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Literature

OTHELLO: A POSTCOLONIAL PLAY

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ABSTRACT

In pursuance of Literary Theory and Criticism, texts are drastically heterogeneous. They do not contain any general meaning, but each time a text is read from a different perspective, it reproduces new meanings and contributes to the propagation of new ideas and theories. A deconstructive reading can reveal the irreconcilable possibilities generated by the text, and the reader finds it strenuous to determine any permanent meanings. In this paper, Shakespeare's Othello is read from a different perspective in adherence to postcolonial theory. The Othello bears several references to postcolonial qualities – the Eurocentric ideology of Elizabethan people, who incline to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions, the notion of postcolonial othering, the position of marginalized, a clash between the Orient and the Occident, the hybridity of culture, identity crisis, and European racial consciousness, etc. Thus, the present paper focuses mainly on Shakespeare's work Othello with a postcolonial approach in the light of Edward Said's Orientalism.

This paper intends to propose a new reading of Othello (Shakespeare, 2011), a play by William Shakespeare, from a postcolonial perspective. We will illuminate some basic postcolonial issues and explore the principles and workings of the play *Othello*. Postcolonial criticism is an approach to analyzing the question of racial identity. This study scrutinizes how Shakespeare's play *Othello* relates to the social codes and the history of the reception of Shakespearean drama within decolonization movements. Shakespeare's *Othello* is considered a postcolonial text because the colonized copes with cultural hybridity in which the *self* and the *other* entwine the colonial experience. Some scholars have taken this play by Shakespeare as an early postcolonial work. A theme of colonialism and a sheer criticism of the European attack on the new lands of the West is straight away presented in *Othello*. The postcolonial reading of *Othello* projects the colonial experience back to Europe and a history of interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans. Slavery, colonialism, culture, imperialism, and the power to change other civilizations by the West are the concerns to speculate. This paper attempts to present an investigation of postcolonial qualities as cultural specificities and the way in which these qualities translate from the socio-political sphere into literature. The focus of this paper is postcolonial ideologies and their construction and deconstruction in Shakespeare, using the works of distinguished postcolonial literary theorists. Prior to the analysis of Shakespeare's play *Othello* from a postcolonial perspective, it is required to circumvent confusion while dealing with the obscurities pertaining to the term *Postcolonial*. The usage of receptive and productive vocabulary may subside the risk of incising personal opinions into the prevailing text. The purpose is to set up an appropriate context that can be used for analyzing the play *Othello*. This segment will answer questions like - What is Postcolonialism? What are the colonial ideologies? How could Othello be scrutinized through Postcolonialism? (Cado, 2014).

Postcolonialism

At the outset, it's important to define the term "Postcolonialism" and discuss its scope. In the 1960s and '70s, the term "Postcolonialism" referred to the period immediately after decolonization. To Robert J.C. Young, any work scholarly and creative that deals with the issues of European colonization of Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and other parts of the world and also traces not only what the colonizers did but also the sort of response that came from the

colonized people – how did they represent themselves and how did they fight back, constitute the field of postcolonial studies. A wonderfully articulated definition of Postcolonialism by Robert Young is preferred here: "Postcolonialism offers a language of and for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledge and histories are not allowed to count. It is above all this preoccupation with the oppressed, with the subaltern classes, with minorities in any society, with the concerns of those who live or come from elsewhere that constitutes the basis of postcolonial politics and remains the core that generates its continuing power" (Young, 2009). If we deconstruct this passage, we could decode some defining attributes of Postcolonialism: It is about human consciousness that has traditionally been either silenced or marginalized by the dominant groups or discourses. It talks about how one's national origin and race determine one's place and value in the eyes of the dominant nations. The text which paved the way was Edward Said's Orientalism, published in 1978. Said defines "Orientalism" as a Western way of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978b). For Said, Orientalism is a hegemonic discourse with the assumptions of Western superiority over Eastern cultures that serve the ruling world powers and are manifested throughout all forms of discourse, including literature and research, in order to perpetuate the power of these dominant groups.

Theoretical Foundations

The postcolonial study is a field of study mostly established in the branch of literature that deals with any issues related to the historical colonialism or colonization of most of the world by the European nations and the responses of the people who were colonized, both literary and political and their struggles during and after colonialism in one way or the other constitute postcolonial studies. Within this, there are different political and conceptual divisions like- postcolonial Marxism, postcolonial feminism, and postcolonial historiography, but all of these fields of study when dealing with the issues of colonialism, its impact even after the post colonies become independent nation-states, all of that can be subsumed under the larger rubric of postcolonial studies. Robert Young has suggested in one of his magisterial books on colonialism called "Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction," an alternative term which was called 'tricontinentalism' (Young, 2016). The term refers to the field of study of three major continents that were colonized, Africa, Asia, and South

America. In postcolonial studies, what we encounter is some canonical texts, and these are mostly theorists, novelists, short story writers, and playwrights who form a sort of counter canon to the mainstream American or British literary canon. The contemporary three major theorists are – Edward W Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, but Said is instrumental in launching the field of postcolonial studies because of his 1978 book "Orientalism" (Said, 1978b) and also for his work that followed that book. Said coined the concept of Orientalism as a term comprising the whole of European ideas, thoughts, cultural depictions, military reports, and claims to superiority over the Middle East, in particular, the Arab /Muslim countries of Northern Africa and the Mediterranean. In Orientalism, Said tries to explain that what Europeans and Americans think of the Middle East without having read much about it and without having been there, projects the stereotypical view of the Middle East, which he calls the 'orient,' is intentional. This thought was discursively produced because the body of knowledge existed in Europe as well as in America but mostly in Europe, where people claimed a certain degree of expertise on the Orient and called themselves Orientalists. Because of that knowledge, Said argues that the disciplines of Modern Oriental Studies involuntarily permeate with the traditional representations of the essence of the Orient, which he calls Orientalism, creates a timeless perception of the Middle East in the minds of the Europeans. Orientalism as a notion is based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the orient' and 'the Occident' in which a typical image of the Orient is presented as culturally and biologically inferior. To Said " 'Orientalism' can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978a).

Postcolonial theorists apprehend that the subjectivity of the colonized is fractured by persuading them to identify with Western values and cultural norms, which Homi Bhabha, a critic of Said, emphasized as the instability and hybridity of identity and uncertainty in neocolonial relations. In Bhabha's 'mimicry' concept, native copying of the white behavior is never quite the unadulterated recognition of a superior culture because the performance and enunciation are never the same with regard to the original (Bhabha, 1997). Postcolonial studies intend to deconstruct the Eurocentric values and fortuitously look for injustice and irrationality that has piled on to this day and is still continuing. But no matter what their unproven axiom, the questions center on the plight of the formerly colonized, their scuffles, victories, histories, and their stories all replenished and articulated to confound the simplistic imperial and colonial narratives about the inhabitants of the global periphery.

Post-coloniality in Shakespeare's works

Shakespeare was in the limelight when European colonialism was in its primeval stage. Colonialism in Shakespeare's works is subjected to new and exciting critiques, especially the post-realist critics who appreciated the Shakespearean plays as they celebrated the superiority of the 'civilized races' (Loomba et al., 2013). He became 'the best' during the colonial period, the exemplar of Englishness and a measure of the self and the social. His works are interpreted in highly conservative ways by the colonial educationists and administrators, intending to show them endorsing existing racial, gender, and other hierarchies. This makes it clear that Shakespearean plays are both emanated from and used to demonstrate colonial authority (Loomba et al., 2013). His plays have often been re-read, and adaptations are made from postcolonial, feminist, and racial perspectives. Most of Shakespeare's plays, most notably *Othello*, bear several instances of the scornful attitude of Elizabeth to the East and paves the way for the postcolonial reading of the text. For

example, in the play *Othello*, the Venetian merchant, a Moroccan Muslim black man, sells himself at the court of Venice. After the climax of the show, we notice that all the attributes which are proposed to Othello are the same general attributes that hidden and obvious Orientalism deal with irrational, barmy, emotional, extremist, chauvinist, etc. (Nejad, 2018).

Race and Otherness

Before the publication of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, postcolonial subjects had been defined with respect to alienation, hybridity, and split subjectivity. The urtexts are adduced to discuss the problems surrounding colonization and the negotiation of race and Otherness (Roux, 2009). But Fanon's classic anti-colonial treatise often adduce psychoanalytic discourse, stressing that in colonialist ideologies, 'the real other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man.... The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self – that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable' (Fanon, 1967). The 'white man' beyond its denotation monopolizes the category of the Other, acquiring access to subjectivity. A psychoanalytic reading of the play *Othello* validates the promotion of colonialist ideology. While Othello's (self) identification corresponds to the typical subject or Other binary, his (self) representation backs up the colonialist formation of the Other as a non-subject. When we look through the early colonialist context, we find Othello's subjectivity is measured by the visual signifiers 'white' and 'black,' and that makes up an Otherness which is inwardly chaotic and crucial with regard to what it is not (Comensoli, 2004). Shakespeare's *Othello* gives an instinctual response to the black character on stage, Othered, as much to the Venetian communal context and alienation from the tumultuous cosmopolitan center of Early Modern Venice, making the play- racist and symbolic, which is unavoidable. In Ania Loomba's *Renaissance Drama, Gender, Race*, a course or an approach is recognized: "Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way until he occupies its 'true' position as it's other" (Loomba, 1989). Commenting on his Otherness, Ania Loomba states: "Not just Iago and Brabantio, but Othello himself makes many references to his blackness and status as "outsider" (Dubey, 2015). Othello, being an alien in a foreign land, desperately holds an identity that is constantly diminished and, in the end, replaced by a racist remark, 'the Moor'. In Fanon's words, Othello is 'an object cut off from his 'own presence,' which implies a forceful representation of the vision of the universal 'primitive' – 'thick lips' (I.i.10), 'old black ram' (I.i.11); 'Barbary horse' (I.i.12); 'gross ... lascivious Moor' (I.i.13) – Othello's ontological subject status is questioned, and the Otherness confirms his subjectivity. Othello's attempt to transform himself into a Venetian, his growth as a self, and his complex hybridity remind us of all major characteristics of the postcolonial subject, as per the academic discourse.

The title "*Othello, the Moore of Venice*" complements the process of othering within the context of early modern European colonialism, which contributes to the constitution of Englishness. The word *Moor* refers to Arab Muslims, North-African Muslims, and African-Black. Each of these three words – Black, Muslim and African endorses the Elizabethans' perception of the 'Moor' who was understood either as Turks or Arabs, and countless reports of the travelers hypothesize – Ethiopians and other Africans are often taken for Muslims. In addition, the Moore of Venice appears to be an unusual event because Venice is not actually a place of Moors; it is rather a place of culture, order, and control which is completely opposite to the presumably savage Moors. But Othello's race is quite ambiguous because he is often called Moor by the other characters in the play, which is unquestionably racist and deliberately incorrect. Jack D' Amico, in his "The Moor in English Renaissance Drama, states that "as an opposite in

race, religion, and disposition, the Moor can be used to confirm the superiority of Western Values" (Toker et al., 2011). A testification of his heritage is required to avoid ambiguity: Firstly, we perceive that the filthy remarks are made to defame Othello by twisting the fact to some extent, for example, Brabantio's concluding statement on Othello when he comes to know about the elopement that Othello must have used black magic or must have drugged his daughter to seduce her; otherwise, their affair is unimaginable. This particular instance does not sound as disrespectful as other comments put up by others in the play, but it evidently demonstrates the unreliability of Othello's description by the other characters. Secondly, when we look through the stories of Othello, which according to him, charm Desdemona and she fall for him, construct his identity, and these stories of his past both connect him with the Unfamiliar Other and simultaneously help him to remain detached from it. But when we consider both the sources to testify his heritage, we find that both the sources sound dubious because the stories constitute only blurry information about his past, and we lack solid information about him (Cado, 2014). The way Shakespeare portrays the image of Othello in the play indicates several backgrounds: Othello may be an African, Spanish or Turkish, or when it comes to religion, he may be a pagan or a Muslim. In this case, we have no clue of his exact story, and race, religion, and ethnicity have no clear extremities in particularity. To Ania Loomba, it is anachronistic to speak of race in the historical context of Renaissance society (Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism) (Loomba, 2002). The race itself is an ambiguous term because it does not come up with an exact definition and even more when it is placed in the context of the early modern period, but the only way to perceive racial identities is based on observations and mythology, and the sources which we consider dubious were the only ones that were available to Shakespeare. Thus, the vagueness of Othello's heritage contributes to the sense of unfamiliarity and Otherness. With the undetermined issue of Othello's racial heritage, his social position is quite impressive. He became an important person in Venetian society through his military exploits. He identifies himself as a true Venetian, and likewise, his position also shifted from an outsider or opponent to an insider or protector. In *Shakespeare's Race and Colonialism*, Loomba says that "while Othello is the defender of the Christian state against the Muslim threat, he also embodies that threat" (Loomba, 2002). As a true Venetian, forgetting his Otherness, Othello fully adopted the values of Venetian society and accordingly incorporated its racism in the self, which means the notion of Otherness is internalized to sum up the mechanisms of colonial power. It is very interesting to watch Othello's progress: in the past, he was of a Muslim/pagan/ non-Christian origin, then he embraced Christianity to justify his actions and became a reliable insider, proved his loyalty by leading numerous military expeditions; But ultimately, he falls back on his Moorish barbarity as he was overpowered by jealousy, condemned his wife of promiscuity and became a murderer. "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.II.6). I think this violent ending has carried off Othello's mask of artificial civility as it was unnatural, and the stereotypical masculine image of a jealous Moor is revealed. Despite his honorable and admirable nature, Othello falls into the scheme of the stereotype. Labelling Othello as 'the Moor' weakens Shakespeare's effort to prioritize Othello's race and Oriental descent (Toker et al., 2011). As the title implicates, Othello is not just Othello himself; rather, he is symbolic of all Muslims, all Blacks, all Arabians, all Africans, and at length, the whole East, which is the main concern of Orientalism, whereas all other characters in the play can be recognized as the embodiment of the West. They display the hues and shades of the West. For example, Desdemona- a charm of manner, Cassio- a charade of knowledge and charisma, Iago- the epitome of a conniving and evil character, Brabantio- the genteel racist, Roderigo- a fool, Emilia- a woman of practical intelligence and emotional resilience. In the scene of

Othello's scandal, we infer from the references to Othello's blackness that he is of African genesis; yet it is mainly Iago who manipulates Brabantio and Roderigo to clinch that blackness down, transform it into something called racial stereotype and use it as an out-and-out marker of cultural difference, just to show Othello as an outsider and is not "of Venice". But to the contrary, Shakespeare's ethnic lines typify Othello as a Moore who is concomitant to Venice. We can say, in short, that Othello is a different stranger than others in Venice. Being an Orient, he is completely merged into Venetian society, yet remains a stranger and handles both military and social actions. As a Moor and a Venetian soldier, Othello acquires a space between *them and us*. He appoints his own officers over the candidate (Iago), the "great ones of the city" (I.i.8-9), and he determines where and with whom Desdemona will live, against the protests of her father. Othello is proud of his own. He elopes with a woman whom he says was attracted to his adventures on the soil of Africa and who calls him "the Moor" (I.iii.244), uses his Moorish heritage to make a great play of defending his honor -when Iago confronts him with the news of Brabantio's ravings, and he responds to the ravings in the Venetian court. Brabantio's endeavors to stereotype Othello as - the Moor, as a demon and a witch, uses his heritage to the point of vulnerability to prove him guilty, but for Othello, it is a point of contentment. For Eastern Othello, it is not difficult to think that the Western Plots are in him, and due to this chauvinism or extremism, he doubts Desdemona's loyalty and comes up with his own tragedy (Nejad, 2018).

If we read Othello not as a play but as a narrative about a venerable soldier and an able statesman who is overpowered by the racist ideology of his time, then we can apprehend that even a central and honorable figure, in every possible way, identified with the multiracial values of the European city-state, is possessed by Otherness: he can never take his figurative identity for granted because he is overindulged to his subjectivity which endangers the public identity that he performs: "a monster in his thought," in Othello's own words, "too hideous to be shown" (III.iii.90-91). In act IV, when Lodovico comes up against the agonized Othello and asks: "Is this the same noble Moor whom our full senate Call all in all sufficient?" (IV.i.138-139), the answer to this question does not indicate that the noble Moor is superseded by an Other, rather he has been a victim of self-division and alienated from his symbolic identity (Roux, 2009). We come across several instances of racist language coming from both the Venetians and Othello himself. The play carries binary oppositions like black and white, contrasting darkness and light, and the characters' derogatory remarks on Othello's foul blackness and Desdemona's pure white innocence clearly expose the racial politics in *Othello*.

The collision between East and West

This segment discusses the matrimonial union of a black man and a white woman, which is hard to imagine in Venetian society. In Act I. scene iii. Brabantio says that the marriage between his daughter and Othello appears to be a nightmare to him, and this inconvenience interrupts his sleep. To Said, the old-fashioned sentiment of the Europeans draws a line between the East and the West and states explicitly that the Orient and the Occident should not be combined. Whenever efforts are made to entail such combinations of cross-cultures, they prove a fatal blow. To interpret righteously, the notion of Eastern Othello marrying Desdemona or West is an anomaly that is heartbreaking. It questions the ethereality of the East trying to be equal with the West. We trace it to Brabantio's apprehension that this marriage will ruin his culture, race, and legacy, and his successors will face the consequence of being infected by this hybrid culture. He fears interracial marriage based on the fact that Othello and Desdemona are from two different worlds. This is clearly manifested in his fear when Iago mentions in the dialogue, "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 gannets for germans ." (I.i.12-13) This dialogue of Iago accurately conveys the Western perspective of the East while writing the book of the nobility. Brabantio finds it hard to believe that his daughter, who is symbolic of Venetian beauty, goes against the traditional Venetian custom by marrying an outsider, a black man named Othello, instead of one of the rich Venetian men she is expected to marry. He accuses Othello of using sorcery to seduce Desdemona. He asks, could a maid so "tender, fair, and happy" go-to "to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou" unless magic is involved. For Brabantio, it is inconceivable that Desdemona is overwhelmed by the magnificent charm that many of his associates do not want and who are content to marry an alien black Othello. The communion of East and West is so far eliminated from the mind that the West cannot withstand this connection (Nejad, 2018). This bicultural consensus appears as if the East has startled the West by exerting force. But as a matter of fact, Desdemona is enthralled by his adventurous past as a soldier who has been to exotic lands. She overhears his stories about his expeditions and later asks him to tell these to her in person. But it is interesting to note where the marriage finally springs from. In this context, it must be the East's persuasion or compulsion to create the link and not through its uprightness but by stealing it and finally fleeing. But the young West is aware of the link and ignores its consequences. In short, we can say that the link between the East and the West is fundamentally a false one because the supposition sounds impossible, which leads to the destruction of both sides. In this case, Othello doubts Desdemona's loyalty which is seen as his weak point because, in the beginning, he was sure of Desdemona's chastity but later, the seed of doubt emerges. There may be many reasons for this betrayal as Othello is aware of the fact that he is black, which symbolizes wickedness and violence, and does not hold any dignity like other Venetians do, fat and old. This indicates that somewhere eastern, Othello's self-esteem is hampered when he compares his eastern appearance with Desdemona's western charm. He thinks that its characteristics are the same as that of the West, but in reality, the East lies much below the West. This is what Edward Said says- Orientation of the East. In this situation, the East is making efforts to transform into What the West has been about. Thus, Othello, who is revered highly just for his adequacy on the battlefield, is considered violent and untrustworthy, which costs him his self-esteem.

While talking about the link between East and West, we should bear in mind – the legacy of the East – Desdemona's handkerchief, which symbolizes fidelity. The handkerchief, which Desdemona receives from Othello, she keeps with her as a symbol of Othello's love. Othello claims that his mother used to keep it for his father as a sign of faithfulness. To Othello, the handkerchief represents marital fidelity. This napkin plays an important role in the show as it is directly connected to Othello's perception of Desdemona's infidelity. It is viewed as a gift, a gift from the Eastern Othello to the Western charm, or on the other hand, a contract of marriage. It is a legacy from East Othello which passes from his mother to him, from Othello to Desdemona, from Desdemona it comes to Emilia, from Emilia to Cassio, from Cassio to Bianca, and finally, from Bianca, it reaches Othello. This is suggestive of completing a full circle, which means: that through a series of developments, it leads back to the same source or a complete reversal of the original position. In an exemplary manner, it alludes to the economic exploitation of the East. Othello can be brought to bear the source of the East (oil, cotton, sugar, and other raw materials) and realize that the East is providing access to the European trade market. The resources meant for the indigenous groups are being plundered and moved to the West, eventually reaching out to the markets, and again sold back to the East itself. It is just the same way: drawing the raw materials from the East, turning them into commodities after a series of developments, and then selling them back to the East by plungers like Bianca in Othello.

CONCLUSION

Finally, a postcolonial reading of Othello opens up the extent to which 16th-century colonial attitudes are maintained in the actions of Othello when he accomplishes the racial assumptions mounted upon him in the end. After being considered "the Moor," "the thick-lips," "an old black ram," "the devil" by Iago, and animal-like by Brabantio, Othello behaves apathetically, but eventually, he becomes violent and strangulates Desdemona to death carrying out his racist expectations that he is not well acquainted with the culture of the so-called "civilized" Venetian society. His self-assertive behavior validates perceived racism that 'the other' is barbarian and inhumane and consequently surrenders to their basic primal urges. These endorsements of 16th-century perspectives on miscegenation and 'the other' can be considered intolerable in today's postindustrial society.

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