

# **مسرحية "عطيل" لوليام شكسبير: وجهة نفسية اخرى**

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## **Shakespeare's Othello: Another Psychological Perspective**

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### المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى تسليط الضوء على مسرحية " عطيل " لوليام شكسبير، والتي تعتبر إحدى أهم تراجميدياته. تقسم الدراسة الى فصلين، الأول عبارة عن مقدمة مقسمة الى ثلاثة فروع تعنى بتحليل القصيدة كصورة تعكس المشاكل النفسية للبطل و مأساة لأنسان يفشل في فهم أهمية الحب في حياته وكونه غير قادر على تمييز العدو الحقيقي. أما الفصل الثاني فيركز بدوره على موقع المسرحية بين اعمال شكسبير الاخرى من خلال تحليل دور الخصم في الايقاع بالبطل. الكلمات المفتاحية: مسرحية عطيل، عطيل، اياغو.

### Abstract

The Present study aims at shedding the light on William Shakespeare's play Othello, which is considered as one of his most well-known tragedies. The study is divided into two sections, the first one is an introduction that includes three sub-sections concerned with the analysis of the play as a picture reflecting the psychological problems of its protagonist and as a tragedy of a human who fails to understand the importance of love in his life and being unable to recognize his real enemy. The second section, however, concentrates on the play's position among other works of Shakespeare throughout analyzing the antagonist's role in the downfall of the protagonist .

**Key words:** Shakespeare's Othello (The play), Othello, Iago.

## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *Othello* : A Critical Background

(Jay, 2012: 18) considers that “Shakespeare's *Othello* could be examined from many levels, one of them is the thematic level of analysis”. But this play was performed on stage in modern society and gains a wide attention for dealing with subjects like honest love and the social discrimination among individuals in gender and color. Of course, such events that happen in the play carry many similar details to the contemporary present situation of modern life despite the difference between past and present time.

*Othello* is one of Shakespeare's tragedies that differs from other tragic plays of Shakespeare in its major subject-matter. “Other tragedies like *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* deal with public and social troubles in addition to general problems of human nature” (Safdri & Khan, 2017: 5). *Othello*, however, discusses some other issues like family relations especially the husband-wife relationship and the love concept with emphasis on dealing with the act of examining the true or honest love that can or cannot stand against the obstacles or deceptions of life. More importantly, the character sketch of its protagonist gives great depth and attention to the play particularly when studied in relation to the antagonist Iago, who participates majorly in the tragic end of *Othello*. Such kind of mixture between the contrasting feelings and events of characters in the play contributes greatly to the development of the plot giving a more space to scholars to study and analyze the play.

Moreover, the character sketch of the hero *Othello* seems to open the way for many criticisms on the play to discuss his personality. Or as Throughout, analyzing the character of *Othello*, scholars could reach at different issues like “...marriage institution and the concept of confidence as well as the consequences of color or race...”. (Johnson, 2009: 2). *Othello*, from one hand, is a perfect lover who succeeds in gaining Desdemona's heart by his courage and nobility. But from another hand, he suffers self-confidence or seems unable to recognize and control the mentalities of a wicked and selfish character like Iago. In other words, it may be *Othello*'s inner weakness which allows Iago to feel superiority and recognition over other characters. Still, “the characterization of *Othello* or his psychological attitude of inferiority towards others” plays a significant role in the development of events in the play. (Johnson, 2009: 2). However, many critical writings on the

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play approach it from the antagonist view-point. They regard the play as the normal line of some process in which the major character gives a wider space for others to control him especially when the others (Iago) uses his unique intelligence and a well-planned strategy to destroy his enemy (Othello) psychologically.

It is, actually, Othello's characterization that puts the play in a position of discussion on many levels of analysis. Othello's main problem may not only be his jealousy but also his complexion. He regards that there is some missed value inside which cannot be neglected or hidden. His wife, Desdemona, loves his brave and noble personality but used to feel that he is disturbed or even cautious to some extent. Othello himself declares this saying:

"My name that was as fresh /  
As Dians Visage, is now begrim'd and  
black/ As mine own face'; 'Turn thy complexion  
there:  
/ Patience, thou young and Rose-lip'd  
Cherubin, / I here look grim as hell" (ACT IV,  
SCENE II. A room in the castle).

Other readings of the play assume that even Shakespeare intends to show the evilness that exists beyond the black color when he portrays Othello in such terrible condition in the final scene as he "kills his wife and commits suicide" (Rosha, 1980: 66-67). But of course, such action comes under the long process of revenge or hatred that Iago arranges for Othello.

### 1.2 Othello as a Tragedy

(Ji and Alkoly, 2018: 417) approaches the play from "The dichotomy of Othello and Iago which serves to develop the events and situations in the play". In that, Iago is the assistant of his master Othello. He keeps very close to Othello and contributes to create all doubts inside Othello's mind about a false or unreal love relationship between Desdemona and Cassio the honest accountant in the play. Iago's wicked strategy seems to influence all situations and causes the tragic destiny of the protagonist. Furthermore, Othello also helps Iago to control him by giving him the opportunity to have an elevated position which could determine the actions of the hero. Othello gives Iago the place to exploit even other characters like Rodrigo and Emilia. Such treatment may spring from Othello's lack of self-confidence which he feels when comparing himself

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to the major representative of native white culture Iago. This approach, in fact, makes the play gain a wide reputation among Shakespeare's tragedies because it offers Othello the black character to be its protagonist. Yet it sheds the light on the inner aspects of one's psyche and reveals the hidden instincts of the self which could not be declared clearly.

Still, some critical views on the play study it as one of the most well-known tragedies since it deals with the characterization of Othello as the most victimized protagonist who lost his life and love out of lack of understanding and self-confidence due to the prolonged temptations of Iago's. The following extract which is taken from (Abo Oruq, 2016: 21) describes Iago's personality makes the idea clear:

Iago is simply a man who has been slighted and revenges himself; of a husband who believes he has been wronged, and will make his enemy suffer a jealousy worse than his own; or an ambitious man determined to ruin his successful rival one of these, or a combination of these, endowed with unusual ability or cruelty".

In this way, it becomes obvious how Iago is a villain. It is, then, Iago's cruelty which leads Othello to be under his control. The whole events of the play are weaved in a very accurate manner which is arranged and planned by Iago. Despite the nobility and honesty of Othello yet he lacks the capacity of controlling others like Iago. In other words, Iago's genius mind enables him to analyze the thoughts and intentions of people around him specifically his master Othello. Iago's real problem results from his inability to accept Othello as his master. This fact is the original point from which Iago's hatred and jealousy come into ground. In addition, Iago appears as an ambitious man who feels superiority over others. He could not realize the aspect of true love or spiritual emotions or even noble sensations. The result of his hatred is the complete sense of nothingness or purposelessness that he gains from his doings and this is indicated when he causes all characters to have a tragic end.

(Rosha, 1980: 67) mentions that “critics view the play from a somehow remote area of analysis, since they think that Othello's marriage to Desdemona could be an important factor behind his tragedy”. This opinion, however, assures the fact that when marrying Desdemona, Othello becomes indulged within a totally different world. In that, by such marriage Othello becomes a member of the Venetian society which is different in religion, nationality and even history. In other words, he is to be considered as immigrant for a new different country and thus he must be able to face many difficult results and unexpected responsibilities.

## **SECTION TWO**

### **2.1 The Public Eye: The position of the play among Shakespeare's works.**

Like many of Shakespearian tragedies, *Othello* is a play which narrated the tragedy of his own time. “The first performance of the play was on 1604” (Jay,1-2). In general, this play represented a suitable field for writing about tragic stories in contemporary literature. As a play, *Othello* is presented to express a practical subject for testing tragic ends of the protagonist in modern plays. The way its hero is treated emphasizes the deep levels of analysis this play shows about its hero and other characters.

As one of Shakespeare's tragedies *Othello* is entirely complex and deep. Through its complexities and details, Shakespeare directs the readers' attention to the characters' analysis in this story. He gives them the ability to understand points of weaknesses, strengths, passions and even sides of nobility. Shakespeare's ability to involve readers in the lives and fortunes of his characters is one of the best reasons for his success as a playwright. “Despite its being as a tragedy, yet Shakespeare's *Othello* functions to be a perfect example of moral attitudes and elevated values” (James, 1999: 2-3). The play focuses on sending a universal message about the concept of real love and marriage issues. Throughout its protagonist, the play concentrates on subjects like understanding each other's view point and self- confidence. “The play, is actually, full of details and images that describe themes of psychological analyses” (Roberts, 1962, 2). The character of the antagonist represented by Iago, adds to humanistic level of analysis when he contributes to the destruction of the main character. Its simple language and direct style refers to the simplicity of the play and this enables readers to have

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suitable illustrations about the story. The concept of love is very essential in the play. The love story between Othello and Desdemona is strongly emphasized still unable to overcome the thoughts presented in Othello's mind. The ideas that Iago reaps in Othello's mind are enough to make him suspicious about his family especially his wife. Shakespeare is conscious while portraying the husband-wife relationship in terms of hypocrite sense in the mind of Iago. The problem is existed because of the absence of understanding between both lovers.

Regarding this concept, the play is considered the most painful among Shakespeare's tragedies. The end of a noble and loving hero like Othello represents something of injustice. "*Othello*, though, contains simple and direct style yet it reveals concepts of psychological analysis which are to be seen throughout the depiction of each character's inner face" (Khan & Safdar, 2017: 13). It also tries to answer several questions about the whole play and its characters depending on how each one thinks of the others.

### 2.2 William Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Psychological Perspective.

Shakespeare's *Othello* could be interpreted thoroughly depending on the analysis of its major character. The love relationship between Othello and Desdemona is expressed from different levels and tested under many meanings, one of them is the characterization of its protagonist as viewed by the antagonist Iago. Such kind of love between Othello and his wife may not be enough to stand against the outer waves of conflict Othello lives. "It could be Othello's personality which makes Iago control him" (Roberts:4). And this conflicting feelings between the two seem to be the major concern of this study.

Certain criticism approaches the play from another viewpoint. This opinion relies on a remoter area taking into consideration the different cultures Othello and Iago come from. Iago's wicked intentions arise from the clash of cultures between the two. Iago as a member of western European culture does not be able to accept Othello as his master. For him, Othello who comes from the black origins could not appear as a master of the White western Iago. Feelings of jealousy and envy are the most influential factors that enforce him to move against Othello.

As far as Othello is concerned, all know how much he loves his wife Desdemona yet in the same time his love lacks trust and self-control. He never thinks despite his great passionate attitude towards his wife. She mentions such thing in her saying:

My noble Moore,  
Is true of mind and made of no such baseness  
As jealous creatures are. (SCENE IV. Before the castle.)

Jealousy may not come to Othello all of sudden, it is only a result of the act of creating doubts inside him by Iago. These doubts assume a love affair between Othello's wife, Desdemona, and his honest assistant Cassio which of course not a real story. Cassio's declaration makes the idea clear:

Certainly, Othello, a North African Moor and a senior general in the Venetian army, is not instinctively jealous. For instance, Cassio calls him \_great of heart. Besides, even Iago cannot but appreciate Othello by saying that the Moor: Is of a constant, loving, noble nature, And I dare think he will prove to Desdemona a mostdear husband. (ACT IV, SECNE II)

Critically, some consider the play as a story narrating the tragic end of an insane hero who spends his life searching an evidence that answers his doubts about his wife. On this occasion, "Desdemona used to carry certain handkerchief which then regarded the evidence of her (unreal) treachery of her husband Othello" (Roy & Haque, 27). However, Othello's doubts lead him to stop everything by killing his wife and beloved, then killing himself. Such an end does not seem very surprising when readers see the hero's condition from the beginning as he appears hesitated and disturbed about Desdemona and Cassio.

### 2.3 Othello and Iago: The Protagonist and the Antagonist.

(Johnson, 2009: 21-22) sees that "Shakespeare's *Othello* is a play which is highly complex". For it tries to investigate the hidden undiscovered intention which could not be revealed easily in everyday life details. The character analysis of both Othello and Iago goes beyond having a psychological view-point which attempts to provide answers or interpretations to their behaviors. Moreover, some critics describe the conflict between the two characters in terms of the absence or the lack of arriving at an accepted understanding of each other's identity. Such kind of analysis takes into consideration several factors including the original culture each stands for. Othello's lack of confidence may result from his belief that his character as a black color prevents him from having control over the white colored Iago and others. His lack of self-

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confidence could possibly be a major reason for being suspicious or doubtful about his wife. His feeling of inferiority concerning his color and lack of trust looks to be another factor of being jealous and psychologically disrupted.

Anyway, Othello proves that he wants to retain the shattered personality by letting Iago's claim to be true. "The General, Othello, re-creates a superior act when he believes Iago's lies and tricks which make him lose control of himself causing the murder of his wife and committing suicide" (Zouidi, 2015: 108). As if he wants Iago to reconsider his attitude to Othello's personality as his master and General. Whatever interpretations are, Othello indicates his weak and shattered psychological status by letting a wicked person like Iago to decide his faith by weaving lies and false stories.

Despite his attempt to prove that he is self-confident and strong personality, Othello does not develop a well-sustained character that he always wants to be. The image of color or blackness controls his mind and leads him to be in doubt of the whole people around him. Even when he regrets losing his wife, Desdemona, Othello appears as somebody who imprisons himself in the struggling ideas inside him. He loves his wife greatly but was unable to neglect Iago's extreme effort of creating lies about Cassio and Desdemona. Of course, Iago's intentions do not stop at making Othello jealous or suspicious but his purpose looks remoter. Iago suffers some sort of psychological troubles concerning his role as inferior to a black general. To destruct Othello's life and love is a major aim for Iago who feels jealous from his master. Still, Iago's pride plays a role in portraying a picture about Othello permitting the idea that somebody like Othello does not deserve to be superior to him.

It is then the fault that Othello commits great sin when he leaves Iago to be his close assistant and gives him a wide space. "Iago's personality perfectly fits the characterization of sixteen and seventeen century Venetian society in its cold and rational mentality" (Rosh, 1980: 70). Such character finds it difficult to accept the presence of a stranger to their culture like Othello. Moreover, Iago's wicked intention does not allow or accept the existence of somebody like Othello to be his general. He insists on creating a character filled of jealousy, hatred, suspicion and even hesitation. Iago's endeavors represent a kind of prison from which Othello is never able to escape. He succeeds to make Othello believes the

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treachery of his wife leading him to kill her and commit a suicide that appears to be the only way of escaping from such deadly situation.

The following lines extracted from Act 1 scene 1 , makes the idea clear as it shows Iago's corrupted mentality revealed in his speech with Roderigo:

“Others there are/ who, trimm'd in  
forms and visages of duty,/ keep yet their  
hearts attending on themselves,/ And,  
throwing but shows of service on their  
lords,/ Do well thrive by them and when  
they have lined their coats/ Do themselves  
homage;” ( Shakespeare's *Othello*, ACT 1  
SCENE 1)

These lines, however, reflect Iago's villain nature as he advises Roderick to provide him some assistance with getting Desdemona. From the beginning Iago's attempts of cheating are obvious for the audience. He does whatever he could in order to disturb Othello's life. He fabricates a love relationship between Desdemona and Cassio for destroying not only Othello's marriage and love but even his personality. His revenge from Othello springs from his inner evil intention and hidden feelings of hatred and jealousy. Moreover, Iago's strong and confident character enables him to control the deeds of other characters including the protagonist although he knows that his nature is villain and devilish.

(Jacobsen , 2009: 496) regards that Iago's intention results from “the unfair or imperfect treatment from the part of Iago towards Othello”. For many times, Iago feels a kind of injustice because Othello's preference of Cassio. This is evident when Iago complains about Cassio's promotion assuming his uncomfortable condition since he feels that he deserves more:

But he (as loving his own pride and purposes)  
Evades them with a bumbast circumstance  
Horribly stuffed with epithites of war,  
And in conclusion,  
Nonsuits my mediators; for, “Certes,” says he,  
“I have already chose my officer.”  
And what was he?  
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,  
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine

...  
That never set a squadron in the field,  
Nor the division of a battle knows  
More than a spinster—unless the bookish theoretic,  
Wherein the [togaed] consuls can propose  
As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice,  
Is all his soldiership. (qtd. in Jacobsen, 2009: 497)

Iago, from another perspective, is never easy. He has some dangerous mentality which leads to see others inferior. His problem comes from inside since he has certain psychological troubles resulting from his claims that his hatred and aggression for Othello and Cassio are justified. According to him, Cassio is merely an accountant or a less experienced figure who should not be compared to him. From another corner, he hardly believes that Othello is superior to him or his master. In other words, Iago's ideas are not justified rather they crystalize his extreme envy and jealousy. This is, of course, part of his rational attitude of life for he never pays attention towards the emotional side of humans or the feelings of heart. A character like Iago represents for a wide degree the reasonable way of thinking or the voice of reason and cold culture that neglects the role of passion. Thus, for him, having the right to destruct others is a normal way of getting much power or control over them regardless of concepts like ethics or morality.

Added to this the fact that Iago's personality could be viewed negatively and positively depending on the roles he plays in the play. He is actually a two-sided character who, from one hand, appears as an assistant for Othello and an antagonist but from another hand he is the evil factor that caused his tragic end. Iago seems to have a great influence on other characters contributing to major events of the play. In one time, he plays a role that controls and restrict other roles resulting in a character of rare identity that could perfectly contains intelligence and evilness. "The final scene of the play summarizes the features of his personality when Cassio and Rodrigo fight each other and both were wounded, Iago comes at this time stabbing Rodrigo and killing himself but leaving Cassio alive" (Abu Oruq, 47). By this action, he wants to kill that last evidence of his conspiracy (Rodrigo himself) and to make Othello a kind of insane to kill his wife. Even then, when Emilia tries to speak the last words before her death by Iago, she tried to tell Othello the

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truth that his wife is innocent and she loved him honestly. The tragic end comes when Othello kills his wife and starts to regret losing his great love as he shouts lying on her bed then commits suicide.

Such story of the struggle between complete different identities of the two, Othello and Iago, represents a kind of characters of a special type. Critically, If the character of Iago is studied from an independent view-point, it is then obviously representative of that kind of people who will be able to sacrifice their own life for the sake of selfishness. It is Iago's inner darkness that prevents him from leaving others happy or being better than him. Iago, briefly, is ready to kill himself for the purpose of making Othello miserable and destructed and leaving Cassio to be the victim. Othello, from another point, stands for that weak leader who gives a wider space to other characters to control and change his life. "The whole tragic story then could be caused by the hero's powerless or negative mentality" (Djungjung, 2002: 1) in addition to the wicked long-processed way of falsifying truth by Iago.

### CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a play that contains many contrasting emotions or views. Its plot and major events lead the audience to be very emotional and passionate while analyzing the personal attitude of each character. The play, from one hand, deals with the tragic end of a loving noble character who lacks understanding and trust, but from another hand it tries to send a universal message for all humans all over the world about the importance of marriage institution. The struggle between the Antagonist and the Protagonist depicts the major theme around which all events are to be built. Even the tragic end of Othello and the other characters are to be tested under the wide difference between the two major characters Othello and Iago. Finally, such a play narrates the tragedy of a one character and tries to reveal other feelings like jealousy, hatred, selfishness and even envy. That is why this play gives the opportunity for many readers and scholars to analyze the character sketches of the protagonist and the antagonist depending on a psychological way of analysis.

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