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Shakespeare's Eurocentric Landscapes and Social Interactions in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract

*Liberal humanist critics believe that great literature has timeless significance and transcends borders across the continents. They also believe that a literary text does not need to be placed within a context: socio-political, literary-historical and autobiographical. A Universalist claim made by liberal humanists on behalf of literature has been contested in recent decades. Such a claim encourages a schism between the regional and national cultural forms. Promoting universality negates cultural differences across the globe. Whenever a universal norm is claimed for a literary text, Eurocentric norms and practices are promoted and elevated and non-European norms are relegated to regional, local, subsidiary and marginalised roles. Based on this theoretical framework of the representation of the East, this paper aims to examine the depiction of the non-Western landscapes and the characters associated with these places in William Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.*

Keywords: Eurocentrism, Oriental, Landscapes, Venice, Cyprus, Alexandria

I

To liberal humanist critics, great literature has timeless significance and transcends borders across the continents. They also believe that a literary text does not need to be placed within a context: socio-political, literary-historical and autobiographical. A liberal humanist also considers that to understand a text, the contexts should be detached from the text. This school of criticism also believes in the universality of literature. Such literature is “not for an age, but for all time,” said Ben Jonson of Shakespeare. It is also “news which stays news” said Ezra Pound (cited in Barry 18). Several recent criticisms, new historicism, feminism,

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postmodernism and others, have contested the universalities of literature. Postcolonial criticism, one of these criticisms, also erodes the universal nature of great literature claimed by the liberal humanist critics. It contends that such a universality of great literature discourages the differences among several cultural forms. It also widens the schism between the local and more accepted (national) cultural forms. It also disregards different experiences and outlooks in pursuit of a single standard of universalism.

Postcolonial criticism rejects such universalism considering that whenever a universal norm is claimed for a literary text, Eurocentric norms and practices are promoted and elevated and non-European norms are relegated to regional, local, subsidiary and marginalised roles. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has been instrumental in uncovering the Eurocentric universalism that reduces the East as "Other" to the West. He says that in the Western mind, the East has been featured "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (cited in Barry 284). To European minds, the East is associated with exotic cultural forms, uncontrollable passion and romance, strange landscapes and haunting memories. In contrast, Europe is considered to be a place where there is significant and meaningful personality, relationship and experience (Said 39-40). Based on this theoretical framework of the representation of the East, this paper aims to examine the depiction of the non-Western landscapes and the characters associated with these places in William Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Othello (1603) is considered to be a tragedy with several distinctive features, such as a tragedy of passion, intrigue and sexual jealousy. In the play, Othello is a Moorish soldier of fortune of the Venetian Senate. He is an established public figure who displayed immense fortitude and devotion to duty even in the face of great adversity. He has won the leadership in the white society. He is employed by the Venetian republic as a professional soldier, and a mercenary and has become its most reliable and popular general. He falls in love with Desdemona, a daughter of a Venetian noble. They marry against her father's wishes. As per the new duties, they, including other soldiers, leave Venice for Cyprus and the outer limits of the world. Othello's ensign, Iago manipulates the former that Desdemona has been unfaithful

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to him with his lieutenant, Cassio. Othello's rage leads him to strangle Desdemona leading to tragic consequences. The play is set in Venice, Cyprus and the outer limits of the world.

Antony & Cleopatra (1606) talks about a triumvirate, Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus who rule the Roman Empire. After encountering the Egyptian queen Cleopatra in Alexandria, Antony leads a debauched lifestyle causing a dissension between Octavius and Antony. Having his wife, Fulvia, died, Antony returns to Rome and marries Octavius's sister Octavia for political alliances and benefits. Antony returns to Cleopatra after a war breaks out between Octavius and Antony. She accompanies him to the Battle of Actium. Both of them return to Egypt, pursued by Octavius. Antony is defeated in Alexandria. Believing that Cleopatra has a suicide, Antony attempts to kill himself which renders him brutally wounded. He is brought to Cleopatra and dies in her arms. To avoid being captured by Octavius, Cleopatra kills herself with a poisonous snake. The play is set in the Roman Empire and Cleopatra's Empire.

II

Such a scant summary of both plays does little justice to the twists and turns in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but it is noticeable that Western and non-Western landscapes and settings are crucial to the plots of the plays. The play, *Othello* is set in cities, Venice, Cyprus and the outer limits of the world. The play shows that the Turks reside at the outer limits of European places. They are depicted as dangerous infidels who are always trying to create problems for other people. They are shown to be sailing back and forth trying to confuse and trick the Christians to invade dominate and destroy the latter. In this regard, Said that it was a common belief in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that Africa was "on the fringe of the Christian world, a natural asylum for heretical outlaws" (63). In the play, this outer limit or the other land is depicted as the land of vast caves, barren deserts, and rough quarries, full of rocks and hills that seem to be touching the sky. The cannibals inhabit this place: "Wherein

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of ante vast and desert idle/Rough quarries, rock and with heads to touch heaven/And of the cannibals that each other eat” (I.II.140-141, 143)¹.

At the outside limit of this land, there is a raging ocean with high seas and howling wind. Venice and Cyprus stand above the landscape circled by the limits. In Shakespeare’s Venice, there is a good form of government, law and social concord. On learning that his daughter has been eloped by Othello, he is furious. He even makes racist slurs about Othello’s race. Brabantio’s emotions and irrational fears, arising due to the elopement of Othello and Desdemona are checked and controlled. Brabantio expresses that “This accident is not unlike my dream/Belief of it oppresses me already” (I.I.143-4). He cannot imagine how Desdemona “a maid so tender, fair, and happy” can fall in love “to the sooty bosom/Of such a thing as [Othello] (I.II.65, 69-70). To him, their union is unreasonable and “against all rules of nature” and this might have happened with the help magic: “...with foul charms/Abus’d her delicate youth with drugs or minerals” (I.II.73-74). These emotions having the potential to cause riot and conflict in Venice society are examined accordingly by a court of law to show that reason and civic power prevail in Venice. Brabantio is convinced that the relationship between his daughter and Othello is inspired by genuine love. His acceptance of the relationship shows that the citizens of Venice are law-abiding. Personal opinioned emotions do not matter at all once the court allows. It shows that the union of a black man and a white woman appears unnatural in Venice society yet it is accepted if their love is genuine. After both of them, Othello and Desdemona, declare their genuine love and explain it to the congregation in the court, the people in Venice accept it. Desdemona tells the Senate that she loves the Moor and she loves to live with her: “That I did love the moor to live with him” (I.II.250). The officials and people of Venice support nurture and accept the lovers. This shows that Venice society follows reason not passions. If passion had been prioritized, there might have been a bloody street brawl and even a riot between the different people of

¹Textual References to *Othello* from William Shakespeare’s *Othello in Shakespeare Complete Work*. Edited by W.J. Craig. London, Magpie Books, 1992.

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different colours and opinions. Othello's ensign could have started a riot had the Venice court not accepted their relationship.

Cyprus, standing on the frontier between 'other limits and 'Venice' is shown to be different from that of Venice. Here passions denominate in all spheres of life, and they become explosive. Unlike the established government and its orders of Venice, no rational force can control violence and civilization in Cyprus. The reason for lawlessness is that this place is exposed to the Turks. Here Iago's manipulative plan begins to work successfully but he fails to so do in Venice. Everything becomes lawlessness and chaos: the General is set against his officers, husband against wife, Christian against Christian and servant against master. Justice becomes meaningless. People in authority become the guardians and destroyers of laws. Othello takes over the role of accuser, judge, jury and executioner of his wife. Unlike, Venice, no one follows laws in Cyprus. Everyone does whatever his or her emotions and intentions lead. A sort of binary opposition based on the geographical areas is set up in the play. The outer limits (the East) are represented as the land of cannibals, vast caves, barren deserts, rough quarries, brute force, riot, darkness, lust and hatred while Venice (the West) signifies law, senate, amity, hierarchy, love, justice and innocent trust.

Apart from the setting, description, mood and tone in the play, characters are shown to be directly influenced by the geographical areas. Venetian people are described as honest citizens whereas people in the outer limits are considered to be deceitful infidels with animal instincts. Turks and other people are associated with various forms of negative connotation. They are depicted as a threat to Christianity and Western values. In one of the acts in the play, the drunkard soldiers having a street brawl are termed "turned Turks"; non-Westerners are represented as having no taste to recognize value and beauty. The East, the outer limits, is constructed in contradiction to the West, Venice.

The construction is based on differences to create a sort of binary opposites of the "self and other", "rational and irrational" and "civilized and barbarian". However, such binary oppositions get disrupted as the Other is not as submissive and weak as the colonial empire's assumption. Othello, in most cases in the play, does not fit into the Western's imaginations of the other as a fixed entity. Brabantio cannot understand Othello's outsider position in Venice

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society. Othello's courageous personality has inspired Brabantio's daughter "to fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (I.III.98). On falling to understand what inspired his daughter to fall in love with Othello, Brabantio is suspicious of Othello. He assumes that magical power might have lured Desdemona. There is complexity in the binary oppositions. Othello himself is not sure about the ambiguous status of his identity in the final act. In smiting himself, he believes that he has become the Turk. Nevertheless, the Other (Othello)'s position is ambiguous in the play, yet it is observed that Othello's nobility and rational characteristics get dissolved in Cyprus. It is evident from the play that Shakespeare's Venice is an image of good government, season, and law and social concord whereas Cyprus is shown to be with explosive emotions where everything falls apart.

Antony and Cleopatra is set in the Roman Empire and Cleopatra's Empire. Regarding the geographical and historical setting, the Western empire in the play is associated with rich names and glittering catalogues creating an atmosphere of imperial magnificence. Scenes occur at Rome, Messina, Syria, Athens, Actium and other places: "Extended Asia: from Euphrates/His conquering banner shook, from Syria/To Lydia, and to Ionia" (I.II.97-100)². They also command over the sea "rid all of the sea of pirates" (I.II.183) and "He is an absolute master" (II.II.164). The Western protagonists are referred to as superhuman. Caesar is considered 'the universal landlord' while Antony is addressed as 'the greatest prince o' the world'. This world seems dull in Antony's absence "no better than a sty" and when Caesar hears of Antony's death, he thinks: "The death of Antony is not a single doom, in the name lay/A moiety of the world" (V.I.16-17). These scattered geographical areas suggest the imperial magnificence and human grandeur of the Western empire. Antony is idealized beyond all natural limits. The imperial setting is idealized with a world resplendent and magnificent. In short, the Mediterranean empire is idealized beyond all rational limits and descriptions.

² Textual references from William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Edited by M.R. Ridley. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1951.

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However, Antony, ‘the greatest prince of the world’, changes his temperaments and values once he is in Alexandria, Egypt, Cleopatra’s empire. He is no longer an ideal ruler as per the Roman standard. Antony’s passion is primarily depicted as lust, the lower elements of physical passion and physical indulgences. His life with Cleopatra is composed of love and feasting. Enobarbus cries:

Bring in the banquet; wine enough

Cleopatra’s health to drink

(I.II.11)

Mine and most of our fortunes, tonight

Shall be—drunk to bed

(I.IV.45)

Antony “fishes, drinks and wastes/The lamps of night in revel” (I.IV.5). He also engages in “lascivious wassails” (I.IV.56). Pompey prays that Cleopatra may keep Antony from the wars: “Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts/Keeps his brain fuming: Epicurean cooks...” (II.I.27). In one of the scenes in the play, a party goes on with music sounding, more and more riotous in humour, conviviality and song showing there is fun and feasting yet the party has less gravity as compared to the Alexandrian and Egyptian feasts: “This is not yet an Alexandrian feast/It ripens towards it” (II.VII.95) and “Shall we dance now the Egyptian Bacchanals/And celebrate our drinks” (II.VII.104).

Besides feasting and merry-making, physical eroticism happens in (Alexandrian). Here, the protagonists no longer have control over their passions and everybody talks and discusses sex boldly. At the beginning of the play when he is in the Western empire, Antony talks of cooling “a gypsy’s lust” (I.I.10) but later in the play, Mecaenas talks of “the adulterous Antony” (III.IV.93). When tragedy overtakes him, Antony abuses Cleopatra for her impurity: “this foul Egyptian...triple–turn’d whore (IV.XI.23, 26). The scale of sensuous and erotic increases after the setting of the play has been shifted to the Orient. Charmian talks and discusses sex freely with the soothsayer: “Then be like my children shall have no names...how many boys and wenches must I have?” and “And fertile every wish, a million” ((I.II.34, 36). Cleopatra’s ladies devote most of their time to physical love and they

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emphasise ‘fertile’ only. Her palace has been given all the perceived ‘Oriental’ settings, the nakedness of her slaves that have serpentine and ungodly attraction: “Horrible villain! I’ll spurn thine eyes” (II.V.63). It is evident that the Roman Empire and its people are shown to be magnificent, virtuous, and rational whereas Cleopatra’s Egypt and its people are depicted as mysterious landscapes, exotic and sensuous.

III

To conclude, from the above, it is observed that Shakespeare’s Venice in *Othello* signifies law, love, justice, trust and controlled emotions with established government whereas Cyprus and the outer limits are depicted as lands of lawlessness, jealousy, hatred, darkness, lust and explosive emotions. People in Venice are shown to be law-abiding and dutiful citizens. In the other world, Cyprus, people no longer follow the established norms and duties resulting in creating chaos and falling apart of values. Othello, who was once a decorated soldier loses the reasoning faculty of mind. He can be easily fooled by his ensign. In the same way, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the landscapes are associated with different values and significations. The Roman Empire is shown to be magnificent and its citizens are virtuous, rational and dutiful. Whereas Cleopatra’s Egypt is depicted as having mysterious landscapes and its citizens are sensuous and erotic indulging in exotic activities. Once Antony lands in Egypt, he is shown leading a debauched lifestyle that ultimately causes a dissension between him and Octavius.

Based on these observations, it is observed that the claim for universality of liberal humanist critics encourages a sort of differences between the different cultural forms, in which non-European modes of cultural forms and practices are demoted. Such a claim disregards different experiences and outlooks in pursuit of a single standard universalism that promotes Eurocentric norms. As a consequence of this, both plays show the East as a place of uncontrollable passions and emotions, exotic cultural norms and practices, strange landscapes and haunting memories and experiences.

In contrast, Europe is shown to be a place where there is meaningful personality, relationship and experience. According to Said, such contrasting images were depicted as a discourse to justify the Western dominance, restructuring and control over the East. To him, a

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Western discourse of representation, Orientalism, is nothing but a ‘virtual reality’ of the East that does not correspond with reality. At the end of his book, he questions “how does one represent other cultures?” to highlight the Western discourse of misrepresentation of the East (Said 325). Spivak charges Said with an “embarrassingly incomplete” project citing the reason that if the representation of Orientalism is so false as Said insists, he does not offer nor suggest a method to represent the ‘truth’ of the East (cited in Young 391). Thus, it can be said that it is difficult to represent other cultures; by culture, here it is meant any phenomenon. As Foucault contends there is a close connection between the production of knowledge and the operations of power, the exercise of power, in the form of his plays, Shakespeare creates knowledge about the East, even though the knowledge (the depictions of the East) is not innocent.

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