

Gendered Prejudice and the Racialized “Other”: An Enquiry into Shakespeare’s *Othello*

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Abstract

At the heart of William Shakespeare’s Othello lies the Venetian gentry’s very public contempt for the non-European protagonist Othello, who is frequently referred to as the “moor”; immediately racializing him as an anathema to the polite society of Venice. Othello’s identity is the fulcrum around which the play revolves, as his confidant Iago often preys upon Othello’s internalized inferiority complex regarding his race to sow doubts about Desdemona’s infidelity; almost guiding Othello to believe that it is very likely that Desdemona is unfaithful to him because Othello lacks all the cultural sophistry and racial purity to fully satiate her mind. The sexual politics of the play is not just limited to Desdemona’s perceived unfaithfulness, but also to other female characters, who are suspected of debauchery by their husbands; such gross hetero-patriarchal assumptions about them are indicative of the sexual mores that belie the very foundations of the Venetian society. Into such a scenario of distrust and suspicion, the racialization of Othello disrupts the binary constructs of good vs. evil, as his actions are often muddied by his inability to dispel the doubts surrounding his wife which severely undermines his leadership capabilities. This paper argues that the racialization of Othello and the sexual hypocrisy of the male authoritarian figures about the women in their lives are issues that drive the plot forward and eventually bring the tragic hero’s downfall, culminating after a series of events endanger the marriage of Othello and Desdemona and put Venice’s integrity at risk. Theoretical framework includes feminism, gender criticism and critical race theory.

Keywords: Racialization, Othering, Infidelity, Gendered Politics, Subjectivity, Prejudice.

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Introduction

The political economy of Venice, as seen on the pages of Othello is one of triumph and vindication. Othello is about to be sent on a military expedition to Cyprus, it is expected he will defend the Venetian cause and achieve victory. From the outset it becomes apparent to the reader that Othello's military acumen is highly respected, and he is trusted by his superiors to do the needful. This mood of triumphant complacency is disturbed by Desdemona's elopement with Othello, the young daughter of a rich Venetian gentleman Brabantio. An act so out of order that Brabantio resorts to seeking the help of the Duke to reclaim his daughter and when he fails to do so, he chides and warns Othello in the following manner:

A maiden never bold of spirit
 So still and quiet, that her motion
 Bluh'd at herself: and she in spite of nature,
 Of years, of country, credit everything,
 To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on? (I, iii, 95-99)

Here Brabantio is unabashedly denigrating the physical appearance and demeanor of Othello, describing him as a scary villainous figure that no respectable woman can lay her eyes upon; a gross and contemptible attempt at racialization, that exclusively "others" Othello from the rest of the white skinned Venetians, immediately making the protagonist feel ostracized in his own city. Such deep-seated hatred for the Racialized other results in the demonization of Othello and put his new marriage on shaky foundations.

Iago's Animus towards Othello: Jealousy, Racism, Homo-Eroticism

Iago, the ensign of the hero feels betrayed when he is not considered for the role the military commander and instead Othello gets what Iago feels should have rightfully been his. Iago suspects Othello of having slept with his wife Emilia, a character flaw and alleged promiscuous

behavior that he attributes to Othello's non-European origins and Moorish upbringing; thereby reducing Othello to a sub-human level in the following manner:

But for my sport and profit; I hate the Moor,

And it is thought abroad, that twixt my sheets.

He's done my office; I know not if't be true... (I, iii, 384-87)

Such venomous allegations are not based on any solid evidence, but rather are figments of imagination that drive Iago blind with rage and he vows revenge; plotting the ruin of Othello's perfectly nice marriage and chooses Desdemona and Cassio as his unwitting victims, whom he treats as mere collateral damage.

In his essay "Iago Psychoanalytically Motivate", Stanley Edgar Hyman argues that cuckolding is an indirect form of homosexual intimacy because it is "two men symbolically uniting sexually by sharing the body of the same woman" (Hyman 372). Iago inadvertently admits to his obsession of becoming intimate with the military captain. Iago's misogyny is can also be attributed to the fact that marriage is a betrayal of the homosocial bonds that are curated between men in a military setting. Here is an example of a Shakespearean hero being Racialized and Sexualized at the same time, albeit completely unbeknownst to him.

By emphasizing upon the Moorish origins of Othello, Iago also signals the contemporary anxiety and confusion surrounding the Ottoman Empire as is highlighted by Daniel J. Vitkus in his *Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor*. Such closeted fears about Othello's religious identity and Iago's consequent jealousy make it necessary to see the play in a light of homosocial desire. As a Moor who rises through the ranks in Venice it can be presumed that Othello is a recently converted Christian from Islam; so Iago's hyper fixation on Othello's origins and his dismay over the fact that Othello is judged to be the better military commander, is a window into the public frenzy that was rampant during Shakespeare's time about a possible Ottoman aggression into the Christian lands of Western Europe. Iago feels out

of place and deprived more so because the homosocial desire that he holds supreme is neither valued nor acknowledged by the male characters in the play. Vitkus' essay mentions that in the seventeenth century English mind, circumcision was almost akin to feminization. And since one of the requirements of Islam was to be circumcised, this made Othello, the character, immediately suspicious. For Shakespeare to place Othello as a tragic hero seems to be a very progressive decision, as the sexualization in this play is not just limited to the women characters.

Venice Women: Life in a Vicious Cycle of Patriarchy and Misogyny

In Othello, it becomes readily apparent that the locus of male honour and bravado lies in the perceived chastity and sexual monogamy of the women in their lives. This sort of mentality is not just limited to the husbands, but also to whom anyone who might consider himself a guardian of the women of the family, as is evident in Brabantio's rant to Othello in the first act of the play:

Come hither Moor:

I here do give thee that, with all my heart,

Which, but thou hast already, with my heart

I would keep from thee. For your sake

I am glad at soul I have no other child,

For thy escape would teach me tyranny (I,iii,190-95)

By criticizing Desdemona's decision to elope with Othello, Brabantio highlights the prevalent mindset of claiming male ownership over female desire and sexuality. He perceives the elopement as a sort of tyranny, as if it subverts his authority over his subject, i.e. his daughter.

The misogyny of Iago towards his wife Emilia can be understood as a form of internalized inferiority. Iago considers himself unworthy of receiving his wife's love, which is greatly heightened by his dejection over the fact that Othello is considered for a military promotion

and not him. His doubts over Emilia's fidelity are a projection of his own shortcomings as a soldier, one that drives him furious and propels him to vow revenge.

Iago would therefore like to be even with the Moor, either by seducing Desdemona or at least by driving Othello mad with jealousy. He says that he loves Desdemona not because of any lust in him but because he wishes to exact revenge upon the Moor:

now I do love her too
 Not out of absolute, (though peradventure I stand accountant for as great a sin)
 But partly led to diet my revenge, For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
 Hath leap'd into my seat, the thought whereof
 Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards,
 And nothing can, nor shall content my soul,
 Till I am even with him, wife, for wife. (II,i,286-91)

This again is an example of locating male honour in female chastity, a tendency that will ruin the lives of Desdemona and Othello. Iago shows no remorse and has no respect for his wife, as he goads her on to steal Desdemona's handkerchief that he will place on Cassio's person, so as to raise suspicion in the Moor's mind. This malignant villainy of Iago robs the women of the play of any agency over their fates, as they are unknowingly manipulated and taken advantage of. Hapless victims such as Desdemona suffer at the hands of their husbands through no fault of their own and their misery brings out the deeply entrenched hetero-patriarchy of the Venetian society. Othello is shown to be suffering from the same male chauvinism as well, as he blindly accuses his wife of infidelity without actually verifying any of Iago's claims.

Double Time, Double Standards: Gendered Discrimination in Othello

The expression "double time" has been applied to a dramatic device that Shakespeare used in Othello in order to make the plot credible and convincing. Shakespeare keeps two clocks going, one recording 'short' or dramatic time, and the other 'long time' recording historical time.

In the play it is apparent that Othello and Desdemona have been at Cyprus hardly for thirty-three hours, which makes it highly unlikely that Othello's cuckolding might have been taken place. After the doubt of Desdemona's adultery has taken root in his mind, Othello rages on, saying "In her stolen hours of lust, she has slept the next night well". The lapse of time makes him adamant in his belief that Desdemona is with Cassio, even after her murder has taken place.

Such gendered violence is unthinkable on many parts, primarily because there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Desdemona was unfaithful; so her murder at the hands of her husband is a vicious mathematical error. After her death, Othello is grief-stricken and is exhorted by his ensign to make the voyage back to Venice and face legal prosecution. Shakespeare seems to suggest that gendered violence eventually as a way of turning back on the oppressor as is evident in the downfall of Othello, a once exalted warrior, now crestfallen by a totally avoidable act of banal violence.

Killing Desdemona: Strangulation of the Self

Othello commits the heinous murder of his wife in Act 5, Scene 2. Desdemona is deep asleep in her chamber, Othello is indignant. After a brief interrogation, Othello is convinced that Desdemona has slept with Cassio and he wants to mitigate justice. Strangling his wife in a deep embrace, Othello finally reasserts his male dominance on a woman who had loved him despite societal and paternal objections. Much to his surprise, Othello feels disgusted with himself after killing his wife. His rage soon turns into abjection, and he cannot bear to live with himself. The impression that the audience gets is that Othello's self is now completely annihilated, his judgment fails him, and he is deeply remorseful. The murder that he had been plotting for throughout the play, does not satiate his male ego, rather it turns him into an emotional cripple, failing to see the right from wrong and leaves him at the mercy of the Venetian criminal justice system.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's achievement lies in not stereotyping the Racialized "other". All the invectives that are labelled against his hero come directly from the villain. Othello is only a handful of Shakespearean tragedies that neatly divide its character into categories of good and evil. The gendered politics of the female subjugation is deftly handled, and it complements the racialization of Othello. Deep prejudices against women and people of colour and their impact on the Venetian society can be gauged through the plight of the doomed couple, whose misfortune holds a mirror to the conscientious spectator. Every woman character in this play is a unwitting victim, battered and bruised through the patriarchal violence that pervades Venice. Racialization and suppression of deviant bodies go hand in hand in this play, culminating in a disastrous end for both the genders. Disaster stems from not being able to keep the personal and the political aside, at least for Iago; and for the rest of the wretched souls, their inability to separate fact from fiction causes their doom, an inability that can be attributed to their eagerness believe and act on Iago's exhortations, because Othello and the other Venetian elite are already prejudiced in assessing a woman's temperament. Racialization, which means discrimination based on a person's race, almost becomes a technique for Iago to drive home his evil machinations and the society at large is shown to be terribly incompetent in absorbing the racist vitriolic that his crooked mind unleashes. Othello perished by his indecisive mind, while Desdemona suffered through no fault of her own, both are victims of gendered prejudices of the society at large and the racializing attempts of one. Commiserations to Othello are antithetical to modern, liberal values, even if he is a victim himself. Shakespeare shows that there are no morally incorruptible individual in this wasteland, where the path of the righteous man is beset by evil; which Cassio and Othello find to their detriment, even a minor character such as Rodrigo is not exempted from Iago's cruelty. The play becomes a tragedy when we realize that a society that had almost made peace with inherent differences between individuals

of heterogeneous origins, ends up re-establishing the codified racist, sexist schema of discrimination and segregation and herein lies the dramaturgical brilliance of William Shakespeare.

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