

**NEGOTIATING THE WORLD OF THE POWERFUL AND THE POWERLESS: A FEMINISTIC READING OF *OTHELLO***

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Women have often found themselves on the margins of society for centuries. Because of their imagined or constructed inferiority or biological difference from man and socio-cultural norms of patriarchal society, women have always been victims of heartless oppression. Whereas patriarchal male dominated society has been largely accountable for their subjugation, the conscious or unconscious internalization of patriarchal norms by women themselves also remains a pivotal factor in their subjugation. Elizabethan society was no exception in this regard as Desdemona remains submissive to the desires of her husband. The present paper aims at studying *Othello* as a text that embodies the ideology of Elizabethan patriarchal society that causes the ruin of Desdemona. *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* or *King Lear* as the titles of these tragedies indicate, are largely male-centered. In *Othello* the major focus remains on Othello and Iago than their wives Desdemona and Emilia respectively. The paper further seeks to show that a writer cannot divorce himself from the socio-political milieu of the times. Though Desdemona becomes a victim of Othello yet she also defies parental authority and Elizabethan norms by marrying a man of her own choice. It must not be overlooked that "*Othello* has the distinction of being the vehicle used to introduce a new potent force to English stage—namely Women"( Matteo, 13). By emphasizing women's problems and catering to male-centered Elizabethan society simultaneously, Shakespeare attempts to create a balanced world where he cannot be altogether dismissed as a writer advocating patriarchy. The paper seeks to negotiate these two worlds of male domination and female marginalization coupled with a little empowerment of women to underscore the ambivalent overtones of the play.

Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, serves as an agent of patriarchy. He considers his daughter as his property only to be governed by the rules of the male-centered set-up. He doesn't want his daughter to defy the norms of the father world by choosing Othello, a negro as her better half. In an appeal to Duke, he lists certain male-demarcated boundaries which he hopes his daughter would never cross: "A maiden never bold/ Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/ Blushed at herself; and she, in spite of nature/ Of years, of country, credit, everything/ To fall in love with what she feared to look on?/ It's a judgment maimed and most imperfect/ That will confess perfection so could err/ against all rules of nature, and must be driven/ to find out practices of cunning hell/Why should this be?" (35-36). Brabantio, the father, here cannot believe that his daughter who is and should be so blushed should opt for a black as her husband. He represents here the mentality of Elizabethan and James I's society which believed in the observance of patriarchal norms. He believes in the chastity of his daughter who cannot turn against nature, county and tradition of her race to marry such a black man as Othello. The issue of race also gets prominence as the marriage of Desdemona to a black man obviously turns white society hostile against her. The question that comes up here is that why it is called an act against nature. The answer perhaps is that it is not an act against nature but an act against patriarchy. She does not transgress the rules of nature but that of culture or society.

Though Desdemona finds her loyalties torn between her love for her father and her husband Othello yet she readily confesses her love for Othello. To the utter shock and dismay of her father, she professes her love for Moor in the following words: "I do perceive her a divided duty/ To you I am bound for life and education/ My life and education both do learn me? How to respect you; you are the lord of duty, I am hitherto your daughter But here's my husband: And so much duty as my Mother showed/ To you, preferring you before her father,/ So much I challenge that I may profess/ Due to the Moor, my lord." (42-43). These words of Desdemona make her a woman of strong character. She acknowledges the love and education she received from her father. However, she asserts herself as a woman having her own individuality and dreams in life. She appears to be wise despite being unwise by showing allegiance to Othello in the same way as her mother showed to her father. Shakespeare projects Desdemona as a strong woman who asserts herself by destabilizing the patriarchal boundaries that her father symbolizes. She refuses to be a scapegoat though later on she falls a victim to the forces of suspicion in her husband. In this state of despair, Brabantio, not only disowns his daughter but also feels comforted at the fact that he has no other child otherwise he would have become harsh towards them: "God be with you, I have done./...I had rather to adopt a child than get it./...For your sake jewel,/ I am glad at soul I have no other child,/ for thy escape would teach me tyranny/ To hang clogs on them. I have done, my lord" (42). He further advises Moor to be aware of the character of Desdemona who has betrayed her father. Desdemona's choice of Moor as her husband is considered by Brabantio as a setback to his character and honour. His repent over having a daughter like Desdemona speaks volumes about his tormented and agonized self. This act of her makes him curse his daughter in a way that shows his narrow-minded disposition against women in general. A woman is here presented as essentially of a fluctuating nature who may deceive any man. Shakespeare here presents the psyche of a father who deems it as a blow to his dignity in a society championing patriarchy. Desdemona breaks here what Julia Kristeva terms as 'the Symbolic Order' which is marked by fear, subjugation, law morality and suppression which a child is subjected to in the presence of a father figure. After this act of Desdemona, he even dismisses the idea of keeping the former at his home at the prospectus of Othello's going to a war.

The villainous nature of Iago is revealed in Act 1. He seeks to avenge on Othello for two reasons: the first being that he is not made a lieutenant by Othello and second that he has slept with his wife, Emilia. In his plot to destroy Othello, Iago uses Desdemona as an instrument. He conceives of a malicious plan which consequently becomes the reason for the downfall of Othello: "After some time to abuse Othello's ear/ That he is too familiar with his wife./ He has a person and a smooth dispose/ To be suspected, framed to make women false"(56). Thus Iago, bent upon destroying Othello seeks to spoil the image of Desdemona in his eyes. The question that props up here is that why a woman, say Desdemona, is made a scapegoat by Iago. Why should a woman be used as a means to achieve a nasty end? Shakespeare here questions patriarchal society which largely makes women victims to achieve something heinous or to enjoy certain privileges.

Iago has low opinion of women. Being suspicious of his wife's affair with Othello, he holds his wife in great disrespect. He chides her in the presence of Desdemona and Cassio: "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips/ As of her tongue she oft bestows on me/ You'd have enough" (67). He goes on criticizing Emilia in particular and women in general in the following dialogue : "Come on, come on/ You are pictures out of doors,/ Bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens,/ Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,/ Players in your housewifery, and housewives in.../ Your beds"(67). Iago through his wife Emilia presents women as treacherous, having a dual identity. He rebukes her for having real face masked behind the fake one. He condemns her for being astute enough to leave her husband in bed and indulge in household chores when she should satiate her husband. When the household chores really need her during the day, she becomes slothful and becomes soft-spoken in front of others but remains blunt towards her husband in privacy. Iago,

therefore, strikes hard on the character of Emilia, suspecting her to be immoral. Iago's opinions of women in general also invite Desdemona's wrath and she advises Emilia not to be beguiled by her husband's treachery or sarcastic remarks: "Do not learn/ Of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband. How say/ You Cassio is he not a most profane and liberal counsel" (72). This clearly illustrates that even Desdemona regards Iago as having malignity against women. Iago here emerges as an anti-woman character/male chauvinist who is inclined to destroy or expose the nature or character of his own wife.

Othello's first meeting with Desdemona after their parting on their wedding night is symbolic in many respects. In the first place, Othello's deep love for Desdemona on seeing her after his marriage is tinged with irony. He calls Desdemona a 'fare warrior'. In this ecstatic state, he longs to die at this moment for he fears he may never get such blessed moments again: "If I were now to die 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear/ my soul hath her content so absolute that not another comfort like to this/ succeeds in unknown fate"(74). Does it show his preadumbration of the gloomy future ahead? Whatsoever be the reason, his love for Desdemona finds true representation in this emotional pouring. Calling her 'a fare warrior' shows that he loves and holds Desdemona in great esteem. Even Desdemona does not want that their love should reach at its culmination at this meeting but wants it to grow deeper and deeper: "the heavens forbid/ But that our loves and comforts should increase/ Even as our days grow" (74). Shakespeare maintains that it is not women who are characterless but it is male members of devious nature who make them seem characterless to their lovers. One cannot imagine at this time that a man of such nature like Othello can be ensnared into the plots of Iago, only to murder his own wife. Shakespeare, thus, doesn't become anti-feminist but rather attacks devious/vicious males for making women characters suffer.

Iago's vicious nature leads to the downfall of Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo and Othello in the play. He makes Cassio commit bloodshed under his evil influence. Since Cassio loses his self-respect during his violence/clash with Roderigo and Montano, Iago induces him to approach Desdemona so that she might request her husband to forgive Cassio. Iago uses Desdemona here as a means to give rise to suspicion in Othello's mind. Iago's knavery is fully revealed in his advice to Cassio: "Confess yourself freely to her, importune her help to put you in your place again. She is so free, so kind, so apt, so blest a disposition that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested" (107). Shakespeare portrays Desdemona as an embodiment of beauty, kindness, honesty, self-sacrificial but at the same time she is also shown as having fallen a prey to the forces of patriarchy. From this episode onwards, Iago capitalizes on these qualities of Desdemona only to turn these into vices in the eyes of her husband Othello. These evil designs of Iago to spoil the image of Desdemona in Othello's eyes are fully unraveled in his soliloquy: "For whiles this honest fool/ Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,/ And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,/ I will pour this pestilence into his ear : / That she repeals him for her body's lust"(109). The dramatist here attacks villains like Iago who turn an honest and loyal wife into a lustful and characterless one. However, it is highly ironical that even heroes like Othello get governed by such senseless designs of Iago. Iago makes every character in the play the victim of his conspiracy. What he thinks and speaks of women invites condemnation of the readers. In order to induce in Othello the infidelity of wives/women, Iago conspires: "I know our country disposition well-/ In Venice they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience/ Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown" (131-32). Since Othello is an outsider or a black, Iago makes him understand the nature of women. These lines speak volumes about the way women are conceived as characterless or faithless, always inclined to deceive their husbands in order to satiate their lust. They have been dismissed here by Othello as given to sensuality. Hence these lines show the portrayal of women in a negative light. These suspicions lead Othello to curse himself in agony "Why did I marry"? (135) In this state of despair, he rather wishes that had he been a celibate, such things would not have come to such a pass.

The episode of Desdemona's handkerchief is also symbolic as far as the development of the plot is concerned. Through Emilia's conversations, we get to know that it was given by Othello to Desdemona as a token of love. Even Desdemona keeps kissing it all the time. However, Emilia takes it only to please her husband. This is what she plans to do with this handkerchief which Desdemona drops accidentally: "I'll have the work ta'en out/ And give't to Iago: what he will do with it/ Heaven knows not I, / I nothing, but to please his fantasy" (139). Emilia is projected in these lines by the dramatist as submissive who copies the napkin of Desdemona only for the delight of her husband of whose treacherous designs she is yet unaware of. She simply carries out the orders of her husband not having even the faintest inkling that this would ultimately cause the separation of two great lovers resulting in the murder of the beloved by the lover.

Othello is portrayed by Shakespeare as a jealous husband who deplores to have an adulterous wife like Desdemona. In order to prove his suspicions, he calls upon Iago to present some testimony. In a fit of rage, he outbursts at Iago: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,/ Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof" (144). It is ironical that a man who loves his wife so profoundly now turns it into hate. The question that arises is: why does he not use his wisdom to know the truth? Why does a woman victim of his suspicions? Why does not he inquire of it from her only? Though Othello is to be blamed for this, yet it is Iago who creates such situations so astutely that Othello is ensnared easily. There are two incidents that confirm Othello's suspicions: first the way Iago fabricates the story of Cassio's dream in which he curses Moor and the second the stealing away of the napkin of Desdemona. This is how he fabricates Cassio's dream: "In sleep I heard him say 'Sweet Desdemona, Let us be wary, let us hide our loves', / And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,/ Cry 'O sweet creature'/ And then kiss my hard...lay his leg over my thigh,/ And sigh, and kiss, and they cry 'Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor'" (149). Iago's relating the dream of Cassio in such sensuous and graphic encounter serves/fuels Othello's wrath against Desdemona and Cassio. He is now bent upon destroying both of them. Both of them get punishment but it is Desdemona who loses her life.

Othello's doubts about Desdemona's character are proved the moment she fails to produce the handkerchief. Being given to his mother by a magician, this napkin has symbolic meaning. It was prophesied by the magician that this napkin would keep Othello's father under her mother's control. However, if she loses it, the love of her husband would also die out. It was the same napkin that Othello's mother had given to him to give it in turn to her would-be daughter-in-law. Therefore, Othello here establishes an analogy between what magician had said about the napkin and what its implications were for Desdemona when she had lost it. It meant that she would no longer be able to receive the love of her husband and would be treated as an object of humiliation. This incident prepares the ground for worst to come for Desdemona. Desdemona's pleadings for Cassio further cement Othello's doubts about her disloyalty.

Shakespeare also projects Emilia as an assertive woman. Though in carrying out the orders of her villainous husband, she appears to be submissive yet she is deeply read into the nature of men. Othello's eerie behaviour with Desdemona propels Emilia to pass this satirical observation about men: "'Tis not a year or two shows us a man/ They are all but stomachs, and we all but food:/ They eat us hungrily, and when they are full/ They belch us" (160). She here exposes the true nature of a man who looks on a woman primarily as a sexual being as Kate Millet observes in *Sexual Politics*. It takes women one or two years to understand a man fully. They are just sexual objects which are used and abused by men to satiate their lust. Once this lust is over, a man becomes fed up with a woman. Shakespeare here empowers a woman to expose the true nature of males who are conditioned by patriarchal culture.

As the action of the play moves, Othello begins to lose self-control. The self-control that he exercises on himself in the beginning of the play begins to waver as he now gets fits of epilepsy. Unable to cope with the suspicions of his wife's infidelity, he calls himself a monster:

Othello : A horned man's a monster, and a beast.

Iago: there's many a beast then in a populous city,  
And many a evil monster (172).

Iago here maintains that if he/Othello reckons himself to be a victim of his wife's adultery, then there would be countless men in this city who will be victims of their wives' treachery. Thinking himself to be a cuckold, Othello gives vent to his anger, fears, desperation and Iago adds fuel to it by commenting that many husbands would be cuckolds in that city. Here, we find again the portrayal of women in negative light. It is ironical that time and again it is only a woman who becomes the object of Iago's curses whereas men who visit them go scot free.

Iago hatches a plot to confirm the doubts of Othello regarding Cassio and Desdemona's affair. He makes Othello overhear and see from the ambush Cassio's amorous conversation about Biyanka, a prostitute who loves Cassio. However, Othello mistakes Biyanka for Desdemona and words like 'sweet', 'pretty', 'fine', 'kiss' etc. that issue forth from Cassio's lips fill Othello with wrath for Desdemona and Cassio. Further, Desdemona's concern for Cassio proves fatal to her self-image. During her conversation with her cousin Lodovico, in the presence of Othello invites the indignation of the latter:

Desdemona: I would do much/ To atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio.

Othello: O devil, devil/ If that the earth could team with woman's tears/ Each drop  
She falls would prove a crocodile:/ Out of my sight (183-85).

Her goodwill to amend the relations between Cassio and her husband is judged by Othello as her devious designs to keep Cassio near him and thus satiate her physical desires. By striking Desdemona with his hand, Othello curses her for making him a cuckold. Othello here dismisses the tears of Desdemona as tears of crocodile, thereby criticizing women in general. He maintains that whenever a woman sheds tears, men begin to feel softly for them and exonerate of all the wrongs that they commit. Women's tears are jewels for them, only to adorn and win the favour of men. Since Othello is occupied with doubts, he loses his poise and temper and speaks ill of women in general and Desdemona in particular.

Even Emilia fails to subside the storm of suspicions in Othello's psyche. Othello's inquiring from her about Cassio and his wife's affair fail to divert his psyche. Emilia's assertions about Desdemona's honest and loyal character remain futile in changing the defiled image of Desdemona. However, Emilia in plain terms and assertive stance pleads for Desdemona's loyalty: "I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest, / Lay down my soul at stake: if you think other/ Remove your thought, it doth abuse your bosom./...For if she be not honest, chaste and true/ There is no man happy: the purest of their wives/ Is foul as slander"(189). Emilia portrays the character of Desdemona in true light. She tries to dispel the myth about Desdemona's character as harboured by Othello. It amply illustrates the portrayal of Emilia by the dramatist as a character of strength or strong character. Refusing to be subdued by patriarchal force in Othello, Emilia defends Desdemona saying that if she is not chaste then no woman in the world can be or ever be chaste because even the chastest wife would also be called treacherous. Shakespeare here imparts power to women to assert their womanhood in a male dominant society.

Othello's senseless allegations on Desdemona as immoral or treacherous speak volumes about the power that a man enjoys in society. He takes it for granted to rule over the world-physical, psychological or social-of a woman. Capp maintains about the authority of man at this time in the following lines: "Wives must obey bad husbands just as subjects must obey bad kings" (Capp, 8). Being filled with all the poison that Iago directs against Desdemona, Othello showers curses on his wife which smacks of hate: "O, ay, as summer flies are in the shambles,/That quicken even with blowing. O thou weed/ Who art so lovely, fair and smell'st so sweet/ That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst never, Been born...Was this fair paper, this more goodly book/ Made to write



‘whore’ upon?” (193). He shamelessly compares his wife to a bee that conceives again the moment it lays its egg. He rues the day she was born. The only word that creeps his conscience at this troubled moment is “whore”. Such senseless addressing of his wife makes readers raise several questions: Why such words have been coined for women only? Why she is compared with the most notorious objects/creatures of the world? Why does a woman remain submissive? Why doesn’t she resist the unnecessary advances of her husband? In the context of this play, why forces of reason stop functioning in Othello? Why a man of so much strength considers his wife a ‘whore’ without reaching after fact? These questions thus propound the belief that a woman’s opinion, her choice, her desires were of no importance in Elizabethan society and Desdemona meets the same fate.

It cannot be said that Desdemona doesn’t resist the allegation of being a ‘whore’ ‘faithless’ ‘strumpet’ or so. To her utter dismay, Duke is bent upon to kill her. This is how Desdemona refutes the charges of her husband:

Othello: Why, what are thou?

Desdemona: Your wife, my lord: Your true and loyal wife/ Heaven

Doth truly know it.

Othello: Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.

Desdemona: To whom, my lord? With whom? How am I false?

By heaven, you do me wrong.

Othello: Are you not a strumpet?

Desdemona: No, as I am a Christian. /If to preserve this vessel for my lord/ From any hated foul unlawful touch, Be not to be Strumpet, I am none.

Othello: What not a whore?

Desdemona: No, as I shall be saved (190-95)

Desdemona tries to stuff sense into her husband’s psyche. To his each allegation, she retorts back in a more confident way. Yet she remains submissive in so far as she does not act. She only requests or pleads but doesn’t force her husband. Being a woman and lacking in physical vigour, she finds it difficult to prevent her ‘lord’ from strangulating her. One more allegation that can be leveled against Desdemona is that she does not cry for help. She does not even once call Emilia for help. In this sense, she remains as a submissive and self-effacing wife, yielding to this brutal desire of her husband to kill her. It is important to quote here Michale Ryan for his important statement about Elizabethan society: “In traditional societies women are often made to appear under the complete control of their husbands...That many women freely accede to such subordination is a sign of how successful cultural conditioning can be even when it works against one’s interests”(Ryan, 132). Her repeated requests to her husband to spare her life and to go after the truth do not bear any fruit. Her pleadings here evoke pity of the audience:

Othello: That handkerchief/ Which I so loved and gave thee, thou gavest/ To Cassio.

Desdemona: No, by my life and soul...O, banish me my lord, but kill me not!

Othello: Down, strumpet?

Desdemona: Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight” (227-29).

Longing of a loyal wife for life fails to evoke the kindness and sympathy of her brutal husband. She dies an unnatural, untimely and unfateful death. A man of a strong mental and physical equilibrium derides, suspects and kills the same woman whom he loved from the core of his heart. Hence, here a husband deems his wife to be his sole property which he can use or abuse in his own way. Riche Sabrina writes in this context: “To Othello, Desdemona must die or ‘else she’ll betray more men’, “it is not as a Moor that he speaks but as a custodian of patriarchy mindful not only about his honour but the honour of his patriarchal species as a whole”(Sabrina, 4). A woman has to conform to his world, which is characterized by force, coercion, violence and fear; otherwise she may meet the same fate as Desdemona does here. Hence, it cannot be said that Shakespeare was an ant-feminist

playwright but rather by striking on the patriarchal world he questions the male prejudices that were directed against women during Elizabethan era.

Emilia not only shows her strength of character in front of Othello or her exposed husband Iago but she also makes certain important statements as to why women turn disloyal. She through her sound reasoning attempts to make Desdemona understand the wicked nature of men who fail to understand their wives. She opines:

Let husbands know  
 Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell,  
 And have their palates both for sweet and sour  
 As husbands have. What is it they do  
 When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
 I think it is. Is't frailty that thus errs?  
 It is so too. And have not we affections?  
 Desires for sport? And frailty as men have?  
 Then let them use us well: else let them know  
 The ills we do, their ills instruct us so (212).

Emilia holds men responsible for turning for love and physical appetite towards other women. It is they who fail to understand the emotions, expectations and desires of their partners. If they can cheat them then why can't women. A man's lechery becomes the reason of a wife's treachery. Emilia tries to make Desdemona peep into the wicked and sinful world of men. Emilia, therefore, strikes hard on male-chauvinism and contests the sins that men commit against women.

Emilia also takes Moor to task for committing such a heinous crime against such an angel looking wife. She refuses to be cowed down by the threats of Moor and curses him in most derogatory remarks: "O, the more angel she,/ And you the blacker devil...o gull, o dolt, as ignorant as dirt!"(234). Addressing Othello by such names manifests Emilia's courage. Not caring a bit for her life, she makes Othello realize his worth in place of Desdemona, the true, the loyal, and the faithful. She no longer remains a passive onlooker and challenges the patriarchal order by turning against a wrong doer. She, therefore, challenges the authority of a General to do whatever pleases him against women and in this context his wife. She is shocked by the fact that it is no other man but her husband who causes this bloodshed and the death of innocent Desdemona. She deplores: "May his pernicious soul/ Rot half a grain a day!...No, I will speak as liberal as the north/ Let heavens and men and devils, let them all,/ All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak"(238). Emilia takes the liberty to destabilize the patriarchal structures. She does not care at all as to what would the people say about her. She goes on to expose the truth and unmask her husband's villainy. She defies her husband's instructions though at the end she is slain by him. Wendel substantiates Emilia's protest in the following words: "Emilia, Desdemona's female attendant in *Othello*, represents an attempt by Shakespeare to explore notions of femininity that problematize widespread understandings of what it meant to be a woman during this era"(Wendel, 1). Shakespeare has, thus, portrayed Emilia as an assertive woman who rises in protest against Moor and her own husband, Iago. The death of Desdemona and Emilia at their husbands' hands establishes the power that patriarchy exerts over women.

The play moves to a conclusion where it can be argued that in order to create a balanced world, Shakespeare portrays two types of women: submissive as well as assertive. Assertive women refuse to submit to the structures of patriarchy and challenge the patriarchal world whereas submissive women become victims of male conspiracy. Emilia and Desdemona play their own parts emphatically as well as passively, respectively. However, all women become sufferers whether they protest or submit. Emilia is assertive whereas Desdemona is both submissive as well as assertive.

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