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REVIEW ARTICLE

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AND INTERACTIONS: SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO AND TEACHING THE IMAGE OF THE TURK TO A NON-EUROCENTRIC MIND

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ABSTRACT

This paper is set out to explore the image of the Turk via the fundamental historical, socio-political and ethnical premises prevailing in one of the most well known pieces of English literature, Shakespeare's Othello. It is set out to examine the image of the Turk and Turkish material culture in Shakespeare's play set against a specific, controversial and often violent historical background. The dominating factor during the Renaissance and Reformation was the dichotomy of Catholic Church and Protestants. The unfolding of this "domestic" religious dichotomy, not only revealed the tensions within Christianity but also the conflicts between Christianity and what is known as Islam. It forms the "perception" on the one hand, of the catalytic Figure in Islamic history – the Prophet and in Christianity- the Savior or the Messiah Jesus Christ on the other. It is not a coincidence that the history of emotions is the motive in these simplistic perceptions. All these created images and perceptions can be delved into through a deep analysis which is the anchor while teaching a piece of English Literature to the learners who have not breathed within the philosophy of Eurocentrism.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the communal problem of "adaption" to the surrounding notions in a piece of literature that can be solved by teaching discourse analysis whose fundament can be delved into by teaching the atmosphere in which the piece of literature concerned was/is written. It is set out to examine the image of the Turk and Turkish material culture in Shakespeare's plays in perspective of "the historical back ground", Renaissance moulding the medium of the era", "rediscovery of the ancient texts" and "the history of emotions". Interrogation of the Turk's image in Shakespeare's plays requires more than the mere image inquiry of the Turk. In order to appreciate the 'essentia' of what it means to be the Turk in Renaissance period, the image of the Turk is to be interrogated with the embodiment of discourse analyses that is conflated with various historical factors.

The prominent problematic issue is the association of the enemies "Catholic Church" and "Ottomans". The former assumes the authority to prosecute the ones who are in betrayal by indulging into Protestantism, the latter functions as the Muslim enemy penetrating into the heart of the territories

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long-time owned by the Christians. While assessing the image of the Turk in Shakespeare's plays, a learner should take regard of the psychology of the Renaissance man in order to make a crystal clear and working connection between the image of the Turk and the era. These connections are like labyrinths one within the other or one leading to another. Shakespeare, as a man of Renaissance, makes manoeuvres through these labyrinths to depict the image of the Turk. The manoeuvres are the essential products that are the subjects of discourse analysis and pave the way for how to teach a piece of English Literature to a learner with non-Eurocentric mind. The period Shakespeare lived in was the era of the Empires whose militaristic prosperity and the idea of imperial power by means of land conquerance are the prominent features of the time. However, Shakespeare deciphers the images of the icy waters of the Bosphorus, the circumcision practice as a religious ritual, the Sultan's amorous excesses, the mute eunuchs of the court and the plot to put young Amurath on his father's throne that were all the indications for his greater interest in what was exotic during Renaissance period (Draper, 1956). It also puts light on Shakespeare's knowledge of the exotic and inviting Eastern worlds outside the confines of a strict and conservative Elizabethan England.

Dichotomies within a Labyrinth

The prominent factor dominating the Renaissance era and Reformation was the dichotomy of Catholic Church and

Protestants. While unfolding the religious dichotomy, the reader should take cognition of not only the tensions within Christianity but also the conflicts between the impression of Islam and its Prophet and Christianity. English Protestant texts mould the era's atmosphere whose formidable influences worth delving into the details of it. The reformation period was the period of "witchcraft" for both of the sides concerned, namely, the Catholic Church and Protestantism. Zrotestantism's basic protest was that Catholic Church is more interested in the economic gains obtained from selling the lands of the Paradise rather than the essence of the religion which makes an allusion to the materialization of the faith. Protestants also emphasized the Catholic Church's implementations to sustain and improve its economic benefits in the name of religion and its appetite to "desire the undeserved". Another significant dichotomy is between the development of science (scientific way of interpreting the world) and geographical discoveries and Catholic Church's outdated teachings and implementation, the former pushing for a change in the picture depicted by Catholic Church, the latter advocating the archaic, status-quo. The rear motives of Reformation were emphasized through its rhetoric pointing out the Catholic Church's indulgence in extremely material and carnal implementations to "sell the religion" and "to seduce people". It is not a coincidence that in the mind of the white-Christian Renaissance man, the Prophet of Islam is also contrasted with Jesus Christ, the former represented in the realm of spiritual world order and miracles, the latter, represented with earthly issues, founding authority and religion through violence and promising a heaven with rivers of "milk, honey and wine" (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, p157). The identification of the Turk image with that of Catholic Church's blasphemy against God is of another allusion to the religious tension between what is known as Islam (and its prophet) and Eurocentric views of it.

The Image of the Turk within the Labyrinths

The extent to which the term "Turk" can be used interchangeably with other terms such as "Moor", 'African', "Mahometan", "Ottomite", "Egyptian", "Saracen" and "Muslim" are thus the prominent factors to be unfolded since these words imply that the image of Islam overlaps with the image of the Turk. The overlap between the impression of the Turk and the view of Islam obviously stems from Ottoman Empire's association of its wars with that of sacred conqurance (Djihad) with the attributions of being the prominent spokesman of Islam and the possessor of political leadership. Though the association between Islam and Catholic Church made by Protestantism is superficial and not detailed, the results are of significance in pointing out the terms of sensuality, materialism, emotionality and "selling" religion. The rhetoric is instanced by the implementations and preachings of promising a heaven of wine, honey, milk – the Catholic Church's overwhelming authourity to the extent of selling lands of Paradise.

The ideology of associations made in English Protestant texts is more clear in Vitkus' (1997) words; popular and learned English protestant texts were conflated with the political external and the demonic internal enemies, which is pointed

out with the association of the Pope and the Ottoman sultan with Satan or the Antichrist. According to protestant ideology, Ottoman Empire's intervention into Christian lands, the Pope and Devil all desired to "convert" good protestant souls to damnation and their desire to do so was represented with sensual temptation of virtue and a wrathful passion for power (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997).

The Era of 'Converts'

Catholic Church's view of the Protestants as the ones who are converted from the sacred path and the subjects of the scourge of God is another part of the labyrinth to be unfolded where the feature of being scourged by God is similarly attributed to Islam and Turks. "The English attitude toward the Ottoman Empire was conditioned by the views of authorities on the Continent. Luther was the principal exponent of the theory that Islam was the scourge of God" (Patrides *et al.*, 1963, 132) which is conditioned by the famous preachings such as; "although a wicked King is sent by God as a curse to his people, and plague for their sins; yet it is not lawfull for them to shake off that curse at their own pleasures, that God laid upon them" (Patrides *et al.*, 1963, p130)

The Medium and Shakespeare's Pen

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' Protestant England functioned as the catalyst that moulded the pen of Shakespeare. A literature student improving the awareness of the labyrinths through a discourse analyses based upon such a historical back ground can grasp that while Shakespeare was involved in writing Othello, he was also affected by the surrounding texts and literature written about the Africans, Muslims or Ottomans. The rise in Anglo-Islamic contact resulted in texts giving information about the North-African societies and Ottomans which reflect the English fascination with the cultural aspects of Muslims. Turkish privateers' attacks on the English merchant ships created a huge sum of tales as the production or reminiscent of the crisis of being faced with an expanding imperial power. As Vitkus, (1997) claims, the stories about the Turkish privateers were composed upon the demonizing representations of the Turk (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, 147). Shakespeare was thoroughly influenced by the literature in circle which acknowledges the Ottoman palace rituals to such an extent that is instanced in Draper's (1956) words as; an allusion in Henry IV seems to reveal even some knowledge of the inner workings of the Turkish court. Henry on succeeding to the throne, assures his nobles that he will not remember old grudges, and that this is England and not Turkey where Amurath an Amurath succeeds (Draper *et al.*, 1956, p526).

Mediterranean Image in Conflation with the Turk

While taking regard of the exoticism and suspense in Othello, discourse analyses reveals the notion to any reader that Othello's blurred exoticism, polished rhetoric and the feeling of suspense is what is derived from the English perspective on the expanding Ottoman power in the Mediterranean world. Vitkus, (1997) gives the point that, to the perception of Shakespeare's Londoners, the Mediterranean maritime sphere,

including Cyprus and the Venetian territories, must have seemed like a violent unstable sea of troubles-and yet one where vast fortunes could be made by trade and plunder (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997,164). The real life experiences of English merchants on the coast of North African and Alexandria can be reflected as the feeling of freedom and protection and joining Ottoman army and turning Turk whose result would be, as Vitkus, (1997) claims, the use of sermons to condemn the practice of conversion (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, p.153)

Focused Reading on 'Othello' as a Reflection of History of Emotions

The play, Othello begins with the Ottomans' preparation for intervening in Cyprus, however the Ottoman fleet changes the route to Rhodos. The feature of 'changeability' is always associated with what is "negative" in Eurocentric literature. Changeability was associated with the mood of alterity, femininity and African (Mediterranean). Renaissance is the period when the antique texts were reopened and translated. The association of wisdom and rationality with the God Apollo (West), and the association of emotional explosion, mood and changeability with Dionysus (East) is what the classical texts reveal to the literate Renaissance men. In Eurocentric view, what is mostly preferred is the horse imagery with the head of God Apollo (as the symbol of thinking and wisdom) and the remaining part of the body with that of God Dionysus (symbolizing the action and energia part of the wisdom). The Ottoman battleships' change of route imagery in Othello makes an allusion to the God Dionysus in perspective of its features of changeability, uncontrolled energia and being an Easterner. The defeat of Ottoman army in Cyprus have their reflections on the play's last part as proposed in Vitkus' (1997) article, as Othello, Lepanto and the Cyprus wars, and there are verbal echoes of those lines in Othello's suicide speech (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, p149).

It is not a coincidence that the history of emotions and religious difference are the profound motives. The geographical background or setting of Othello also functions as a catalyst in the play. As a support to the argument, Vitkus (1997) indicates that "Shakespeare exploits perceptions of a global struggle between the forces of good and evil...that is in reality complex and multifaceted" (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, p145).

Church literature in the sixteenth century written as opposed to that of teachings of Islam is also influential in shaping the psychic features of Othello and the audience of Shakespeare. The literature in circle gives the impression that the literate English people were not aware of the religious toleration in Ottoman Empire where Muslims, Jews and Christian temples stand beside one another.

The literature in circulation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century also reflected 'the terror' imposed by the Empire of Turks. The glories of Ottomans were perceived as the conversion of the ones whose lands were conquered by the outsider. The word, "to turn" is addressed to Othello who is called "the Moor of Venice". The term "moor" reflects his implicitly given origin. Othello, as a convert, is restricted between two realms of being a Moor or Venetian. His

psychology and identity in Venetian society is reflected in Berry's (1990) words as an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture. (Berry *et al.*, 1990, p.326)

Othello's state of being in between and being called "baptized moor" and "doubly damned", emerges at the end of the play while killing Desdemona where, "Othello's utter departure from Christianity begins and the play ends" (Lupton *et al.*, 1997, p80). The character of Othello is an embodiment of Lutheran perspective of Ottoman Empire, physical superiority of the Mediterranean people (muscles used as a factor for his conqurance of Desdemona) and the general characteristics attributed to the hot natured Mediterranean people and the Turks. The stereotype in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European perspective of the Moors, with assertive maneuvers and changeable people, is reflected in the play where Berry (1990) claims that Othello is set apart from the Venetian society with his past, language, grandeur and exoticism (Berry *et al.*, 1990, p316) which gives a very coherent picture with that of the Ottomans' change of route from Cyprus to Rhodos. Even his physical external features as a Moor – Moroccan – also create an "apartheid" racist environment for him.

Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, functions as the stereotype sixteenth and seventeenth century man of Renaissance whose feelings and thoughts towards Othello opens up another labyrinth where one can enter into the mind of a typical Renaissance man and can put himself/herself into his shoes. His objections are very simliar to that of Catholic Church's objection to Protestantism or Lutheran objection to Ottoman Empire. Brabantio's objection to Othello and calling him "circumcised dog" is not only an objection to his status, but also to what Othello represents or symbolizes which can be illustrated with his words of "foul thief" and "damned" which reflects his feelings of fear and being conquered by a convert.

The sense of cultural belonging is questioned through Brabantio's question marks towards Othello. Brabantio is not aware of the fact that his physical strength seems attractive to Desdemona or though he is aware of it, he endeavours to reject that Renaissance man/woman loves and as much as he or she hates the "the other" and the exotic adventures of "the other".

Another character is Iago who functions as the embodiment of the manipulative mind, playing with the psychologies of other characters and wit. His cunning mind makes manipulative and circumventing plays on that of Othello whose mind is the most open one to attacks due to his constantly changing nature. Iago and Othello compose a kind of dichotomy: the former makes an allusion to God Apollo and the latter to God Dionysu. It might have seen a far-fetched symbolization but it is of less coincident nature since Renaissance era was the era when the ancient texts and Gods of Greeks were re-introduced to the literary texts at its utmost level. One can find many references to Leo Africanus which has many reflections on the depiction of Othello such as "free and open nature", "credulous fool", "murderous violence" and deep love and tenderness that are all the attributions deciphering the Mediterreanean people's traits still existing today. (Berry *et al.*, 1990, p137). Another parallelism between the play and the English view of

Ottomans is the ending part of the play where Othello kills Desdemona. Othello, like the culture produced it, exhibits a conflation of various tropes of conversion-transformations from Christian to Turk, from good to evil, and from gracious virtue to black damnation (Vitkus *et al.*, 1997, p145). Though it seems to be simple act of jealousy and hopeless love and destroying his characters under the pressures of society is a favorite theme of Shakespeare's plays, the transformations play the most crucial role at the end of the play.

Othello's taking Desdemona's life makes allusion to another Turk impression of Ottoman Sultan Amurath who falls in love with his slave, but killing her in order to show off his competence on controlling his sensuality. The play makes use of the stanzas where Othello's murder of Desdemona is depicted and Othello attributes a feature of "sacrifice" to his murder with the words;

"Thou dost stone my heart,
And makes me call what I intend to do,
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice" 5.2.67-69)

The sacrifice is the cutting of the "free and open nature" that permitted him to fall in love with Desdemona, the daughter of a white-strict Christian man.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's play of Othello reflects the image of the Turk as a mirror to the surrounding factors in Renaissance period. The play is like a color spectrum in terms of its characters when taken individually. However, since each of the character is a product of what constituted the essence of the era, they form a rainbow in the play while interacting with each other.

Shakespeare's characters are not stereotypes, but the individuals who reflect the genuine psychology of the man living in Renaissance period with real man sensibilities as instanced by the anger of Brabantio. The characters' vivid reactions and rhetorics towards different events provide the reader with the ability to delve into how the image of the Turk was represented. Since the context and setting was also genuine the reader who knows a little about the Renaissance period and its features can easily make associations between what is represented and what is implied. Last but not least, though the play is a total product of fiction, it is the embodiment of all the "fictionized" facts of history where the perspectives on the image of the Turk are indicated with their attributions to Renaissance era's dominating factors.

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