

When Love was Betrayed: Shakespeare's *Othello* and Literary Criticism

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's Othello remains till date the most significant testament on the human nature. Bedazzled by the performance, Renaissance audience, just like the contemporary one, continued to grapple with the power-play of emotions exerted by Othello employing all their might to understand the final outcome, that of Desdemona's and Othello's death. Since then, there have been numerous attempts to decode the structures which brought into action the tragic self-discovery at the end of the play. Various schools of criticism have tried to decipher the underlying implications and motivations for Shakespeare's most sordid saga which depicted how fragile the human beings are; always at the mercy of their emotions, be it, love, jealousy, pride or ambition. While New Critics focused on their attention on the character of Iago, New Historicists tried to highlight the circulating social and political ideologies of the time. Psychoanalytic criticism dealt with the disharmony created by Iago between Othello's ego and the societal superego leading to his death as the only final outcome possible out of the grim situation. Marxist and Feminist criticism tries to unearth the female labor invested by women was categorically exploited by the capitalist and patriarchal demands of the time. Handkerchief then becomes the necessary embodiment of Desdemona's chastity as well as the main catalyst for all the turbulence depicted in the play.

Keywords: New Criticism, New Historicism, Handkerchief, Drama of conversion, Ego

Othello! Othello! Othello! ...thou have been unjust in loving Desdemona, too dearly. Of thought and passion, of love and betrayal, poor Moor was doomed before one and all to see... Written amidst the exchange of quills and swords, Shakespeare's *Othello* has been marked by a sense of uneasiness for many centuries. There have been many sincere attempts, with the application of different theories, to decode the structure, meaning, language, characters and motives of the play.

[1]

The "close-reading" of the play as suggested by the New Critics during the 1930s and 1940s highlighted the ambiguities hidden in the play. Wilson Knight in his book, *The wheels of Fire* (1949), talked about the 'spatial' qualities which mattered more than simply Bradleyian character analysis. In his essay, "The Othello music," he argued that a pattern was being followed in the play: "the cynical intellect pitted against a lovable humanity transfigured by qualities of heroism and grace." Iago, the cynic, never believed in love and so he hatched a plot to destroy the love between Othello and his beloved, Desdemona. He stated that "Iago, himself a kind of devil, insidiously eats his way into this world of romance, chivalry, nobility." However, he also said that "interpretation here is not easy, nor wholly satisfactory."

William Empson, who could scarcely be described as the proponent of New Criticism but whose critical works greatly influenced certain currents of this approach, analyzed the word 'honest' which occurs fifty-two times in the play in his essay, "Honest in *Othello*" (1951). He

suggested that “‘honest’ carried an obscure insult as well as a hint of stupidity and ‘good’ was apparently less obtrusive form of the same trick of patronage.” This was the reason behind Iago’s and Cassio’s resentment when called “good lieutenant.” Thus, the word was not only complicated but was loaded with larger social issues.

[2]

Carl Gustav Jung’s belief that humans have an individual and collective unconscious, called ‘archetypes’ can be applied to *Othello* in order to understand the underlying thought of the play. Lisa Hopkins in her book, *Beginning Shakespeare* (2010), analyzed Terrell L. Tebbetts’s essay “A Jungian Reading of Othello’s Fictive Self.” She states that much of the contradiction in Othello’s character results from the reader’s inability to understand the “pageants Othello’s repressive ego creates to keep Othello himself and others in false gaze.” Hopkins is in perfect accordance with Tebbetts’s view that a Jungian reading supports not only F. R. Leavis’s denigration of Othello’s character but A. C. Bradley’s admiration of the same as well. It explains “Othello’s suicide in terms of tragic self-discovery rather than mere loss.” (Tebbetts 110) According to Hopkins then, “Jung thus provides not only a complete model for understanding the play but also a transhistorical guide to life, of which *Othello*, proves essentially to be a transcription.”

[3]

The 1980s and 1990s in Britain and United States have been marked by the emergence of a new different kind of approach, namely, New Historicism. Stephen Greenblatt, the most celebrated of the New Historicists, talked about a given idea ‘circulating’ in a particular culture in a particular time. In the context of *Othello*, Greenblatt’s essay, “The Improvisation of Power,” from his book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to*

Shakespeare (1980), talks about the increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of identity as a manipulable, artful process. Greenblatt states that Iago was fully aware of himself as the manipulator and reveled in his ability to manipulate his victims. His attitude towards Othello was governed by the political ideology of the time which saw a Moor as an outcast, “the alien, the conqueror and the infidel.” He constructed a narrative and the characters in *Othello* were doomed to submit themselves entirely to the narrativity. Such is the achievement of Iago’s improvisation that pleasure itself becomes for Othello a form of pollution: love is turned into hatred. This is how, Greenblatt explained, Shakespeare explored the relations of power in a given culture. Influential though it has been, the New Historicist approach has been accused of falsifying history to give adequate grounds to the argument. Due to its highly codified and prescriptive formula, it has taken into consideration only some plays at the cost of the others.

[4]

The Marxist and Feminist approaches to Shakespeare’s *Othello* dealt with the unmasking of social and political ideologies. As Frederic Jameson has argued, Marxism is “a problematic: that is to say, it can be identified, not by specific positions...but rather by the allegiance to a specific complex of problems, whose formulations are always in movement.” Dymna Callaghan in her seminal essay, “Looking well to linens: women and cultural production in Othello and Shakespeare’s England,” in the book *Marxist Shakespeares* (2001) talks about the “material dimensions of Desdemona’s ‘handkerchief/spotted with strawberries’ and her wedding sheets and how female labor produced and (culturally) maintained them.” She argues that women’s labor was very much visible to Shakespeare’s audience and this serves as a contrast to the “historically subsequent occlusion of female labor that continues to enable a considerable portion of the exploitation on which

capitalism depends.” According to her, household stuff is dependent on women’s labor and is essential to the conduct of domestic life. So when Othello feels enraged at the loss of handkerchief, the blame lies squarely with Desdemona as the supervisor of “house affairs” and caretaker of the linens. Thus, the handkerchief passage in *Othello*, as Callaghan indicates, demonstrates the creative labors (psychic rather than manual) invested by women. She concludes the essay by stating that “the handkerchief in *Othello* figures the borderland between writing and all that is not writing, the sphere of the counter-discursive and of materiality itself.”

Another prominent essay, “Othello’s occupation: Shakespeare and the Romance of Chivalry,” views Iago’s speeches as loaded with the language of commerce. Mark Rose suggests that the commercial setting of the play and the commercial language employed by the characters serves to show a structured pattern of thefts. The play begins with a stolen daughter and ends with the consequences of a stolen handkerchief. In *Othello*, heroic tragedy takes shape of the domestic tragedy as Othello himself, infected with the idea of theft in his thoughts, speaks of robbery, “What sense had I in her stol’n hours of lust?” and accuses Desdemona of stealing her honor and also his own good name. (Rose 72) Rose concludes the essay by stating that “tragedy subverts, deconstructs...What Shakespeare has done in *Othello* is to convert the material of Elizabethan romance into tragedy.”

[5]

The postcolonial criticism of Shakespeare is informed by the awareness that we live in a decolonized world and the vacuum left by the exit of the European colonizers is filled actively by the neo-colonial regimes. As a result, the hitherto colonized subject still remains economically disadvantaged and struggles to come to terms culturally with their new (identity, location) situation. This approach centers on

‘how’ Shakespeare’s plays were implicated in the process of colonialism. Daniel Vitkus in his influential book, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and Multicultural Mediterranean* (2003) suggests that “the tragedy of Othello is a drama of conversion.” According to him, tropes of conversion, transformations from Christian to Turk, from good to evil and from gracious virtue to black damnation, runs throughout the play. Shakespeare’s *Othello* draws on early modern anxieties about the loss of identity in a world of “ontological, ecclesiastical, and political instability.” Othello’s fear of sexual instability is closely aligned with the “racial and cultural anxieties about ‘Turning Turk.’” (Vitkus 82) According to Vitkus, Othello has “converted to a black, Muslim identity, an embodiment of the Europeans’ phobic fantasy: Othello has become the ugly stereotype.” Faced with this abominable transformation, “Othello enacts his own punishment by killing the Turk he has become.” (Vitkus 106)

On the whole, critical theories, though limited in their responses, tend to highlight some broader issues pertaining to Shakespeare’s plays. Theories emerge from a particular way of viewing and allow new inflections and permutations to understand ‘the soul of the age’. The inability of New critical, psychoanalytical, New Historical, Marxist and postcolonial theories to fully comprehend the plays written by Shakespeare shows that Shakespeare will never age for us, nor fade, nor die.

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