

Postcolonial Othering in William Shakespeare's Play *Othello; The Moor of Venice*

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Abstract

*The term postcolonial appeared for the first time in the mid-1980s, in the scholarly journals as subtexts in the writings of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. The term was later established in academic and popular discourse. Its thematic concerns include universality, differences, nationalism, postmodernism, representation and resistance, ethnicity, feminism, language, education, history, place, and production (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2004. Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies, p.2). It is the literature that has been created as a voice to the powerless and the poorest members of the global community. "Postcolonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries; a literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized peoples. It focuses particularly on: the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people and on literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of inevitable Otherness". (www.shs.westport.k12.ct.us). This paper will be analyzing the text of the play *Othello; The Moor of Venice* by Shakespeare in terms of the representation of Otherness through the lens of postcolonialism. The love story between Desdemona and Othello was doomed due to the inflexibility of racial politics, the psychology of bodily humours, magic, or the incompatibility of military and private life. Throughout the play, there is the subtle suggestion that Othello, despite his high status, is considered dangerous by his European contemporaries. Brabantio is scandalized when he learns of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, and this revelation almost leads to Othello's arrest and accusations that Othello has kidnapped or stolen his future wife. It's as if the citizens of Venice can't imagine a white woman would have a consensual relationship with a black man, or as if Othello's race poses a threat to the European familial order. Othello continuously subverts this perception, comporting himself with dignity despite European mistrust.*

Keywords: Post-Colonialism, Others, Racial Politics, Shakespeare.

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Introduction

The postcolonial theory was formulated to deal with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries. Whether from the perspective of the colonizer or the colonized, post-colonization is about people and their personal experiences: the sense of disempowerment and dislocation. "Postcolonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century. The Postcolonial theory takes many different shapes and interventions, but all share a fundamental claim: that the world we inhabit is impossible to understand except in relationship to the history of imperialism and colonial rule" (Elam, 2019).

Postcolonial criticism mainly focuses on the literature that has been produced by the colonizers and the colonized, highlighting the issues of power, culture, religion, economy, and politics, analyzing and studying the effects of these elements with reference to colonization (Puduue.edu). The concept of Otherness is one of the prime concerns of the postcolonial theory. The

concept of Otherness perceives the world "as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the Self is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the Other is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil" (www.faculty.mccfl.edu). This perception of the Other is a process of demonization, which expresses the "ambivalence at the very heart of authority" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. 2002, P.3).

Postcolonialism may be described as not a "we" talking about or to "them", but a "them" talking back to an "us", thus implying that post-colonial literature in every way is about the categorization of center and margin. Homi K Bhabha (1994) argued that the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the colonizer\ colonized relationship has been a focus for postcolonial theory. The colonial presence is always ambivalent, there is a split between its appearance as original and authoritative and "its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is this ambivalence that makes the boundaries of colonial positionality- the division of self\other and the question of colonial power – the differentiation of colonizer\ colonized- different from both

Hegelian master-slave dialectic or the phenomenological projection of 'otherness' " (www.books.google.co.uk).

The term Other is defined as the lack of identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense the Other can be described as the foreign: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper. The Self and the Other can easily be comprehended with the help of binary opposition, for example, the perceived binary dichotomy between civilized\savage has perpetuated and legitimized Western power structures favoring "civilized" white men. (www.englishbiz.co.uk).

Cultural representation, or the representation of the colonizers in relation to the colonized, also referred to as the Other, is one of the main aspects in the field of postcolonial theory (Said, 2003). The play *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, by William Shakespeare takes place in Venice, a powerful city-state, which is well-known as a center of trade and banking and for its military might. This city in the play is a representation of white supremacy and hegemony. The very title of the play

employs a binary opposite "*the Moor of Venice*", representing the story of an African general in the Venetian army. Othello the dark-skinned, wild, barbaric, and powerful Moor from Africa has come to live in the urbane city of sophisticated people. The color of his skin was visibly different, he lived amongst these people yet separated from them. He shared their religion, values, and patriotism with Venice however he was an outsider to them due to his origin and history. His black face was that of an outsider no matter how brilliant a general he was, he knew what these Venetians thought of him, as not really one of them: "*Here is the man, this Moor*" (Shakespeare 1.2.74). Shakespeare presented the fact not only through this dialogue but also in the staging of this play that Othello was a black face amongst the sea of white faces, and he was always referred to as a "*The Moor*", representing his African origin, whereas all the other characters were always referred to by their names and were considered seen as independent individuals. The black color of his skin also referred to the concept of color symbolism in Elizabethan morality and society, White represents honor and innocence whereas black is wickedness and guilt. Brabantio in Act 1, Scene 3 called his daughter innocent, naïve and pure,

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while using words like devil and moor for Othello.

Othello being called black and an outsider by different characters was not only a reference to his face but also highlighted the Otherness. The colonized people had been always stigmatized as Others who were barbarians, savages, or people of color by the dominant natives of colonized countries. The Other may be defined as a depiction of the group of people who lack identity, purity, knowledge, self-esteem, and objectivity. The relation between colonizers and the colonized shows the binary opposition of Self and Other respectively.

This paper conducts a deep analysis of the text by doing a qualitative study of it, to figure out and highlight the aspects which proves the play as contemporary writing of a post-colonial world.

Literature Review

Shakespeare and Modern Culture is a book by Marjorie Garber, written in 2008, in which she has discussed all the aspects that relate Shakespeare to modernity. As she says “*It is one of the fascinating effects of Shakespeare's play that they have always seemed to coincide with the times in which they are read,*

published, produced and discussed” (Garber, 2008). Shakespeare has been a prominent figure in the history of English Literature and is still widely read, discussed, and appreciated. Shakespeare's ideas that are considered ‘natural or true’ are the ideas about human nature, human character, individuality, selfhood, etc. are all existing facts prevalent to the present world. Shakespeare has been recognized by the people of every field whether literature, psychology, politics, or sociology. The characters of Shakespeare have been influenced so much that they are still the best subject for case studies as well.

Not just the modern world, Shakespeare has an influencing power for all ages and times. Jane Austen, in one of her novels, praises Shakespeare and his talent, where one character from the novel says, “*Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how*”. His companion onto this responds and says, “*No doubt one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree*”, he furthermore says “*from one's earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody; they are in half the books we open and we all talk about Shakespeare, use his similes and describe with his description*”. In view of these bookish references, it can be said that

“Shakespeare was the author of their common language, the poet and playwright who inspired and shaped their thoughts” (Garber, 2008).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 1850 made his remarks on Shakespeare and said, *“It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now. Now literature, philosophy, and thoughts are shakespeareized”*. Emerson furthermore clarified his views on Shakespeare and said, *“He wrote the text of modern life”*. Othello is a play of modern times as well, as the themes portrayed in the play are still the common practices of every society. The mid sets of the characters of Othello are still according to the existing beliefs of people. (Garber, 2008).

In the article, *Postcolonial Othering in Three Plays by Shakespeare: Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, The Tempest* by Filozofski, Fakultet u Zagrebu, the authors have read the plays of Shakespeare with reference to certain stereotypes about the Other. Each play has been analyzed from the perspective of postcolonial criticism mainly by exploration through speech, race, religion, and gender. The first play discussed in the paper, Othello, is viewed in terms of early modern

European anxieties about race and religion, focusing on the stereotype of a dark foreign man and its perceptions among Shakespeare's contemporary audience. (Filozofski and Zagrebu).

Similarly, another article titled *Post Colonial Shakespeare Revisited* by Jyotsna G. Singh and Gitanjali G Shahani, again chosen to look at Shakespeare texts, exploring the valencies of terms as ‘early colonial’ and ‘proto-colonial’ and their implications for Shakespeare critical practice (Singh and Shahani).

It certainly is possible to read Shakespeare's plays through a postcolonial prism as his plays contain a typical representation of the colonizers, where they are most often depicted as exotic, extraordinary, intimidating, and mysterious. Othello was also considered a savage and has been referred to as the Other by Iago in the play right at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1 with Roderigo.

Analysis

Since Shakespeare's plays were written in the early 17th century, the plays themselves do not belong to post-colonial, but still, they can be read through the lens of postcolonialism. Colonialism is a process of declaring the people of a

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certain place as minorities or specifically as Others. These Others lack in all aspects of life whether social, political, cultural, religious, and mostly the identity. Colonialism in Shakespeare's work has become a topic of major interest among literary critics. There are some plays of Shakespeare that are non-white e.g., *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Merchant of Venice*. This paper discusses *Othello* through the lens of post-colonialism. Othello is a North- African Moor, who contributes to the general picture of Shakespeare of a racial other. The Caliban race of Othello is also not very well defined in the play, due to which readers may consider him a savage. The only Other mentioned in the play except for Othello himself, is the mother of Othello, whose relation is only shown in the play with reference to the handkerchief.

In the Elizabethan era, the perception of Moor was different than it is today, back then it was more comprehensive. People of Elizabethan age had a clear-cut knowledge regarding the Muslims, who were usually Turks or Arabs, for which the Ethiopians and Africans were mostly considered as Muslims as well. Othello has been mentioned as 'black' approximately fifty-six times in the

play 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.88–9), 'Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That clamberers have' (3.3.263–5), 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.289–90) and at many other places. Black implies to Negroes and other non-European races, according to the Oxford English dictionary. This demarcation leads to a complete neglect and exclusion of Othello from the civilized nations of Europe. For the people of today's world, the word black means African but for Shakespeare's audience, Black Moor can be a person walking on the streets of London, who may be an Arab.

According to Norman Sanders, Iago's derogatory comparison of Othello to a "Barbary horse"(1.1.111-112) would not be taken by any member of the Black friar's audience to be other than to an Arabian steed; and his scornful use of the term "barbarian" (1.3.343) is exactly that used by Elizabeth's courtiers to refer to Abdel Ou Ahed [the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth in 1600-1601] and his entourage. (Sanders N., 14).

Othello's image as an Other in the play was this much influencing

that every society would want to adopt him and his loyalty. Ania Lomba while commenting on the Otherness of Othello, makes a statement in her article *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* says “*Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way until he occupies his...position as its other*” (Lomba, 1989). The brutality and rapacity of colonial enterprises dominate the view of a present man, whereas back then in Shakespearean time, colonial ventures were taken positively. The major aspect of colonization that can be seen in the play is the act of domination and influence of the Venetian Civilization onto the world at a very large scale. Another reality of Venice enforcement onto Cyprus has been shown when Montono is introduced as the governor of Cyprus and Othello has to treat him with respect.

Shakespeare in the seventh century exhibited racism by his characters. Othello, who was the most respected general, took Christian faith, and rules was viewed with the eye of doubt only because his ancestry was related to Africa. The people of Venice have no disconnect between

their respect for Othello as a general and social prejudice against him as a black man. The people of Venice had double standards for him as when Barbentio, father of Desdemona, realized that his new son in law has Duke's favors, he kind of started getting lenient to him, “The sooty bosom/of such a thing as thou” in Act 1, scene 2. Shakespeare presented the true color of the prejudice of his era through his plays, especially by Othello. Despite portraying the derogator image of Othello, Shakespeare has also presented a more progressive and enlightened alternative to these racist assumptions by creating a character of African origin who confounds derogatory white attitudes by his dignity and authority in a white European world. The play opens with Roderigo asking Iago: “*Thou told'st me/Thou didst hold him in thy hate*”, to this he replies, “*Despise me/If I do not. Three great ones of the city/ (In personal suit to make me his lieutenant)/ Off-capped to him, and by the faith of man/I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.*” (Shakespeare 1.1.6-12)

Othello's tragedy has been caused by the hatred of a white man. Othello may have been very foolish to believe the lies of a white man, but as

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a black man, he had higher proportions of love, humanity, loyalty, and conscience. Shakespeare has highlighted the themes of jealousy, hatred, self-insecurities, racism, and mixed marriages in the seventh century. Indeed, even until the mid of the twentieth century, mixed marriages were considered 'unnatural'. The concept of mixed marriage is not accepted openly by people, even after so many centuries have passed. Othello is a play, written in such a way that the world of the play blends with the world of the audience, regardless of the time it is read. Othello contains social politics by mentioning Othello as 'thick lips', 'black man', and Desdemona's purity as 'white innocence'.

Another important aspect is domestic violence due to the insecurities of the man of the house. Desdemona was beaten and later killed out of rage by her husband, based on doubt and mistrust. The play has referred to their union as an act of evil magic and conjuring rather than love from the very beginning. When Brabantio finds that Desdemona isn't in the room he questions if it is possibly due to magic that she has been led astray, "*Is there not charms/By which the property of youth and maidhood may be abused?*"

(Shakespeare 1.1.171-173). He also blames Othello of being a devil and doing black magic on her daughter.

*Damned as thou art, thou
hast enchanted her!*

*For I'll 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 curlèd darlings
of our nation,*

*Would ever have, t' incur a
general mock,*

*Run from her guardage to
the sooty bosom*

*Of such a thing as thou—to
fear, not to delight*

*Judge me the world if 'tis
not gross in sense*

*That thou hast practiced on
her with foul charms,*

*Abused her delicate youth
with drugs or minerals*

That weakens motion.

(Shakespeare 1.2.66-78)

Later it is Brabantio, the very father of Desdemona who plants the seed of doubt in Othello's mind. Othello is a moor, once a slave that bought his freedom and made his way

to a power position by struggle and hard work. Brabantio once liked him and listened to his adventures with amusement and hosted dinners for him but now that he has become his son in law, his black skin has marked all his goodness and achievements. He just could stand the fact that his daughter would betray his trust and leave him for the love of a black moor. He intimidates Othello not to trust Desdemona, as their union is absolutely unusual, as a beautiful white lady falling in love with a black, thick-lipped moor was unnatural. Brabantio states: *"Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee"* (Shakespeare 1.2.288-289). Though Othello had a firm belief in his love and union with Desdemona yet this cautioning was embedded deep in him and never left his mind.

Othello is intelligent and confident in military matters but when it comes to the prospect of managing love and marriage, Othello's naivety weakens his self-confidence. Iago discovers that he can easily drive Othello to jealousy and to think that Desdemona loves another man because Othello already feels that her love for him is too good to be true. Othello also perceives Cassio is a man most Venetian women in Desdemona's

position would like to marry, and, therefore, he feels that Desdemona would easily turn to him if she ever ceased to love her husband. Othello is technically waiting for this dream to come to an end and for Desdemona to decide that she has made a mistake by marrying him. Othello's insecurities are so pronounced that only a few hints and innuendo from Iago tear away the confident exterior and expose his fears, desires, and tendency to violence. Othello is unable to deal with uncertainty; it drives him to insanity. Therefore, when he makes a decision, like a true military man, he is decisive in his actions. Iago has only to push Othello to the belief that he has been betrayed, and Othello does the rest, judging, condemning, and executing Desdemona.

It is important to note that the character of Iago is driving the plot of the novel, he is practically writing the narrative for this black moor, even though he is the most despised and immoral character himself. The characters of the play might not see his depravity but the audience isn't blind to his corruption and wickedness. He is full of hatred for this outsider, the Other amongst Us and We. Iago is repeatedly referred to as "good Iago" or "honest Iago", while Othello is usually identified simply as

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"the Moor". Iago is well aware of the true nature of public perceptions: "*Reputation is an idle and most false/imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving*" (Shakespeare 2.3.257-8). Iago is motivated by his hatred and jealousy but he is able to conceal it through his ruthlessly cool composure. Iago is in charge of both Othello and the audience, which truly makes him a colonizer. The relationship between Iago and Othello is just the way the colonial subject is subordinate to the colonizer. He uses Othello's unstable position and internalized otherness to manipulate him, and similarly, uses the helplessness and lack of insight to subdue the audience. The readers also trust Iago because there is no other option but to perceive the world of the play through his eyes, and by accepting his reasoning one also accepts his language and perpetuates the power he has over his subjects.

The most powerful tool Iago possesses is his credibility, this gives him an authority over other characters. Alan Sinfield explains in an essay *Cultural Materialism, Othello, and the Politics of Plausibility* (30-32), where the characters in *Othello* are examined with reference to the plausibility. According to Sinfield Iago's plausibility branches out from the fact

that he echoes the existing ideological patterns of Venetian culture. Sinfield claims that the most powerful scriptor in the play *Othello* is Venice, represented through the character of Iago, and the state actually has the final word after Othello's death.

The Otherness wasn't only external but internal as well. In *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (91-92), Loomba explained that ideologies aren't entirely external, in the case of *Othello*. Although he was accepted into Venetian society on account of his military skills, and his white faith and beliefs yet the difference is not only visible, on account of his dark skin, but is also threatening on account of his connection to the Turks, who were considered a serious threat to the state. Othello is practically locked in his ambiguous position by his own self-estrangement. Once he internalizes the Venetian ideologies of gender and race, he obediently stepped into the role of Other. As a military general, he earned the respect and admiration of the Venetians however hybridity and dependence of his character is prominent here as a true colonial subject, he speaks in the voice of his master which the state. Hence it can be said that Othello is one such man 'often described as "other", for he is

marginalized from white colonial society due to the dark color of his skin (Grade saver, 2018).

Conclusions

When analyzed under the lens of post-colonial theory, Shakespeare's *Othello* is undoubtedly an argumentative and highly charged Jacobean play, *Othello*, a black general, perpetuates the racist attitudes prevalent in 16th century Europe to date. For a modern-day audience, it is impossible to ignore the stark contrast between the racial ideals Shakespeare naturalizes and the democratic intentions of today's society. The play's setting, colonial Venice, and the unjustified perceptions of the other characters regarding *Othello* are obvious examples of racial stereotyping.

This paper analyses *Othello*, by focusing on the postcolonial ideologies of race and collective anxieties that arose from contacts with outsiders. The character of *Othello*, who is perceived as the jealous husband archetype, holds a unique position in Venetian society as someone who is both an insider; a highly regarded military leader as well as an outsider a Moor. The central theme of the play is love; however, the play also exposes the social anxieties

caused by the marriage of a white woman and a black man. The language of the play also emphasizes the contrast between the black *Othello* and the white *Desdemona*. The play revealed the presence of certain racist and misogynist ideologies prevalent in the Venetian society. It is a problem rooted in the history of colonialism and its never-ending influence. The cultural imperialism is still alive today, however, the definition of colonialism has not only changed but evolved over time, the power structures have essentially remained unchanged. Furthermore, it would be wrong to say that Shakespeare is a strong supporter of European cultural heritage, and at the same time, he is an exceptional defender of human rights, siding and presenting the case of the downtrodden and marginalized characters. The most remarkable fact about Shakespeare is that his works allow the readers to observe the echoes of our own times, and how the socio-cultural perspective continues to evolve.

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