

# Exploring the Theatrical Representations of the Moor: A Socio-cultural Critique of William Shakespeare's *Othello*

**Subham Paul**

Assistant Professor in English, Global College of Science and Technology,  
West Bengal, India

Email: [subhampaul1103@gmail.com](mailto:subhampaul1103@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with William Shakespeare's intended presentation of Othello by juxtaposing the way several actors of different time periods have chosen to represent the character. The subject has been approached from multiple viewpoints. Firstly, an attempt has been made to address the question, why Shakespeare at all undertook the task of writing a tragedy on *The Moor of Venice*. A brief overview is offered to shed light on how the English people perceived the moors in the Elizabethan period, and how travel books have represented the moors in different ways. The aspect of Othello's racial identity is addressed through the behaviour of other characters in the play from the various references dotted along the text. The paper then goes on to raise the question of Othello's theatrical presentation and how several actors from different time periods have presented the character in distinct ways. Towards this, the text is analysed and critiqued from a post-colonial perspective. The dearth of detailed description of the theatrical representations of Othello through several ages further makes this study very pertinent.

## KEYWORDS

Moor; Tawny; Racial Identity; Post-colonial theory; Othering; Orientalism.

## Introduction

On the question of why Shakespeare undertook the task of writing a tragedy with *The Moor of Venice* as its protagonist, one needs to look into the antecedents of the play. We are now familiar with the fact that Shakespeare not only relied upon literary sources for writing this tragedy, but his own astute power of observation and his experience with people and the world around him. Long before he contemplated writing this tragedy, he had the opportunity of observing a Moorish embassy first hand. The ambassador of the king of Barbary, Abd el-Ouahed, came visiting in August 1600 and sojourned for six months in London. Being Muslim and

'strange' in their behaviour, he and his retinue evoked curiosity and amusement in the people of England. Before the ambassador's departure, Shakespeare's company the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed at the court during Christmas (1600-1), and may have attracted the other foreign visitors to the theatre. So, we could consider that Shakespeare must have seen the Moors before they left England. It could also be presumed that the first audience of Othello would have compared the Moor with these much discussed foreigners, called 'the Barbarians'.

The dramatic emphasis placed on the character Othello and on other characters is perhaps one of the most

striking departures of Shakespeare from Cinthio's tale, from which it is commonly assumed, that Shakespeare has taken the basic storyline for the play. In 1957 J. Dover Wilson stated that "Bradley was undoubtedly correct in his belief that Shakespeare intended us to think of him as a Negro. That is what the 'Moor' signified to the English people in the Middle Ages during the reign of Elizabeth and James (Honigmann 14). But a year after his statement Dover Wilson revised his opinion based on Bernard Harris's publication of *A Portrait of a Moor* which again reopened the possibility of a 'tawny Othello'. The representation of Burbage's portrayal of the 'grieved Moor' remained intact in the minds of the first audience of the play. However, despite this portrayal it is not clearly stated in the text which race Shakespeare had in his mind for Othello.

For the readers of Cinthio and even for the Venetians in the play it was not uncommon to have a foreign soldier as a commander of the army. According to Contarino's study of the Republic it was the city's custom to have foreign soldiers as protectors. It is common knowledge by now, that even by law it desirable that the general of army is chosen from outside the country. Iago's derogatory description of Othello is proof enough, of how much he had a problem of Othello not being a Venetian. Even Brabantio's view was that the Moor was an honoured guest and a distinguished soldier. It is only that this 'other' race suggested of a violation of racial purity through marriage, both for the Venetians and also for the theatre goers of the Jacobean period.

It is evident that Shakespeare, like his fellow Londoners, was aware of the distinction between 'Negars and blackmoors' (Sanders 11). The distinction of Othello from the presentation of the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* as a 'tawny moor all in white' is proof enough. Another Moorish character presented by Shakespeare is Aaron, the

villain in *Titus Andronicus*. Based on a sixteenth century production, Henry Peacham draws a sketch of Aaron which shows a coal-black Moor. This dichotomy of the presentation of the moorish characters in Shakespeare's plays shows that he did not have any particular conceptualisation about the race. For Shakespeare, it was not necessary that all moors have to be 'black', those who belonged to North-Africa could be tawny.

But Othello's ethnicity has remained a real problem for the critics and actors down the ages. In various stage productions of the play different actors donned different kinds of costumes and make up to enact the role. We can, however attempt to understand Othello's race and colour from the comments of other characters in the play. For example, the Duke says to Brabantio that his 'son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1. iii. 291). In act II, Iago drinks for the better health of the 'black Othello' (2. iii. 29). Emilia accuses Othello for killing Desdemona and refers to the Moor as a 'blacker devil' (5. ii. 129). Othello in the play likens his face with Desdemona's debased honour as being 'begrimed and black' (3. iii. 290-91). Even Othello himself, lamentingly says 'Haply for I am black' (3. iii. 267). But from these comments we certainly cannot reach any conclusion. The Arden edition of Othello, 'black' was often applied 'loosely' to non-European races, little darker than many Europeans" (Honigmann 15). Shakespeare may have used the word 'black' in different sense, may be to mean simply a coloured person who is not white or a 'brunette' (as opposed to 'blonde') or merely 'dark complexioned' (as opposed to fair skinned, not sun-tanned).

The physical delineation of Othello in the text may point to a Negro, from the perspective of a modern reader. But the Elizabethan audience could relate and attribute these features even to the Arabs. Iago Once described Othello as a 'Barbary-horse' (1. I. 110), which to the seventeenth

century Londoners could mean, an Arabian steed. Even Iago's use of the term 'Barbarian' for Othello would refer to the people of 'Barbary', particularly Abd el-Ouahed, the ambassador of Barbary. From the attributes provided to Othello in the play, we could say that he might have been a North-African native as quoted in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* edition of *Othello*, "[M]ore generally, it was the north African races that were popularly associated with the kinds of reactions that Othello manifests in the play: as *Leo Africanus* writes of the Moors of Barbary" (Sanders, 2004, 14). Shakespeare probably has tried to establish a certain binary opposition of black/white in the play at certain levels: factually, physically, visually, poetically, psychologically, symbolically, morally and religiously. Perhaps only a Negroid Othello could project the desired characteristics that Shakespeare attributes to his character.

Of all Shakespearean tragedies, *Othello* was always admired by actors always admired among all Shakespearean tragedies, especially in the eighteenth century it was considered as the greatest of the tragedies, especially from the perspective of regularity of its structure and true representation of characters. In the nineteenth century the admiration reached a higher level, because at this time the stage productions tried "to define the nature of the work as a whole, by taking into account its eloquence romance and passion and the strong character oppositions" (Sanders 38). One thing that was common in the actors who tried to perform *Othello*, is that they always appreciated the theatrical challenges and opportunities of performing the character of *Othello*- one that Colley Cibber puts it, the "Master Actor would delight in."

Even the theatrical presentations also were not fully able to settle the question of *Othello*'s ethnicity. Burbage and Swatson played *Othello* in the early seventeenth century performances by the

King's Men. Burbage painted his hands and face black to play the role. Several black actors won critical acclaim, so did several European actors, who presented *Othello* as a tawny person, examples are, Ira Aldridge in the nineteenth century and later Earle Hyman and Paul Robenson. The question of race and colour assumed more importance in the nineteenth century when Shakespearean commentary began to emerge as a systematic discipline. Playing *Othello* with a blackface was not a matter of concern in the latter half of the eighteenth century, but the question of *Othello*'s colour, so confidently assumed by Garrick, soon became a stumbling block for actors. Later Kean enacted the character of *Othello* with a light brown makeup, abandoning the earlier blackface portrayal in the second decade of nineteenth century. According to William Hazlitt's interpretation, Kean depended mainly on facial expressions in his rendition of the character. He probably chose to wear light makeup with the thought that it would accentuate his facial expressions and enable the audience to observe his expressions clearly, which was otherwise difficult to observe in the huge buildings where the play was usually staged. Kean could have been motivated by the practical considerations in choosing such a style of presentation. Thus, Kean's innovative performance changed the whole perception of presenting *Othello*, as his racial identity became the basis of his theatrical representation, an aspect that influenced theatrical productions all through the nineteenth century. Kean's new representation of *Othello* also matched with the innovative thoughts commented on by Lamb and Coleridge that *Othello* should be represented as a tawny Moor, rather than a black African. It is evident that nineteenth century commentators had a deeply affectionate admiration towards *Othello* which they acknowledge. On the other hand, we can also identify their extreme aversion

towards his blackness and a repulsion at the prospect of interracial marriage. Owing to these contradictions we can identify, in the nineteenth century commentators, ambivalent responses of disguise or denial. Mary Preston changed the fact of Othello's race to correspond with her desire. Writing four years after the American civil war, she states that she had always imagined *Othello's* hero as a white man. Later, she bluntly declares that Othello was a white man! For theatrical productions, race is still a problematic concern. Jonathan Muller produced the play for BBC in the year 1981. He casted Anthony Hopkins as Othello and presented him as a 'hashemite warrior' who was 'drilled' in the British manner. Presenting Othello in this manner, landed Miller in a 'terrible trouble'. Miller stated that the "issue of race has now become an inescapable element in theatre as in real life" (*Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, Pechter, 16).

Most of the actors have tried to project Othello as neither a Negro-black nor as a tawny North African. As long as Othello's costume remained neutral such clear-cut distinction of Othello's race was not really needed on the stage. Some actors have chosen to wear flowing oriental robes while enacting the role of Othello, which is probably an error, because Othello has always tried to project himself as a Venetian. Other actors chose to wear a turban which was probably another error, because just as a cross reflects Christian faith, a turban denotes Muslim faith. However, all through the play, we have Othello striving to project himself as a proud Christian (5. ii. 353). It is also not appropriate to present Othello with a scimitar, though Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* were shown to possess one. Rowe's production of *Othello* in 1709 presented Othello donned in European clothes, even Burbage, the first Othello was stated to have worn European clothes during the performance in early seventeenth century.

If we were to take into consideration Othello's hands and face to appraise his ethnicity, then we could certainly conclude that he was a tawny Moor of North-African descent. Moreover, the places he names are in the Mediterranean Sea and because of the existence of a Moorish embassy in London of 1601. But if someone casts him as a person with darkened skin, robed in European clothes, then the question might well be left open to the speculation of the theatre going audience. Over and above all, Shakespeare intended Othello to be a man of mystery. Hugh Quarshie, a gifted black actor, once argued in his Stratford lecture that black actors should simply refuse to play the part of the title character in Shakespeare's *Othello*, because for him the play too grossly represents the stereotype of the black. Barbara Everett has agreed with Quarshie and yet strongly differed from him, by suggesting that 'the whole issue of black actors in the part may be at best irrelevant and at worst dangerous' (*Inside Othello*, 185). Actually, the fact is that the actor can be a good one or a bad one, but his quality certainly will not depend on his skin colour.

To get an idea about Othello's ethnicity, first the question of why Othello's ethnicity or racial identity assumed so much importance must be resolved. To begin with, Othello is a Venetian first, then a Moor. Through the play, he claims to be a true Venetian in his interaction with the other characters. However, the other characters of the play see Othello as the racial 'other.' For example, Iago envisions Othello as 'an old black rum' (1. I. 87), Emilia calls him a "blacker devil" (5. ii. 129). Iago, it appears, considers Othello as a potential threat to the Europeans, because the child born out of Othello and Desdemona's wedlock will problematize the racial 'purity' of the white Venetians.

One of the key problems of the play, apart from Othello's hamartia i.e. his jealousy, is Othello's race. It is because of

his race that Brabantio had problems with his marriage with Desdemona. Despite his ethnicity, Brabantio was really impressed with the valour and courage of Othello. Owing to his race, Iago was unable to accept him as a commander, despite Othello being a greater soldier than Cassio. But for Iago Cassio was the better choice for the commandership, only because he could not accept a Moor in such a high position as a commander. Shakespeare, a representative of the Occident could be said to have generalised the Oriental Moors. There are arguments that he has deliberately represented Othello as the racial 'other' like he depicted Caliban in *The Tempest*. He has even instigated jealousy in Othello, because as a representative of the Orient, he is to be imbued with such vices. It reflects the stereotypes that the West held and propagated about the East. The text produces an author who seems to be

securing his Christian, European self at the expense of his "other" identity as a "Moor". The most important aspect is that Shakespeare has presented Othello as a Moor, because the whole tragedy is hinges on the identity of Othello as a Moor. If we take out the fact of Othello's Moorish ethnicity, then the whole structure of the play will fall apart. Ania Loomba in the essay named "Post-Colonial Shakespeares" has stated that Othello's "political colour rather than precise shade of non-whiteness is what matters" (50).

Thus, it can be concluded from the whole discussion that Shakespeare in creating the character of the Moor has left ample scope for a multifaceted interpretation of the character for future directors and actors. It makes Othello, one of his most enigmatic characters to be ever interpreted and reinterpreted both in the colonial and the postcolonial context.

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**Subham Paul** is an Assistant Professor at Global College of Science and Technology, Krishnanagar. He has completed his M.A in English Literature from West Bengal State University and secured UGC NET (JRF) in 2022. His areas of interests are Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Partition Literature, Trauma and Memory Studies etc. He has participated and presented papers in many seminars and conferences.