desdemona. Thus, according to the concept of 'mimicry', as pointed above too, Othello too was 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994, p 86). Sardar's (Fanon 2008) following view in his foreword to the 2008 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* can well be applied to the character of Othello:

Dignity is not located in seeking equality with the white man and his civilization: it is not about assuming the attitudes of the master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table. It is about being oneself with all the multiplicities, systems and contradictions of one's own ways of being, doing and knowing. It is about being true to one's Self. (vii)

Fanon (2008) says, if a black goes to Europe, he will feel different from the others. 'The Negro makes himself inferior. But the truth is that he is made inferior...the individual who climbs up into the society – white and civilized – tends to reject his family – black and savage –' (115). He further deals with 'how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors' (x). He uses the word, 'epidermalization' to describe the internalization of the 'black man' to the white society, which according to Fanon causes the 'inferiority' within the black man.

When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behavior is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man. It is the dynamic of inferiority that concerns Fanon; and which ultimately he wishes to eliminate. This is the declared intention of his study: to enable the man of color to understand ... the psychological elements that can alienate his fellow Negro (xiii).

Othello's identity begins to alter with his marriage to a Venetian. Othello was confident about his eligibility for a marriage to a pretty, white and noble woman like Desdemona and it is that confidence that makes him elo-

quent in front of the Senators. He was confident about his honour and prestige he has gained despite being an 'other', solely because he has adapted himself so well to the colonial society. Here the features of his otherness has been embraced by the Venetian society, including a senior senate member Brabantio and this uniqueness adds to his bravery and wide range of experience as a soldier. Moreover, Othello says Desdemona 'wished that heaven had made her such a man' (Shakespeare 1997 1:3: 162) ironically referring to the lack of this manliness in a Venetian. Thereby, Othello develops his identity taking his otherness to qualify his manliness. With this again, Shakespeare is presenting a contrary imagery to the discourse of Orientalism that placed the West 'with the superior pole of these binaries, and relegated the non-West to the inferior pole' (Prasad 1997, p. 12). He further notes the Occident/Orient (or West/non-West) dichotomy that was based on a system of hierarchical binary oppositions such as active/passive, center/periphery, civilized/savage, developed/undeveloped, masculine/feminine, modern/archaic, scientific/superstitious, etc. (Prasad 1997, p. 12). Here, Othello being presented to be more masculine than his fellow Venetians, and also making him the sexual rival of Iago (I hate the Moor:/ And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets/ He has done my office: 1:3, 389-91), Shakespeare again questions the false presentation of the Other.

Othello struggles with understanding his identity even at the last moment before he kills himself, and when he describes himself as, 'one that loved not wisely, but too well' (5:2: 340), he refers to his sense of belonging to Venice as well. He placed himself well among the Venetians, thinking he belongs there, but he was not wise in his behaviour. He accuses the Turks with an imperial and a racial sense, being one of them when he curses the Turk, 'circumcised dog' (5:2 349-52), but ironically the condemnation of another 'other' boomeranged when the Whites too isolated him. Othello thus represents all the colonial subjects who are ignorant of the manipulation and control of the West that ultimately leave the colonized feel frustrated, dispossessed of their identity, disillusioned and devastated.

4.1.2 Racial Othering of Othello

The kind of Moor Shakespeare portrays in *Othello* is quite complex and this complexity has given rise to different costumes to Othello in various productions of the play, too. He is unmistakably black in colour with almost seven direct references to his complexion found in the play (1:1 89, 1:2 70, 1:3 286, 2:3 27, , 3:3 265, 3:3 388-9, 5:2 132). Iago first refers to Othello's colour when he rouses Brabantio saying, 'an old black ram' (1:1. 89), and then the Duke of Venice declares that Brabantio's 'son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1:3. 286). Othello's otherness is referred to many a time in the play through most of the other characters. Roderigo refers to his 'thick-lips' (1:1 67), Brabantio to his face that Desdemona was 'feared to look on,' Iago to his looks that made Desdemona shake with fear (1:3 98 & 3:3 209), and Iago calls him, 'an old black ram' (1:1 89), Emilia a 'devil' (5:2 132), etc. Moreover, Othello is almost always referred to not by his name, but as the 'Moor' just as in *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock is referred to as the Jew, othering them from the major circle. From all these references, the playwright clearly demarcates the attitude of the other Venetians towards Othello. Othello's blackness was not an issue until his wedlock, and this makes the audience understand that issue of race is not just an issue with the skin colour, but it has more connotations such as political, commercial, religious (as in *The Merchant of Venice*), social, etc., associated with it. Iago refers to this fear of the White of hybrid marriages, when he warns Brabantio that the 'devil will make a grandsire' (1:1 91) and Brabantio voices his concerns over miscegenation, when he says such marriages,

may have passage free,

Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be (1:2. 98-9)

It is the ambivalent attitude of the colonizer, as Bhabha points out. He argues that the colonial discourse is characterized not by monolithic homogeneity and hegemonic fixity, but by ambivalence, fissure, and contradictions. For example, even if the West identifies the non-West as inferior and undesirable, the latter was a 'highly desirable and prized object' (Prasad 2003, p.20) for them. Further, the 'weak and effeminate' non-West too was considered 'a grave threat capable of destroying the Western world' (ibid.). It is this fear that is presented in Shakespeare's *Othello* in terms of the fear of the inter-racial marriage between 'black' Othello and the 'White' Desdemona or the colonized and the colonizer. It was not an issue even for Othello's rival Iago that his com-

manding chief was not a Venetian but a Moor, and Brabantio takes him to be a brave soldier and an honoured guest until Othello gets married to his daughter. It is this issue that sets the play in motion bringing the dramatic intensity to the play. It is Othello's racial difference that has made the play difficult to interpret. As Sanders (2005, p.14) puts it,

A black/white opposition is clearly built into the play at every level: factually, physically, visually, poetically, psychologically, symbolically, morally, and religiously.

Probably the best example for the dislike for Othello as a suitor for his daughter is his consent for Roderigo to get married to Desdemona. Brabantio scolds Roderigo saying that he has forbidden him not to hangout near his house because 'My daughter is not for thee' (1:1 99), but when he learns that his daughter has eloped with the Moor, he says, 'With the Moor, say'st thou? (Who would be a father!)' (1:1.163) and then to Roderigo he says, "O, that you had had her!" (1:1174) articulating his utter dislike for the Moor to be a part of his White family. Being a Venetian, Roderigo is a better suit for her daughter than the outcast. Even the Duke's comment that Brabantio's son-in-law is 'far more fair than black" (1:3. 286), is charged with racial prejudice, despite the fact that Shakespeare uses that to send a shock wave to his White audience of the irony of the binary oppositions in the colonial register. While exposing the racial attitudes of a senator (Brabantio) and an ensign (Iago), Shakespeare shows that the European society is infected with the colonial attitudes from top to bottom.

It is only Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio who are keen on highlighting the social otherness of Othello with their every reference to him that separates him from the White society of the Venice. Shakespeare, purposely identifies Othello as a part of Venice, when he names his play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* identifying him along with the white majority. From the title itself, Shakespeare lets his audience know the play is going to deal with race. 'Shakespeare's audience would be only too ready to make the easy and customary equation of the colour black with things evil, ugly and damned. They would expect that a black man must be a wicked man, and they would be shocked to be confronted in the opening scenes with the black Othello's nobility, and with the white Iago's villainy. (Hunter qtd by Marsh 1976, p. 93).

So Shakespeare's intention is clear, that we cannot simply judge Othello's moves in accordance with the stereotyped moral judgments. As pointed out by Bartels (1997 p. 62), the Moors lived in England in the early modern period and the English in Barbary, so, 'For Othello, than, to be "of Venice" – to have a dual, rather than divided, identity – is finally not so strange, so suspect, or so charged... What *is* strange – and made strange in the play – is that others attempt, by invoking stereotypes, to make Othello's position so'. Here, even if the Duke seems to favour Othello, what he is actually trying is to 'use' Othello in their difficult situation.

Thus, Shakespeare is actually bringing out the tragedy of the colonial audience, deconstructing the stereotypical colonial interpretations on other races. The audience that leaves watching Shakespeare's *Othello* must be embarrassed of themselves for the colonial mission that enslaved millions of people owing to the difference of melanin quantity in their skins. This is plainly said in the following lines:

Othello cannot see what – the oppressive force of colonialism – is coming. But Shakespeare does anticipate the conjunction of racism and imperialism, the coincidence of racially loaded othering and an externally threatened state, enough to set the two side by side and explore what happens. (Orlin 1936, p. 64)

It resonates in the minds of the audience leaving the playhouse after watching Othello that racism has a great share in the tragedies of the lives of Desdemona, Emilia, Othello, and even of Iago. Other than Othello, all the others are victims of the colonial legacy, and both knowingly and unknowingly they push Othello towards his tragedy which becomes nails in their own coffins too. Thus, the onlookers who lament over the lives of all these characters, are overwrought by guilt for the racial antagonism each one bears in their minds. From the point Shakespeare names the play conjoining the Moor and Venice in a single phrase, until the last moment when Othello says he is '...one that loved not wisely but too well' (V, ii, 342–355) applying his understanding of his tragedy not only in terms of Desdemona, but also of his association of the White community, the playwright intends the audience to see through these characters and understand the folly of racial prejudice. Likewise, the

play is a tragedy of the colonizer more than that of Othello, the colonized.

Conclusion

The present paper discussed the prime intention of Shakespeare in producing the play is to make the Elizabethan audience convince the irrationality and the inhumanity of practicing the racial antagonism. In proving this point, the paper brought forth various expressions of the characters that showcase how the Venetians in the play who stand for all the White Christian Europeans make a person 'unlike' them for bearing a different skin colour, a victim of racial discrimination. The vilifications of the so-called pure, honest, masculine, white characters in the play, make the only black person in their proximity feel inferior for not being like them, and for not being 'eligible to be honestly loved by a white woman only because he is black'. Watching the personal tragedy of Othello, and the tragedy he causes for the lives of some other White people in the play, Shakespeare's audience understands, probably with heavy hearts, that the colonial interpretations of 'the other' need to be reconsidered. At a time, when England was at the peak of colonization which majorly depended on making the non-white people feel inferior, by producing a play that criticizes his own people, Shakespeare emerges as an early postcolonial writer. His greatness mostly lies in the fact that despite being a part of the colonial society, he takes the side of the discriminated and attempts at a thought revolution of his fellow colonial audience.

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