

Othello the Victim of Racial Other

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Abstract: In spite of his military exploits and the social standing he has achieved, the black moor Othello remains a racial Other in the predominantly white Venetian society. Iago plays on his racial insecurity and brings ruin to him. The paper explores the racist language and views as well as Othello's fragile self-making in the play to reveal the racial politics in this famous tragedy by Shakespeare.

1. Introduction

Othello, a black moor, was appointed a general and married a noble lady in a predominantly white society, which is regarded as "least considered" by the critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge since "Negroes were not known except as slaves" in the 17th century. So it was Shakespeare's intention to make Othello black, but why did he do so? Is Shakespeare racist or anti-racist? Did he warn us through this strange drama about how disastrous a racial intermarriage is, or did he see Othello's image beyond contemporary racial prejudice? Whatever the answer is, the issue of race is brought to the fore. Othello was stereotyped as "the Other" and his military exploits and personal merits were not enough to compensate for his violation of racial taboos. Not only was his happiness destroyed, but his sense of self was shattered by this ill-starred marriage. Racial politics in Shakespeare's plays is as complex as the racial situation today, and this article is to examine how Shakespeare handles race and how racial differences and prejudice influence the character's mind and lead to his downfall.

2. Self-Making and Assimilation

Before Othello became a hero and won the respect from the Venetian state and Desdemona's love, he was a slave. How his career began is not told directly in the play. Roderigo called Othello by the demeaning term "the thick lips" and his blackness is mentioned throughout the play and he admits that "Haply for I am black." His exact origin remains a mystery to us. Though he told Desdemona and her father his past of battles, sieges, captures, escapes and fortunes as well as his encounters with monsters and cannibals, his life story remains obscure and mysterious. He mentioned his degrading experience of once being "taken by the insolent foe" and "sold to slavery," but somehow he managed to find his freedom, and we also know that he was a Christian convert from Muslim, but we are not told of why, when or how for his conversion. When he first appeared in the play, he was already a Christian and "self-made man" who had overcome the racial barrier for the blacks in the white Venetian world through his genius and efforts and had established himself as

a “noble general,” which was regarded as “least considered” by Coleridge. This former slave, by his own efforts, gained a place in the white Venetian society. It is really a magic that a colonizer joined the colonial military elite, and even the Duke praised him to Desdemona’s father Brabantio: “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.” It seems that he was accepted and honored by the society.

Othello served his adopted homeland loyally and keenly assimilated himself into the Venetian society. He fought bravely against the Ottoman Turks, the invaders, who were Muslims and he eventually identified when he committed suicide. His marriage with Desdemona was a means of self-realization. Marrying women above their status has been a common means for men to seek self-advancement throughout human history. But this interracial marriage has proved fatal. He won Desdemona’s heart by his heroic character, which moved Desdemona to set aside the premise of class and race for noble women in marriage. She says: I saw Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate (I. iii. 252-254).

His marriage to a noble white woman could be interpreted as a contradictory desire: a scandalous violation of the taboo, or a legitimate act of assimilation approved by the Venetian council. Othello did have confidence in the status he gained and felt entitled to the love of a white lady. When Brabantio accused him of marrying his daughter, he defended himself: My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly, / Is It they? (I. ii. 31-32) He was convinced that the Venetians would only judge him on his accomplishments and personal merits rather than his skin color, but at the same time his racial inferiority is revealed before us when he apologized at the Venetian Senate, “I do confess the vices of my blood” (I. iii. 124). Othello remains a racial Other who tries to be accepted by his loyal service to the state but is still a racial outsider.

3. Venetian Racial Context and Miscegenation

Although he was a respected soldier and a noble and courageous general, his racially mixed marriage suffered severe racist attacks that created a national emergency and even the Senate was called in for the charge. From the racist rhetoric from the nobility, Venice’s racial context is far from tolerant. To Brabantio, miscegenation is “against all rules of nature” despite Othello’s worthiness and the fact that he was hospitable to Othello. He shouts in an outburst of outrage against his daughter’s marriage with the black general: For if such actions may have passage free / Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (I. ii. 98-99).

Miscegenation is so outrageous that it is described in animal terms when Iago broke the news to the unbelievable Brabantio at the beginning of the play: Even now, now, very now, and old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe! ... You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; / you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; / you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans (I. i. 88-89, 110-113). The racial transgression of their marriage is vulgarized as “making the beast with two backs,” and Othello is described as a black ram and a Barbary horse (punning on the word “barbarian”).

Brabantio accused Othello before the Venetian Senate of putting Desdemona in “chains of magic” for otherwise how could a young and innocent girl agree to marry a black moor: “so opposite to marriage that she shunned / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation” and she thus incurred “the general mock” to “run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing”? In such language, we can see how Othello was defined as “the Other” by the predominantly white culture despite his hard-won achievements. Such vehement reaction to his racially mixed marriage reveals his marginalized status in the white society.

4. Collapse of Self Being

We have long believed that it is jealousy that the “green-eyed monster” ruined the couple’s

happiness. But why it is so easy to provoke jealousy in Othello, a rational and perceptive man who claims “I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove”? Iago’s skillful play on Othello’s racial insecurity is the central cause of his destruction.

As critics for generations noted, Iago did not have a specific motive in bringing destruction on Othello. Iago’s plot against Othello without sufficient motive has been explained as Iago’s villainy, and he is regarded as a villain proficient in the art of Machiavellian politics. But his racist mindset could be a better reason for his deliberate sabotage of Othello, which is revealed in his earlier insulting speech about Othello’s interracial marriage.

Iago convinced Othello that his marriage with Desdemona is an anomaly in itself, “nature erring from itself” and thus promoted racial insecurity in Othello. He responded to Othello’s protest of Desdemona’s betrayal: Her will, recoiling to her better judgment, / May fall to match you with her country forms, / And happily repent (III. iii. 229-238). Iago suggested that Desdemona would certainly regret her rash marriage and find partners from her country folk. His wicked reasoning affected Othello, who tortured himself in self-doubting: “why did I marry?” Iago strengthened Othello’s self-doubt by suggesting that Desdemona would naturally acquire racism from her father. Under Iago’s wicked influence, Othello was convinced that Desdemona had made love to Cassio and he cursed his marriage: “O curse of marriage / That we can think these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!” Othello’s jealous pain and distrust of his own views may have resulted from the interracial union with the daughter of the Venetian noble. Racial insecurity discouraged him from believing in her true love for him. “Othello seems to suffer the insecurity of someone who has crossed the racial line yet feels reproved for it when his white wife is reclaimed by her social and racial world in her supposed affair with Cassio. Iago can count on the self-hating that afflicts the victim of prejudice who cannot himself, believe that he is loveable to someone of the other race” (Bell 8). Othello’s self-making is fragile. His marriage disillusioned him and his confidence was erased by rage and despair and he mourned: O, now for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content! / Farewell ! Othello’s occupation’s gone! (III. iii. 347-357)

The breakdown of personal being he was experiencing is inseparable from his racial insecurity. In his disillusion he recalled how he once killed a turbaned unconverted Turk and then turned his dagger toward himself. His last act is interpreted as the killing of an infidel by his transformed Christian self. “Othello surrenders himself to the prison of race he thought he had escaped. He is not able, in the end, to cast away the role and character which societal convention prescribed to him at the beginning of his career in the white colonial world” (Bell 10). What happens at this last moment is tragic acceptance of his original status as a racial outsider, which neither his military achievements nor his marriage have succeeded in permanently altering.

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