



## Is Othello suffering from Othello syndrome?- An exposition the Tragic Flaw of 'Othello' by Shakespeare.

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### Abstract

This article primarily investigates the tragic flaw of Othello in the famous tragedy of Shakespeare, "Othello" (1604), and the psychiatric disorder 'Othello syndrome'. Othello's tragic flaw in the play is famously known as the sexual jealousy that develops into a state of psychiatric disorder named Othello's syndrome, of which Othello turns himself into a very violent person, and subsequently kills his innocent, beautiful wife, Desdemona in cold blood. This research paper tries to shed light on to explore the actual tragic flaw of Othello - whether it is Othello syndrome or any other human weakness pertaining to Othello's personality' The researcher further makes an attempt to elaborate the nature of Othello Syndrome and its subsequent effects on individuals. This article also recognizes the interesting yet rare encounter of literature and medical science in the case of 'Othello syndrome'. The paper concludes depicting that it not Othello syndrome which is mainly responsible for the downfall of Othello but the smart manipulation of Ingo and his gullibility that led him to lose everything which includes among other things his life itself.

Key words: *Othello syndrome, Shakespeare, tragic flaw manipulation, gullibility, psychiatric disorder*

### Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) whose active theatre life expanded for 22 years, produced 37 plays which consist of 17 comedies, 10 tragedies and 10 histories. All his 10 tragedies which are titled after the names of the protagonists are unique as well as diverse in their themes, plot construction and technique. Out of these ten tragedies of Shakespeare, Hamlet (1601), Othello (1604), King Lear (1665) and Macbeth (1606) are recognized as the four major tragedies which also fall into the category of revenge tragedies. However, the diversity found in Shakespearean tragedies is a very distinct feature, for instance, popular early tragedy 'Romeo and Juliet' brings a very peaceful reconciliation between the sworn enemies, Capulets and Montages in the end; therefore could be categorized not as a tragedy but as a

tragicomedy. Almost all tragic heroes of Shakespeare: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Brutus etc., are far from being perfect though clever and smart personalities. It is quite evident that through the world-famous works of theatre Shakespeare carried tragic drama which was introduced by classic Greek dramatists to a new height; thereby tragedy achieved its maturity in Elizabethan time.

Through Othello Shakespeare introduced the first coloured protagonist or rather first celebrated black tragic hero of English literature. Out of these four major tragedies Othello takes different aspects of love and romance as its major theme. Love, sacrifice, jealousy, betrayal, mutual trust etc. are all displayed in an extremely subtle perspective by Shakespeare in 'Othello'. When, why and to whom one falls in love is rather effectively dramatized in the play; according to Brabantio Othello is "the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou? to fear not to delight"( Act I, Scene II). However, it is Desdemona who was in need of marrying Othello than Othello himself, according to Iago the marriage is "an old black ram" marrying a "white ewe" (Act I Scene I). The tragedy is usually a downfall of a man of high standing due to a tragic flaw; the tragic flaw of Othello is famously identified as sexual jealousy. This paper attempts to explore whether it is indeed the sexual jealousy of Othello that contributed to dawn full of Othello and the consequences, while Iago and Cassio are seriously injured Desdemona, Emilia, Rodrigo are murdered and Othello commits suicide. Othello, therefore, marks one of the solid examples of a tragic ending.

'Othello syndrome' is a psychiatric disorder which is also called morbid jealousy, delusional jealousy, pathological jealousy, psychotic jealousy, erotic jealousy syndrome etc. As Kingham and Gordon (2004) quite rightly point out, it is "a set of irrational thoughts and emotions, with extreme or unacceptable behaviour, in which the dominant theme is the concern with the sexual partner's infidelity not based on concrete evidence. While delusions of infidelity and jealousy have been known since antiquity, only in modern times they have acquired a popular name". These patients are basically diagnosed with hostility, irritability and excessive aggression that leads to violent behaviour and they also tend to misinterpret the behaviour of the spouse or sexual partner to provide evidence through their false perception refusing to conflicting information. It is very interesting to note that while having so many names, why 'Othello syndrome' became the most established named for the said psychiatric disorder making an unusual but interesting merge of medical sciences and literature. 'Othello' by Shakespeare end in full of violence - three murdered, two seriously injured and one commits suicide. As in the case of 'Othello', the patients of Othello syndrome often tend to violence, both or either physical or psychological; therefore it may be regarded as the best name for this mental illness.

The term, Othello syndrome was first coined by Todd and Dewhurst (1915) according to them “the eponym originates from Shakespeare’s tragedy (The tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice) in which the protagonist’s jealousy over his wife’s supposed infidelity ultimately leads him to commit spousal homicide. Penetrates description of the emotional experiences and behaviours of the jealous individual have been described not only by Shakespeare (Othello and A Winter’s Tale), but also by Tolstoy (The Kreutzer Sonata), de Maupassant (One Evening), Burton (Anatomy of Melancholy) and Boccaccio (The Decameron). While the Othello story occurred in the context of a marital relationship, OS can be applied to a generic situation involving sexual, or otherwise intimate, partners”.

It is therefore quite evident that the excessive jealousy in a romantic relationship is rather frequently encountered in literary works. However in the case of ‘Othello’ it subsequently resulted in full of violence with mass bloodshed.

### **Discussion**

Jealousy is quite obvious and pretty normal in romantic relationships, if people are not jealous and possessive when they are in love; the accepted assumption is their love is not true. However, Othello syndrome is an extreme case where jealousy develops into a morbid state, and one’s (his or her) mind creates illogical and unrealistic perceptions of partner’s behaviour, mainly of sexual behaviour. "Does Othello do that" is the question raised here? Is Othello excessively jealous? is a question worth asking to get into the depth of the situation.

It all began with Iago being disappointed by not getting his due (as he thinks) post.

*Three great ones of the city*

*In person suit to make me Lieutenant*

*But Othello’s replay was*

*‘I have already chose my officer’ (act I scene I)*

Almost all the professionals in normal circumstances are eyeing for promotions, so does Iago and being rejected he was planning to destroy the life of Othello at any cost. His master plan was to make Othello jealous with that *green eyed monster* (act III scene 3) and to harm not only Othello but Cassio the newly appointed lieutenant.

That the first seed of jealousy was however planted not by Iago but by the heartbroken Desdemona’s father, Brabantio whose wife died when Desdemona was young but did not remarry to provide Desdemona undivided love and security.

*Look to her Moor if thou hast eye’s to see.*

*She has deceived her father and may thee* (act I, scene 3)

Being shaken by this warning Othello immediately entrusts the responsibility upon Iago who is referred to as *honest Iago* by many in the play.

*My life upon her faith, honest Iago* (act I scene 3)

It is Desdemona who has been in love with Othello for a considerable time, Could provide evidence better than anybody else to the question raised whether Othello is excessively jealous by nature.

*Believe one I had rather lost my purse*

*Full of crusdoes; and but my noble moor*

*Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness*

*To put him ill thinking* (Act III scene 4)

Emilia, wife of Iago and the attendant to Desdemona further inquires

*Is he not jealous?* (Act III scene 4)

Desdemona further explains describing the nature of Othello, according to her.

*Who, he? I think the sun where he was born?*

*Drew all such humours from him* (Act III scene IV)

This proves that Othello by nature is a cool and calm personality not unusually jealous or suspicious of Desdemona's character.

It is undoubtedly smart and well-crafted manipulation of Iago which made Othello jealous and furious of Desdemona. It is pretty obvious that any human being of either sex who is in a romantic relationship would be jealous if the person were the victim the same manipulation as Othello is. Iago once explains his ulterior motive to Rodrigo, a young Veneciant madly in love with Desdemona ...

*yet that I put the Moor At least in to a jealousy so strong*

*That can not cure; which thing to do* (Act II, Scene 1)

Iago manipulation begins with making Othello suspicious of why Cassio seeks Desdemona's assistance to reinstate his post which Cassio lost as a part of Iago's manipulation.

When Cassio leaves after talking to Desdemona Iago says,

*Ha, I like not that*

*That he would steal away so guilty like*

*Seeing you coming (Act III scene 3)*

However, as Desdemona categorically mentions, Othello by nature is not a jealous type and truly trusts Desdemona as a loving husband

*...Tis not to make me jealous*

*To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company*

*Is free of speech sings, plays and dances well. (act III scene 3)*

Yet, Iago's perseverance in putting jealous thoughts into Othello's mind works and Othello begins to be dominated by inferiority complex as natural as ever though he is 'valiant soldier'

*..... Happy for I am black*

*And have not those soft parts of conversation*

*.....or for I am declined into vale of years (Act III scene 3)*

Othello subsequently becomes a victim of very smart manipulation of Iago and gets lost in two worlds

By the world

*I think my wife be honest and think she is not,*

*I think thou are just, and think thou are not ,(Act II scene 3)*

Iago employs mainly of two tricks, 'the handkerchief' and the 'dream'. In the case of the handkerchief which is more striking out of the two, Iago masterminds it extremely well not leaving any doubts for Othello to think or feel otherwise whatsoever. He instructs his wife Emilia to steal the handkerchief that was given to Othello by his mother and to her an Egyptian, and it appears in the play as a symbol of chastity, character and faith. Iago subsequently put it in the chamber of Cassio and lets Othello know of Cassio having the handkerchief.

*I know not that, but such a handkerchief;*

*I am sure it was your wife's did I today*

*See Cassio wipe his beard with. (Act III, scene 3)*

Othello as anybody would be, becomes furious of the betrayal of his faith as the handkerchief is the sacred gift he gave to his wife. At this moment he decides that both Desdemona and Cassio do not deserve to live anymore in the world.

*Ay, let her not and perish and be*

*Damned tonight for she shall not live.*

*No, my heart is turned to stone?*

*I strike it and it hurts my hand. (Act IV scene 1)*

While Othello himself undertakes the assassination of Desdemona, the Cassio's entrusted upon Iago

*Within these three days let me here thee say*

*That Cassio's not alive (Act III scene 4)*

Besides 'the handkerchief' the other ploy Iago utilizes in his manipulation is the fabricated dream that Cassio is said to have dreamt, and Iago narrates to Othello.

*I lay with Cassio lately*

*I could not sleep There are kind of men  
so loose of soul that in there sleep will mutter.*

*Their affairs - one of this kind is Cassio*

*In sleep I heard him say 'Sweet Desdemona;*

*Let us be wary let us hide our loves*

*And then sir, would he gripe and wring my hand*

*Cry 'O sweet creature! 'and then kiss me hard,*

*As he plucked up kisses by the root*

*That grew upon my lips, lay his legs o'er my thigh,*

*And sigh, and kiss, and then cry' Cursed fate*

*That gave thee to Moor?'*

*(Act III scene 3)*

Iago's smart and well-crafted manipulation succeeded; Othello decided and made up his mind to kill Desdemona who repeatedly pleaded her life

*Banish me my lord but kill me not*

*Kill me tomorrow, let me Live tonight*

*But half an hour*

*(Act II scene 2)*

Desdemona constantly kept on pleading Othello to let her live for some time as she knew that the truth would soon come to the surface but Othello, however, was adamant to purify the society by killing Desdemona

*Yet she must die else she is betray more men*

(Act V scene 2)

A Desdemona quite rightly pleaded 'But half an hour' as within half an hour consequent to the murder Othello reaches epiphany; the realization of the manipulation of Iago and the unpardonable blunder he committed yet, alas realization too late.

Is it Othello syndrome that led Othello to assassinate Desdemona? It seems not to be but the smart manipulation of Iago which would entrap any human being survives in this universe. The gullibility of himself is the other factor that led Othello to commit this inexcusable blunder. The most competent general in the service of Venice, 'the valiant Moor' and the unanimous choice of the senate to curb "the general enemy Octtoman" (act I scene 3) is expected not to be naive as that to believe everything Iago says and not to be misled by all the lies Iago utters. It is therefore obvious that smart as well as subtle manipulation of Iago and though unusual the gullibility of himself that led Othello to commit all the violence and murder but not Othello syndrome. Othello in fact is not suffering from the morbid jealousy that more often than not leads to violent behaviour, yet he was made jealous by smart manipulation of Iago which may convert any human being in a romantic relationship into a beast.

## **Conclusion**

As has been discussed in the discussion 'Othello' being one of the major tragedies of Shakespeare, brings in subtle complexities of human behaviour, and sexual the jealousy which is often recognized as the Othello syndrome, on the other hand is a psychiatric disorder that exhibits people of both sexes falling in to vicious and obsessive cycles of mistrust and suspicion of the spousal infidelity. The protagonist, the Moor of Venice is more often identified as a tragic hero whose main tragic flaw is doubtlessly the morbid jealousy that leads to extremely violent behaviour, even to kill his spouse. This paper investigated unobvious reasons for Othello being jealous, and to identify whether the Othello is unusually jealous when compared to others in romantic relationships. In the analysis it became quite evident that not Othello's morbid jealousy but the smart manipulation of Iago who extremely successfully misled Othello with 'the handkerchief' and 'the dream' that made Othello kill his innocent as well as beautiful wife, Desdemona. Othello being the most competent general of Venice should have being more rational than

he is and the gullibility could be easily identified as the other main course for his downfall.

Othello syndrome is an interesting sequence where two diverse fields of study, medical science and literature join hands. Though the morbid jealousy has been identified in many names, 'Othello Syndrome' got established as its name, for Othello displays violent behaviour that is usually expected at the serious stage of the illness.

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