Gender in Othello and Desdemona as a Feminist Martyr

Abstract:

By exploring the situation of the great playwright William Shakespeare, we can examine how accredited women were of great importance since England held the most notable female power they had witnessed in Queen Elizabeth. Feminist ideas shown in reputable texts such as Shakespeare's "Othello" can commonly be signs of writers showing their desire to be a part of a more dynamic world. This indicates a subversion of tradition once these ideas are explored through the medium of literature. Furthermore, the style that an argument in favour of feminism can be demonstrated is often a reflection on the stance of the author as well as society in regards to previously mentioned adjustments. While the central female figure being Othello's wife Desdemona, can be seen as acting the part as a martyr of feminism and is thus craftily used by Shakespeare in order to illustrate a feminist agenda, deeper analysis uncovers Shakespeare's innate discontent with womanly authority as well his preferences in pushing alternate agendas that Desdemona was rather created to encompass through her relationship with Othello rather than her as an individual.

Race In "Othello":

Shakespeare displays his tragedy as being between two influential and reputable male figures whom both desire the same one thing. Respect and power, Iago believes he is deprived of this through how a Moor was able to ascend above him and Othello believes he is somewhat deprived of this through his paranoid belief that he is outcasted as a non-white. Shakespeare makes sure that throughout the play many important figures stress Othello's race as being irrelevant while others swear it makes him evil.

Duke:

"Without more wider and more overt test

Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods

Of modern seeming do prefer against him" (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 122-124)

The duke here scorns at Roderigo for basing his accusations of Othello on race and thus presents a powerful character in Venetian society who disregards Othello's race as being a decisive factor on him as a person. Roderigo on the other hand, is another powerful figure who fears Othello's race and demands that a foreigner should yield no power in his beloved Venetia. Iago notices this and utilises Roderigo's shameless racism to convince Othello that many believe he is ruining a previously homogeneous society. After being convinced of such things, Othello begins to constantly demand and crave respect to prove to himself that society accepts him as one of their own. Thus, this is "Othello's behaviour as arising from his insecurity as a black in a racist white society" (Vanita, 1994 p. 342). While we are shown through the duke that such a society isn't present in the play, Iago manages to convince Othello that there is through Roderigo's blunt accusations, thus feeling Othello's paranoia that 'arises such

behaviours'. Shakespeare, however plays a role in combatting racism "precisely by its presentation of Othello as not all different from any white husband. The development of his jealousy, the language of proper ownership he uses, and his misogynist generalisations about women and marriage…" (Vanita, 1994 p. 342). Shakespeare therefore finds a use in Desdemona to have a relationship with Othello that would seem identical to that of a homogeneous and more importantly, white one. Othello's ownership and later neglect of Desdemona's word is very resemblant of how white husbands were encouraged to treat their wives during the patriarchy. Desdemona is therefore further objectified by Shakespeare through how he uses her in order to present agendas of race and ideas of functioning societies that aren't homogenised. Therefore, Roderigo's blunt racist remarks lead Iago to successfully convince Othello that he does not belong despite Shakespeare creating a remarkably racially inclusive society as demonstrated by the duke. Furthermore, Shakespeare uses Desdemona to present this case through how her relationship with Shakespeare is demonstrative of that of a 'normal' white relationship. Desdemona's role in pushing this agenda thus severely weakens the case of her being a feminist tool as Shakespeare rather utilises his strongest female character to combat racism through forming a mixed marriage.

Gender in "Othello" and Desdemona

Amongst Shakespearean tragedy, "Othello" stands out since it is idiomatic in how it portrays its setting as well as the development of characters. This is due to how Othello, who is a foreigner belonging to regions of Northern Africa, rises beyond boundaries of race or religion in order to be highly regarded as well be among the prestigious men of Venice. Shakespeare voices his discontent with society as seen thorough Othello's associations with the Venetian people. This discontent with society is then manifested through the antagonist that is Iago. By using a feminist lens, we can deduce that the biggest sufferer at the hands of the consequences which make the play a tragedy isn't Othello himself, instead it is Desdemona, his wife. Desdemona can easily be seen as a martyr who represents the feminist fight, shackled not only by being a female finding difficulty in order to chase a living connected to Othello whom she loves, but also as a female who exists is a society dominated by men. Desdemona therefore helplessly struggles to protect her allegiance in marriage as well as her own rectitude. Desdemona however is still helplessly passive and "completely at her husband's mercy" as she is isolated "even more than other wives" due to the "social prejudice against [Othello] him" (Vanita 1994, p. 342-3). Desdemona's inability to do anything, especially through communication seriously compromises herself as a feminist martyr. Further evidence lies once Othello demands that Desdemona has broken her allegiance with him and is promptly affronted. In response, all Desdemona can do to combat such an allegation is to not answer to them at all. Eventually, Desdemona does come back at Othello by attempting to point out the insecurity he has been showing saying,

"Tell me, Othello. I wonder in my soul

What you would ask me that I should deny

Or stand on mamm'ring on…" (Act 3, Scene 3, lines 69-71)

However such efforts are fruitless for Desdemona as Othello only views Desdemona's words as a cover up for her intent to achieve sexual relations externally from the marriage which has

bonded herself to Othello. Losing Othello and his trust is disastrous for the circumstance Desdemona has put herself in as she has isolated herself by being involved in a mixed race marriage. Desdemona's only saving grace is her husbands notoriety as she directly goes against tradition, raising many concerns that the once proud Venice will soon be overrun by miscegenation. Desdemona therefore has no real hope after she loses Othello, especially since she lost the faith of her father through his hatred for the aforementioned scandal of miscegenation. Shakespeare therefore illustrates how patriarchal society operates and control women. First, Desdemona is bound to her father unit she develops enough as a woman to transition that devotion to her husband. Without either of these things, a woman would be unwanted and alienated, typically doomed to suffer as a prostitute or beggar. Ultimately, it is most unfortunate that Desdemona can be considered almost lucky to be killed in the encounter with Othello as there likely was no life left for her without him. Due to this, Shakespeare ironically presents Desdemona as a perfect figure to display the ridiculousness of the patriarchy as she is forced to comply to her death of a false conviction with no real way to fight her way out of it.

As "Othello" progresses, all of Shakespeare's female characters show no need to receive any form of attestation of their worth as people unless they should receive such attestation from their lovers. The patriarchy thus destroys any desire in them to seek praise from anyone else as their purpose in life is to satisfy a husband. Conversely, Othello craves the Venetians' regard to the point where the mere suggestion by Iago of Desdemona being unfaithful literally puts Othello in a state of insanity for the remainder of his life. Furthermore, Iago himself built his entire evil scheme upon manipulating people through abusing his honest reputation. As we see his evil scheme work obscenely smoothly we begin to realise just how much a good reputation carries and justifies the male characters desperate desires to build and maintain one. Conversely, Desdemona is completely submissive to Othello as the only reputation she can have is to be gained through marriage. Despite Desdemona only wishing validation from Othello she is denied even that since Othello hold Iago in a much higher regard and doesn't dare refute his word despite it being baseless against his love's. Through all of Iago's scheme his "feigned love gives him power which Desdemona's genuine love cannot counteract"; Desdemona is therefore demonstrated to the audience to be below any sort of mutual trust between Othello and another male no matter how spurious it may be (Bloom 1987, p. 91). Desdemona ends up being trapped in both Iago and Othello's deep insecurities in that Iago is being outranked by a foreigner and Othello recognising himself as a foreigner thus making him increasingly desperate to seek validation from society.

Iago:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on; (Act 3 Scene 3 Lines 195-197)

Iago is very observant and recognises Othello's desire to achieve what Iago himself has in an undeniable reputation as well as respect from those in lower and higher power. Iago uses his findings to further manipulate Othello by warning him of his jealousy, only making Othello more aware and paranoid of the consequences that he may have to face to achieve what he desires. Othello assumed that completing a marriage to a white woman would complete his transition

into society, finally cutting ties with his African heritage. However he only ends up being convinced by Iago that Desdemona still ended up having more power than him as she was confident enough to cheat on him. Othello knows that, should such a thing be true that his foreign attributes can't even rank him above a woman. Thus having no hope in gaining homogeneity with the Venetian society. Othello's paranoia of the situation swallows him which he cannot escape from until Desdemona is killed. Shakespeare's presentation of Desdemona as a pawn in Iago's manipulation is finally completed once Othello does just that. While such a plot could be a manifestation of Shakespeare's disdain with society's misogyny, Desdemona's portrayal as the helpless victim serves to further discredit female strength and suggests that while Shakespeare seems to hint at rejecting patriarchal society, he cannot bring himself to do this through the use of powerful female characters, thus demonstrating his deep resentment for female authority.

Shakespeare illustrates Othello's demise as being more important than Desdemona's, however Desdemona herself is more so encompassed by tragedy Othello. She sincerely does not deserve her husbands defiance, who villainously does away with her and eventually himself in a frustrating means of psychological freeing. Her whole life has only eventuated to be objectified by Othello's ridiculous "self-sacrifice", Othello ends up being so weak a character that he becomes completely enslaved by Iago's vengeful plot, killing the only person who at that point in time, disregarded the relevancy of his race, showing him unconditional love. Shakespeare may have presented this scenario in such a way in order to demonstrate to society how "murderous jealousy is innate in the husband-wife relationship whit posits the wife as the exclusive possession of the husband and is thus at odds with the human condition wherein one (Othello) can never know another person's (Desdemona's) inmost thoughts and desires". (Vanita, 1994, p. 342)

OTHELLO:

Get me some poison, Iago, this night: I'll not

expostulate with her lest her body and beauty

unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.

IAGO:

Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed,

even the bed she hath contaminated.

OTHELLO:

Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very

good. (Act 4 Scene 1 lines 223-229)

This is shown through how Othello is not made the antagonist in this situation but rather: Iago is the person who is tainted as being the individual who stole a life. However this is not the seemingly irrelevant life of Desdemona, who only exists in order to demonstrate Othello's

suffering. Iago is rather presented to have taken Othello's life through his fall from grace, a grace that he forced Othello to believe he never had. Desdemona's passing is seen as merely a knock on effect from Othello's fall from grace, something Iago cared little for other than her usefulness in easing the process of destroying Othello. All Iago cared for is that Othello would have the blood directly on his hands should he try and find any way to reinstall his reputation. Iago knew Othello as an efficient killer in battle and so demanded he killed by force rather than by a potentially subtle poison. Othello, in his delirium sees right through this and accepts Iago's reason that Desdemona deserves to die at the hands of the man she wronged and in the place she wronged him. Overall, Shakespeare's presentation of Desdemona's murder, positioning the audience to blame Iago for all that has been done is insulting to Desdemona's character as she is objectified through Iago's scheme, stripping the possibility of Shakespeare desiring her to be any kind of feminist martyr since her deaths only purpose was to vilify Iago through his scheme succeeding in her assistance in destroying Othello. In essence, she is presented as a helpless victim of circumstance from the very beginning.

Shakespeare only ever completely utilises the character of Desdemona in conjunction with Othello and therefore asserts the idea that women are only completely useful when they are with the man they are faithful to. This allegiance originates with the woman's father and ends in matrimony as displayed trough Desdemona's transition early on in the play. However Shakespeare constructs this transition as one of spite as Roderigo disowns Desdemona, therefore Desdemona is left only with Othello with almost no life outside of him. This ends up killing Desdemona as she is stuck with Othello through his insanity and is forced to die in his hands with zero resistance. This directly shows Shakespeares disinterest in female power as his strongest female character is completely powerless even when wrongfully convicted. Furthermore the only agenda he does use her for is to lightly mock the idea of racism by demonstrating Othello as a normal (being white) husband. Therefore, "Othello" does explore the construct of society through the presentation of fidelity and race however makes no attempt in creating an empowered female character to deconstruct the patriarchy.