

Re- reading Othello through a Postcolonial Perspective: Marginalization of the Cultural Other.

Rituparna Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Swami Vivekananda University

In the ambit of the postcolonial studies of literary works, William Shakespeare's pathetic tragedy, "Othello" occupies a highly significant status insomuch as it abounds in crucial issues, calling for a scan through a postcolonial lens. The play raises, above all other questions involved in it, the uncomfortable question of racism and the century- worn inhibitions of the White against the Africans, the Caribbeans, the Negroes.

In my attempt to probe into Othello, I prefer to touch, first of all, upon what may be called a diasporic or immigrant issue. An introspection of the play under discussion reveals to us how painstakingly did Othello endeavor to accommodate himself to the cosmopolitan ambience of Venice, to the native Venetians, and how ruthlessly he was left in his own place. Othello, a Moor, hailing from Africa, must have got swamped in an absolutely unfamiliar environment of Venice and sustained an extremely traumatic identity crisis. It is doubtless that Othello was pestered by a feeling of aloofness and alienation. As amigrant in Venice, the dusk- hued Othello was looked upon as an outsider. Being treated as a cultural "other", being unable to comprehend and adapt to the western culture, he had to encounter in Venice, Othello could not but suffer from a lack of selfhood.

Despite his good qualities, Othello unwittingly seemed to be alive to his racial otherness; in fact, he could not but be aware of his blackness because as in "The Merchant of Venice", Shylock is seen to be most frequently called "Jew", as if, it were an invective, to remind him of his otherness, so, Othello too, we find, was frequently defined as a "Moor", a reminder of his being "other", the most unwelcome presence in the milieu of a Eurocentric society. Othello eloped with Desdemona and they got married. Roderigo and Iago roused Brabantio, Desdemona's father, from sleep to inform him of this. Iago told Brabantio a note of venomous contempt for Othello: "Even now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe." The insinuation is very clear here: To Iago, Othello is no better than an old black ram. Here we discern in Iago's voice a trenchant racist note of dissent against an African's love and marriage with a white woman. Such examples of stringent racial prejudices of the white man for the Black and the Brown abound in the domain of European literature. In "The Tempest", a character named Sebastian accuses his brother, king Alonso of Naples of having held his daughter's marriage with the prince of Tunis. Sebastian points it out as the very cause of their disaster.

In a situation where the social ground gives him no secure foothold, but constantly torments him with rankling, an utterly uncomfortable feeling of insecurity and confusion, it was only natural for Othello to flounder into a void of alienation from which, even in the blessed company of the beautiful and graceful Desdemona, he was not released. He had to be always brave, valiant, an accomplished General, noble of mien, for only by means of ensuring such a grand self - dimension that he could hope of curving out an identity for himself, a selfhood, commanding respect and recognition.

Not only did Othello have to present himself as a man of great military skill, worthiness and nobility, he did also have to desperately project himself as one, distinguished from and superior to many other non-Europeans who were

supposed to be savages, monstrous. In the travel stories that Othello told Desdemona, he referred to “the Cannibals that each other eat”. He certainly intended to flaunt that like the white men, he also believed in the existence of the cannibals, thereby having a cultural proximity to the white man. His anxiety and eagerness to distinguish himself from wild men and savages, manufactured by the Eurocentric ideology, is revealed more intensely in his claim to have seen during his travels “the Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders”. (Act I, iii, 145-146) Othello must have fictionalized such images to indicate his difference from the monstrous non-Europeans. The white racists like Roderigo, Brabantio and Iago denigrate Othello by labelling against him such obnoxious terms as “thick lips”, “sooty bosom” and “black ram”. They intended to subvert Othello as both inferior and a vile alien. In the face of such malignancy, Othello desperately sought to distinguish himself from men whose “heads grow beneath their shoulders”

From the very beginning of the play, we see how hard is Othello’s struggle to resist the Eurocentric attack on his blackness. When Iago warned Othello against Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, Othello said: “Let him do his spit: My services which I have done the signiory shall out-tongue his complaints”. Brabantio called on the duke and complained against Othello having eloped with his daughter by means of bewitching her with magical charms: “She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted by spells and medicines bought on mountebanks; for nature so preposterously to err, being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, sans witchcraft could not”. (Act I, iii, 60-65) Othello had to explain to the duke that the only witchcraft he had applied was telling Desdemona the stories of his adventures. Othello said: “She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d, and I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used”. (Act I, iii, 167-169) The uncomfortable feeling of her being a black man open to the contempt of the white Venetians, constantly haunted

Othello's, inducing him into formulating a sort of self-defensive mechanism. For example, when Othello requested the duke to let Desdemona accompany him in his journey to Cyprus, he apprehended that he might be stereotyped as a black man, a lascivious Moor who sort sexual entertainment with Desdemona even at the expense of his military responsibilities. Therefore, Othello said to the duke and the senators pleadingly: "your voices, Lords: Beseech you, let her will have a free way; I therefore beg it not to please the palate of my appetite, nor to comply with heat, the young affects in my defunct, and proper satisfaction, but to be true and bounteous of her mind; and heaven defend your good souls that you think, I will your serious and great business scant, for she is with me...". (Act I, iii, 260- 268) Thus Othello had to convince the Duke and the Senators that she wanted Desdemona to be with him in his trip to Cyprus not at all because she desired for a sexual union with her by winking at his duties. Commenting on this speech of Othello, Victor L. Cahn writes: "We cannot be certain if you want to emphasize the spiritual qualities of their relationship or whether he downplays the physical aspect of the marriage to avoid offending anyone. In either case, we may assume that he is conscious of the racial difference between himself and Desdemona." Cahn further comments: "as a black man alone in a white society, Othello is self-conscious".

That Othello is awfully touchy about and alive to his oriental identity, his dark skin is manifested from the desperation of which he tried to thwart the racist attacks from the jingoistic Venetians, such as Iago, Brabantio, Roderigo. He zealously endeavoured to guard his hard-earned reputation, and became a broken man when, taking advantage of his simplicity and credulity, Iago succeeded in persuading Othello to believe that Desdemona had run into adultery with Cassio, thereby jilting him, Othello got shattered as he concluded that having made him cuckold, Desdemona had not only betrayed his love, but even more unfortunately, she had destroyed his

renown and reputation. Othello felt with an intense dejection that with the decline of his reputation, his very identity had tumbled down. He said to Iago: "... O now forever/ farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content: / Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars:/ That makes ambition virtue: ...the immortal Jove's great clamour counterfeit; / farewell, Othello's occupation's gone!" (Shakespeare 353- 363)

Othello killed Desdemona and tried to justify it as an honour-killing. Lodovico, who happens to be present there, betrayed his shock and asked Othello what should be said to him. Othello replied, saying "why anything, / An honorable murderer, if you will (Shakespeare 294 - 295). Beguiled by the Mephistophelean Iago into mistrusting the incorruptible Desdemona, Othello tarnished his own image, which had so long been translucent, noble and graceful. In fact, this act of violence by Othello unravels the tragic explosion of his tension, his soul-wrenching anguish at his blackness. He thought that Desdemona, a white woman, had deserted him for his blackness and got into an adultery with Cassio, a white man. The more he thought so, the more disoriented he became and then killed his very love. Here we can quote a very comprehensive statement of Coleridge: "jealousy does not strike me as a point in Othello's passion; I take to be rather an agony that the creature, whom he had believed angelic, with whom he had garnered up his heart, am whom he could not help still loving, should be proved impure and worthless. It was a struggle not to love her. It was a more indignation and regret that virtue should so fall..." That Othello killed himself soon after he had killed Desdemona, was just a tragic yet inevitable nemesis. When his identity was gone, his public renowned eclipsed and his love strangled to death by himself, Othello's physical existence would have definitely a constant mortal torture on his very spirit. At the moment of killing himself, Othello apostrophized the murdered Desdemona: "I kiss'd thee are I kill'd thee: no way / but this; / killing myself, to die upon a kiss." (Shakespeare 357- 358)

Culture forms an extremely important issue in the postcolonial introspection of "Othello". From the very beginning of his life in Venice, Othello had been repeatedly reminded that he was a cultural "other" in the Eurocentric Venetian society. No sooner did Brabatio discovered that Othello had eloped with his daughter Desdemona and married her, he went straight to the duke with an apple to persecute Othello. "For if such actions may have passage free", he grumbled, "Bond- slaves, and pagans, shall our statesmen be." (Act I, ii, 98- 99) in other words, Brabantio meant to express his concern that if Othello were exempted from penalty, Venice would cease to be a civilized city and it would be reduced to a barbaric and pagan country like Turkey. During the course of the play, we should not fail to notice the qualitative differences that had been drawn between the Christianity of Venice and the heathen. Christian religion has been highlighted as superior to paganism. Throughout the play, the threat of Turkish invasion is heard to be murmured by the Venetians. This may be deemed as a metaphor for the barbarian onslaught upon the civilization. However hard Othello tried to internalize the Venetian culture, he could not avoid being beleaguered by the white racism. Even Desdemona took a fancy to Othello mainly because she found his stories of adventure intriguing, and himself exotic.

The handkerchief issue which led Othello into self-destructive suspicion, also highlights Desdemona's lack of understanding of Othello's cultural roots and sentiments. Othello had given Desdemona a handkerchief which his mother had given him on her death bed, desiring him to give it to his future wife. Telling Desdemona about the backdrop of the handkerchief, Othello had stated that an Egyptian sorceress had given his mother the handkerchief, claiming that it would keep her husband loyal to her; however, if she were to sell it or give it away, his eyes would wander out in quest of love elsewhere. Thus in Othello's belief, the handkerchief had a deep spiritual value, representing marital fidelity

and bonding. That Desdemona handled the handkerchief carelessly and lost it reveals her dearth of comprehension of the cultural values in which Othello's root was so deeply entrenched.

In the conclusion, we may comment on the basis of Ania Loomba's interpretation of Othello in her book "Colonialism / Postcolonialism" that theme of sexual jealousy, which several critiques have sought to showcase as the root of Othello's tragedy, is far less crucial than the racist context in which Othello and Desdemona lived and loved. Iago's machinations are not "motiveless malignity", a coinage used by Coleridge, but "born out of racial hatred and insecurity". (Loomba 75)

References

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