

Role of Othello's Jealousy in his Tragedy By William Shakespeare

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Abstract

This article is basically an attitudinal study of Shakespeare's famous character Othello and throws light on Othello as a character in the play in detail. There are various misconceptions and charges against Othello as a jealous character. This article is aimed at countering that claim.

What Shakespeare wants to show is not only the jealousy but also certain minute aspects that are often neglected in criticism. There are many other things, which contribute a lot in Othello's tragedy and constitute the main action of the play. Jealousy has very little to do with Othello's tragedy. Throughout the play there is no direct physical clash between Cassio and Othello which could prove that Othello was influenced by Cassio at all. We are shown Iago arousing sexual jealousy in Othello and giving dramatic imagery to his venomous tongue. The skillful Iago traps Othello.

Introduction

Othello is a saga of love. Othello an embodiment of love is beguiled by Iago's (an embodiment of hatred) conspiracies. Iago seduces Othello masterfully. Othello is shown vulnerable to Iago's

vicious planning. He is not a bad natured man as Iago passes remarks for him that “The moor is of a free and open nature/That thinks men honest that but seems to be so; /And will as tenderly be led by the’ nose as asses are”. ¹(1, 3,393-395)

It is clear from the text that Othello seems no wise man and is made a fool by Iago. “What should such a Fool /Do with so good a woman”. (5,2,35,36) Othello is completely governed by passions. Being a general he knows only how to kill. He is a general and taught to behave that way, when he has to kill, he does it. His love refrains him from doing so but he cannot control himself. The reason for killing Desdemona is that “she must die, else she ‘ll betray more men. (5,2,6) There is a lurking fear in Othello ‘s mind that she will have sex with more men. That’s why he kills to save her from being a whore.

Although Othello is continuously attacked by Iago’s blames against his love (Desdemona) yet it is Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, who at the very outset passes a judgment about Desdemona “Look to her moor if thou hast eyes to see / she has deceived her father and may thee.”(1-3-292-293) Though Othello pays no heed to Brabantio’s words yet immediately says to Iago, “My life upon her faith! Honest Iago”. (1-3-294) And this very seed of suspicion grows and becomes a strong tree. Iago tries to prove her an adulteress. He fears the repetition a reality.

He is a man of action who is in love with Desdemona as he says “How I did thrive in this fair lady’s love and she in mine” (1-3-125) .He knows he loves her because of her kind attitude

¹ Alexander, Peter. Ed. Shakespeare’s complete works. London: The English Language Book Society and Collins, 1965.

as he recalls “She loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them.”

(1-3-167-168)

These lines clearly interpret that he was in love with Desdemona. Othello is beguiled by love. He suffers from a chaos every single second “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee/And when I love thee not chaos is come again.” (3-3-91-92-93)

He seems unable to make heads or tail of a situation which seems larger than life for him like Hamlet, “to be or not to be” ... a state of mental anguish... a confusion is aroused he utters “I don’t think but Desdemona’ s honest”. (3-3-29)

Iago adds fuel to fire “Long live she so and long live you to think so.” (3-3-29)

Here the real conflict starts Iago takes advantage of Othello’s credulousness. He ridicules his belief, mocks his love and pushes him very hard to suspect and finally kill Desdemona. He shares his sincerest thoughts about his wife with the most insincere person on earth. Othello is shown between a devil and the deep sea: if he believes Iago, he is robbed and if does not do so, his love keeps on spoiling herself.

Having an inquisitive bent of mind, he wants to know the reality and says to Iago “Farewell farewell if more thou dost perceive, let me know more. Set on thy wife to observe.” (3-3-242-243) He is not sure what Iago tells him but he fails to inquire a scandalous matter.

Theme of appearance and reality runs throughout the play what he thinks feels and sees in no longer an ultimate reality. His belief in his love, which is more important to him than his love is shattering he believed Iago more than his innocent love (Desdemona) which is his greatest hamartia and brought his downfall.

Shakespeare artistically brings into light the greatest human weakness. He loved Desdemona from the core of his heart and does not want to let her go in the arms of others. Snyder discusses this point “

“The love that in comedies was a strength in Othello is vulnerable to attacks of reason, arguments from nature. More than that: vulnerability is its very essence. Before falling in love with Desdemona, Othello was self-sufficient, master of himself and of the battlefield. After he believes her to be false, his occupation is gone. Why? Because love has created a dependency, a yielding of the separate, sufficient self to incorporation with another. (29)

It is not jealousy but hallucination of Othello. It makes him believe and act against his will. Killing of Desdemona is not a murder for him but a sacrifice of his love for the sake of his honor. Shakespeare made Othello credulous because it was a common characteristic of a hero in love (which resulted into a frenzy and an act of killing). It is the power of the sexual imagery which haunts him. Bull puts forward:

“Most dramatic representation seize upon and emphasize the way this condition like a fatal disease, grows on the hero and destroys him until the recovery of sanity and dignity at the tragic end we almost share the madness that mounts in his mind until it reaches a point in which he appears to hallucinate, seeing what is not there and writhing before the inner vision of his wife’s betrayal Cassio’s lip meeting Desdemona’s their naked bodies twining together.” (80).

It is the bombastic language, which creates superb imagery by which Othello is deluded---that ultimate visibility which goes beyond evidence Iago has manipulated to prove 'Othello's love a whore'. So he kills her but saves her from being a whore though it was not actually so. There lies the greatest tragedy of Othello. The play shows human beings nearly blindfolded by poisonous and suspicious passions and do what makes them repent for the rest of their life.

Greenblatt adds a further insight to our understanding

“the orthodox doctrine that governs Othello’s sexual attitude—his simultaneous idealization and mistrust of women---seems to Iago sufficiently close to be recognizable, sufficiently distant to be manipulable... attempts to define the precise moment at which venial temptation passes over into mortal sin: (51)

IAGO: To kiss in private?

OTHELLO: An unauthorized kiss.

IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend abed.

An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

OTHELLO: Naked abed, and not mean harm?

It is hypocrisy against the devil:

They that mean virtuously, and yet so do,

The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.

IAGO: So they do nothing 'tis a venial slip (4-1-2-9)

It is the spell of Iago's tongue that pushes Othello in the dark and blind tunnel of suspicion. Iago is matchless in exploiting his sexual imagery so skillfully.

Fear of losing makes him kill her he fears as if Desdemona has already fallen in love with Cassio (if he does not kill her) he was afraid it will aggravate the situation even more. She might get

more and more chances to bring Othello's honour to dust. He is unable to think right; his thoughts are paralyzed. He is credulous because he is abhorred "thick lips" (1-1-67) "The moor" (1-3-40) "an old black ram" (Cefalo, 2015) (Cefalo, 2015) (Cefalo, 2015) (Cefalo, 2015)1-1-90). His love and marriage with Desdemona was something next to impossible. Shakespeare may want to show that in such a case (marriage of a moor with highly placed, white girl) marriage bond is fragile and bound to break. Othello is a domestic tragic hero. He stands parallel to Adam. He is deadly skeptical.

In Othello, the eponymous protagonist is a romantic and passionate figure whose active and impressionable imagination is easily stimulated by Iago's calumny against Desdemona. Othello's romanticism is glimpsed early on in the play in a lyrical speech made as he disembarks after a stormy voyage and is reunited with his bride. Addressing Desdemona, he says, O my soul's joy!
/If after every tempest come such calms,/May the winds blow till they have waken'd death,/ ...'T were 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 (2-1-182-191).

Othello, a prototype of the romantic male, believing Desdemona an adulteress, accuses her of being a corrupted text: "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4-2-72-72). He had thought he owned that original "pure" text which secured his sense of self. The death of the innocent Desdemona is almost less scandalous than Othello's assumption that her adultery justifies his murdering her. His self-condemnation is provoked only by the discovery of her blamelessness.

Iago's malignity furnishes after having provoked Othello into murderous fury against his wife, Iago slyly suggests, "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated." (4-1-204) Othello resorts to smothering rather than strangling his wife, but the

preservation of Desdemona's loveliness is a key factor in his decision: Yet I'll not shed her blood, /Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, /And smooth as monumental alabaster. (5-2-3-5)

Bradley insists “the ‘centre’ of Shakespearean tragedy maybe said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character or in character issuing from action.” (Preface xi)

“O, now for ever/Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell
content!/Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars/That makes
ambition virtue! O, farewell! /Farewell the neighing steed and the
shrill trump /...The immortal Jove’s dread clamour counterfeit, /Farewell!
Othello’s occupation’s gone” (3-3-352-361)

Desdemona’s death is death of his confidence in his love he later kills himself as he prophesies chaos “when I love thee not chaos is come again.”(3-3-93)

Othello has misconception and all the tragedy depends on it. He is badly deceived by Iago. Othello, is a tragedy of misunderstanding either if Othello understands Desdemona he would know that she is simply not the kind of girl who would during their honey moon start a love affair with his officer if Desdemona understands Othello she would know that he does not see her as a real girl, but as something magical that has happened to him.

This point is noticeable that being a Moor Othello was prejudiced. Race is an important factor and cannot be neglected easily .A dormant inferiority complex which throughout his life could not get a chance to come to the surface. Desdemona ignores it but he himself is well aware of it. Desdemona states in the beginning: “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (1-3-253). As for as Othello’s black colour is concerned Cavell argues,

“I think it is commonly felt that she overlooked his blackness in favour

of his inner brilliance and perhaps further felt that this is a piece of deception,
at least of herself.” (11)

Black Moor was black from inside. He asks Iago “I will have some proof my name that
was as fresh as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face.” (3-3-390-392)

It was not so easy a decision to kill Desdemona. The heart of Othello was full of love for
her. He had to make it like a stone then he could commit a cruel act of murdering his wife. His
heart turned so hard “No my heart is turned to stone, I strike it out and it hurts my hand”(4-1-78).
He then says “O perjured woman! thou dost stone thy heart,/And makes me call what intend to
/A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.” (5-2-66-68) He commits murder not out of sheer
jealousy but rather out of excessive and blind devotion to his love. He does not inquire, as he is
unable to meditate and find out the panacea of that complicated wound.

He is fully at the disposal of “Honest Iago” (2-3-169) (ironically). He shouts “Villain, be sure
thou proved my love a whore, be sure if it, give me the ocular proof, or by the worth of mine
eternal soul, thou hadst been better have been born a dog, thou answer my waked wrath”(3-3-
363-367). It was a problem of honour for him that his wife is having sex relation with his officer.
He is stung “if she be false then heaven mocks itself, I will not believe.”(3-3-282)

Othello’s jealousy is the one flaw that brings him down the most .If Iago does not
instigate all that the situation would have been better. It was Iago who was jealous not Othello.

Handkerchief also plays its role duly. It enhances the suspicion growing in the mind of Othello.
Othello is greatly attached with it. Othello associates bad luck with loss of handkerchief. Othello
is under a great pressure of family tradition when he says with a sorrow tone “She hold her while
she kept it /Would make her amiable and subdue my father/Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
or made a gift of it my father’s eye should hold her loathly and his spirit should hunt”. (2-56-61)

Othello is emotionally attached with handkerchief. It has a superstitious effect on Othello as it belongs to his mother. Moreover, he gives it to his wife as a token of love. When he finds that she does not have it anymore his outrage sees no boundaries. He is extremely skeptical about the chastity of his wife.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that Shakespeare wants to portray a great man with heroic qualities and flaws together as a human being normally have. Othello acts and behaves as anybody in his shoes might have done. His tragedy is more like a tragedy of his love and not of jealousy. Iago instigates him. Whom he always thought a guiding companion proves to be a misguiding enemy. He suffers from a great mental shock. In Elizabethan drama it is not possible to show a man so broad minded that someone is telling him about the sexual activities of his wife and he does not mind it. Othello was valiant he possessed the necessary violent emotions as well to react against the crime which Desdemona did. (though she was innocent) His act of killing and repentance is the biggest proof of his love for Desdemona. She is the one who trusts him and he did not want her to have any other man in her life. It is the cruelest reaction he manages to do out of his love.

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