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What Accounts for Othello's Tragedy? A Reading of *Othello* from the Perspective of Post-colonialism

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Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that Othello is a tragic hero. Nevertheless, for successive centuries, scholars have been of diverse opinions as to the root cause of his tragedy. Viewed from the perspective of post-colonialism, *Othello* demonstrates how colonialism wields its influence around the world, how colonizers lord it over their subordinates, how the marginalized experience excruciating inner conflict, and how the dialogue between the central and marginal cultures is thrown off balance. With the binary opposition between "centre" and "margin" established in Othello's mind, what he does to counteract the iniquity is to vanquish, by force, the power that tries to lord it over him. It is therefore safe to conclude that Othello's tragedy, which stems from his black identity branded on him with his birth, is unavoidable in a colonial society. Therefore, the play exposes how identity—especially when marked by race—can become a prison, shaping not only how one is perceived but how one perceives oneself.

Keywords

Othello; colonialism; centre; margin

1. Introduction: What Underlies Othello's Tragedy?

For hundreds of years, literary critics have been contending with one another as to the root cause of Othello's tragedy. Some tend to believe that it is jealousy and credulity that deprive Othello of his reason and humanity, propelling the meritorious general down to his ruin. Others, however, hold a different view by insisting that it does Othello great injustice by labeling him a narrow-minded and jealous husband. They further point out that Othello kills Desdemona, inspired by the lofty motive of upholding justice and punishing evil, in exactly the same way as a general executes a traitor. Recently, scholars' attention has been shifted to racial (Khomenko, 2021) and ethical issues (Li & Zhu, 2022), exploring the issue of identity (Shepherd, 2025), which lays a solid foundation for the present paper. The author of the current paper believes that Othello's black identity bears directly on his tragedy. Making an issue of Othello's dark skin, the treacherous Iago succeeds in igniting the wrath of Desdemona's father and then provoking Othello's feeling of inferiority, thus plunging the mighty warrior into an abyss of humiliation and sorrow, leading to his doom. Viewed from the perspective of post-colonialism, *Othello* demonstrates the racial and cultural superiority of colonialism, the inner conflict of a marginalized man, and the imbalance of dialogue between the central and marginal cultures.

2. Racial and Cultural Superiority of Colonialism

In the preface to *Imperialism and Colonialism: Essays on the History of European Expansion*, the American scholar H. L. Wesseling points out that "colony" is a technical term which refers to, in the original sense, the phenomenon of people of one place migrating to some other place to settle down to a new life (Wesseling, 1997, p. ix). The term

"colonialism", originating in France, is inextricably bound up with ruling people of different races, who come under direct political control from European countries. Frantz Fanon, a French-Algerian political philosopher, is keen-sighted enough to perceive that colonialism emerges under the cover of cultural superiority and hegemonic plunder, gradually growing into a cultural-psychological mode serving the political and economic interests of capitalism (Wang, 2001, p. 13).

The great geographical discovery of the 15th century unfolded the entire globe, in all its grandeur and vastness, before the eyes of the Europeans, prompting the emergence of the first batch of navigators, adventurers, and colonists who pioneered new routes to far-flung corners of the world to openly loot treasures and slaves. The European imperialist powers, led by Britain and France, subjected the Africans, Mexicans, and West Indians to colonial rule, who were regarded as barbarians bereft of cultural status and racial dignity. Aimé Césaire, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, makes a scathing remark in this regard: "The Europeans hold everything in Africa in scorn. The world of barbarity is Africa; the world of civilization is Europe" (Gilbert, 2001, p. 57). In the Shakespearean age, people were fascinated with all these colonial "exploits" and overseas adventures, which invariably aroused great public interest. Just as Othello's account of his personal experiences to Desdemona and her father:

"*Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,*
Of moving accidents by flood and field
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
And portance in my travels' history:
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven
It was my hint to speak, —such was the process;
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders." (Shakespeare, p. 18)

Othello's experiences vividly illustrate how the aboriginal Africans used to be conquered, looted, enslaved and slaughtered by the civilized Europeans. In the very beginning of the play, Othello began his service as a senior general in the Venetian government. Trusted by the duke and placed in full martial and political command of Cyprus, Othello is nevertheless derogatorily referred to as "*a Moor*", a debasing term used to describe all people with dark skin in the Renaissance period. Making an issue of the marked difference between Othello and Desdemona in skin colour, Iago launches into vicious slander against the couple: "*Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is topping your white ewe." "Not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, /[…] one may smell in such a will most rank, /Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural*" (Shakespeare, p. 61). In the eyes of Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman who covets the beauty of Desdemona, Othello is "*a gross lascivious Moor*", "*an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere*". Brabantio, Desdemona's father, burns with fury about her daughter's marriage. According to the old gentleman, Othello is essentially a "*sooty, foul thief*". On five separate occasions, Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter with evil magic:

"*O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?*
Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou." (Shakespeare, p. 12)

And, "*thou hast practised on her with foul charms, /Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals*". Like Iago, Brabantio does not hesitate in heaping slanders on Othello: "*I therefore apprehend and do attach thee/For an abuser*

of the world, a practiser/Of arts inhibited and out of warrant. /Lay hold upon him: if he do resist, /Subdue him at his peril." He goes further to assert his white man's stance by affirming that "*if such actions may have passage free, /Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.*"

In the play, the cultural superiority of colonialism also manifests itself in Catholicism that Othello practises. Ye Weilian, a distinguished Chinese scholar, traces the germination of colonialism all the way back to Christianity. From the era of the Renaissance onward, all nations and peoples outside the Christianity-centred Europe have been indiscriminately referred to as "pagans", unbaptised and thus uncivilized, who are invariably equated with barbarians. In addition, colonialism is supposed to "civilize" the pagans by steeping them in Christian culture (Ye, 1999, p. 369). Having weathered so many bitter adversities, Othello finally converts to Catholicism and succumbs to the cultural tradition of Italy, his colonizing country. Therefore, he subscribes to the Christian idea that women in general, as descendants of Eve, are by nature fickle, prone to induce men to crimes. As Iago remarks, "*In Venice they [women] do let heaven see the pranks/They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience/Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown*" (Shakespeare, p. 60). Othello's vulnerability to this prevailing view on women unequivocally accounts for his suspicion of his wife's unfaithfulness. Just as Gayatri C. Spivak, an American Indian scholar, points out, the collective cultural memory of the colony is irrevocably branded with marks of its colonizing country due to its subordination in aspects of politics, economy, culture, and language (Gayatri, 1988, p. 208). As a matter of fact, exposing the coloured race to the education and culture of their own country, the colonizers managed to shape their subordinates into the obedient and docile type desired by the colonizing country.

3. Excruciating Inner Conflict of the Marginalized Man

In his widely influential work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon reflects on the deep-lying consciousness of the black race in regard to their skin colour and the racial discrimination thus incurred. According to the scholar, the black race has long been afflicted with this consciousness, which renders them instinctively humiliated. With the economy, politics, and culture of the colonizing country reigning supreme, the black people are undoubtedly reduced to the inferior race who, in order to struggle free of their racial shackles to win favour with their white "superiors", strive to obliterate this inborn shame, though often futilely. Their efforts to ingratiate serve to render them all the more conscious of their skin colour, throwing them into a vicious cycle of endeavouring to please and feeling self-inferior. This pent-up emotion of self-abasement, nowhere to be channelled, only leads to the warped psychology of the black race. It is right this furious battle raging on in Othello's mind that Iago manages to take advantage of to ruin this hero.

It is patent clear that from the very beginning of the play, a discordant note is detectable in the love between Othello and Desdemona. A young white upper-class lady and an old black weather-beaten warrior: the glaring contrast caused a big stir among the Venetian upper-class society, sending ripples even to Othello himself. Had Desdemona not dropped a broad hint by saying: "*If you had a friend that loved me, /you should teach him how to tell your story. /And that would woo me*", Othello would, in all likelihood, have refrained from proposing to her.

Another person who has sensitized Othello to his marginalized status is Brabantio, his father-in-law. Having gone through so many vicissitudes of life, Othello finally succeeds in extricating himself from slavery and even making his way into the Venetian government. He thinks himself valued and accepted by the white-dominated society. But as a matter of fact, Brabantio feels for him an entrenched contempt, regarding him as an inferior all along. In spite of all this adversity, however, Othello gains solace from Desdemona's pure and courageous love, which comes as a ray of genial sunshine amidst the tempestuous storm of slander and hate.

However, the sinister Iago continues to sow discord between the couple by provoking Othello's feelings of inferiority, again and again. Slandering that Desdemona is adulterously paired with Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, Iago further justifies Othello's suspicion of his wife's infidelity: "*The knave [Cassio] is handsome, young, and hath all those / requisites in him that folly and green minds look after*" (Shakespeare, p. 35). These "requisites" of being "young" and "handsome" are obviously wanting in Othello. And furthermore, Cassio is white! Mark these meaning-loaded words addressed to Othello by Iago:

> "*Not to affect many proposed matches*
> *Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,*
> *Whereto we see in all things nature tends—*
> *Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,*

Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me; I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms
And happily repent." (Shakespeare, p. 61)

These words strike Othello right to the depth of his heart, in which his inferior complex is once again set ablaze: through personal endeavours, one can elevate oneself to a satisfactory position or achieve success in certain aspects, but what on earth can one do to change one's skin colour? Iago carries on with his venomous slander against Desdemona, obliterating in Othello the last vestige of confidence still cherished for the girl's chastity: "*She did deceive her father, marrying you;*" "*She that, so young, could give out such a seeming, /To seal her father's eyes up close as oak—*" (Shakespeare, p. 60). Othello begins to burn with a scorching sense of inferiority: "*Haply, for I am black /And have not those soft parts of conversation /That chamberers have, or for I am declined /Into the vale of years, /She's gone*" (Shakespeare, p. 62). Consumed with humiliation and fury, Othello is convinced that Desdemona's betrayal stems from her inborn scorn for his dark skin, a mark of his marginalized identity. His feeling of shame unpacified, his fury soaring to the sky, Othello launches into a terrible revenge. Desdemona's pretty visage and fair complexion, which used to be such an attraction to the mighty warrior, only serve to disgust him at the moment. Accusing his wife of being "*false as hell*", Othello swears, "*I'll tear her all to pieces.*" He finally strangles the innocent Desdemona, leaving her no chance to excuse herself. It is Othello's special identity as a marginalized man that is taken advantage of by the treacherous Iago, who succeeds in propelling the hero down the ruinous road to his ultimate doom. It is therefore safe to say that Othello's tragedy is more of a tragedy of colonialism than a tragedy of love.

4. Conclusion: Marginalized Status as the Root Cause

As revealed by the foregoing analysis, Iago's treacherous scheme serves merely as a catalytic force in Othello's downfall; the true essence of his tragedy lies in his deeply ingrained sense of inferiority, which renders him psychologically susceptible to any disparagement concerning his race and social standing. Othello's internalized racial insecurity—a product of the Venetian society that simultaneously depends on and ostracizes him—transforms him into a man perpetually on the defensive, hyper-aware of his precarious position as an outsider. His Moorish identity, marked by his dark skin and foreign origins, brands him as an interloper in a world dominated by white European norms. Thus, while Iago's manipulations are undeniably malicious, they succeed only because they exploit Othello's pre-existing anxieties about his place in Venetian society.

Othello's inferiority complex is not merely a personal failing but a structural consequence of his marginalized status. Despite his military prowess and noble bearing, he remains an object of both fascination and disdain—a "noble Moor" to some, yet still a racialized "other" whose marriage to Desdemona is viewed as transgressive. This societal tension manifests in Othello's own psyche, where he constructs a binary opposition between his own "marginalized" identity and Desdemona's "central" position as a white, aristocratic Venetian woman. His love for her is, in part, an attempt to bridge this divide, to claim legitimacy in a world that denies him full acceptance. Yet, when Iago insinuates that Desdemona has betrayed him, Othello's deepest fears are confirmed: that he was never truly worthy of her, that his blackness makes him inherently unlovable, and that the harmony he once envisioned was nothing but an illusion.

The collapse of this idealized vision of love and order propels Othello toward violence. His earlier self-assurance—rooted in his military achievements—crumbles under the weight of racialized self-doubt. In his mind, Desdemona's alleged infidelity is not just a personal betrayal but a cosmic disruption, a sign that the world itself is irredeemably corrupt. His decision to murder her is, paradoxically, an act of perverted justice—an attempt to restore balance by destroying the "deceitful" force that has, in his view, undermined the natural order. In killing her, he seeks to reclaim agency, to defy the emasculation and humiliation he associates with his racial subjugation. Yet this act only reinforces his tragic fate, proving that even his rebellion is shaped by the very oppression he seeks to escape.

Ultimately, Othello's tragedy is not an isolated personal failure but an inevitable outcome of the colonial and racial hierarchies of his time. His blackness, far from being a neutral trait, is the lens through which his entire existence is interpreted by others and, crucially, by himself. His psychological vulnerability is not innate but culturally manufactured, a product of a society that grants him conditional acceptance while always reminding him of his Otherness. Thus, his downfall is not merely the result of Iago's cunning or Othello's own jealousy, but of a systemic devaluation

that precedes and predetermines his fate.

In this light, Othello transcends the confines of a domestic tragedy and becomes a searing critique of racial and colonial power structures. Shakespeare's play exposes how identity—especially when marked by race—can become a prison, shaping not only how one is perceived but how one perceives oneself. Othello's destruction, then, is not just personal but political, a testament to the devastating consequences of internalized oppression in a world that refuses to see him as fully human.

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