

Othello And The Discourse Of Orientalism

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(Othello)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to show whether Othello, the man, does commune with the general discourse of Orientalism or not. *Othello* is played out in the burning hatred of the stranger, in the clash of races and in opposition of beliefs- and beyond all in the atmosphere of jealousy. So, western critics called this union between Othello and Desdemona unequal marriage as the bride is European and the groom is an Arab Moor.

He was treated with contempt and despised by all Venetians for a crime he committed- that is his union with a white Venetian girl. Therefore, Othello is essentially a natural victim to a white man's scheme, and he fulfills some of the demands of Orientalism. Furthermore, Shakespeare does not love his hero. I am going to discuss the devaluation of Othello and how he was dehumanized by the white man. I will, also, try to prove that Othello was a disinclined, repugnant and a wearied of guest. Shakespeare exaggerated his hero's naivety and exposed him as an easily-led man which

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does commune with the same discourse of Orientalism which, in its term, insists on exposing an Oriental as naïve and simple.

At the end I will gather up causes which exactly comply and correspond with the aim of Orientalism. This will be by interpreting the causes of his crime, and I will try to apply these causes to commune with a similar action through which an Easterner would not spare a moment to kill his female if she gets involved in illegal sexual affairs.

Finally, these proofs will give indication that Othello, who is not different from any Oriental, was created by a Western expert (in Oriental affairs) in the same workshop of Orientalism.

Othello and the Discourse of Orientalism

At the period of *Othello's* publication, the spirit of wild adventure had seized the Europeans. The discovery of the new lands overseas was yet recent; fables and mysteries were still hanging over the western shores, with their dim enchantments, visionary terror and golden promises. This is pronounced well by Edward Said who, in his book on *Orientalism*, emphasized the idea of western attraction by the orient as being "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes." (1)

Perilous expeditions, distant and dangerous voyages were undertaken everyday to the vast Oriental world. From these lands of exotic people, the European travellers returned with tales of the vast desert with "cannibals that did each other eat." (2) With just such stories the orientalists, such as Walter Raleigh, Joseph Pitt, M. Neighbour and many of the seventeenth century travellers returned from the new world with their fanatic, splendid and fearful exaggerations.

Othello reveals the burning hatred of the stranger, the clash of races, and the opposition of beliefs, and beyond all the atmosphere of jealousy. Shakespeare, then had twisted the situation of Othello and Desdemona "into a problem of miscegenation." (3) It could be right to say that the union between

Othello and Desdemona is an unequal marriage as the bride is European and the groom is an Arab black Moor. Therefore, from the very beginning of the play disillusionment and the opposition of codes loom from time to time, but the play goes on despite the disinclination the hero undergoes.

It is a play, too, espied with an eastern burnished sun which produced Othello's burned complexion, the sun that gives a particular colour to the Eastern people as it was noted by some orientalists such as C.M. Doughty and Richard Burton whose complexion "was more oriental than the English." (4) This natural phenomenon brings Othello face to face with the exact discourse of Orientalism which mentions much about the burned complexions of easterners, particularly the Arabs, due to the burning sun over their desert.

In *Othello*, the human passion is raised to its highest pitch and "forged to a white heat of dramatic action." (5) Othello is a mind poisoned with coceit, deception and intrigues of a cunning host (Iago) who hates the black race, "I hate the Moor." (6) Iago says again somewhere, "I do hate him as I do hell pains." Othello is spiced with a flavour of exoticism, that is the exoticism of colour, strangeness of behaviour and, perhaps, with the flavour of eastern traditional behaviour and belief. He is treated with contempt and

despised by all for, in the eyes of the Venetians, he committed a crime- that is his union with a “white ewe” who was as white as snow.(7)

Also, Othello is envied for the respected position he obtained in the country that hosts him. This is the cause of his suffering at the hands of a white man. Iago believes that the stranger does not deserve such success and value. In a jealous tone he says that Othello “ hath a daily beauty in his life.” (8)

To Shakespeare, it is not a matter of paramount importance whether Othello came from the shores of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, from the Arabian Gulf or from the depth of the desert. Nevertheless, Othello as an Easterner, an Arab and a Moor, has become the subject of attack by the Venetian gentlemen. So, the fundamental sense of the discourse of Orientalism, I may say, does apply to the social differences and distinctions in *Othello*.

Mankind is encountered with evil and its destructive power. Raghukul Tialk (1983) argues that Othello is an “emotional equivalent of universal human experience”. (9) But it will be fair treatment if Shakespeare generalizes his hero’s problem to become an equivalent to the universal human experience in which this matter touches the Arabs, the Europeans and the Africans. But Othello saw the cliffs upon which his wife was wrecked by the hand of a white man, of this revengeful and vindictive spirit. (10) Othello’s mode of action does not arise from his character, it was imposed and practised upon him by Iago.

There is no doubt that the depiction of Othello manifests Shakespeare’s skill in human nature. The general observation of Samuel Johnson at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century would put Othello on the same track of his oriental counterpart. Johnson assured that Othello is “magnanimous, artless, and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge.” (11) This character diagram would exactly conform to the general discourse of Orientalism in connection with men’s position in the Arab oriental world (12)

The early scenes of the play emphasize Othello’s colour, which means that there is a link between Othello of the Renaissance and the “noble savage” tradition of the Eighteenth Century product of man. (13) This inherited image, however, ranges from Lady Hester Stanhope’s “savage people” to R. Richardson’s “savage and slaves” to W. R. Wilson’s “these savages” to E. Warburton’s “ noble animals.” (14) These attitudes were descended from Sixteenth Century travellers and scholars to the Arab World such as Ludovico Di Varthema who in 1503 likened the Arabs to the beasts

“lyke beasts kyll themselues” (15) William Bedwell (1561- 1632) and Edward Peacock (1606-1691) were also Di Varthema’s inheritors concerning this point. Therefore, Shakespeare’s slogans of dehumanizing Othello as an oriental were not the pioneers in this field, for both Iago and Roderigo abused Othello by saying:

Even now, very now and old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe (16)

And somewhere else by saying:

.....you will have
your daughter covered with Barbary horse; you’ll
have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have
coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans. (17)

Even Brabantio (the father-in-law) revolted at the silly thought of the “sooty bosom” (18) These derogatory insults are directed towards Othello. Intending to enrage Brabantio, for instance, Iago tells him about the illegality of the union between Othello and Desdemona:

I am one, Sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter
And the Moor are now making the beast with two
Backs (19)

In this context A.C. Bradley (1968) states that in *Othello* “there is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion.” (20) But to the Elizabethan the figure of the Moor represented, not an ethnic type but amoral one, and this partial view is represented in *Othello*, though he mentioned the derogatory comments of Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio. To these people the Moor epitomizes lust,(21) witchcraft, (22) and satanic evil.(23) These images are, perhaps, descended from Sir John Daves (1564) who was Shakespeare’s contemporary. In his *Microcosmos* (1603) he emphasized and characterized those intruders who came from the southern lands (Africa) as cruel, mad, black, hot and lustful:

For southern men are cruel, moody, mad
Hot, black, lean leapers, lustful (24)

Shakespeare draws on these prejudices, and the play, in no way, supports them. However, these comments on Othello, as an Easterner, paved the way for the Victorian Orientalists and modern travellers to launch a similar attack on eastern husbands, the thing which places Othello, as an oriental husband, on the same track and discourse of Orientalism.

It could be right to say that Othello is an Oriental who has unlimited trust in others; which allows him to be fooled by his host Iago. Perhaps, like other oriental husbands, he lacks subtlety in his response. The process of not seeing through Iago and/or realizing the truth reflects relatively his simple

soul. This simplicity is the habit of the Eastern males. (25) Othello's naivety leads them (his Venetian enemies) to believe that he is an easy prey to their devilish schemings, for an Oriental, in an Occidental view, is an easily-led person, who could be easily victimized. (26) Othello is enticed to jealousy which, later on, took a complete control over him, but what makes him almost unique in Venice is not only his naivety but also his isolation by his colour. Therefore, the Europeans could have found Othello's nobility hollow, and that he is an "egoist" who did not know others but himself. (27)

Shakespeare, nevertheless, exaggerates his hero's naivety and simplicity. He creates from him a short-sighted man who can not feel the plot being woven to trap him. Othello is unaware of what is going on because either Shakespeare wants to limit his black hero's abilities to discover things, or because, as an oriental Arab, he is supposed to be naïve. If the scale of the latter suggestion weighs heavier, this will, undoubtedly, conform to the essence of the discourse of Orientalism which cares, very much, to expose the oriental to be so. (28)

We came to know that Desdemona is condemned for the unsuitableness of her choice. Her admiration and love for the oriental "Ram" appears to the Venetians as a violation of the European probabilities-to her father the "sooty bosom" and the "black horse" is a seducer, lascivious and a corrupted man,(29) The father imputes his daughter's acceptance to magic and charm (30) but the Venetians forget that a cavalier of those days, even among Arabs, could only win the heart of his mistress by entertaining her with wonderous narratives as Othello did with his beloved Desdemona:

She loved me for the dangers I had to pass,
And I loved her, that she did pity them. (31)

Othello has a romantic career and has travelled into distant lands in Africa, Asia and over dark seas. He wins over the heart of Desdemona, a girl of exceptional beauty, who was sought after by the gallants of her own country, and whose father's attempts to take her away from Othello have failed. The situation of this relation developed to the extent that her father threatened Othello, but the latter tried to ease the tense situation saying: "keep up your bright swords)" (32) Brabantio does not stop here, but he demands an arrest to punish Othello who, in his turn, keeps peace of mind when he says: "Hold your hands." (33) By this calm behaviour Othello gains the respect of the senators because he tells the truth of his relation with Brabantio's daughter.

Othello is similar to the rest of the Easterners. This is clear when he was called for his defence before the senators. He had only to relate a plain

tale of his love. The hard circumstances Othello underwent softened the heart of Desdemona as well as the rest of the senators who were fully convinced of Othello's claim. In this connection, Othello's story reminds us of the oriental black valiant Antara Ben Soddad, who too, suffered a lot on the way to reach his sweetheart Abla. This brave oriental hero could win his beloved due to his valiant actions and suffering. The similarity, here, lies in that both Othello and Antara were victims of their colour and the envy of the surrounding men. (34) Othello, then, is an oriental great lover on western land, and the love he stores for Desdemona is matchless even in the East. He calls his love "divine." There is a sort of hyperbole in his relation with his beloved. It is clear that Othello loves too much and with the same degree he will hate, and this is the characteristic of an eastern lover. (35)

Iago is responsible for the downfall of Othello. He is an artful man who has deeply studied human nature. He perhaps knew of the torments which afflict the mind of man (and far beyond bodily torture) there is the torment of jealousy. To him, this can be applied suitably to the case of the Moor as an easterner who, like other easterner heroes, will deal seriously with women's honour and chastity. Therefore, Iago knew that arousing such an issue to Othello will be intolerable and will arouse his "homicidal jealousy." (36)

Othello's jealousy has become very intense after the information he obtained about his wife's contact with Cassio. Othello would not stand the matter, for the Eastern sultry heat did work violently upon him. (37) From that moment Othello, the Moor, never tasted peace of mind, for when Iago gave the proof of the dishonesty of Desdemona through the handkerchief, Othello, like any Oriental husband, foamed and shouted that he would not feel rest:

Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. (38)

Othello would engage himself in action rather than mere words. That is the threat, of an Easterner husband who would not hesitate to take revenge on the wife and the involved lover; the revenge which would devastate all that comes before it.

Such an Eastern scale of revenge could even blind the husband searching for his lost honour. Yes, Othello would launch a campaign of revenge with no hesitating steps, in this connection, always forward towards some swift means of death for his infidel female. So, the handkerchief was a sign of Desdemona's infidelity which deluded Othello to pass an urgent sentence of death upon her. He loathed her as much as he loved her. Othello then is jealous of Cassio, and he thinks he has been seen

as a cuckold, for when Othello was taken by surprise, by the force of passion aroused in him by Iago, he found no way but to try and prepare for Desdemona's death:

I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me. (39)

To behave rashly in connection with issues of honour among oriental people seems normal. These issues make the oriental a distracted person for the rest of his life:

But I do love thee! And when I love thee not
Chaos is come again. (40)

This is Othello as an oriental whose temper has become sharp after the rumour about his wife's chastity. Here, Othello accused her plainly of being unfaithful and of loving another man:

That handkerchief which I so loved
And gave thee,
Thou gav'st to Cassio. (41)

The internal conflict in Othello's mind begins as soon as he suspects the faithfulness of his wife as do the Eastern husbands. On this ground, Iago works easily upon Othello's noble nature. Iago whispers the ecstasy of his triumph over his oriental guest who falls beside his feet:

Work on, my medicine work! (42)

This was followed by an other ecstasy on the part of Iago when he says:

My Lord is fallen an epilepsy. (43)

Iago, of course, inflames Othello's position and instigates him to murder his wife and her supposed lover Cassio.

Nothing can restore to Othello that sweet rest and tranquility which he once enjoyed with his beloved Desdemona. He no longer looks delighted in things around him. His heart that used to be aroused at the sight of the troops, that heart which would stir and leap at the sound of a drum, or a trumpet, seemed to have lost all that pride and ambition, and all his old joys forsook him. (44) This is the characteristic of the eastern husband who will not be at rest until blood is shed for the sake of his lost honour which, in the oriental belief, is a top priority of one's being. I will, in this respect, paraphrase the words of the Arab poet AL-Motanabi (303-354 H): never an honour is unhurt unless blood is shed. (45)

The Moor, in the light of these evidences, like any other Eastern husband, would like to shed the blood of revenge so as to have peace of mind for the rest of his life. Therefore, Othello entered his wife's chamber, full of bad intention- that is putting his lady to death. Othello, like his eastern counterpart, without meditation or even delay, would fulfil his goal rather proudly, and honorably. (46) The

Moor was gnawing his under lip when she was awakened with his kisses. She saw him rolling his eyes as if fate and destiny employed him for this heavy task; the task of swallowing her soul. He bade her prepare for her end, and told her that she would not find the light of another day. (47) Would he, then, be lenient at her begging for compassion? No, the answer will be, for he shouts: "it is the cause." (48) Othello is unable to hear other explanation of the cause, he doesn't want to mention it. He will not let his ear hear any more from her, he will not give her any chance to clear herself. But were Othello, I believe, an occidental, he would have let her proceed towards clearing her position, but being an eastern from sultry deserted countries which gave him hot temper, he will not endure more talk from her. The high degree of his resentment and destination blinded him to the extent that he would not bear her voice.

In this context, the oriental is the maker of his destiny, he behaves as if he is authorized from God to act freely with his female whom he doubts. Nothing would prevent him from acting, since the matter is connected with a celestial and heavenly authorization. The westerners may say that in this matter, the oriental, particularly the Moslim Arab, sees himself as a demigod. Therefore Othello as an oriental, could not be extracted from his tradition and discipline which have a great connection with the Koranic teaching concerning adulterers. (The Koran, Ch. 17: 32)

No doubt the Moor is a noble and a successful military man and a genius but, like other easterners. He is severely excited by the question of his wife's chastity. He shows no consideration for remorse or pity, he rather gives rein to all the dictates of his inflammable passion to take revenge. The conflict then, to Othello, is between love and hatred, jealousy and remorse. But like the eastern husband, resentment overcomes his tenderness, and this, to Othello, is a step towards the sublimity of thought which brings about the strangling of the guilty wife as the best way for the oriental to acquire the purgation of honour. Othello, thus, in his passion is purely an easterner. This speech does parallel the discourse of orientalism in connection with this matter where Othello believes that he is killing Desdemona for a good honourable reason, sacrificing her to an ideal rather than murdering in vengeful hatred. (49)

Othello's counterpart in the East can't let his female live, he must sacrifice her to the cause of honour and chastity. Like easterners, he sheds tears because he is torn between love and honour and between love and doubt, but he strikes where he loves. This is the oriental atmosphere of dealing with a female's infidelity; that is the oriental world in which a person is not ready to sacrifice his honour for the sake of his love.

Accordingly, Othello's deadly strike is that of the agent of justice. (50) Therefore, such bloody act is not murder in his view. To Othello, as it is to other eastern husbands, all is done for the sake of honour. (51)

Nothing can bring together the scattered fragments of the torn soul of Othello except ending his beloved's life, because, to him, if she remains alive, she will cause him no rest in a heart rending agony. But in our oriental world such an agony can't find an adequate expression in words. Similarly, Othello can't find the substitution for his torture through tears. He, as an oriental, applies a suitable solution by chopping the tree from the surface of the ground. (52) Having done so, he ends a state of chaos within himself. This act from Othello does equate the long and old discourse of orientalism, for we read in several Orientals' reports a synonymous talk. For instance, Lord Byron (1813) in the *Giaour* seems to have taken from the Eastern events to supply the ground work for his tale which contained the adventurous life of a slave-girl Liela who was severely punished according to the Moslim customs by being thrown into the sea (for her infidelity) by her master Hassan. (53)

That is the legal eastern prevailing cruelty for the sake of the lost honour. But as the story of the cruelty of the oriental Arab husband, Othello is concerned, this cruelty goes hand in hand with that of Scherezade who used to tell stories to her cruel husband, the Sultan, for a period of a thousand and one nights. (54) The story became the cause of debate among European orientalis in connection with the Eastern cruelty towards women. This inherited traditional image of eastern husbands reminds us of the orientalist Isabel Burton who, in her book *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and The Holy Land* (1857) portrayed the husbands in the East as giants and dragon-like men from whom their wives go away and cry. (55)

The Moor tries to make an excuse at the end of the play for what he has done. But whatever his excuse will be is not going to convince the western readers of the legality of killing his wife. This stranger never admits his guilt, for he has a tremendous capacity for seeing what he wants to see and believing what he wants to believe and nothing else. In this context, he is typically an easterner treating his wife, according to western readers, in a callous and tyrannous way. Therefore, his nobility is perhaps too much for him, that is to say, in the eyes of the Venetians, he does not deserve it, and that he was given more than what he should be given. (56) The unbridled man went alone with no hindrance, for nothing can divert him from his own track of belief- the belief of an easterner who, according to the western understanding, knows nothing save his own self. (57) As an Oriental, Othello

is not to bow before others' advice. In this connection, Martin Stephen and Philip Franks (1984) showed Othello as an "egoistical." (58)

Like other easterners, Othello is proud of what he has achieved, not on military level, but the achievement of purifying his honour. It is a proper pride for him as an Arab Moor. He would go out among people and announce that he had killed his wife so as to get their applause, turning his back to the civil law, which perhaps, has, to Othello, an adamant role in this connection. The deed of adultery, thus, turned the once inevitable love into hatred. Having killed his wife, the Moor stood by her body which lies at peace, he stood unaffected by his bloody deed, as it should be so in the eastern mode. But when Emilia reveals the truth in a trembling voice, Othello turns into the most miserable of men as he looks with anguish at the murdered cold body.(59)

Whichever view we may adopt, we have to bear in mind that Othello believes that he behaves in a normal way despite his being among westerners who, perhaps, do not take his matter as much seriously as he took it. Therefore, normality and legality of the action are the demonstrating powers which designed Othello's mind. Even his simplicity could have internationally been made by Shakespeare to display his Eastern black hero for his spectators as inferior to the Shakespearean tragic heroes who were white Europeans such as Hamlet and (or) Macbeth. This inferiority springs from the dehumanization of Othello by his hosts. This understanding too, springs from the old discourse of Orientalism (which is mentioned above) concerning dehumanizing the easterners.

But the difference between Othello and his Eastern counterpart in this matter is that the former accepts, at the end of the play, that he must be punished or punish himself for what he had done. (60) This does not parallel the prevailing value of the atmosphere of the easterners who never repent such an act which they consider as duty. Othello, thus, differs from an eastern killer, for the former with a sudden and unexpected move rescued his nobility with a fatal strike directed to his own chest, while the latter would not do that- for that strike would be directed only to his female companion. However, the matter of destruction by the power of love does conform to the eastern taste and flavour as we see cases of self-destruction among eastern lovers, for instance, Zelica and Azam, the Magnoun and Leila, too died side by side when encountered by fate. (61)

Another point of difference between Othello and the eastern lover is that Othello is torn by his great love and doubts that overwhelm him, while

the easterner would not allow himself to be torn by his guilty lady, he may immediately find a way of executing her with no hesitation or consultation, even with his elders or relatives. The action is done promptly and independently. What makes Othello, again, different from his eastern counterpart is that Othello suffers mentally after Desdemona's death which is expressed physically when he falls to the ground passionated, whereas an easterner would not repent such an act of killing or even allow any kind of mental suffering, because he always thinks that he is right concerning any action that involves honour; which, to F. R. Leavis, is a "self-idealization." (62) However, the European cold atmosphere could stand behind Othello's signs of repentance or remorse if there is any.

Notwithstanding, Othello was not a person with lust for blood, but bloody affairs were imposed on him through the impact of his social **disciplines** which were imported by him from the oriental social life of his origin. These disciplines are inscribed in his mind as they are already inscribed in other oriental men's minds. Thus, this normality of behaviour is not strange for Othello, but it could prove strangeness in the Western idealism which depicts Othello as a ram or a barbary horse. (63) Othello wins our sympathy, pity and respect. It was not devilish blackness that covers the noble soul of Othello. He looks at things as he understands them, and not from a black binocular, but what he sees is that the white purity of Desdemona conceals her black sin-stained soul. This image forces Othello to become the slave of his oriental origin, which is a clear sign that Othello, the person, does commune with and conform to the common discourse of Orientalism, and that he is created by a western expert (in oriental affairs) in the same workshop of Orientalism.

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