

Elizabethan era and othello



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Consider how Shakespeare's themes of prejudice and chaos versus order were received by his contemporary audience. How does Geoffrey Sax's production continue to find relevance in these issues for the modern audience? Othello is a play of tragedy; that examines the darker aspects of human existence, and forces us as audience to contemplate what it is to be human.

Shakespeare privileges and challenges the Elizabethan attitudes and values towards the prejudices of race and gender while also presenting his contextual theme of chaos versus order. These values transcend the context of both modern and contemporary audiences and it is through the BBC adaptation by Geoffrey Sax that modern audiences are able to engage with relevance of these issues. Othello is a story of black and white, or even more so black versus white. Shakespeare represents this racial battle on an interesting level, as a battle of good versus evil which is always seen in black versus white.

It is within the character and interactions of Othello that, Shakespeare privileges and challenges the idea of the prejudice of racism. It can easily be seen that in Elizabethan times there would be no-one who would look favourably on a "black" man yet Shakespeare has placed him in one of the highest positions as the general of the Venetian army in Cyprus. Othello is a man of confidence, nobility and rank yet he is constantly inferior because of his colour as can be seen through Iago who refers constantly to him as "The Moor" and even states him of one with the devil; "When devils will the blackest sins put on" (Act 2 Scene 3, Line 341). This is likely to represent the attitudes of a great deal of people at the time the play was written as even

the Queen of England was racist as at one point she expressed her discontent at the great number of ‘Negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm’. Yet it is through Othello’s character that Shakespeare is able to challenge the stereotypical ideology of ‘The Moor’ by making him an Elizabethan hero. From the beginning of the play, Othello is depicted as a true hero.

Even Iago admits constantly that Othello is “of a constant, loving, noble nature” (Act 2 Scene 1 Line 270) despite his hatred. He is a great general and a great man. Like any Elizabethan hero; he is flawed; his nobility and honesty permits Iago to use his deceitful ways. Whereas a black person would normally be used in Elizabethan literature to represent the darkness, Iago’s absolute evil takes on that role. Though a man of African or other wise indigenous heritage is typically portrayed in Elizabethan literature in a negative light it is in Othello that allows Shakespeare to make this “Moor” to be appreciated by Elizabethan audiences. The prejudice of racial discrimination is still relevant within modern society as it is still an issue of significant concern.

Within Geoffrey Sax’s BBC production we the modern audience are able to engage with how these concerns are still a major part of our society, particularly the contextual significance of white and black audiences engaging with this production. This can be seen with Othello’s promotion which rather than being of personal significance is of political gain for his superiors. In addition to the prejudice of racism, the play also shows to some degrees of sexism. The play is also a study of gender, the ways by which Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s culture, and our culture define men and

women. There are only three women in the play and each one is bound up in a relationship with a man and at the end of the play only one of the women survives.

The word ‘gender’ describes those physical, biological, behavioural, verbal, textual, mythic and power dynamic cues that signal to others in the society, specifically the society of the Elizabethans. Constantly throughout the play, particularly Act 2 Scene 1, Line 108-112; “Come on, come on! You are pictures out of the door, Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens, devils being, offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds”. Although a joke, Iago’s speech represents a type of mistrust in all women. Furthermore Brabantio reminds Othello that Desdemona may be unfaithful to him.

These kinds of perceptions make women very susceptible to the whims of men. To Shakespeare contemporary audience this would have been the accepted attitude, and would have been a respected dominant thinking that the Elizabethan patriarchal society. A stereotypical view regards women as the emotional, weak and submissive sex, resulting in their elimination from positions of high power. Women were seen as objects, to be used or manipulated, a view upheld through Iago’s line: “Look to your house, your daughters, and your bags”, as he likens women to mere possessions. In contrast, the male was traditionally seen as the stronger, wiser, and more reliable of the sexes, who should be involved in the processes of leadership and planning, as demonstrated by Lodovico’s praise of Othello: “the noble Moor, whom our full Senate call all-in-all-sufficient”. Thus, a Feminist reading

of Othello examines how women are economically, socially, politically and psychologically oppressed in a Patriarchal society.

Base use of animal imagery by Iago demonstrates the common stance on women: “ wild-cats in your kitchens...players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds. The submissive nature expected of women can be appreciated through the subservient and respectful manner with which Desdemona conducts herself in the courthouse: “ Most gracious duke, to my unfolding lend your prosperous ear. ” As a result, Desdemona is viewed as a pure, innocent and loyal being, as evidenced through personification: “ A maiden never bold; of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion blush’d at herself”. Such obedience is also demonstrated in Desdemona’s undying loyalty to Othello, even on her dead bed: “ A guiltless death I die! and “ Commend me to my kind lord. ” However, a more independent side of women is presented in the Sax film, through the portrayal of females as more feisty and strong-willed, yet still suppressed by the trappings of their patriarchal society. Desdemona is portrayed by a brunette, who promotes a more sensual, sexual and feisty aura.

This can be clearly identified in the establishing scenes of the film, where she moves confidently and swiftly through the abandoned streets of Venice, wrapped in a veil, to keep away from prying eyes, symbolic of the hold society has upon her. Similarly, the open passion displayed between Desdemona and Othello, in various and numerous mis-en-scenes of intimacy, juxtaposes the traditional reading of the play, where women were seen as inferior and dominated by males, rather than passionate and sexually familiarised. Due to the passionate, independent and strong-minded

characterisation of women, as portrayed by the Geoffrey Sax film version of Othello, an intense feeling of unease is produced by the futile death of these innocent, but loyal women. As Othello begins to abandon reason and language, chaos takes over. His world begins to be ruled by chaotic emotions and very shady allegations, with order pushed to one side.

This chaos rushes him into tragedy, and once Othello has sunk into it, he is unable to stop his fate from taking him over. Shakespeare's structural choice of setting is very significant within the play, as Venice and Cyprus act as a metaphor for order and chaos with Venice representing the order, Christian faith, culture and civilisation while Cyprus is an island that represents that of conflict, war, isolation and political instability. This technique is again symbolic as it is also a figurative metaphor for Othello's character, as he descends into madness the setting is a shift from the logical, calm and confident General to the mad, jealousy lover of Cyprus. Important is the contrast between Othello's language as he falls into a trance, and Othello's language in any previous part of the play, including Act III. He speaks in single, disconnected words "handkerchief confession handkerchief," or "Noses, ears, and lips" that completely contradict his ability to speak coherently and elegantly, as Othello has shown, especially in Act I with Brabantio.

The lack of connection in his language parallels his descent into emotional and logical chaos; as he becomes more upset, without a true cause, he falls farther and farther from himself, and the order which typically rules him. Again, the theme of order vs. chaos comes into play. In the context of the

Elizabethan period, power was of extreme social and cultural significance as it was in direct association to the status and structure of society.

Elizabethan world view played an important part in Shakespeare's text, and the Elizabethan people credited it's involvement in his plays.