

*Othello: A Postcolonial-Feminist Reading*  
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**OTHELLO : A FEMINIST READING**

Shakespeare's *Othello* daringly challenges gender and racial stereotypes. The heroine at first seems to be that rare character in tragedy, a strong outspoken woman who is also unquestionably good. Her initial actions are strikingly bold, not only does she steal away from her father's house to marry Othello, but she also appears in the Venetian senate chamber to testify to her love and to ask to accompany her husband on his military mission. She is afraid neither of public speech nor of declaring her own mind. Many early modern texts, however, enjoined women to silence and to obedience. Much in Desdemona's bold behaviour allows for sinister interpretation if one reads her with the intent to find fault. Iago, Othello's lieutenant, is just such a reader, a walking encyclopaedia of gutter thoughts. He assumes his own wife as being unfaithful to him, though there is no evidence in the play that that is true. Iago tells Othello that because Desdemona defied her father in marrying him, she will in turn deceive him. Because she married a man not of her own country, Iago assumes that she has perverse, erotic tastes and excessive sexual desire. Similarly, he urges Othello to mistrust Desdemona's opinion. When Desdemona advocates for Cassio, Iago leads Othello to believe that it is a sign of her love for him.

Why does Othello accept Iago's readings of his wife? Partly the answer lies in the way Iago adopts the voice of worldly common sense, speaking about 'women' as if everyone knows what he says to be true. Reading through an anti-feminist lens, Iago turns Desdemona's unusual

attributes of courage, clear sightedness and verbal dexterity into marks of whoredom. Bianca's role in the play reveals the deep structure of the fantasy Iago induces in Othello. Bianca, one of the play's three women, is not a wife, but an unmarried woman in Cyprus who has developed a powerful affection for Cassio. Though Cassio and Iago laugh and make jokes at her expense, treating her as a courtesan, there is no textual indication that Bianca is attached to a number of men simultaneously. Her loyalty to Cassio is unswerving. When he is wounded in the last act, Bianca rushes out to help him. In doing so, she opens herself to the charge that she herself is would-be assassin. However, despite her unusual qualities, in the play's gender economy Bianca stands for the non-wife, the sexually unchaste whore. In one of the key symbolic scenes of the play, Othello confuses his wife with Bianca.

This confusion of wife and whore is compounded by Iago's skilful manipulation of what is perhaps the key symbolic object found in Othello, namely, the handkerchief Othello once gave to Desdemona. The trajectory of this handkerchief is crucial to the play's crucial meaning. Momentarily ignored by Desdemona, the castaway handkerchief is retrieved by Emilia, who gives it to Iago, who drops it in Cassio's chamber. Cassio then picks it up and gives it to Bianca. Othello's jealousy is compounded when he sees Bianca carrying the handkerchief.

Feminists have probed into the multiple significances of this object. As a gift from Othello to Desdemona, it can symbolise the bond between them. He accuses her of destroying the bond. But in actuality, he is the one who destroyed their bond by mistrusting her. But the handkerchief is important not only as a sign of an abstract bond, but also as a material object in its own right. It is, for instance, the kind of household object over which a good wife was to

exercise managerial control. When Othello accuses Desdemona of losing the handkerchief, he is accusing her in essence of ceasing to be a good housewife and of becoming a sexually and economically impoverished whore.

As the tragedy unfolds, the play creates a stark juxtaposition between Desdemona's purity and martyred virtue and Othello's irrationality and cruelty. Race and gender are set horrifyingly at odds. From a feminist perspective, even the vindication of Desdemona is deeply problematic. It seems that in the second half of the play, Desdemona is stripped off her former courage and strength. She patiently endures Othello's wrath, even when he stripes her in public. Desdemona seems to express her own acceptance of Othello's cruelty to her. Later, after Othello has strangled Desdemona, she momentarily revives and declares herself guiltless of any crime. Moreover, she assumes responsibility for her own murder. When Emilia asks who has killed her, Desdemona responds, "Nobody, I myself. Farewell."

Lisa Gardine has argued that 'good' women in Renaissance tragedy are often represented as long-suffering martyrs. This is a long standing version of acceptable femininity. The Desdemona of the play's early acts is not such a martyr, but towards the end of the play, she conforms more closely to the stereotypical picture of the good wife as one who is chaste, silent and obedient. Desdemona's absolute purity is especially emphasised in the scene where she prepares for bed and sings the song about the woman abandoned by her lover.

At one point in the scene, Desdemona asks Emilia if she would, for the entire world, sleep with a man not her husband. Then, Emilia declares, that women have appetites and affections just as men do, and that if men mistreat women, women will learn from men how to

satisfy themselves outside of marriage. This brings about a contrast between Desdemona and her servant maid. Desdemona is clearly the heroine of the play, but some feminists have preferred the earthy pragmatism of Emilia to the idealised virtue of Desdemona. Certainly the two women are strongly contrasted in this scene, inviting the audience to compare their virtues and attitudes toward men. Realising that her husband has been responsible for Othello's jealousy, Emilia refuses to obey him when he commands her silence. Instead, she reveals his crimes and dies by his hand. In the end, her friendship with and loyalty to Desdemona win out over her bond to her husband.

The play thus ends up strongly vindicating the purity of Desdemona and the courage of Emilia. However, this is done in counterpoint to the gradual transformation of Othello into a stereotypically jealous, irrational, and murderous Moor. In the play's final acts, Othello strikes his wife in public, strangles Desdemona in her bed, and kills himself. This is an act which within a Christian framework is a taboo, a mark of despair rather than trust in God's providential care. These acts represent the obverse of the confident and poised general, who in the first scene of the play, faced down a crowd of armed men with confidence. All tragic heroes to some degree disintegrate before the moment of death that allows for a partial restitution of their former greatness.

What is horrifying about Othello's disintegration, however, is that it conforms to derogatory discourses that delineated the Moor as bestial in his lack of reason, uncontrolled passion, and potential for jealousy. As a consequence, Othello's disintegration seems to follow from his status as a 'barbarian', a thinly civilised black Moor whose primitive and destructive

impulses are unleashed by Iago's skilful manipulations. Othello himself seems to locate the origins of his sins in his own 'otherness.'

## CONCLUSION

For contemporary feminists, it has become important to understand how the 'fair' Desdemona is constructed in relation to the 'black' Othello. They are interested to examine how the gender and racial ideologies of the play intersect to destroy both the Moorish general and his Venetian wife. The unjust suffering of Desdemona reveals how easily an early modern woman could lose the title 'good-wife' and be vilified as a whore. Equally horrific is that in *Othello*, this martyrdom of Desdemona coincides with the play's escalating emphasis on Othello's barbarity. To a great extent, *Othello* enables the fantasy of victimised white womanhood imperilled by black masculinity. In fine, the play thus provides much food for thought for feminists as well for postcolonial theorists.

## Bibliography

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