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“Haply for I am black”: Orientalist Stereotyping in *Othello*

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1622) is considered a tragedy with several distinctive features, such as a tragedy of passion, intrigue and sexual jealousy. To conventional scholars, *Othello*, unlike *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, appears to be ‘ugly and idiotic’ and lacking in self-control and mental balance. Other critics also view that he is jealous by nature, while others feel that Iago makes him jealous. This paper, however, attempts to read the characterization of *Othello* as the Orientalist stereotyping of the Other (the Oriental). Notwithstanding, he is an established public figure as a General who has already displayed immense devotion to duty and responsibility.

Keywords: Orientalism, Oriental, Occident, *Othello*, Race.

I

At the most superficial lexical level, Orientalism is an extension of the word ‘Orient’. It, however, becomes complex connotations when it is seen as a well-constructed political doctrine and cultural practice deployed against the Oriental by the Occident. Edward Said contends that Orientalism is a discourse based on a transcendental dichotomy between the West and the Orient. Defining Orientalism proves to be complex and contradictory. Nevertheless, it is an academic tradition of study, teaching and writing about the Orient; it is a “style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinctions made between the Orient and the Occident” (Kennedy 21). According to Said, the choice of “Oriental” was canonical: it had been employed by Chaucer and Manderville, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron. It designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, and culturally (31). He states that one could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood.

Conventional critics, without taking into consideration the discourse of Orientalism, read *Othello* as a tragedy with several distinctive features, such as a tragedy of passion, intrigue and

sexual jealousy. Bradley views that “... of all Shakespearean tragedies, *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most sensible” (143). To some critics, *Othello* appears to be “ugly and idiotic” unlike *Macbeth* and *Lear*, and he is seen as lacking in self-control and mental balance. He is also depicted as a person who loves emotion for its own sake. Scholars find *Othello* causing his death either because of his passion-wrought nature and simplicity of character. Other critics also view that he is jealous by nature, while others feel that Iago makes him jealous. The degradation of *Othello* seems to be due to an external agent, the manipulative, cunning Iago. However, if *Othello* is considered in the context of early Renaissance about others (Moor) or in the context of Victorian celebrations of a civilizing mission promised on the ‘barbarism’ of non-European, *Othello*’s race served as a marker for racial oppression and a rallying cry for resistance to disapprove of miscegenation or racial mixing (Chatterjee and G.Singh 67). This paper aims to argue that race is a critical factor in the play, *Othello*.

II

Webster’s *Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913) states that a Moor is any individual of the swarthy races of Africa or Asia. In early modern England, Moor became almost an umbrella term for non-Europeans (Loomba 106). In the sixteenth century, writers called a dark North African a moor or a blackmoor or a black or a Moor (Bradley 162). In the play, *Othello* is a Moorish soldier of fortune of the Venetian Senate. He is often represented as having “thick lips”, “sooty bosom” and animal lust. Brabantio cannot fathom how his daughter can elope with *Othello*. Their union turns out a tragedy that seems to give a warning against interracial love, in particular, the union of black and white. He is an established public figure who has displayed immense fortitude and devotion to duty even in the face of great adversity. He has won the leadership in the white society. He is employed by the Venetian Republic as a professional soldier, and a mercenary and has become its most reliable and famous general. The Venetian Senate gives him his due by addressing him “All in all sufficient” in the army of the State. He also belongs to a royal family: “From men of royal siege” (I.II.22). He is worthy of *Desdemona* in every way. He is now happy in marrying her whom he loves with all his soul. Nevertheless, *Desdemona*’s father cannot fathom his daughter marrying *Othello*. He is being sought to be punished. Iago advises him to hide, but *Othello*, being a self-respectful and dignified soldier, considers that it is improper for him to hide away. He considers that he must present himself in a manner befitting his rank and position to tell the Senate how he sincerely loves her: “I must be found. My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly” (1.11.30-32). Being charmed by the misfortune, adventure, and valour of *Othello*, *Desdemona* tells the Senate that she loves the Moor and she loves to live with her: “That I did love the moor

to live with him” (I.II.250). It is indeed a marriage of two true minds in stark contrast to the sterile and bickering of Iago’s marriage to Emile and the possessiveness of Bianca’s relationship with Cassio in the play.

The story leading to the marriage of Othello and Desdemona is an adventure straight out of a ‘romance’, a wandering knight meeting a lady on his quest. It is the knight’s feats that win the lady’s love. However, race is particularly crucial in *Othello*. Othello’s race is represented to employ a negative connotation to his character and add a visual negative effect to complement his destructive actions. His race and the racism of other characters in the play lead to the disapproval of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Racism believes in the ideology that humanity consists of well-defined races. All races are different and some are superior, and the others inferior. It also believes that the superior races should rule over the inferior ones. Blacks are generally stereotyped as more ‘physical’, verified by their ability to work hard and long in the heat; therefore more ‘potent’. Since most White men saw black women as lustful, they also thought Black men were such. This myth of Black’s sexuality grew and Black men are seen as “potential rapists” of white women (Trost 65).

On learning that Othello has eloped with Desdemona, even before confirming the news and searching for her in his house, Brabantio reflects that “This accident is not unlike my dream/Belief of it oppresses me already” (I.I.143-4). He cannot fathom how Desdemona, “a maid so tender, fair, and happy”, can love and run “to the sooty bosom/Of such a thing as [Othello] (I.II.65, 69-70). To him, their union is so preposterous and “against all rules of nature” that the only logical explanation is that there is magic involved. It also implies that the elopement happened due to Othello’s perceived lusty nature. It is evident from the play that Othello is born of a noble background, and he has the respect of the State. In addition, Brabantio has an affinity for Othello as he explains, “[he] loved [Othello]; oft invited [him];/Still questioned[him] the story of [his] life” (I.II.128-129). There is no reason for Brabantio to disapprove of Desdemona’s union with Othello. However, he begins to suspect that Desdemona has fallen “to the gross clasps of a lascivious moor” (I.I.127). Though he has enjoyed the company of Othello, he still finds the thought of his daughter with a black man extremely repulsive. To him, Desdemona’s love for Othello is nothing but a sort of defective and imperfect judgment on her part. He thinks that it is against nature for Desdemona to fall in love with Othello: “...judgement maimed and most imperfect” (I.II.99). He also assumes that she must have been corrupted by sorcery and drugs: “...with foul charms/Abus’d her delicate youth with drugs or minerals” (I.II.73-74). Despite Othello’s recommendable services, Brabantio declares him to be a heathen dealer in witchcraft and aphrodisiacs. The senators’ class prejudice and

religious intolerance are also revealed in their horrified fear that if such unions are permitted, “Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesman be” (I.II.99). The whole Venetian society believes that a decent relationship with a Moor and a white Venetian girl is ‘unnatural’.

Such Venetian’s prejudice against Othello might have been formed due to the myth that the African blackness was attributed to God’s curse on Ham and his descendants, who were then considered to be ‘less developed mentally’. The notion of Africans as minors became widespread among the Europeans. They even doubted whether they had souls or minds capable of adult growth. A theory came to be fashionable that mental growth in Africans ceased early and that childhood was never left behind (Nandy 15). According to Ania Loomba, the scientific theories on race are diverse and not always in agreement with one another. The idea of biologically constituted races intensified the contradiction between racial differences and the biblical notion of a unitary human species. Rather than challenging the negative stereotypes associated with races, the scientific theories extend and ossify the fixed notions on races by attributing racial characteristics to biological differences such as skull and brain sizes, facial angles and genes. At the same time, they believe that social, political, economic and religious factors also attribute to the overall development of a race or individual. The potential of social factors in changing a race’s characteristics compelled the Europeans to pursue the project “The Whiteman’s Burdens”. However, this ‘burden’ simply facilitated the capitalization of global expansion, and racism was the conduit through which the labour of colonized people was appropriated (124). In the context of the play, even though Othello has also adopted the ‘cultural forms’ including the Christian faiths and practices, he is still black and foreign, and his earned position has been threatened by all sections of Venetian society. This shows that race is a crucial factor in the play.

Othello has adopted the Christian faith and holds it with unaffected sincerity. He is “of a constant, loving, noble nature” (III.I.301). When Brabantio charges him of wining his daughter with magic and drugs, he maintains his impulses. He considers the drunken soldiers’ brawl unethical Christian values: “For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl” (II.III.174). Due to his power, royal lineage and Christian faith, he holds a responsible position in Venetian society. Colour, however, is the area where there has been no significant change. Before the Black people adopted the Christian faith, they were thought of as heathens. Even after most of them have accepted the Christian faith, they are still considered “Other” primarily due to their skin colour. To the Whites, it appears there are “White-Christians” and then there are “Black-Christians” (Trost 68). The Whites have not erased the myth of race that Blacks were the descendants of Ham in the Genesis story, punished for sexual excess by their blackness. The

stereotypes associated with Blacks as the epitome of sin, filth, ugliness, evil, and the Devil have not been erased, though they have accepted the Christian faith. On learning the love union of Othello and Desdemona, Brabantio immediately regarded him as a heathen dealer in witchcraft and aphrodisiacs. The senator's racial prejudice is revealed in his horrified fear that if such unions are permitted, "Bond-slaves and pagans shall be our stateman be". Thus, Othello is still considered a pagan and bonded labour because of his colour.

Hostility and racial slurs are made to Othello by almost all characters, in particular Iago and Roderigo, in the play. Othello is referred to by his name only seventeen times, while he is referred to as "the Moor" fifty-eight times. This indicates that Othello is constantly being degraded and set up as an evil outsider in the play. He is being judged by his skin colour rather than the person under the skin. In the opening scenes of the play, the two soldiers, Iago and Roderigo, refer to their leader, Othello as, "thick lips" and "the devil" instead of taking his name. Though Cassio is a foreigner, a Florentine, there are no racial remarks on him. Both Othello and Desdemona consider that their marriage is the natural process of their mutual love. Iago considers that Othello is not a human being. He thinks that he is an animal: a ram, a horse, an ass, etc., and his sexual union with Desdemona will produce not children but colts. Their marriage is nothing more than a "brawl vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian and that Desdemona "will find the errors of her choice" (I.III.363-64, 359).

Othering or racial stereotyping dating back to the Greek and Roman periods has provided abiding templates for subsequent European images of barbarians and outsiders. In medieval and early modern Europe, a new identity, primarily Christian, was constructed in opposition to other communities. Laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality were associated with the non-Europeans (Loomba 147). Othello does not fit any of the stereotypes associated with the Moor as devoid of basic intelligence, involved in superstition, magic, over-sexed and barbaric. Contrary to prejudice, Othello displays a wealth of intelligence, which can be observed through his analytical and social skills as a general in the army. Rather than embodying the stereotype of the "lusty moor" (II.I.307), he is not preoccupied with sex. He desires Desdemona's company: "...not/To please the palate of [his] appetite/Nor to comply with heat" (I.III.263-265). The new couple have not yet consummated their marriage because Othello has remained focused on the war at hand instead of being preoccupied with the new life: "The purchase made, the fruits are to ensure/That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (II.III.9-10). One can question why Shakespeare does not permit sexual relations between Othello and Desdemona. Ania Loomba views that to most Europeans, "New World, Africa or Eastern peoples were widely believed

not be libidinous than Europeans but also indulge in same-sex erotic practices” (154). The non-consummation of their union might indicate that the Orient (Othello) is not interested in different sex. Except for the skin colour, Othello demonstrates the qualities of a noble Venetian. He has integrated into the Venetian society; he holds the respect of the Senate. He is “far more than black” (I.III.292).

The theatre was an essential medium of information when few people could read and access books in the early modern period. Stage representations of outsiders were instrumental in influencing public opinion about outsiders. The English people passed their time, learned about the affairs abroad, and took pleasures at home through stage representations. Ania Loomba writes that “the othering of a vast number of people and their construction as backward and inferior was crucial not only for creating images of the outside but equally essential for constructing the insider, the “self” (105). It might be unthinkable for the Elizabethan or early modern European audiences to see a Moor falling in love with a Venetian girl. To entertain and satisfy the audiences’ desires, it seems the play, *Othello* takes a new turn. Iago causes Othello to doubt his position as an integrated Venetian and puts him in the constructed ‘role’ as a Moor. Othello begins to accept the idea that he is an outsider and starts to question Desdemona’s love for him. He starts believing Iago’s views that her love for him is unnatural desires: “Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural” (III.III.229-233). In the ‘myth’ of black men’s sexuality, it is believed that black men were more sexual than white men and had larger genitals than white men. So, it is believed that “white women would be more satisfied with black men” (Trost 64). Based on this myth, Othello starts believing that Desdemona’s love for him is not true love but lust. The noble Othello disappears and the audience is left with “the Moor” with all his stereotypical traits, his racial inferiority and jealousy. He does not become over-sexed, but he becomes preoccupied with sexuality, constantly brooding over Desdemona’s sexual activity. He begins to follow the uncultured, barbaric stereotype of the Moor; he speaks irrationally and strikes his wife.

Hearing a groan from her mistress, Desdemona, Emilia is horrified to see her nearly dead. She defies Othello and harbours racist sentiments: “And you the blacker devil!” (V.II.129). Even Desdemona blames herself for her death: “Nobody; I myself, Farewell/Commend me to my kind lord: O farewell (V.II.122-123). It indicates that she has committed a crime in loving the Moor: “Since guiltiness, I know not: but yet I feel fear” (V.II.38). This shows Desdemona has finally accepted the racial stereotypes of the Moor who is considered to be a suspicious person having no faith in his with: “...confess thee freely of thy sin” (V.II.53) says Othello to Desdemona. She thinks Othello has finally become what he has been considered all along.

Othello becomes “the base Indian” that cannot tell the worth of a pearl. He does not think of himself as the dutiful servant of the Venetians. He is compared to “the circumcised dog” (V.II.354). In the opening acts, Othello personifies self-control, a man with a secure sense of his worth that nothing can rattle the consequent calmness of mind and manner. He has roamed the wild world and he was unmoved by its terrors. However, he is shown believing his wife is a whore and committing murders to revenge himself. He does not remain a Venetian for the entire play. The Europeanized Moor ceases to be “far more fair than black” (I.III.292) and ‘turns Turk’. Othello has an ambiguous identity in the play. In the final act of smiting himself, he recognizes that he has become the ‘Turk’. Nevertheless, he continues to project his public image as the defender of Christianity.

III

From the above, it is observed that at the beginning of the play, Othello is one of the most trustworthy and responsible members of Venetian society. In most parts of the play, his traits do not fall into the racial stereotyping of the Other (the Orient). As the play develops, he has been reduced to the typical Other who is irrational, childlike, violent, suspicious and dangerous. It can be said that traditionally, though the play is read as a tragedy of passion, intrigue and sexual jealousy, it is evident that race is crucial in it. Considering that the play was written when English mercantile and European colonial enterprises were in their infancy. Such discourse of representation of the outsider seemed inevitable to justify the supremacy of Europeans to dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient. It also suggests that Shakespeare was one of the prominent Orientalists who promoted Orientalism, a school of scholars consisting of a group of artists, mainly from Western Europe, that became popular from the Renaissance onwards. These orientalist visited the Middle East, North Africa, and the Far East and depicted what they saw or imagined, sometimes in a rather romantic and extravagant manner. By embracing politics, culture and historical contexts, the Orientalists invented the Orient as a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience. Several terms were used to express the relationship between the Orient and the West: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different: thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature and normal” (Said 40). Taking into account the representation of Othello, the Moor and the Other in Venetian society, it can be considered that the play, *Othello*, is an Orientalist discourse.

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