
A FRESH LOOK AT SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATURGY: TOWARDS AN ORIENTALIST APPROACH TO 'OTHELLO'

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ABSTRACT: *Much ink has been spilt over Shakespeare's Othello and the controversy over its main concerns, themes and aims. While some critics maintain that the themes of prejudice, love, faith and unbridled jealousy are the focus of the play, other scholars argue that the play is a story about ambition, human frailty and the destruction of an innocent and real love. This paper advances the claim that, through its nuances and subtleties, Shakespeare's Othello provides much more to ponder and can be equally perceived as a story about the clash and collision of two different cultures, human relationships and racial problems. Using Edward Said's theory of orientalism and imperialism as a foundation for analyzing and reinterpreting Shakespeare's Othello, the study will also showcase how through his speech and action, the most intriguing character Iago serves primarily as an agent of orientalism.*

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare, Othello, orientalism, cultural clashes, imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

Today's critical consensus is that *Othello* speculates on a myriad of themes ranging from love, ambition, motivation, destruction of evil, the struggle for power to color prejudice, racial problems, happiness, religious belief and faith. One of the advocates agreeing with this conclusion as reasonable, judicious, and temperate is Alexander Leggatt (2012) who sees in the dialogue between Iago and Desdemona a strong indication that Shakespeare's *Othello* touches on such themes as happiness and religious faith:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.184-188)

Adopting the same posture, Hind AlKoli also maintains that common human issues such as jealousy, the fight for positions, and ambition run throughout the play. In her seminal article "An Analysis of Power Desire" (2018), the author points out that "Shakespeare's *Othello* is a deep interpretation of a realistic view of psychology and human motivation in the character's life, presence of evil [...], instinct and weakness in visible power desires that lead to loss of control of morality" (p. 418).

Counteracting such claims about the play, a considerable number of new critics refute the idea that Shakespeare's *Othello* examines such concerns. Taking a completely different direction, they contend that the play evokes more crucial issues such as cultural clashes, racial differences and defends orientalist principles. Thomas Rymer (2003) was among the early critics to adopt an orientalist approach to *Othello*.

In a similar vein, Coleridge also deconstructed the common hegemonic discourse on the play and adopted a different view regarding Othello. He made it clear that Shakespeare never considered the character Othello as a negro despite Othello's statement in act three, "I am black" (3.3.262). Racist and imperialist views on this play have continued till the present time, especially with a number of critics like Charles Campbell (2011), Albert Gerard (1977), Arthur Little (2000) and Rana Kabbani (1986). With this in mind and in line with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, the paper will further explore orientalist and imperialist thoughts in Shakespeare's Othello, highlight the clash between eastern and western cultures, and exhibit how Iago plays the role of an "agent" of orientalism and racism.

The Clash between Eastern and Western Cultures

A considerable number of critics believe that the clash of cultures between the East and the West is one of Shakespeare's main concerns in Othello. Gerard (1977) for instance, maintains that this play is about collision of two different cultures represented by the East and the West (the former refers to Islam while the latter refers to Christendom). The clash in the play is also represented by the "sinful" union between a white woman (who stands for the white canon) and a black moor who belongs to the eastern world. As such, Gerard (1977) sees that Othello is just a barbarian from the beginning to the end of the play.

In a similar vein, Arthur Little (2000) argues that Shakespeare's tragedy focuses on "the threat of racial mixing poses to the state's national and imperial destiny" (2000, p. 86). Referring to the idea of miscegenation which is considered a shameful act for the white canon, he also affirms that the play revolves around the rape of a white woman by a black man. Kabbani's speculation on the play meshes with Gerard's and Little's views when he asserts that

although Shakespeare "whitewashes" Othello by making him a servant of the Venetian state, a soldier fighting for a Christian power and, most importantly, a killer of Turks, he still remains a savage. . . . The play ultimately condemns the idea of inter-racial sex, for such intercourse can only lead to tragedy. . . . The black man cannot simply be allowed to "tup" the "white ewe" uncurbed; both must be punished for such transgressions, even when their mutual affection draws a cautious amount of sympathy for them (Kabbani, 1986, p.20).

This means that even though Othello has been used as a defensive tool to protect the Venetian nation, he is just an Arab, barbarous black moor and he is not regarded as a Venetian citizen. Henceforth, it is the Venetian culture which imposes upon Othello to live as a "useful fighter" for the Venetian nation. This goes in line with Said's theory of Orientalism and imperialism which stipulates that when one culture dominates the other, the strong culture seems takes over the weaker culture, which leads to its subjectivation and eradication.

Along the same line, Campbell (2011) further argues that Othello resembles any other encounter narrative such as that of "Spanish Chronicles," the "conquest of Mexico," and Bradford's account of Plymouth-Planation. Referring to Othello, Campbell (2011) goes on to say that, in encountering the Venetian dominant culture, the "black moor" who represents the Arab and Muslim world shows no resistance, assimilates to it and falls an easy prey for the "violent encounter" which erupted at a later stage in the play. (Campbell, p. 12).

In the same spirit, Kabbani (1986) also directs our attention to the idea of miscegenation, which is highly regarded as “unacceptable” by the European “canon” in general and the Venetian nation in particular. It is for this reason that Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is perceived as a horrible crime. This partly explains why “it is unnatural for people of different cultures and colors to be attracted to one another,” (1.3.342-343) as Iago puts it. Similarly, Michael Neil (2005) discusses the clash of cultures in his literary criticism on *Othello*. He points out that Shakespeare had this theme in mind when composing the play. The author also maintains that the play is about a clash between two different civilizations: the East and the West (represented by Christendom and Islam). He therefore agrees with Kabbani that Shakespeare's main concern in the play is to examine the clash of cultures between two different cultures:

The burgeoning empire of the Ottoman Turks had pushed rapidly westward, overwhelming the Christian strongholds of Rhodes (1530) and Cyprus (1573), besieging Malta (1565), and twice invading Hungary before the century was over . . . Othello is a Christian convert. . . . Yet it can hardly be an accident that his nemesis is given a Spanish name that recalls . . . Sant’ Iago Matamoros (Saint James, the Moor Slayer). . . . [Iago’s] evil seductions compel the Christianized Moor, in symbolic terms at least, to “turn Turk” and to become the “circumcised dog” (5.2.298) whom only suicide can destroy (1986, p. 289).

Toker & Karakuzu (2011) have also considered the clash between the two cultures in Othello in light of Edward Said’s theory of *Orientalism* and *Imperialism*. They have referred to the dominating culture as the “occident” while the dominated one as the “orient.” This former has been first expounded by the earlier European colonizers who divided the whole world into two parts- the West which is known as the “occident,” and the East which has been named the “orient.” Toker & Karakuzu added that the relationship between these two worlds was based on “power, domination and varying degrees of a complex hegemony.” (2011, p. 109). The imperial spirit represented by the West, according to Toker and Karakuzu, has always underestimated and despised the colonized culture and perceived its people as “backwards”, savages and barbarians. As Frantz Fanon puts it:

Europe is powerful and articulate. Asia is defeated and distant. It is Europe that articulates the orient, this articulation is a prerogative not of puppet master, but of a genuine creator whose life giving power represents the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries. The orient insinuates danger. Rationality is undermined by Eastern excesses (2008, p. 57).

In addition, Toker and Karakuzu also argue that the colonizers tend to look down at the far-away lands (The eastern world) along with its people and culture and often portray it as “exotic” and “mysterious”, associating Arabs with all negative and dark remarks. This idea is obvious in the play as the following lines display:

“...canibals that each other eat,

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads

Do grow beneath their shoulders,” (Othello, 1.3.143-145)

To further substantiate their claims, Toker & Karakuzu similarly argue that Desdemona, who represents the Western world gets to know about the mystery and the fascination of the “eastern” world as

represented by Othello. Therefore, Othello is regarded as “Desdemona’s new founded-land.” (2011, p. 110). The authors here refer to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism and imperialism again and they throw light on the line drawn between “East and West”, two worlds with two different schemes and agendas; one representing civilization while the other depicts “backwardness”, one is famous for humanism while the other is labeled as “barbarous,” and one which represents Christendom while the other represents Islam.” (2011, p. 110).

More support is provided by Toker & Karakuzu (2011) to defend their view that the clash of cultures between east and west is Shakespeare's central argument in Othello. For more clarification, they assert that Othello has come to a land he is not aware of, to a totally a new environment with its culture, traditions, religion, language and people. It is for this particular reason, according to them that Othello is regarded as an “outsider” to the Venetian environment no matter what he has offered to the white society. In other words, he does not fit in the “western” context and he is “a wheeling stranger” as Shakespeare himself puts it. Othello himself wonders why would a beautiful woman marry him and then he could justify that by saying that, “she lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d.” (1.3.167). Such orientalist perspective and depiction of a cultural clash between the east and the west meshes with Jamil Al Asmar's view when he describes the marriage of Othello as Desdemona as an “unequal” union since the two parties belong to different cultural backgrounds, which is the reason why “disillusionments” and “oppositions” start to appear in the play (2005).

In the same manner, Roohollah Roozbeh (2017) points out that bringing a “black man” with a “white woman” is culturally “unnatural” as it does not fit the European culture. This also explains why the marriage between Othello and Desdemona fails as Othello is to be blamed for this “unnatural “and “unacceptable” union. Roozbeh also suggests that Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is against nature and that is why Barbantio thinks that there must be a witchcraft involved here. Otherwise, why would his daughter fall in love with a black “Ram”. In Act scene 2, unconscious and racist prejudice is at work when Barbantio refers to Othello as a moor and describes Othello's marriage to Desdemona as "unnatural" even though Desdemona decided to marry Othello through her own will:

"and she, in spite of nature,

Of years, of country, credit, everything,

To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!

Ay, to me;

She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted

By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;

For nature so preposterously to err,

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,

Sans witchcraft could not “(1.3.96-98)

Orientalism and Racism

Employing a postcolonial approach to Shakespeare's *Othello*, many scholars and critics have exposed orientalist ideas and defended the view that the black race is a victim of racism and is always associated with witchcraft and black magic. The most frequently illustration of this is when Brabantio accuses Othello of using black magic to win Desdemona:

Oh, thou foul thief, we have though stowed stowed my daughter?
 Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her
 For I will refer me to all things of sense
 If she in chains of magic were not bound
 Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy
 So opposite to marriage that she shunned
 The wealthy curled darlings of our nation (1.2.63-69)

Al-Asmar (2005), moreover, shares the same belief that racism and orientalism have existed since the sixteenth century till the present time. He contends that Shakespeare is not a pioneer in this field like previous scholars and travellers to the Arab world who have already spoken about this matter long time ago. Al-Asmar provides the example of Varthema, Bedwell and the Peacock, the early travelers who have likened Arabs to “beasts.” With reference to *Othello*, he points out how Othello is perceived by the West as a symbol of “lust, witchcraft and satanic evil,” and that such comments on the moor paved the way for the westerners to launch a spate of attacks on this easterner at later a stage. In this regard, Al-Asmar also argues that Shakespeare has created a naïve hero who is short-sighted and who is not fully aware of the conspiracy plotted against him. This is either due to the fact that Shakespeare has intended to limit Othello’s abilities to unravel matters around him or –as an oriental Arab–he must be a naïve, an “easy-led person, who could be easily victimized.”(2005, p.95). In the first scene of the play, Iago supports this assumption when he says:

The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;

And will as tenderly be led by th’ nose

As asses are. (1. 3. 390-393)

Along the same lines, Campbell (2011) argues that Iago is the “agent” of racism and orientalism in the play. Campbell (2011) maintains that this type of racism against the Black was initiated by Iago and then his fellow Roderigo who refers to Othello as “thick lips” (1.1.63). This kind of racist attitude towards the black can also be noticed in Iago's discourse and the speech through he is sensitizing Barbantio to the nasty repercussions deriving from Desdemona and Othello's marriage:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise,

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (1.1.85-88)
[.....]

You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse,

you'll have your nephews neigh to you,

you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for Germans. (1.1.108-111)

Referring to animal imagery used in the play, Campbell (2011) displays how Iago speaks of Othello as a black “ram” and a black “beast” who is raping a white angel. Influenced by Iago’s racist belief, Barbantio, describes Othello as “the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou” (1.2. 69-70). Against this backdrop, Roozbeh (2017) considers Iago’s avoidance of Othello’s name as a form of racism and demonstrates that Iago's use of various black names not only refers to the idea of racism, but also insinuates the “superiority” of the occident and the “inferiority” of the “orient”.

Iago: An Agent of Imperialism

Othello seems to be unaware of himself at the very beginning of the play. He sees himself equal to all people around him. It was Iago who informed him about his race, his culture and his origins by means of imperialism and orientalism as Campbell (2011) has suggested. As an agent, a thinker and a scholar of orientalism, Iago successfully manages to poison his counterpart Othello and weaves a web to make him fall in the trap. Al-Asmar (2005) agrees with Campbell (2011) and states that "Iago is responsible for the downfall of Othello, he is an artful man who has deeply studied human nature". Al Asmar has no doubt that Iago "knew of the torments which afflict the mind of the man (and far beyond bodily torture) and that this kind of torture "can be applied to the case of the Moor as an easterner who, like other easterner heroes, will deal seriously with woman’s honor and chastity. (2005, p.96)

Similarly, Campbell (2011) believes that Iago is clever with words and can manipulate narratives to enforce Othello to follow “a strict Christian doctrine that saw pleasure in marital love as a sin.” (p. 11). He also contends that Iago has a colonial attitude towards Othello and that, it is for this reason that Iago manages to mislead Othello (the colonized mind) and weave a snare to trap him as Campbell puts it..

Iago becomes a cultural advisor to Othello, as the one who has succeeded in reading the Venetian character and that of its colonized others, blacks and women. Othello’s foolish faith in Iago’s honesty includes an idea of Iago as a scholar of human nature, a kind of homespun anthropologist.” (2011, p. 14)

Falling prey to an imperialist tactic, Othello trusts Iago’s words and blindly believes this fellow is "of exceeding honesty, and knows all qualities, with a learned spirit Of human dealings". (3. 3.257-259).

In the same manner, Campbell (2011) affirms that Iago practices an imperial policy and uses an imperial discourse when he says that “it is unnatural for people of different cultures and colors to be attracted to one another” and that “all women betray their husbands” which has resulted in making Othello think that his beloved is “that cunning whore of Venice.” (4.2.88-89). Not only this, Campbell goes on to argue that Iago colonizes Othello mentally and psychologically by devaluating him by means of imperialism (Campbell 2011) and that he dominates and colonizes Othello’s mind through imperial discourse. Accordingly, Othello seems to recognize the racial and cultural differences and links his wife’s betrayal to such differences:

Haply for I am black

And have not those soft parts of conversation

That Chamberers have

She’s gone (3. 3.262-266) [...]

My name, that was as fresh

As Dian’s visage , is now begrimed and black

As mine own face (3. 3. 383. 385)

In this regard, Campbell (2011) also maintains that the play is about “cultural misreading” and he brings to light an important signifier which is the “handkerchief.” It is through the handkerchief that Othello will get to know about the loyalty of his wife. Campbell sees it as a symbol which defines the relationships between the characters and a mirror which reflects Othello’s cultural background as an Arab. The handkerchief, according to Campbell is a “signifier of the encounter narrative [and] the encounter of discourse. It is also the key to the “net” or the “web” Iago is weaving in order to make Othello believe that his wife is cheating on him. Campbell's perception of Iago as an agent of imperialism is substantiated with another scene in the play which shows how Iago is poisoning Othello's mind with the idea that his wife has another adulterous lover (Cassio) by referring to Cassio's possession of his wife's handkerchief. Iago's influence on Othello is so powerful that it ends with Othello smothering himself because, for Othello losing his wife's handkerchief means his own loss and destruction:

Which I first gave her; I saw it in his hand

It was a handkerchief; an antique token

My father gave my mother (3. 4. 55.65)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper revisited Shakespeare's *Othello* and looked at *Othello's* various themes including racism, , imperialism and orientalism with a special focus on the clash of cultures between the east and the west which is represented through inter-racial marriage. In line with Edward Said's theory of imperialism, the paper has also discussed how Iago is an agent of racism and orientalism in the play. Another significant contribution of this paper was to demonstrate how the handkerchief which is a very important symbol of the hero's identity, culture and a signifier for the loyalty of *Othello's* wife.

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