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Shakespeare's *Othello*: the Open Nature of the Hero and its Devastative Upshot

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<p>Keywords: - Othello -jealousy -isolation - tragedy - experience tragic flaw</p> <p>Article Info</p>	<p>Abstract: Emanated from many characters, jealousy is the essence of Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> for causing the personal conflict within the play. It is used to be the motive for destructive actions that lead to the sorrowful ends of many characters including the tragic hero, Othello, who proves that jealousy is one of the most subversive emotions. The aim of this research is to concentrate on Othello's open nature as a tragic flaw that creates his vulnerability to be jealous of the alleged disloyalty of Desdemona, his faithful wife, and then to kill her.</p>
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مسرحية عطيل لشاكسبير: طبيعة البطل المفتوحة وعواقبها المدمرة

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الخلاصة: تعتبر الغيرة التي اظهرها العديد من الشخصيات محركا مهما لاجداث مسرحية عطيل حيث سببت الكثير من الصراعات الشخصية في هذه المسرحية الشاكسبيرية. لقد استخدمت الغيرة كدافع لافعال مدمرة أدت بالنتيجة الى النهاية المأساوية للعديد من الشخصيات بضمنهم البطل المأساوي الذي اثبت أن الغيرة هي اكثر العواطف قدرة على التدمير. هدف البحث الحالي هو التركيز على أن العيب المأساوي في شخصية البطل عطيل هو طبيعته المفتوحة وعدم تحفظه في اقامة العلاقات مع الاخرين أدى به الى أن يثق بالشخص الخطأ الذي اغتتم نقطة الضعف هذه لاثارة غيرة عطيل وايهامه بان ديسديمونا، زوجته المخلصة، خائنة وهذا ما قاده لقتلها.

Introduction

Othello is a tragedy that tells a story of a secret marriage of an outsider black general, Othello, the tragic hero, and Desdemona, the beautiful white girl of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Later, the vision of social harmony is destroyed, their marriage is ruined for the reason that Othello trusts a villain, Iago, who is able to plant doubt within Othello's mind and that is what causes his suspicion of his wife's faithfulness and leads him to kill her as a result of jealousy, and then to kill himself. Iago serves as a persistent agency of creating strife and evil. His villainy controls the events in a whole from the beginning till the end. He uses cunning to deceive all other characters and to direct their activities to serve his vicious plans. He can do so by exploiting the weak points of each character who believes that Iago is honest. A. N. Jeffares believes that *Othello* is not mere a play of presenting tragic events, "but a study of the ways in which evil can cause the confusion of right and wrong and thus bring about the destruction of people who are fundamentally honest and virtuous." ¹

Othello chooses Cassio, Desdemona's friend, to be his lieutenant. Iago, who is very proud of himself, becomes jealous of Cassio's position. But this jealousy is the occasion that he wants to exploit rather than the reason of his conspiracy against Othello. Actually Iago is jealous of Othello's power as a military leader and of his courtship with Desdemona. That is why jealousy represents the catalyst for developing the sequence of events. Fed by his innate

sense of malice, it is jealousy that prompts the villain to plot Othello's downfall employing a flurry of deceit and trickery as a means to carry out his plan which aims to arouse Othello's passions. Nicholas Royle describes *Othello* as “a play about the mad and deathly power of jealousy; seeing and blindness; the visibility and significance of blackness, racial and ethnic difference; religion and war (Christian Vs. Islam, Venetians Vs. Turks); storytelling and witchcraft.”²

"Othello appears in the opening acts as the very personification of self-control."³ It is an expected trait of a person who has been a warrior since he was seven years old as it is mentioned in Othello's following speech:

Othello: For since these arms of mine had seven year's pith
... , they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field.⁴

Iago begins his malignant plan to break down Othello's self-control by talking about jealousy:

Iago: O beware, my lord, of jealousy:
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who certain of his fate loves not his wronger;
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet fondly loves? (III.iii.167-72)

Being a military leader, Othello sees himself as a man who judges by dealing with facts. He believes only what he sees or what his most trusted man, Iago, reports to him. The one thing that seems certain to Othello is Iago's friendship; he always calls him "Honest Iago." (I.iii.290) Planning to steer Othello towards his tragic conclusion, Iago offers a story of betrayal to his master by which he snares his soul in jealous rage of infidelity and honesty. He convinces Othello that his wife, Desdemona, is false in her virtue by offering some deceitful proofs.

Iago plants an idea that Desdemona and Cassio fall in love. He states that he has seen them whispering and laughing as if they are flirting each other. Othello does not believe such a memorandum for knowing that they are friends and he trusts their faithfulness. He asks Iago to provide him with proofs of his wife's infidelity, “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore; Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof.” (III.iii.360-61) Although the case of

whispering and laughing represents no demonstration, it is a good spark to begin the fire of jealousy.

Iago goes on feeding Othello with more falls evidence. He tells him that he has heard Cassio makes love with Desdemona in his dream. He states that one night while they were sleeping by each other, Cassio started confessing his love for Desdemona and, then, he began kissing Iago thinking that he is Desdemona. Cassio, according to Iago, claims that he is upset that she has married the Moor:

Iago: In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,
 Let us be wary, let us hide our loves'.
 And then, sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,
 Cry, O sweet creature! And then kiss me hard, (III.iii.420-23)

It seems that Othello accepts that for saying, "I'll tear her all to pieces!" But the scoundrel wants his plan to be very well done, he replies "Nay, yet be wise; yet we see nothing done." (III.iii.433-34) Iago achieves a step further, he plants a handkerchief, Othello's first gift to Desdemona, in Cassio's room. Then, he proclaims that he has seen such a handkerchief with Cassio, "See Cassio wipe his beard with." (III.iii.440) Othello's jealousy begins to rage and his thoughts become impure. Cassio does not know anything about the origin of the handkerchief and its meaning.

Finally, Iago decides to take the decisive step in turning Othello's flame of jealousy. He tells Othello that Cassio has told him that he has had sexual intercourse with Desdemona and furthermore he tricks Othello leading him to overhear a conversation between Iago and Cassio in which they are talking about the bad fame of a woman, Bianca. Thinking that this conversation is about Desdemona, Othello is completely convinced and there is no more doubt in his mind about the infidelity of his wife. Asking Iago to kill Cassio, he decides to put an end to Desdemona's life. "Within these three days let me hear thee say. That Cassio's not alive." (III.iii.473-74)

At the time that Desdemona realizes that her husband is changed for behaving strangely, she does not consent the idea that Othello becomes jealous, "Alas the day, I never gave him cause." (III.iv.151) But her maid, Emilia, is growing anxious, "They are not never jealousy for the cause. But jealous for they're jealous." (III.iv.154-55) Then, Desdemona replies, "Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind." (III.iv.154-56)

Iago's final proof is not credible at all, but his trickery induces Othello to accept it. It is a matter of using false proofs devilishly by a clever man. Iago's plan is well arranged to the point that Othello cannot suspect it. Firstly, he begins by telling Othello what he really has seen; laughing is an ordinary exercise between the friends. Iago, then, uses to build upon that a web of deceit.

Critics express two views towards Othello's state of jealousy. Some of them believe that Othello's quick belief that his wife is unfaithful represents an indication of his lack of judgement and maturity. He is strong as a military leader but not as a lover. Other critics confirm that Othello's jealousy can be understood as an evidence of his strong love for Desdemona. His pain "takes the form of jealous fury mixed with expressions of genuine love for his wife." ⁵ Even when he is about to commit the murder, Othello comments on his wife's beauty and kisses her.

Although Othello is a cultural and racial outsider in the Venetian society, his skill as a warrior and martial expert is of great importance to the state. He is considered an integral part of Venetian civic community for the urgent need to his wide experience. He is greatly demanded by the Duke and senate as it is mentioned in Cassio's comment that the Duke has sent many groups to search him:

Cassio: You have been hotly called for,
 When, being not at your lodging to be found,
 The senate hath sent about three several quests
 To search you out. (I.ii.44-47)

Othello is shown as a hero of war and a man of great pride and courage. G. Wilson Knight states that Othello "is a Moor; he is noble and generally respected; he is proud in the riches of his achievement." ⁶ The following speech of the Duke reveals that the Venetian government trusts Othello enough to lead the Venetians:

Duke: The Turk with the most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you; and though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a more sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you. You must therefore be content to slubber the gloss of your new fortunes with this more stubborn and boisterous expedition. (I.iii.219-25)

As the play goes on, Othello's character begins to deteriorate gradually. Othello's character develops from a flawless and perfect leader into a killer. In this context, an important question must be asked: What is the reason behind Othello's downfall? To say simply that he is a jealous man whose jealousy of his wife gets out of hand, seems to be unacceptable idea. One cannot deny the huge impact of jealousy as a main factor of Othello's degeneration and when he is incited to jealousy, it controls him entirely. But jealousy is not a part of his nature. "He is not naturally jealous." ⁷ Most of the evidences in the play tend to support the idea that Othello does not show himself to be jealous early in the play. Jealousy is the major driving force of creating the plot and Shakespeare has worked hard to incorporate jealousy with death to the point that its effect causes many characters to be killed, but one has to admit that Othello cannot be jealous without the great influence of a tragic flaw within his personality that leads him to be jealous. Othello is a very trusting person. His personality is recognized by trusting others too facilely. Moreover, he cannot trust the right person. Othello trust the wrong man and that is what kills him and his wife at the end. He is "trustful, and thorough in his trust. He puts entire confidence in the honesty of Iago... This confidence was misplaced." ⁸ He spends a terrible time in trying whether to believe Iago or his wife although he is in need to trust his wife. He is not able to reach the conclusion that Iago is an enemy but not a friend.

The following words reflect that Othello' jealousy is arisen in his mind at the present, "And yet how nature erring from itself." (III.iii.229) These words express Othello's agreement to suspect Desdemona and Cassio as a result of trusting Iago. They can be seen, in one way or another, as a starting point of his destructive jealousy. E.A. Edwards states saying that Othello "makes his tragic error by trusting Iago." ⁹

Othello's open and trusting nature enables Iago to manipulate the moor and then to spit out the venom inside Othello's blood, "But with a little act upon the blood, Burn like the mine of sulphur. I did say so. (III.iii.329-30) Iago's insight into Othello's true nature teaches him that his plan of destruction "was to deliver blow on blow, and never to allow his victim to recover from the confusion of the first shock." ¹⁰ Othello provides Iago with the occasion that he need to achieve his vicious aim systematically, step by step, leaving no chance for a meeting between Othello and Cassio. Othello "has taken the poisoned bait, and Iago can proceed to implant certain simple ideas in Othello's mind." ¹¹

The Moor is cheated by Iago's skilful and falls proofs and that is why he decides that Desdemona must die, "Yes she must die, else she'll betray more men." (V.ii.6) As she lies at his mercy, Desdemona asks to know her offense. He names Cassio and the handkerchief that she has given to him as an evidence of her treachery. Othello, who does not like to accept any defence or justification, stifles her till she dies with no mercy.

Othello's perversion reaches its lowest level. He considers the murder a sacred duty. He decides not to send her to damnation before giving her enough time for last prayer, but Desdemona's lament for Cassio again provokes his jealousy and he kills her not as a referee but as a criminal.

Othello: O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart,
And mak'st me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice. (V.ii.63-65)

But When Othello begins to realize how deeply he has loved Desdemona and how blindly he has ruined what was the best accomplishment of his life; his suffering reaches a new degree. The severe pain of this realization goes deeper within Othello's soul to the point that he starts to see himself damned and excluded from the sight of Heaven at the final judgement.

Othello: When we shall meet at compt
This look of thine will hurl soul from heaven
And fiends will snatch at it. (V.ii.271-73)

The poison of jealousy vanishes for knowing the truth about Desdemona's innocence. Othello, then, sees that there is no way to atone for her death, but to execute himself, "I kiss thee ere I killed thee no way but this, Killing myself, to die upon a kiss. (V.ii.354-55) Othello's death is indebted to the heroic tradition of tragedy in which "the hero passes judgement on himself and executes it." ¹² He wants to show everyone that his love to his wife is true even in death. Credibility can be deceived especially when a person whom we trust so much is the very one who is deceiving us.

Desdemona loves the Moor in spite of the fact that he is black. She devotes her heart along with her fortunes to him. She does not hesitate to support her husband's situation informing the Duke and the Senate all together that she pledges allegiance to Othello.

Desdemona: But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my Lord. (I.iii.183-87)

Her heart is subdued to an implicit devotion to the man that she has selected as a husband. Othello's black colour is esteemed above all those who have white skins in a white community. This indicates that Desdemona's love to Othello springs out of her inner nature. It is supposed that their relationship cannot be shaken forever and nothing, even death, can destroy their love. But the weapon that Iago uses to defeat this love is the sole means that love cannot be alive. The seeds of doubt are carefully and gradually planted within Othello's mind. The aim is to make his jealousy breaks out into unlimited fury. Othello certainly loves Desdemona; he assures her and expresses his love of her beauty:

Othello: Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
 But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,
 Chaos is come again. (III.iii.90-92)

Othello's deadly mistake is that he cannot keep his love away from Iago's trap. Juliet Mclauchlan states, "Othello does not really know his wife." ¹³ It seems that she wants to say that Othello cannot trust his wife because he does not know her well and that is what offers an unjust excuse for Othello's strange behaviour towards her. One can believe that this means, by one way or another, that Othello trusts Iago as a result of knowing him. But the events of the play reflect an apparent fact that Othello does not know Iago well and that he trusts the malicious person. That is why one tends to think that it was better for Othello to trust his wife who challenged her society and even her father to support his situation when she stood as the only female character surrounded by many powerful men including the Duke. He has to appreciate that and to make sure about what he has received about her illegitimate relation with her old friend Cassio.

Othello's military life overrules his civilian life entirely to the point that he is unable to interact with the ordinary citizens or even to live a normal life as a result of his love for war. He fails in making transition from a military strong man to a rational thinking human being and lover and that is why he is manipulated and led to his tragic end.

Above all, Othello is a soldier. His job affects his married life from the very beginning of the events. It is to say that war, to him, is something mingled with his blood. As a response to Othello's stories of war and adventures, even Desdemona becomes in love with danger. She is satisfied to be the wife of such a warrior rather than to be an insect of peace. That is why Desdemona accompanies Othello to Cyprus and she is unperturbed by the storm or the Turks

who threaten them. Harold C. Goddard states, "There was a boy within this girl, a man's courage at the heart of this maiden whose very motion blushed at herself." ¹⁴

Othello proclaims that his success in love comes as a result of his success in the military field. When the Turks are defeated by the tempest, their fleet is drowned. Othello is left without duty. That is why he has no means of proving his manhood in the battlefield. Influence by Iago's trap, Othello starts to be mixed up and that is what makes his expression of jealousy rapidly devolve from the conventional to the absurd:

Othello: Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue. O farewell!
Farewell neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone. (III.iii.349.58)

It becomes very apparent that Othello's jealousy is a consequence but not a reason. It is isolation that represents the origin of Othello's open nature, a flaw within his personality that leads him to be vulnerable towards Iago's web of lies and then to be thrown into a state of jealousy that makes him mix the one with the other. Shakespeare deals with this problem in *Othello* by making its tragic hero an outsider man whose military experience is the reason that makes him be accepted in the Venetian society. Othello does not belong to the country in which he lives. He is visibly alienated from others by his colour, a black man in white society. As a man of another race and from another country, much of the conflict that he faces during the events is due to the opinion that he does not belong, "Othello is a very isolated figure. He is isolated by his colour, which makes him almost unique in Venice, and his race which means he was not born into the ways of Venice." ¹⁵

Othello's colour is used as an important element in Shakespeare's conception of the tragic pattern. When he is held in suspicion by a man who accuses him of seducing his daughter with mysterious charm, Othello stands apart from everyone else. But, his sensitivity to the issue becomes clear when Iago uses it as a proof that Desdemona cannot be faithful to a man so foreign:

Iago: Her will recoiling to her better judgement,

May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. (III.iii.238-40)

Moreover, Othello has lived all his life as a man of war and that is what isolates him from those whom he meets within society. This problem affects him heavily; it leaves him more open for the reason that he thinks that he can trust people such as Iago to be a means that helps him to break his isolation. But he does not know that he has committed a grave mistake. This flaw is exploited hideously by a villain who spares no effort to do evil for the sake of evil itself.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a tragedy of a man whose isolation greatly influenced his personality leading him to trust others easily. As a result of being isolated because of his colour as an outsider moor as well as his inability to drive normal life or to interact with other people with the community in which he lives, Othello committed fatal mistake that he allow himself to become a man of open nature, trust others simply, and that is what leads him to be vulnerable towards an enemy who lurks to get a chance to destroy him for being jealous of Othello's strong personality as a military expert whose martial experience makes him accepted in a white racial society in spite of the fact that he does not belong to it. Othello is unlucky for trusting the wrong person who is able to exploit Othello's flaw perfectly and to inflame the fire of his jealousy guiding him to kill his faithful wife who has challenged her society to marry the moor. The play is really a character study of a good man who is trapped into Iago's gin from which he has no chance to escape. The lesson is that it is very dangerous to believe or trust any person entirely.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Othello* Ed., by A. N. Jeffares (Beirut: York Press, 2002), p.xxxii.
2. Nicholas Royle, *How to Read Shakespeare* (London: Granta Books, 2005), pp. 72-73.
3. Alvin Kernan, "Othello: an Introduction", in, *Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, Ed., by Alfred Harbage (United States of America: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1946), p.75.
4. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Ed., by Norman Sanders (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1984), p.72. Subsequent references to this play will be to this edition.
5. A. N. Jeffares p.xxii.
6. G. Wilson knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1930 p.105.

7. Martin Stephen and Philip Franks, *Studying Shakespeare* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1984), p.69.
8. A. C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan and company Limited, 1904), p. 156.
9. E.A. Edward, "Tragic changes" URL. <http://ayjw.org/articles.php?Id=787492>, p.1.
10. A. C. Bradley. P. 160.
11. John Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1951), p.146
12. Dieter Mehl. *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Cambridge: C.U.P.), p.76.
13. Juliet Mclauchlan, *Shakespeare: Othello* (Great Britain: The Camelot Press, 1971), p.36.
14. Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: C.U.P., 1951), p.83.
15. Martin Stephen and Philip Franks, p.68.

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