

Othello is responsible for his own actions: a critical study

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is measured as one of the most straight ahead tragedies which took material from the Italian writer Cinthio's *Hecatommity*. The play is expanded through the character of Othello, Black Moor. The play thrashes out various themes like revenge, power, jealousy and suppressed sexuality. However, literary critics have identified that the major theme of the play is the revenge of Iago, Othello's villainous assistant. Examining the play William Shakespeare's *Othello* a reader can easily find that the dramatist has portrayed the character of Iago as powerful and intellectual villain. Even though, Iago's revenge plays a vital role in leading Othello to his tragedy, one cannot ignore the reason for that revenge. The root causes of Iago's revenge are vested in Othello's actions, such as, Othello's act of having pushed him secondary and appoint Casio to the post of Lieutenant, Othello's illegal affection (as Iago suspects) with Iago's wife Emilia and finally his assumption that he is in love with Desdemona. The story of the play is dedicated to Iago's peaceful effort to make Othello jealous of his beautiful wife Desdemona. This single mistake or character flaw brings Othello to ruin and he suffers a dramatic fall from extreme grace. *Even though, there is a character flaw and the complications of external forces working against him, Othello is responsible for his miseries and his actions alone determined his fate.*

The play has split in to five acts which clearly presented the traditional Elizabethan style and the crisis between Othello and Iago begins in first act. Othello ignores the words of authorities and sidelined Iago from the selection procedure of lieutenant ship. Iago's intentions make known the depth of his revenge against Othello and others. Iago put forward three complaints against Othello. They are Othello's act of having pushed him less important and promoted Casio to the post of lieutenant, Iago's misgiving is that Othello has been

making love to his wife Emilia, and finally Othello's supposition that he is in love with Desdemona. Based on these three complaints Iago weaved his plot against Othello.

The calamity begins with Othello's decision to take on Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago feels disappointment and shame and he cleverly put away the marriage between Othello and Desdemona and decides to attack Desdemona's father Brabantio. Here reader can find Othello paved the way for Iago to clear his way for revenge. As H. S. Tushack comments; "Whatever those reasons, he takes the first step towards achieving his objective when he persuades Roderigo to stir up against Othello" (Tushack 8). Othello's decision is final in Iago's issue regarding the position of lieutenant and Iago believes that there is a conscious effort from Othello's end behind his expulsion. Here it is easy for a reader to comprehend the fact that Othello's thoughts and actions alone determined his tragic end.

Othello's illegal relationship with Emilia acts as a catalyst in Iago's increasing revenge against his General. Iago feels ashamed and his doubts about his wife's loyalty changed him a revengeful beast. Therefore, he says,

"I hate the Moor,

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets

He has done my office." (Act 1 scene 3)

It is significant for the reader to think that Iago becomes helpless and he fails to react against his General's illegal relationship towards his wife. It hurts him deeply and his pain gradually transformed into revenge and he chooses Desdemona for his plot against Othello. Iago cleverly motivates Othello to suspect his wife Desdemona and in a moment of extreme madness Othello strangles his wife Desdemona. Later he kills himself realizing his follies of blindly believing Iago's words and killing his innocent wife. Here one cannot avoid the role of reason behind Iago's revenge. Rebecca W. Bushnell underlines this view by saying; "It is

clear that the tragedy would never have happened without the agency of Iago as the tragic plotter” (Bushnell 65). Here Othello struggles with unending pain and he fails to understand his servant’s secret plot against him already. Roderigo can see the revenge attempt of the diabolic villain Iago but, he or she cannot ignore the causes that made Iago a revengeful person. Othello’s actions hurt Iago one way or another which in time causes for him to take revenge upon his own master. Another important thing is that Othello’s affair with Desdemona collapses the social order. Here one can see that Desdemona avoids her father’s warnings and eloped with the Moor. When realized the truth, Brabantio, Desdemona’s father curses his daughter. In Shakespearean plays one can notice the fact that when the social order is collapsed, it will lead to conflicts. In Othello’s case, his marriage with Desdemona paved the way for his inferiority complex because of his physical appearance. This inferiority complex gradually changed into extreme jealousy towards his wonderful wife Desdemona.

Some regard *Othello* as a play of jealousy in which “...Othello’s overwhelming jealousy drives much of the play’s action” and it “...serves a destructive power that destroys the real love and can leave a jealous person alone and ruined” (Mussari 84). Consequently, the jealousy Othello causes for tormenting his and his wife’s life. Iago, the plotter was well aware of this fact and he won in his attempt to make use of it against his master Othello. Moreover, Othello’s jealousy destroys the real love between him and his wife. When Othello’s jealousy and inferiority complex mix together and reach its peak he kills his wife, in a frenzied emotion. This also supports the view that Othello was digging his own grave through his words and deeds. Mark Mussari’s remark, “Emilia’s comment that jealousy is a monster “born on self” applies to both Iago and Othello” (84) justifies the proposed thesis of this essay. Mussari has also identified that “Othello’s jealousy feeds on itself throughout the play and eventually drives him to madness and murder” (84). Thus, the claim, “Othello is responsible for his own actions”, is much more affirmed.

Othello's jealousy and suspicion were not the only factors included in his tragic flaw but certain other factors are also there. Helen McCulloch and Gary Carey have rightly observed and commented thus, "Some say that Othello's tragic flaw was jealousy which flared at suspicion and rushed into action unchecked by calm common sense. A more modern interpretation would say that Othello's tragic flaw that he had internalised, that is taken into himself, the prejudices of those who surround him" (McCulloch & Carey 87). They think from the perspective of Othello and find that Othello might have thought of the attitude of the public to a black man; "...an unattractive creature, not quite human, unworthy of love" (McCulloch & Carey 87). For Othello, his wife, Desdemona also has such perceptions about him, and therefore, her love must be pretence. It may be because of this, Othello accepts everything propounded by Iago regarding his personal appearance. It should also be noted that "beneath Othello's quiet dignity lies a well of uncertainty about himself as a husband for one as young and beautiful as Desdemona. Doubts about his age, race, and experience in anything other than military adventures make him vulnerable" (Beard et al 81). For Othello, his ability as a general is not only enough to attain the love of a beautiful woman like Desdemona.

Othello's over suspicion, insensitivity and easily believing nature also lead him to his tragedy. He suspects that his wife Desdemona has illegal affair with Cassio. But he never questions her to reveal the reality, which would certainly avoid all those tragic deaths. His insensitivity is evident when he blindly believes the words of Iago and acting like a puppet in his hands. While watching the play, even groundlings might feel that Othello should question his wife at least once to unveil the real truth. His easily believing nature, that is, believing the words of Iago has obviously fastened his ruin.

The insensitivity or thoughtlessness of Othello is best evident when he appoints Cassio as the lieutenant. "When Othello decides to give the position to Cassio, a younger and

less experienced individual, Iago becomes determined to destroy Othello and his family.” (Hughes 4). If he considered Iago, the senior official for this position, he could save himself from all other grave issues. For Iago, Cassio is not deserved for that post. This is very clear when he says;

“That never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the division of a battle knows

More than a spinster.” (Act 1 Scene 1 lines 23-24 *Othello*).

As such, once can say that Othello had at least the duty of conforming Iago the reasons for selecting Cassio for that post. The passive reactions of Othello in many occasions causes for subsidizing him. In another context, when Iago provides the handkerchief as evidence to Desdemona's and Cassio's illicit relation, Othello is unwilling to unearth the reality but only suspects his wife. It is to be noted that never does his eye of suspicion fall upon Iago, the usurper. He is mistaken by Iago's sweet words; “My lord, you know I love you” (Act 2 Scene 3 *Othello*), and regards Iago as an innocent man. He could not recognize the real intention of Iago, that is, to take revenge upon Othello by having sex or raping Desdemona other than seducing her. This is very clear when he says,

“I do love her too,

Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure

I stand accountant for as great a sin,

But partly led to diet my revenge” (Act 2 Scene 1).

Another reason, namely, his jealousy, can be identified for Othello's suspicion fall upon directly. His inferiority complex of being a black Moore prevents him from questioning Desdemona. But one cannot agree with the fact that Othello engaged in the killing of his wife not because of his belief in the public perception. And it will not be proper to think

“...Othello as a black man with the white soul and Iago as the white man with the black soul”
(Kolin 217).

Conclusion

To conclude, one can infer that Shakespeare's *Othello* presents many examples that prove the title hero Othello himself is the main cause of his suffering and death. Though the major theme of the play is concerned with the revenge, a close observation will help one to identify the tragic flaw of Othello. By presenting the central character as a Black Moor, the dramatist could create a series of feelings in the minds of the audience. The actions of Othello also agree this fact and that is why one feels it as the most straight ahead tragedies. The different faults committed by Othello are the appointment of Cassio to the post of lieutenant, Iago's misgiving is that Othello has been making love to his wife Emilia, and finally Othello's supposition that he is in love with Desdemona. That is why Iago taking the first step against him by turning Roderigo against Othello. Othello's illegal relationship with Emilia also acts as a serious issue that makes Iago's increasing his revenge against his General. Iago turns his jealousy into revenge and he chooses Desdemona for his plot against Othello. He decides to rape or exploit her sexually to take revenge upon him. When reaching the conclusion one can see that Othello's jealousy and suspicion, jealousy and inferiority complex which drives him to madness and murder. Othello's over suspicion, insensitivity and easily believing nature also do the same. The passive reactions of Othello in many occasions cause also increases the problems. Therefore one can say that even though, there is a character flaw and the complications of external forces working against him, Othello are responsible for his miseries and his actions alone determined his fate.

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