



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A READING OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*: A CRITIQUE OF COLOUR DISCRIMINATION

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2023  
Received in revised form  
27<sup>th</sup> October, 2023  
Accepted 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2023  
Published online 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2023

##### Key words:

Discrimination, Colour, Violation,  
Racism, Love, Jealousy, Infidelity,  
Revenge, Repentance.

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Citation: Dr. Shalini Misra. 2023. "A Reading of William Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Critique of Colour Discrimination". *International Journal of Current Research*, 15, (12), 26619-26621.

#### ABSTRACT

Discrimination is a grim reality in our society that affects all people. Racial / Colour discrimination has existed in our society for centuries. This is a serious concern and needs immediate attention. The main causes of racial / colour discrimination are: superiority, prejudice, stereotyping, jealousy etc. This is a big challenge, which, if ignored, may result in a serious threat to life. *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, one of William Shakespeare's finest creations, reflects the same theme. It would not be just to say that this was a reflection of his personal experience, but at the same time we cannot deny the fact that it raised the burning issue of racial or colour discrimination in his time and challenged civil, cultural, political and social rights. Discrimination on the grounds of caste, colour, race, religion, sex etc. is a violation of the right to equality. The major themes in *Othello* include racism, love, jealousy, infidelity, revenge, repentance etc. *Othello* provoked many reactions because of the issue of race, colour and anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. This play has shaken the faith of the readers in basic human values as it proved that 'Black' is associated with 'Evil and Sin'. Othello, the most dignified character in the play, was a victim of racism and his brutality was revealed when he killed his innocent wife Desdemona. The objective of the present paper is to examine how a legendary writer such as William Shakespeare dramatizes colour discrimination, a very sensitive issue, which is widely prevalent in our society. In the play, Othello's own weakness (inferiority complex) had been exploited by Iago and Roderigo. Othello, a competent and experienced soldier, fell victim to a political conspiracy which resulted in his downfall.

## INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare (23 April 1564- 23 April 1616) was a playwright, poet and actor of exceptional brilliance. With his deeper understanding of human life and keen insight into human affairs, he could not only observe the problems and issues of the society but also analyse with deep penetration the effective means to establish a better way of life. Racial / Colour discrimination is one of the main themes in *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, one the finest creations of William Shakespeare. It refers to treating someone as different from others on the basis of colour, shade or texture of his / her skin. This is unlawful and immoral. Colourism has existed in our society for centuries. Some people may look different but how other people judge them, forms the basis of racial / colour discrimination. This may result in low self- confidence and low self- esteem of the people who are discriminated because of their colour and complexion. In one of William Shakespeare's renowned plays, the protagonist remarks:

*Ham.* There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will,-  
*Hor.* That is most certain. (*Hamlet* 5.2.10-12)

This is very true that fate is the final thing. Whatever is to happen, will happen and in this very fact, lies the human beings' greatest defeat. Our fate is ultimately governed by a supreme power, regardless of our efforts to shape our ends. This is the peculiarity of *Othello*. Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello* is the most thrilling and most horrible. *Othello* has a very sensational opening. Othello, a noble moor in the service of the Venetian State has a love affair with Desdemona, the daughter of a senator and this culminates in an elopement. Iago, Othello's ancient tells this alarming news to Desdemona's father:

Iago. Zounds, sir you're robb'd; for shame,  
put on your gown;  
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul;  
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe. (*Othello* 1.1.86-89)

Since the beginning, we find numerous instances of colour discrimination in the play. Othello, a brave and highly competent soldier, has been referred to as "black ram" (1.1.88). Brabantio literally loses self- control and blames Othello having played magic spell on his daughter. He maintains the conviction that his daughter possesses a demure and introverted disposition, rendering it implausible for her to conduct herself in such a manner. He says that

such a girl could never fall in love with a person whose very sight is frightening to her. Iago further provokes Brabantio, "Your daughter and the moor are now making the beast with two backs." (1.1.115-116). This indeed, is a very humiliating remark. Othello has been called "thick-lips" (1.1.66), "a Barbary horse"(1.1.113)and "a lascivious Moor" (1.1.126) , while Desdemona has been referred to as "white ewe" (1.1.89) and "fair daughter" (1.1.122). The case is brought to the Duke and the Senate. Brabantio says to Othello:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou  
stow'd my daughter?.....  
If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,  
So opposite to marriage that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,  
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou,-to fear, not to delight. (*Othello* 1.2.62-71)

The adjectives- fair, tender and happy are in total contrast to foul thief, sooty bosom and fear. According to Brabantio, Othello, who is a black complexioned person has terrified his daughter and he can never be a source of happiness or comfort for her. He accuses Othello of using such arts as are not sanctioned by law. In his defence, Othello replies that he has lived an adventurous life for quite a long time and this has thrilled Desdemona. This was the only form of magic art he has played on Desdemona. He suggests that the best course would be to call Desdemona so that she could tell the truth to all. Brabantio stands speechless when he listens to Desdemona's witty remark:

My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty:  
To you I am bound for life and education;  
My life and education both do learn me  
How to respect you; you are lord of duty;  
I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband;  
And so much duty as my mother show'd  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge, that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord. (*Othello* 1.3.180-189)

Having failed in his purpose, Brabantio says in utter disappointment that it would be much better to adopt a child than to beget one. Now the question arises, "How can Othello be noble and wicked at the same time?" Desdemona's devotion to him has no match and definitely Othello also loves her deeply. Desdemona's choice of Othello , rejecting all worthy suitors suggests that she had a capacity to transcend the boundaries that separates race from race. But, we find that racial discrimination can't be eradicated as this is deep rooted in the society and people have been practising this since ages. It is a very common observation that most of the differences in human relationships arise out of the difference in caste, creed, colour and culture. There is a myth that if one member in a family dares to do such a thing, it not only brings disgrace to that family, but also inspires others to behave in the same manner. One startling fact here is that Desdemona who is so bold and resolute to defy the convention and challenge the society, turns so helpless and passive before Othello at the end.

Des. And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then,  
When your eyes roll so: why I should fear I know not,  
Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear. (*Othello* 5.2.36-38)

Othello's actions are guided by others. He has been presented as a weak- minded, weak- willed and extremely helpless fellow who falls victim to a conspiracy that brings his ruin. He is an easy prey for everyone whosoever wants to exploit his weakness. In fact, Iago proves himself to be a strong-willed, determined and self guided person who never yields to anyone. He is the architect of his destiny. Even when he knew that the slightest deviation/ smallest mistake in his scheme/ plot will ruin him, he doesn't hesitate. He is ready to do or die. His never- give- up attitude makes him succeed in his plans.

He is a man of will, purpose and action. He is governed mainly by two motives – ambition and authority. Othello is governed by hatred and jealousy. A C Bradley remarks in *Shakespearean Tragedy*:

Iago's plot is Iago's character in action;  
and it is built on his knowledge of Othello's  
character, and could not otherwise have  
succeeded. (179)

There is no doubt that Iago's skill was extraordinary and luck always favoured him. If Desdemona had spoken against him , if Othello had listened to Emilia or he had got the proof of Desdemona's innocence , if he had met Cassio or Roderigo and had a word with them to clarify the confusion, all Iago's wicked plans would have spoiled and ruined him completely. But, nothing such happened and he was always saved. Despite all this, we cannot hold him responsible for Othello's action that brings his downfall. Othello himself was responsible for what happened as he could not overcome his weaknesses and complexes. We find him boasting of himself which itself speaks of his low self-confidence and low self -esteem. When Iago tells him that his action could affect his relationship with Desdemona, he remarks:

I know that boasting is an honour,  
I shall promulgate-I fetch my life and being  
From men of royal siege, and my demerits  
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune  
As this that I have reach'd ... (*Othello* 1.2.20-24)

No man of honour ever speaks like this. He is not a keen observer. He does not introspect. He is a slave of emotions and mostly governed by negative emotions like hatred and jealousy. His deep love for his beloved disappears in a moment when Iago tells him that Desdemona has betrayed him by sleeping with another man. He behaves as a man of emotion, not intellect. Lodovico is amazed to see him act in the most brutal and violent manner. He remarks,

O thou Othello, that were once so good,  
Fall'n in the practice of a dammed slave,  
What shall be said to thee? (*Othello* 5.2.290-292)

Othello remarks he could address him as he likes, even if it includes the title of an honorable assassin. He believes what he did, he did not do it impulsively or ignorantly as he knew well what he was doing. He had no regrets till the time he comes to know the complete truth. There is no logical justification for his beastly act. He believed every word of Iago as he knew that he never deserved a rare beauty like Desdemona. He knew that it is very difficult for a fair beauty to love a black moor. This was the very basis of his hatred for Desdemona. Andrew Hadfield remarks in *William Shakespeare's Othello*:

Is the Moor who commits his crime, on  
Iago's urging, as noble as he- and everyone  
else- says he is? Or...is he perhaps an insecure,  
oversexed soldier, experienced in adultery-  
with Emilia, among others-who is more than  
ready, even eager, to believe wrong of his wife?  
Is he a self-deceived impostor, fooling himself  
as well as all the others? (64)

All his romance, his love, his appreciation and admiration of Desdemona vanish and he remembers only one thing that his beautiful and charming wife has committed adultery and she deserves the severest punishment i.e. "Death". His feelings of jealousy and hatred are intimately connected with the loss of the handkerchief that he gifted to Desdemona as a token of love. It is barely credible that a person of such rank and competence could ever commit such a heinous crime as murdering his beloved who never gave him a cause to distrust her. He behaves as a neurotic and while murdering Desdemona, he murders the nobility, virtue and morality. His cynic act is perhaps symbolic of his dark skin. He reaffirms the faith of the readers in the general philosophy that "Black" is associated with "Evil and Sin". Conclusively, we can say that Othello is not the tragedy of

Othello, but Desdemona who suffered from beginning to end. Her married life had never been bliss. Othello was a victim of racism and Desdemona paid a price for loving him too much that he couldn't believe it to be true reflection of her feelings. He thought that it was not real love, only infatuation that brought Desdemona closer to him. He assumed that it was not he, but his tales of bravery and courage that attracted her towards him. In fact, Othello's own weakness had been exploited by Iago to serve his evil purpose. We do not feel any pity for Othello rather we are moved by the sufferings of Desdemona who was excessively in love with the man who accuses her of adultery and calls her a "whore" (4.2.21). She is brutally murdered by the devilish "Moor". She pathetically remarks, "A guiltless death I die." (5.2.123). She suffers because of her innocence and too much goodness.

Othello suffers terribly because of his own fault of character. Finally, Othello commits suicide. He tells people to refer to him as a man who loved sincerely and passionately but not wisely.

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