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Othello: A Postcolonial-Feminist Reading

A. Balu Vijayaraghavan
Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Indian and World Literatures
The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad
Email: balu.vijayaraghavan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Othello is admittedly one of Shakespeare's most unusual tragedies. While Shakespearean tragedies are typically about people of elevated social rank, *Othello* stars a Moorish soldier in the employ of the Venetian state and the 'white' daughter of a Venetian senator. They are neither of European royalty nor aristocrats. The play does not apparently deal with the affairs of state. Rather, like *Romeo and Juliet*, it appears to be a love story about two people whose love ends tragically. However, a close reading of the play reveals some complex issues, both personal and political, which make it a highly complex tragedy worthy of very serious consideration. Why did Shakespeare choose a black man, Othello, as the hero of the play? In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare had portrayed a conventional negative stereotype of the Moor in Aaron, but here, he breaks away from that conventional image. Did Shakespeare have any direct contact with black people? Or with new world "Indians"? What was his response to the prevailing stereotypes of the black race? Has this ethnic question anything to do with the tragedy in the play? Such questions have become very relevant since the 1980s, mainly because of the fact that the contemporary society has become more sensitive to issues of racial identity and equality, and also of gender equity. Probably, some modern critical/literary theories like feminism and post colonialism which have become popular after the 1980s can throw light on the intricate issues which bring about the tragedy in *Othello*. Here follows an attempt in this direction.

KEYWORDS

Othello; Shakespeare; Postcolonialism; Feminism.

Shakespeare and Postcolonialism:

Postcolonial criticism of Shakespeare is a method of analysis that addresses the questions of racial identity, equality and gender equity through two main modes of enquiry. First, it investigates how Shakespeare's plays relate to the social codes and conventions by which early modern Europeans define non-European and non-Christian people and races they encountered. Second, it explores the more recent history of the reception of Shakespearean drama within non-Western societies and settings - in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus, postcolonial criticism of a play like *Othello*, not only draws our attention to Renaissance attitudes toward Moors, Africans and Turks, among others, but it also examines how the play may have been interpreted and performed in countries involved in recent colonial and postcolonial struggles.

This process was, of course, a complex one. On the one hand, Shakespeare was an export to the colonies

as a part of the colonial policy of cultural domination. On the other hand, it also enabled the colonised groups to revise and remake Shakespeare's works in ways which related to their own social conditions.

The decolonisation movements in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s laid the initial groundwork for postcolonial criticism. During this period, Europe's former subjects began to free themselves not only from political role, but also from the cultural colonisation that they had experienced. The African novelist Ngugi has written extensively about the ways in which English literature served as a mode of domination during British colonial rule in his country, Kenya. Ngugi cited Shakespeare's role as exemplar of English education for Africans under British rule. Ngugi recalls: —"According to the English teachers in Kenya, William Shakespeare and Jesus Christ had brought light to darkest Africa." Ngugi's humorous remarks typify the way in which non-Europeans began to think their relationship to the works of Shakespeare.

Othello: A Postcolonial Reading

Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, images of Black Africans or Moors in early modern English culture provide a crucial context for understanding Othello's complex role in the Venetian society of Shakespeare's play. Why is a highly decorated and respected general like Othello considered an unsuitable match for a Venetian senator's young daughter, Desdemona? Many derogatory references to Othello's race throughout the play offer a clear explanation. Not only does Iago use bestial imagery to denote the supposedly unnatural marriage between the Moor and Desdemona, but Brabantio also accuses Othello of wooing his daughter by witchcraft. It would otherwise be unnatural "for her to run to the general's sooty bosom." Perhaps, what is most tragic is how Othello himself internalises some of the racist stereotypes deployed by Iago and Brabantio. He identifies with images of the "turbaned Turk" and "circumcised dog" at the end of the play.

Until the 1960s it was not unusual to read criticism of *Othello* from Brabantio's perspective. Accordingly, an interracial marriage was seen as an aberration of nature and tragically doomed to failure. In fact, famous 19th century critics such as Coleridge and Charles Lamb even questioned whether the play could be defined as a true tragedy. In their view, the play dramatized what was considered an inviolable taboo in 19th century England: a white woman in embrace of a black man.

Postcolonial criticism offers an historical explanation for the treatment of *Othello*. It explores the complexities of early modern racial attitudes. If one historically examines racial attitudes of the period, one finds that in the theatre as in the culture the colonised people are often shown as distinct from the English. In other words, the colonised people were treated as "the other" Even while Europeans were gaining more knowledge of other races and cultures, this prejudice persisted. They continued to demonize "black" races of people who, above all, looked different from them. These historical conditions help us to better understand how Shakespeare could imagine that Iago could manipulate Othello into believing his own inferiority. By the early 17th century, when Shakespeare was writing *Othello*, knowledge of Africa was far more detailed than it had been at the beginning of the Elizabethan era. The knowledge about Africans' dark skin and unfamiliar customs and habits clearly set them apart in the English imagination as a different category of humanity. Therefore, not surprisingly, Iago's references to Othello's black inferiority were clear to the

audience who had in their minds the grim images of the black, verbal and visual, that circulated in the popular imagination of Elizabethan England.

Postcolonial criticism again draws our attention to the role played by Shakespeare‘s plays on different historical occasions relating to specific political struggles in recent times. It is a common knowledge that Shakespeare‘s plays are neither intrinsically stable, nor a part of an unchanging common human experience. They can be thus subjected to criticism according to the needs of the changing climes and times. Thus, the impulse to historicise Shakespearean plays reaches towards both the past and the present.

Postcolonial approaches have shown us how racial themes in *Othello* were repressed in apartheid South Africa. In the mid-1980s, for example, when the subject of race was a taboo in South Africa, critics generally avoided *Othello*. Even when they did write about the play, they generally avoided its concern with colour. Instead, they focussed on abstract issues and interpreted it as a sheer tragedy of jealousy.

Shakespeare and Feminism:

Shakespeare‘s plays are full of puzzling occurrences. In *The Winter’s Tale* King Leontes suddenly becomes extremely jealous of his wife. He doubts that she must be having an affair with his oldest friend. In *Hamlet*, the prince delays his revenge on Claudius and instead turns his anger against his mother Gertrude. Why does Hamlet do this? Why does Leontes become suspicious of his wife? There is no one answer to either questions, but feminist criticism is a mode of analysis that helps make sense of dilemmas such as these in which gender issues seem to lie at the heart of a play‘s mystery.

Gender refers to the distinctions cultures make between people and things based on the idea of sexual difference. But biology alone cannot explain the elaborate and varied systems cultures have employed in distinguishing genders. Genders are built by human effort as part of specific historical conditions.

Feminist literary criticism attempts to understand the role literary texts play in helping to construct the gender categories. Shakespeare, for example, lived in a patriarchal culture by which historians mean a culture in which authority and privilege is particularly invested in the hands of the father or patriarch of a family. Wives were subordinate to the father. In Shakespeare‘s Christian culture, the authority for this family structure was predominantly Biblical. It followed Saint Paul‘s injunction: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.” This patriarchal family structure, in turn, was the model for governmental structures. The king was assumed to be the supreme authority in the land, as was the father in the family.

There were of course contradictions in this gender system. Women, while subordinate to men, were also given authority over children and servants in their households, even when those children and servants might be male. Again, women were expected to have primary control of the domestic arena, including the preparation of food, the care and education of children, etc.

Feminist criticism investigates how Shakespeare‘s plays relate to the codes and conventions of the gender system specific to the early modern period. For example, in renaissance England, women were generally defined in relation to their marital status. i.e., they were maids, wives and widows. The only other category was for whores. All of Shakespeare‘s comedies are motivated by the imperative to get maids to the altar. With marriage as the goal, the interest of the comedies lies largely in the way blocks to marriage is overcome. Feminist criticism of the

comedies has thus explored the different consequences for men and women. For the men of Shakespeare‘s comedies, marriage is one of the social roles they will perform. Their social destiny has been achieved with their marriage. For the men, there is marriage and then, more public achievements and courtly service.

Feminist critics have also observed that in the middle portion of Shakespeare‘s comic plays the female protagonist enjoy an unusual degree of freedom. In the middle portion of his comedies, Shakespeare offers “a world upside down”, in which women have powers not usually granted to them in “the real world” of Elizabethan England. Here, the female heroines successfully perform roles usually reserved for men. However, at the end of most comedies, the hierarchical gender system is typically restored, and women are returned their subordinate roles.

For a time, the plays offer a holiday world of expanded possibilities.

In tragedies, women‘s position is more troubled. Here, wives and mothers, rather than maids, are more often at centre stage. The questions about the chastity of wives are the source of intolerable anxiety in the plays’ male protagonist.

The purpose of most feminist criticisms is not to indict Shakespeare for failing to hold the gender values of the early 21st century. As a person of his era, it would have been an historical impossibility for Shakespeare to replicate the views of modern day feminists. Instead, feminists’ aim is to understand just how thoroughly Shakespeare shared the gender assumptions of his own time and the ways in which his plays may have disrupted those assumptions.

When Shakespeare reproduces ideas that perpetuate gender inequality, feminists call attention to that fact. By placing Shakespeare firmly in his own time and pointing to the ways in which his plays seem at odds with many contemporary assumptions about men and women‘s roles, feminists are able to “denaturalise” Shakespeare‘s texts-i.e., show that they are not a mirror of nature, but a reflection of man-made ideas and concepts, concepts that other ages can question and even discard.

***Othello*: A Feminist Reading**

Shakespeare‘s *Othello* daringly challenges gender and racial stereotypes. The heroine at first seems to be that rare character in tragedy, a strong outspoken woman who is also unquestionably good. Her initial actions are strikingly bold, not only does she steal away from her father‘s house to marry Othello, but she also appears in the Venetian senate chamber to testify to her love and to ask to accompany her husband on his military mission. She is afraid neither of public speech nor of declaring her own mind. Many early modern texts, however, enjoined women to silence and to obedience. Much in Desdemona‘s bold behaviour allows for sinister interpretation if one reads her with the intent to find fault. Iago, Othello‘s lieutenant, is just such a reader, a walking encyclopaedia of gutter thoughts. He assumes his own wife as being unfaithful to him, though there is no evidence in the play that that is true. Iago tells Othello that because Desdemona defied her father in marrying him, she will in turn deceive him. Because she married a man not of her own country, Iago assumes that she has perverse, erotic tastes and excessive sexual desire. Similarly, he urges Othello to mistrust Desdemona‘s opinion. When Desdemona advocates for Cassio, Iago leads Othello to believe that it is a sign of her love for him.

Why does Othello accept Iago‘s readings of his wife? Partly the answer lies in the way Iago adopts the voice of worldly common sense, speaking about “women” as if everyone knows what he says to be true. Reading through an anti-feminist lens, Iago turns Desdemona‘s unusual attributes of courage, clear sightedness

and verbal dexterity into marks of whoredom. Bianca‘s role in the play reveals the deep structure of the fantasy Iago induces in Othello. Bianca, one of the play‘s three women, is not a wife, but an unmarried woman in Cyprus who has developed a powerful affection for Cassio. Though Cassio and Iago laugh and make jokes at her expense, treating her as a courtesan, there is no textual indication that Bianca is attached to a number of men simultaneously. Her loyalty to Cassio is unswerving. When he is wounded in the last act, Bianca rushes out to help him. In doing so, he opens herself to the charge that she herself is would-be assassin. However, despite her unusual qualities, in the play‘s gender economy Bianca stands for the non-wife, the sexually unchaste whore. In one of the key symbolic scenes of the play, Othello confuses his wife with Bianca.

This confusion of wife and whore is compounded by Iago‘s skilful manipulation of what is perhaps the key symbolic object found in Othello, namely, the handkerchief Othello once gave to Desdemona. The trajectory of this handkerchief is crucial to the play‘s crucial meaning. Momentarily ignored by Desdemona, the castaway handkerchief is retrieved by Emilia, who gives it to Iago, who drops it in Cassio‘s chamber. Cassio then picks it up and gives it to Bianca. Othello‘s jealousy is compounded when he sees Bianca carrying the handkerchief.

Feminists have probed into the multiple significances of this object. As a gift from Othello to Desdemona, it can symbolise the bond between them. He accuses her of destroying the bond. But in actuality, he is the one who destroyed their bond by mistrusting her. But the handkerchief is important not only as a sign of an abstract bond, but also as a material object in its own right. It is, for instance, the kind of household object over which a good wife was to exercise managerial control. When Othello accuses Desdemona of losing the handkerchief, he is accusing her in essence of ceasing to be a good housewife and of becoming a sexually and economically improvised whore.

As the tragedy unfolds, the play creates a stark juxtaposition between Desdemona‘s purity and martyred virtue and Othello‘s irrationality and cruelty. Race and gender are set horrifyingly at odds. From a feminist perspective, even the vindication of Desdemona is deeply problematic. It seems that in the second half of the play, Desdemona is stripped off her former courage and strength. She patiently endures Othello‘s wrath, even when he stripes her in public. Desdemona seems to express her own acceptance of Othello‘s cruelty to her. Later, after Othello has strangled Desdemona, she momentarily revives and declares herself guiltless of any crime. Moreover, she assumes responsibility for her own death. “When Emilia asks who the culprit is,
Desdemona responds, —Nobody, I myself. Farewell.”

Lisa Gardine has argued that “good” women in Renaissance tragedy are often represented as long-suffering martyrs. This is a long standing version of acceptable feminity. The Desdemona of the play‘s early acts is not such a martyr, but towards the end of the play, she conforms more closely to the stereotypical picture of the good wife as one who is chaste, silent and obedient. Desdemona‘s absolute purity is especially emphasised in the scene where she prepares for bed and sings the song about the woman abandoned by her lover.

At one point in the scene, Desdemona asks Emilia if she would, for the entire world, sleep with a man not her husband. Then, Emilia declares, that women have appetites and affections just as men do, and that if men mistreat women, women will learn from men how to satisfy themselves outside of marriage. This brings about a contrast between Desdemona and her servant maid.

Desdemona is clearly the heroine of the play, but some feminists have preferred the earthy pragmatism of Emilia to the idealised virtue of Desdemona. Certainly the two women are strongly contrasted in this scene, inviting the audience to compare their virtues and attitudes toward men. Realising that her husband has been responsible for Othello's jealousy, Emilia refuses to obey him when he commands her silence. Instead, she reveals his crimes and dies by his hand. In the end, her friendship with and loyalty to Desdemona win out over her bond to her husband.

The play thus ends up strongly vindicating the purity of Desdemona and the courage of Emilia. However, this is done in counterpoint to the gradual transformation of Othello into a stereotypically jealous, irrational, and murderous Moor. In the play's final acts, Othello strikes his wife in public, strangles Desdemona in her bed, and kills himself. These are acts which within a Christian framework are taboos, a mark of despair rather than trust in God's providential care. They represent the obverse of the confident and poised general, who in the first scene of the play, faced down a crowd of armed men with confidence. All tragic heroes to some degree disintegrate before the moment of death that allows for a partial restitution of their former greatness.

What is horrifying about Othello's disintegration, however, is that it conforms to derogatory discourses that delineated the Moor as bestial in his lack of reason, uncontrolled passion, and potential for jealousy. As a consequence, Othello's disintegration seems to follow from his status as a "barbarian", a thinly civilised black Moor whose primitive and destructive impulses are unleashed by Iago's skilful manipulations. Othello himself seems to locate the origins of his sins in his own "otherness."

Conclusion:

For contemporary feminists, it has become important to understand how the "fair" Desdemona is constructed in relation to the "black" Othello. They are interested to examine how the gender and racial ideologies of the play intersect to destroy both the Moorish general and his Venetian wife. The unjust suffering of Desdemona reveals how easily an early modern woman could lose the title "good-wife" and be vilified as a whore. Equally horrific is that in *Othello*, this martyrdom of Desdemona coincides with the play's escalating emphasis on Othello's barbarity. To a great extent, *Othello* enables the fantasy of victimised white womanhood imperilled by black masculinity. In fine, the play thus provides much food for thought for feminists as well for postcolonial theorists.

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