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**PSYCHOANALYSIS OF *OTHELLO*: SHAKESPEARE'S APPROACH REVISITED**

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**Abstract**

Shakespeare has been studied by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychoanalysts and many other specialists. The testimony of Shakespeare as an advocate of psychoanalysis is that even Freud quoted lines from the dramatist's plays to help him to deal with serious issues and problems i.e. extreme failure and instinct of death. In other words, Shakespeare's plays serve significant socio psychological purposes which Freud developed into 'psychoanalysis'. The present article is analysis of Shakespeare's main characters in *Othello*. It gives a picture of why things happened so tragically in the play simultaneously raising a question if characters could be blamed or the circumstances. Why a character's behavior was transformed into violent, jealous or tolerant. Freud's psychoanalytical theory's constituents such as 'id', 'ego' and 'super ego' can be good reference for the study. However, the study has not included a criticism of 'conscious' sub-conscious and unconscious'.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, instinct, behavior, id, ego, super ego etc

**Introduction**

Psychoanalysis includes variety of elements; however sexuality is perhaps the most important one. The most popular Psychoanalyst, Freud considers Id (libido) as central part of one's personality that governs the behavior of an individual. Shakespeare's personal life and related aspects have always been cynically questioned especially his sexual nature. The story begins when he at age of 18 married a woman who was at least eight years older than he. Their first child was born only about six months after the marriage ceremony. This incidence suggested that the pregnancy was either not normal or most probably pre-marital. Such a background opens up a controversy on account of loyalty, trust and character. It is also suspected that Shakespeare authored only 26 sonnets for his dark lady and 126 for fair youth.

It may also be added that the concept and foundation of 'marriage' in Shakespeare's plays are so fragile that it can never

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continue and its ultimate end is separation. The critic argues, that the only agenda of marriage is purely normative, sexual and somewhat social. Here begins the psychoanalysis. If we consider Freud's theory that there are three parts of one's personality: Id, Ego and super ego, and libido (part of Id) is the central powerhouse that controls human behaviour unless the man has reached the stage of 'ego' (social part) and later 'super-ego' (the moral and spiritual part of the personality).

Shakespeare's psychoanalytic study included couples, families, and groups. As an example, scholars have discovered that the more closely Shakespeare's text is read (especially in the Sonnets), the more in-depth layers of meaning are revealed. For example, sonnet-18 (some lines are omitted:

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
...  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course,  
untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
...  
When in eternal lines to Time thou  
grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes  
can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to  
thee."

(source:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summers-day>

Interesting to note that this sonnet is addressed to the poet's friend (fair youth), and by looking at it, there is no apparent indication of any sexuality, however, enough of platonic love is traceable. This is the dynamic side of the great man of letters that he uses all the dimensions of human psyche: be it is immortality, eternal concept, physical and pure love and social status.

By comparing his friend's charm with temporal summer's lease, and then a successful trial of immortalizing the eternal grace, the poet has given enough indication that he believes in immortality which comes only through pure love and a genuine bond rather than mere physical attraction.

**Elements of sexuality, love and violence in Shakespeare's plays**

**Sexuality in Othello**

It is indeed difficult to categorically state that Othello's central focal point is sexuality. Othello was not an emotional character, but quite affected by his own 'self' while Iago's sexuality was of different nature. His villain-like traits are not exactly marked by negative love or sexual desire but by jealousy and position consciousness. However, Shakespeare's portrayal of the heroine characterizes typical love type who adores the black moor (the hero) for her attraction rather than anything else. Though sexual issues are found in almost all young characters yet the play is mostly about 'ego' the social

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issues. Even having a close bond with a beautiful figure like Desdemona is a matter of social status rather than romance or sexuality. Each character has its own priority keeping preferences and human nature in view.

**Love in Othello**

Nearly all the characters are found engaged in ‘love’, but only Desdemona’s love seems genuine. All other characters are driven by some motives; therefore we can find controversies and scandals (genuine or hatched). Love has never been more important than honor or social status in the time of Shakespeare. As he says:

...But why should honor outlive honesty?

(Shakespeare, 1973, p. 947).

**Jealousy: main factor of the tragedy**

The play is mainly a favorable plot for a study as to how jealousy can be fueled by evil characters like Iago in the play ‘Othello’. The hero has succumbed to the tricks of the jealous characters when Iago in particular succeeds in proving innocent Desdemona as an unfaithful wife. The fuel of jealousy caught fire when Iago complains to Roderigo that his commander (Othello) has ignored him and promoted Casio. He decides to be revengeful. In the process of revenging, Iago first decides to inform Desdemona’s father (Brabantio) that his dear daughter has decided to marry Othello, despite the fact that Brabantio opposes because Othello is a moor.

**Insecurity and failure**

The Othello’s complex (feeling of being inferior) changes his personality and behavior. It creates unnecessary doubt and jealousy, sense of revenge and finally leads to hatred in Othello which becomes the only cause of disaster. Othello became a victim of Freud’s theory of Inferiority complex. He is often referred to as the “Moor” (I.i.116), “the Barbary Horse” (I.i.111), “old black ram” (I.i.8), “Thick-lips” (I.i.66).

Undoubtedly Othello lives in a very strange society as he is a black moor who is living with white people. Though no sensible and cultured white man will point out racial issues yet Othello faces weird issues in his daily life. It might be a symbol of his self-awareness. He is bothered about his race, poor background including language.

It has been noted that one of the key reasons of Iago’s success of spoiling Othello’s married life is “Inferiority complex”.

Othello says:

“Rude am I in my speech, more than pertains to feats of broil and battle”- (I.i.81-82).

This kind of speech is evident that Othello usually feels himself inferior to others. He tries to deal with the issue of the color.

It has been noticed that Desdemona is able to cope with the racial prejudice but Othello

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is certainly not because he actually comes from a known racially deprived society. He looks as an odd man out. No one can blame Desdemona because if it was so, she would surely not marry Othello even if she loved him. In fact her relationship with him is based on love. But Othello is overpowered by the feeling of blackness, language and humble background. He confirms, "I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation". (I. ii. 268)

Iago, the villain, shows self-awareness to a degree, in that he admits of his rival:  
Cassio ... hath a daily beauty in his life //  
That makes me ugly; (Act 5 Scene 1)

He also confirms his feeling of 'inferiority', yet he does not seem to grow on the moral dimensions, He seriously lacks most of them consequently fails to realise that such qualities but anything else elevate others. He is not beguiled by anybody but trapped by his own ill-will. Ultimately he became a soft victim of his negative thoughts and feelings, which he has planned and implemented for his co-actors.

The crime that he has committed seems to have no chances of redemption. In other words, he has to face the consequences.

**Violence in Shakespeare's Othello**

There are many forms of violence in William Shakespeare's Othello. The play 'Othello' portrays how jealousy can

negatively control an individual's mind which can lead to many dramatic phases and finally to a tragic end. The main character that epitomizes violence is Iago. The personality and behavior of this negative character became further bitter due to two reasons: why Casio was promoted to a higher position and how Desdemona can fall in love with Othello who was not even white. Instead of finding faults with his 'self' he explored other faults besides going beyond the limits and soiling other's reputation and even life.

Knowing that 'drinking' may lead to violence Iago persuaded Cassio to drink despite Casio's initial refusal. Under the effect of wine, Cassio says, "A knave teaches me my duty! I'll beat the knave into a twiggen bottle (p. 48)." This tiny issue depicts how Iago's tricks turn into Cassio's loss of mental and behavioral control leading to even physical violence. Many other times, Iago beguiles Othello to doubt Desdemona's faithfulness, and he traps other characters to materialize his evil aims.

**Psychoanalysis of main positive and negative characters in Othello**

**Desdemona**

By comparing three main characters of the play, it is quite easy to say that Desdemona has all the traits of the lead character

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(hero/heroine). Her royal background, philosophy of life, life related visions, emotions and love all are indicatives of a noble personality. He is a satisfied lady, not jealous or affected by any complex or negative feeling. She loves Othello, a black moor ( soldier in army) and boldly justifies it despite many odds.

She states:

"...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."(*Act One, Scene Three*)

The lines show that she is trying to be loyal, honest, faithful on account of her character. She also expects that her beloved-husband should fully trust her, but it does not happen for some reasons.

On other occasion, she makes it quite clear that she loves Othello, thus claims her loyalty as under. It shows her submissive nature that makes her great:  
"That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
...Even to the very quality of my lord:  
... And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him."  
(*Act One, Scene Three*)

Having showed her honesty, faithfulness, and sincere love Desdemona expects Othello that he understands her true love for him, but unfortunately it does not happen in the play till the hero kills her out of doubts, suspicion created by Iago. It is so unfortunate that the hero does not understand the conspiracy hatched by the evil and jealous character(s), consequently the whole tragedy occurs.

**Psychoanalysis of main positive and negative characters in Othello**

**Desdemona**

Desdemona is the real hero/heroine of the play, however, her soft and humble nature has even been depicted by the dramatist that even characterises any common woman. Despite the fact that she is from the royal family, she behaves quite simply and normally. It may be considered as greatness of one's personality, but at the same time, it may be proved to be a weakness for a lady of her status. And that has what happened in the play Othello.

Hence there is no denial of the fact that she genuinely loves her beloved-husband. She boldly announces her feeling and sincerity of her love towards the hero:

"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

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Due to the Moor my lord."

(*Act One, Scene Three*)

Desdemona is very confident of her decisions of choosing a black moor (as most jealous consider). It is the positive side of her personality which proves her firm decision making ability without any social pressure. It may not be the best time to mention that for Shakespeare 'ego' (social part of one's personality) is more important than 'Id' (sexual/emotional side). In the case of Desdemona, Id is more demanding, therefore she ignores the social element and chooses Othello despite many odds.

She boldly makes it evident that she loves Othello and thus claims her loyalty as under:

"That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of  
fortunes

May trumpet to the world: my heart's  
subdued

Even to the very quality of my lord:

... And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him."  
(*Act One, Scene Three*)

Having expressed honestly about her faithfulness, Desdemona still expects that Othello understands her stand and believes that she is honest and loyal. This is height

of her commitment towards her love and decision to live with her partner.

**Othello's character**

Othello being a soldier might be very impressive on the battlefield, but there are flaws in his character due to insecurity caused by his humble background or some other reasons despite the fact Desdemona never considers any such criteria. And the feeling of insecurity leads to the tragic end. Shakespeare has been successful in portraying the human psyche in a splendid manner. Though he loves and admires his wife, but he hardly believes that he can be loved by such a beautiful lady. In the back of his mind, he is well aware that he does not deserve Desdemona. And this negative feeling leads to disaster.

Othello explains that Desdemona took initiative for falling in love with him. (Act One, Scene Three). This is another demonstration of her not being a submissive, passive character—she decided she wanted him, and she pursued him. At the same time, it shows that Othello was not confident of proposing Desdemona for love as he was well aware of his humble racial background and even position against the rank and beauty of Desdemona. As mentioned earlier that Othello was suspicious about a few things, Desdemona is not insecure or ashamed at all for any reasons. She was even called a "whore", but

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she never reacts otherwise “rather sheshows her full devotion and complete loyalty to Othello. Therefore, she tries to resolve the dispute caused by misunderstanding between the two leading characters. As Othello mistreats her, Desdemona’s feelings are not waning: “My love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns,” (Act Four, Scene Three).

**Iago's character**

Iago is such a central figure in the Othello that sometimes he overpowers the main hero as he perfectly portrays the character of a negative man who is full of jealousy against Othello despite his claim that he also loves Desdemona. In Act 2, Scene 1, Iago has a master plans to trick Othello. Perhaps his negative personality is confident that Othello can be beguiled easily and carried away. Iago's negativism is mainly an outcome of jealousy with Othello, but it is not initially caused by love or sexuality but for power and position and racial feeling. Therefore he insists on Roderigo to believe that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. His ironical tone is expressive of his nature: “As honest as I am”, 2.1.193).

Iago is considered as a narcissistic character who is controlled by ‘ego’. Analyzing the character through a Freudian psychoanalytical lens reveals this trait. Critics opine that he is emotionally immature therefore he reveals a lot of things

related to his dislike for Othello. Hence, we should not forget that sometimes, he uses soliloquy to hide his hidden intentions.

Iago is even suspicious of Othello’s affair with his wife (Emilia) which is absolutely weird. He declares: I hate the Moor, And it is thought abroad, that ‘twixt my sheets He’s done my office. (Shakespeare, 1973, p. 922)

Iago has been portrayed as one in a quest for influence. The readers can see him spending the entire drama seeking to exert influence and use power.

He is clever enough to justify his character:

And what's he then that says I play the villain,

When this advice is free I give, and honest, (Act 2 Scene 3)

On the other hand, Iago was at serious fault considering the heroine (Desdemona) an ordinary woman who can succumb to ordinary pleasure seeking techniques. Shakespeare’s food imagery expressed the nature and hatred of Iago comments on her using food imagery who could be considered as little vulgar et least for a royal character like Desdemona:

'Blest fig's end!' (2.1.238). This is the best example of vulgarity and obscenity as ‘figs’ weirdly symbolise female vulva.

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**Conclusion**

From the viewpoint of psychoanalytical theory, all the three main characters have been portrayed brilliantly. The central issues of the play's plot are: possession, jealousy, social status, inferiority complex, revenge, doubt, loves wit out trust, rare sexuality and so on. The only positive aspect in the entire play is the love of Desdemona for Othello: the black moor.

The concept of love presented by the dramatist through different characters is an outcome of human psych which is in the line of psychoanalytic theory. Iago was quite a normal man but he could not control his type and amount of jealousy. Instead he tried to control the bond between the hero and heroine by exploiting his association with Desdemona which later was concluded as a device rather than a genuine feeling. Iago could not control his feelings regarding the proposed marriage of Desdemona with Othello while he exclaims in scene 2 of act 1 : "I do love her too". This leads to an idea that Iago has similar feelings for Desdemona, however, it could not be guaranteed if Iago really wanted a genuine bond with the heroine or he just wanted to exploit his relationship with her. In other words, Iago has had a powerful desire of domination over Othello's wife (Desdemona), and it is also clear that his love is entirely different from that of Othello's.

It is also quite normal that people have and express love in different ways for different reasons. Extra possession is also indicative of too much love with a fear of losing for some reasons. Perceptions may vary from person to person. It is also evident that Iago's motives seem unconventional, but he longs for something entirely different from conventional lovers who mostly want to have sexual relationship with her. Not only Iago has a desire of love for Desdemona, other minor characters such as Roderigo's love for Desdemona are also of different kind.

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