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## Shakespeare's *Othello*: Pro Colonial? Anti-Colonial?

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### **Abstract:**

*Othello, the Moor of Venice* finds a place among Shakespeare's four sublime tragedies. Othello, however, is different from the other Shakespearean tragic heroes in being a man of colour. Also, he has risen to his present station through constant efforts and labours proving his mettle at every point. He is not a prince like Hamlet, he is not a king like Lear and, he is not a nobleman like Macbeth. He is a warrior and it is this status we find him in when the play opens. Why has Shakespeare chosen a Moor for a hero? Couldn't Othello have been a white man? Is it his position as a black man in a white society which makes all the difference? What is Shakespeare trying to say by bestowing upon the 'blackamoor' qualities traditionally attached with the fair races? Why is he inverting the conventional associations of colour prevalent in the contemporary society? The paper is an attempt to answer all these questions.

### **Shakespeare's *Othello*: Pro colonial? Anti-colonial?**

*Othello, the Moor of Venice* finds a place among Shakespeare's four sublime tragedies. Othello however, is different from the other Shakespearean tragic heroes in being a man of colour. Also, he has risen to his present station through constant efforts and labours proving his mettle at every point. He is not a prince like Hamlet, he is not a king like Lear and, he is not a nobleman like Macbeth. He is a warrior and it is this status we find him in when the play opens. Why has Shakespeare chosen a Moor for a hero? Couldn't Othello have been a white man? Is it his position as a black man in a white society which makes all the difference? What is Shakespeare trying to say by bestowing upon the 'blackamoor' qualities traditionally attached with the fair races? Why is he inverting the conventional associations of colour prevalent in the contemporary society?

Shakespeare, a product of the renaissance at its peak had his take on everything that was seething around him. As an artist (and a discerning one at that), it was his agenda to portray in his works the various, often conflicting; viewpoints then current among the different segments of the society. Shakespeare took advantage of the Moor of Venice to expose the wrongful earmarking of character according to the colour of the skin. That the bard was basically a humanist is evident from his choice of Othello - a blackamoor, as the protagonist. The play also exposes the racial prejudices of the white and their opportunist nature. It demonstrates how the 'one' trait - his colour - becomes a setback for Othello. Shakespeare is not proving the supremacy of the Janus-faced white society here but exposing how under the 'white' influence of 'honest' Iago the 'black' Othello grows darker.

The origins of Othello and the black/white controversy are first seen in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, where we are faced with Aaron - the out and out evil blackamoor. However in Othello, this black/white divide comes into play. In the introduction to *Titus Andronicus*,

Jonathan Bate talks of the “later play in which Shakespeare redistributes the characteristics of Aaron, giving his racial identity to the noble but gullible Moor and his villainy to the demi-devil with a black heart in a white skin. Most productions emphasize the embryonic Iago in Aaron, while Aldridge’s serves to remind us that there is an embryonic Othello in Him.” (Bate 58)

The tragedy of Othello comes into being not because he is excessively gullible or jealous in love but because he is an outsider. He is a black man in a white world where all his deeds will be judged on the skin- deep blackness in him.

In the beginning of the play, we get acquainted with the hatred which Iago, who may be taken to be a representative of a larger section of the Elizabethan society, harbors for Othello. His speeches are heavily laden with cruel racial insults throughout. Iago, who poses to be the honest and true friend of Othello, seems hell bent upon destroying him. Venting his hatred against his General, he reveals his selfish and cynical character. His intensions become clearer to the audience when he goes to Brabantio and informs him on Othello and Desdemona. “Though *Othello* is constructed around the remorseless desire of the ensign Iago to destroy his General, the Moor, Shakespeare refused to provide the villain with a clear and convincing explanation for his behaviour.”(Robinson 90) As the play advances; the ambiguity, fogginess and confusion gradually evaporate. Through Iago’s soliloquies, the logic and the explanation which seemed to elude us throughout, appears in the form of Iago’s hatred for the colour that Othello’s skin had. It has often been argued that Iago’s hatred for Othello springs from his suspicion that Othello has slept with Emilia. He says:

Now I do love her too,/ Not out of absolute lust.../But partly led to diet my revenge,/ For that I do suspect the lusty Moor/ Hath leaped into my seat – the thought whereof/ Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards,/ And nothing can or shall content my soul/ Till I am evened with him, wife for wife:/ Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor/ At least into a jealousy so strong/ That judgement cannot cure.(2.1.285-96)

Cassio is chosen as the instrument of revenge because he fears him with his ‘nightcap’ too. His distrust of his wife is the fountainhead of his cynicism which he showers the world with. However, the actual source of his hatred seems to lie somewhere else. Iago did not have any problem with Othello as a ferocious fighter against their enemy. His skills and efficiency in warfare is great. But the same attributes of his character become an indication of barbarism and savagery when he is elevated to a status higher than Iago and the whites. Eventually, when Othello marries Desdemona and exposes a so called elite society to the danger of miscegenation, considered to be one of the most heinous acts by whites, people like Iago take to their holy mission of stopping this sacrilege. Iago voices this fear of the elite society when he tells Brabantio that “you’ll have your nephews neigh to you” (1.1.108-9) and Desdemona and “Moor are making the beast with two backs.”(1.1.112-13)

Marching forth on this trail of destruction, Iago makes use of the faith and trust that Othello and other characters repose in him. He does not let a black, who according to him “had no understanding of Christ or his Gospel” (Coyle 95), dream of an equal and respectable space in his society. Thus the tragic end that Othello eventually meets is not because of any defect or flaw in his character that could be attributed to his racial status. His flaw was entirely human: not to be able to see through Iago’s cruel intentions. Moreover it was the result of Iago’s manipulative genius, racial malice and superior cunning against which the simple nature of Othello stood no chance. No race and colour can be called immune to the “green-eyed monster” (3.3.168) of jealousy.

Some critics accuse Othello, being excessively gullible, responsible for his downfall, but they often neglect the point that Othello was not the only one to fall prey to the treachery of Iago. Iago manipulated other unsuspecting characters too. Othello's failure is the effect of inequality in the white world which makes a black feel inferior: lacking in virtue and other civilized and human traits. In his struggle towards a just and equal status he finds prejudice mixed with racial hatred, and unintentionally starts internalizing various racist attitudes bred by the whites. At this point Othello becomes the victim of Iago's devilish machinations and starts judging his worth by the measures of the white society. Slowly and effectively, Iago undermines the integrity of Othello and eventually leads him on to Desdemona's murder and his pathetic end. Some critics, who may be called racist, consider the act to be a proof of what they call the black man's "innate barbarism". But the barbarism here has been grafted onto Othello by Iago who peddles every situation to his benefit. Voicing a somewhat similar sentiment towards the racial divide, Tony Morrison says:

It wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. (Bouson 159)

Through these characters, Shakespeare seems to have attempted an inversion of the stereotypical associations of the white and the black colour and protest against these tendencies. Speaking of Shakespeare's protest against racism and colour prejudice, some critics opine that during and before the Elizabethan period, there existed nothing which maybe called racism. But we find ample evidence to showcase the prejudice prevalent among the members of the society against foreigners, who mainly comprised of blacks and slaves. They were not treated as equals and were considered uncivilized. Long before Elizabethan age, slaves were treated like animals. The slave tradition was in vogue even during the times of Aristotle. The Queen, "highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which as she is informed are crept into this realm... who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people... most of them are infidels... the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of her majesty's dominions"(Coyle 95), was just as partial as Aristotle who said: "a slave is a sort of living piece of property ...their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, ... It is better for them to be ruled thus...The use made of slaves hardly differs at all from that of tame animals, they both help with their bodies to supply our essential needs".(Robinson 35)

When Iago compares Othello to 'an old black ram' and 'a Barbary horse', he is exhibiting the traditional notions of inferiority of other races in comparison to the English blood. Both Iago and Roderigo in their scornful speeches subscribe to notions shared by a majority of the contemporary society. Shakespeare on the contrary does not seem to be following any of these prejudiced traditions of hatred and subjugation. In his portrayal of the character of Othello, his argument seems to be embedded in the assumption that "the rule of a master over slave is contrary to nature, and that the distinction between master and slave exists only by law...and, being an interference with nature, is thus unjust."(Robinson 34)

Therefore when he makes Iago call Othello unjust and unnatural, he in fact unveils the unjust and immoral designs of the white man in claiming mastery over another fellow human. Iago trespasses every limit of humanity and morality in his insatiable pursuit to destroy a supposedly alien and unworthy intruder.

The racist sentiment, which is quite erroneously by some critics judged as a reflection of the mindset of the dramatist, is evident in the speeches by Iago and some other villainous characters in the play. This malice emanates from Iago and eventually passes on to others. Iago

was hoping for the post of Othello's lieutenant. He even had three influential Venetians plead his case to Othello. However Othello "loving his own pride and purposes" evaded them with "a bombast circumstance, / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war" (1.1.11-13) and non-suited his mediators. Quite ironically, Iago complains soon after that "'tis the curse of service: / preferment goes by letter and affection/ And not by old gradation, where each second/ Stood heir to th' first." (1.1.32-35) Iago claims that Cassio's soldiership is "Mere prattle without practice" (1.1.23-24). Quite ironically he turns this around when Othello's merit is called to question. Othello was made a General and praised highly for his services to Venice. But Iago could not accept that a black controlled his destiny. His sense of hatred and loss reached its culmination and he decided to tell upon Othello and Desdemona. He feels that he has been robbed of his promotion by Othello and echoes his feelings in his statement to Brabantio "you're robbed" (1.1.83). Brabantio's daughter had married without his permission and that too a black. The import of the colour of his son-in-law becomes clearer when he says that "an old black ram is tugging your white ewe" (1.1.85-6). He further makes a plea to the 'snorting citizens', to wake up 'or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.' (1.1.87-8) Shakespeare keeps us aware of the evil intentions of Iago from the very beginning of the play. Throughout the play, he reeks of cynical and inhuman tendencies. He himself exposes his dualities and wickedness when he says: Not I for love and duty/ But seeming so, for my peculiar end.../ I am not what I am. (1.1.56-62)

He accuses both his rival as well as the system for his own failure in attaining a position which he thinks Othello denied him. His cunning and devilish character takes an uglier form when he advances his envy to Cassio, whom he calls a Florentine. Also, when he talks about society as predatory and ready to peck at, he is in fact expressing his intentions of grabbing unjust benefits as a predator. It is important to note here that Iago's discontent against society and other characters is not induced by some unjust treatment or prejudice against him. It results from his failure and lack of virtues. Even then, he always blames others for this. Black men were traditionally accused for their lack of emotions such as love and fidelity. Their relations were considered to be governed by lust. Here is Iago, calling love 'merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will' (1.3.332-3), shattering the traditional associations. We find a complete absence of the scruples and moral superiority when he tortures Othello and causes him utter mental anguish by his repeated suggestions of the non-existent infidelity of Desdemona. Some critics have called the cunningness of Iago as 'skill' and 'improvisation' and accused Othello of being excessively simple. Yet, "in its fine scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying Iago's use of colour prejudice, and in its rejection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play, as it always has done, continues to oppose racism." (Robinson 93)

The malice and hatred that Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio exhibit towards Othello is counter- balanced by other characters who do not entertain this tradition of prejudice. Though their speeches again are a confirmation of this biased attitude of people belonging to the time, they also confirm the truth that there were many white people who were not really comfortable with the division of humanity on the basis of colour and race. The first incident in the play - the marriage of Desdemona goes against this division. Going against what her tradition and education dictate her, she considers the colour of her husband a sign of virtue and valor. Therefore when Emilia asks her about the General being jealous, she confirms the absence of such an emotion in him. She tells Emilia:

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born Drew all such humors from him.

Not just Desdemona, in love with Othello, held such notions regarding Othello. The Duke too says to Brabantio:

“If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.”(1.3.287-88)

He also says: “I think that this tale would win my daughter too”. (1.3.170)

The entire Venetian court on coming to know about the marriage ignores their General's colour and prefers his merits. It is generally said that Venetian court does not go against the Moor because of the crisis facing Venice. It cannot, however, be ignored that Othello has steadily risen to his present position long before the Turk invasion. The Venetian court and other characters seem to be rejecting the notions of any inherent inferiority and defects of a lesser race in Othello. Shakespeare by making a black the hero of his tragedy seems to be joining this protest against subjugation. There appears an effort on the part of the dramatist to remove all the traditional propaganda regarding colour and race that was poisoning his society.

At the end of the play, when Othello smothers Desdemona, all our efforts to separate him from the accusations of an inherent badness of his race seem to fail. We have a fresh resurgence of racial criticism and associations which emphasize the connection between this act of impulsive killing with his race and colour. At a closer look, all these accusations seem superficial because the circumstances which bring Othello hither simply cannot be ignored. Othello's suspicion of Desdemona's interaction with Cassio is also grounded in Brabantio's parting speech: Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father and may thee. (1.3.290-1). He is painfully aware that he is black and Desdemona is beautiful. He has doubts regarding her constancy because deep inside he too feels that she has cheated on him because he is black, “And has not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have”(3.3.266-7) or because he has “declined/ Into the vale of years.”(3.3.267-8) Iago fuels his suspicion by picking up from where Brabantio left. He says “I know our country's disposition well: / In Venice they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands.”(3.3.203-5) He adds later “She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks, / She loved them most” (3.3.208-10). He sets the handkerchief trap for Othello, Desdemona and Cassio after careful planning; exploiting the emotions of his wife Emilia, Desdemona and Cassio on one hand while subtly dropping hints for Othello on the other.

The last frenzied act of Othello, which he commits in an externally induced state of mind, does not in any way establish in him a streak of savagery and barbarism which other so called civilized and elite people without colour lack. If this tragic murder still confirms something, it is the pathetic consequence of human limitations. The tragedy of Othello has always been referred to as the tragedy of human error, not exclusive to any particular race. Shakespeare here seems to be emphasizing the vulnerability of humanity to concealed treachery and malice.

Othello may at times seem to be too gullible because the audience has been made a confidant to every treacherous act of Iago from the very beginning. Iago, the master puppeteer, ends up maneuvering not only Othello but Desdemona, Cassio, Brabantio, Roderigo, and Emilia to suit his plan. The only flaw in all these characters may be a lack of a superhuman insight into Iago's devilry. Iago is the catalyst which precipitates racial discrimination through his interaction with the various characters in the play. Through his portrayal of Iago, “Shakespeare demonstrates that in an imperfect world human judgment can never penetrate beyond the opacity of deliberately deceptive discourse”.(Orkin 188) That Othello is a man of colour is only

incidental. Any man trapped in a similar situation, worked upon by someone in a similar manner will end up as our protagonist, irrespective of the colour of his skin.

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