

Creation of ‘Other’ in *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

In Shakespeare’s era colonial venture was viewed positively because the Western Europeans regarded non-Christendom countries as being uncivilised and backward. Colonialism was a denial of all culture, history, and value outside the colonizer’s frame and it is very much a part of power dynamics operating in any human situation. In Shakespeare’s *Othello* the protagonist, Othello is exploited by the power dynamics on the basis of colour of the skin. The plot of the drama *Othello* reveals a conflict between a black man and the white society. As an efficient General, Othello is displaced into an alien space and is othered by the Venetian social context. The racist comments and attitudes of the characters show us the colour prejudice and how Othello commits the crime of murder because of the pressure given by the white man Iago. Thus colonialism creates ‘otherness’ in Othello and this line of thought is the analysis of the paper titled “Creation of other in Othello”

KEYWORDS

Prejudice; society; Othello; Colonialism.

Introduction

Literary studies play a key role in attempting to impart Western values to the natives constructing European culture as superior and as a measure of human values and thereby maintaining colonial rule and Gauri Viswanathan says that:

Certain humanistic functions traditionally associated with literature – for example the shaping of character or the development of the aesthetic sense or the disciplines, the ethical thinking – were considered essential to the process of sociopolitical control by the same tradition. (3)

In the colonial context the English book is made to symbolize English authority itself and it challenges rather than accepts colonialist views of racial

difference. Language of the imperial centre is inevitably produced by literate elite whose primary identification is with the colonizing power. The idea of race is a major feature of political discrimination. For at least 200 years ‘race’ has functioned as one of the most powerful and yet most fragile makers of social difference. Colonial enterprises have facilitated contact and exchange between people of different ethnicities, religion and cultures. Race continues to be relevant to post-colonial theory. It is so central to the growing power of imperial discourse and it remains central and unavoidable fact that race is used as the dominant category of daily discrimination and prejudice. External traits like skin colour is the visual language of human difference and human community and it is one of the most

effective and compelling determinants of cultural difference and of literary specificity.

In Shakespeare's works, these ethnic identities could be understood as the fluid or as the first moment of the emergence of modern notions of race. Races are conceived of as either 'black' or white. Skin colour has dominated racist ideologies. Post colonialism is the criticism of Shakespeare produced from the perspective and informed by the awareness of the fact that we live in a world where some nations have historically colonized others. Shakespeare's plays were implicated in the process of colonialism and is generally very interested in how they were. Shakespeare celebrates the superiority of the civilized races. In *Othello* Shakespeare used colonial educationist and administrators to reinforce cultural and racial hierarchies. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin opines that "He became, during the colonial period, the quintessence of Englishness and a measure of humanity itself"(1). This implies that Shakespeare cannot be discussed without it. Political criticism of Shakespeare shows that it is virtually impossible to seal off any meaningful analysis of English culture and literature from consideration of racial and cultural difference and from the dynamics of emergent colonialism

Othello is a play set as a struggle between the liberal, enlightened Europeans and the savage, maurading Turks. Othello, the Aleppine Turk wages an inner struggle between the two and overcomes his sinister side but only at the expense of his honour, his family and his life, the traditional sacrifices of a Shakespearian tragedy. Fanon says that inner struggle is the psychological impact of colonialism stemming from racial prejudice that lay at the bottom of economic and political aspects of colonialism. Symptomatic reading of Shakespeare's play *Othello* gives way to

unravel the colonial ideologies and also the postcolonial strategies. Colonialism is very much a part of dynamics operating in any human situation. Political power that constitutes is used for domination and exploitations.

Othello is one of the first black heroes in English literature. A military general he has risen to a position of power and influence, and he is referred as 'the Moor'. In the Renaissance, a black Othello is more subversive 'other' or dangerous but Lynda Boose's assessment is that circumcision rather than skin colour is the trait that Othello invokes as a final, inclusive sign of his radical 'otherness'. In Shakespeare's time there was a good deal of animosity between the Muslims and Christians in Europe. Muslims were a part of a group that had invaded many lands and threatened Europe with invasion. The Elizabeth society fostered a general cultural hostility to strangers which stemmed from the growing presence of black people who posed an economic threat to the state. Race was a great topic of debate, discussion controversy and passion in the sixteenth century as seen in the twenty first century. Much more the black moors were disliked by Europeans for they were Muslims. The word 'Moor' refers to the residents of the ancient Roman Province of Mauritania in North Africa. Therefore it is obvious that Othello, the moor finds himself in a society and culture that are very antagonistic to him.

Othello is viewed as 'other' as Shakespeare fashions Othello, the moor from the materials of his culture. Othello lives under an alien law and serves as the captain of its army. He is a barbaric figure outside all religion and therefore more easily convertible to Christianity. Therefore it is obvious that how Othello is not entirely individual in his own control. It may be due to the insecurity and doubt that he holds himself having internalized the very social order through which he permeates. Before Othello's capitulation to

Iago's provocation, he tragically deludes himself into believing that despite his African ancestry he is not an alien in the venetian social hierarchy. His 'otherness' is masked by his supreme confidence and ability but his status as a black-skinned figure in Venice makes him an outsider and exposes him to some pretty overt racism.

Colonial process of 'othering' is carried out very well by Iago. Iago manipulates all other characters at his well controlling their movements and trapping them in an intricate net of lies. His machination then is not motiveless malignity but born out of racial hatred and insecurity. Shakespeare shows us honestly the colour prejudice of his own era in the racist comments and attitudes of Iago. In Elizabethan discourse the word 'black' could suggest various concepts that extended beyond the physical colour of skin including a wide range of negative connotations. We come to know about Othello from Iago's violently eroticizing and racializing report to Brabantio. Iago uses racist slur when he awakens Brabantio with the news that his daughter Desdemona, a white Venetian has eloped with Othello, an older Blackman. He plays on Elizabethan notion that black men have an animal like hyper-sexuality. He uses animal imagery in his racist diatribe against Othello. Iago's description of Othello creates the reality of the 'other':

... An old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe. Arise,
arise!
Awake the snorting citizens with
the bell,
Or else the devil will make a
grandsire of you (I, I 88 - 91).....
You'll have your daughter covered
With a Barbary horse. (I, i, 110 -
111)

Brabantio objects to Iago's middle of the night assertions saying that his house isn't a grange. Iago takes the opportunity to pun on the term 'grange' as

he claims that Desdemona is having sex with a Barbary horse making the beast with two backs. This implies that animal like sexuality corrupts Desdemona. In the mind of Roderigo Othello is always a stranger and he finds Desdemona to be "tying her duty, beauty, unit and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger". (I, i, 134-135). Later Desdemona's father argues that her love for Othello is unnatural since according to him Desdemona would never fall for a black man who she 'feared' to look on. Brabantio couldn't be more wrong about his daughter. It seems that Iago has played perfectly for he knew Brabantio's intense racism. Venice is a predominantly white city where Othello is a moor and he is a man of colour. Because of this, his every action is considered and judged intensely and critically than a white man's action.

Duke's words are also troubling. He hinges on the negative connotation of the colour 'black'. He is also of the opinion that Desdemona would never have run to the sooty bosom of Othello. The marriage of Othello and Desdemona is against all sense and nature and unthinkable. Mixed marriages were regarded as 'unnatural'. It would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful venetian girl falling in love with a veritable Negro. Brabantio's objection to Othello could be seen in a post-colonial context as racial as much as anything else. The idea of 'other' moving closer to the insider status becomes a thought too horrifying for him to bear. But the Duke of Venice consoles Brabantio "If virtue no delighted beauty lack / your son-in-law in far more fair than black. (I,iii 290-291) Brabantio's racist tirade against his new son-in-law is stopped short, once he realizes that Othello is a fellow councilor who has the Duke's trust. The Duke's consoling words reveals the truth that Othello is respected as the Venice's most successful general and the obvious choice to lead the expedition against the Turks. He has earned his position as a commander

and general because of his valor in war and the Venetians need someone to protect them. In this role and in this city he is a significant figure – except when he marries Desdemona. Because he is an outcast his marriage to ‘one of them’ is seen as some kind of breach in protocol. The fact that Othello is black and Desdemona is white establishes the “insider / outsider” status. Othello is an “outsider” a soldier who is on the periphery of their world. Othello’s self may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.

Besides that Iago’s villainy systematically negates the self in Othello. He has the capacity to make Othello’s blackness the primary signifier of his otherness. Iago plants the seeds of jealousy in the mind of Othello. He works his evil machinations and it is much easier for Othello to believe that his wife could be unfaithful because he knows prostitution is rampant in Venice and it is a part of the culture in which Desdemona grew up with. Othello may have been very foolish to believe the lies of Iago. Iago plays on Othello’s fears about his wife’s sexuality and also on Othello’s fear about his status as a black Moor. He is insanely jealous as the victim of the racist ideology everywhere visible in Venice, an ideology to which he is relentlessly subjected and which comes to define him as he internalizes it. In the racist discourse Othello associates the blackness of his own skin with something dirty and strained which is exactly the kind of thing that the racist Venetian characters have been saying. A valid and active sense of self may

have been eroded by dislocation resulting from migration. The crisis in self-image is due to his displacement from his native. By this time Othello has internalized racist ideologies of other characters. He sees himself as a soiled black man begrimed and black ‘as mine own face’.

After getting the ocular proof and living reason for Desdemona’s infidelity the passionate Othello resolves to kill her. He describes her and the description reveals his preoccupation with her whiter than snow skin. Here Othello represents black culture which is stereotyped as emotional rather than rational. It was a generally accepted notion in Renaissance period that black men are savage murderers. Othello’s skin colour and features have been combined with physical and mental characteristics. He behaves true to this opinion. He is quite free from introspection and is not given to reflection. Emotion excites all imagination but it confuses and dulls his intellect. He has little experience of the products of civilized life and is ignorant of European Women. After an agonizing dialogue with Desdemona he stifles her. Then he kills himself. By killing himself as he is describing the killing of a Turk, Othello identifies himself with those who pose a military threat to Venice acknowledging in the most powerful and awful way the fact that he is and will remain very much an outsider. It is clear that Othello’s tragedy has been caused by the hatred of a white man – Iago who is obviously his moral inferior. Hence one could say that Shakespeare celebrated the superiority, of the ‘civilized races’ and reinforced cultural and racial hierarchies. Thus in ‘Othello’ there is creation of the ‘other’ who are not ‘I’ or ‘We’

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