

A "race and color" reading



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Othello is one of the greatest tragedies by William Shakespeare. The Socio-Economic setting of the play drives us to ponder over it again and again. Othello was a Moor and had fallen head over heels in love with Desdemona and won her hands in marriage. Being unacquainted with the customs and norms of an alien culture, Othello had to suffer a lot. What would have happened if Othello were not a Moor but a respected citizen of Venice?

Automatically, the socio-economic equation would have changed and Othello might surely have enjoyed an enviable privilege to have a well-planned control over the whole situation. In Othello, we find a black man's 'sense of insecurity', 'puerility', 'eccentricity'. Iago, the 'artist in crime' is a sordid opportunist of the postcolonial era, who insinuates, motivates and plans adeptly to take advantage of the characteristic weaknesses of Othello leading to irremediable frustration and despair that act as a stimulus in the murder of Desdemona.

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Othello is the Moor white men need for their protection and well-being. Othello comes from a different socio-economic background and is employed by the tense and visibly perturbed Duke: "Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you, / Against the general enemy Ottoman. Written at a time when Negroes were being supplied to Virginia, Shakespeare's Othello's spirit glows

with noble ancestral memories and critics like Grant White hold that only a civilized and warlike race could produce an Othello.

Othello has a presence; he can raise the whites like Cassio to higher ranks, he can head an army, he can order two drunken men to sheath weapons, he can, if required, dismiss them for their offence and he is black and belongs to a lower socio-economic strata and after all race and social status mattered at that time.

Hence the union of Othello and Desdemona is presented as the mating of animals, with the Moor as the 'black ram', a practitioner of 'arts inhibited.' A white Prospero can use magic openly and boldly and Shakespeare is apologetic to none but King James, while, Othello's wooing and winning of a white woman is tantamount to the practice of 'black magic.' Othello, after all, is an employee of the Duke and hails from a questionable background of a Moor who claims to be well-traveled but is reticent on his redoubtable socio-economic background.

Can he in any way emulate the social status of Brabantio, whose daughter he marries out of love? Brabantio remembers the 'wealthy curled darlings' of his nation and is furious at the thought of his fair daughter against the Moor's 'sooty bosom'. Othello, the Moor, can hardly be accepted by the Venetian public as his skin is of black hue and he comes from an alien socio-economic status.

Othello seemed gratified as he had proved to be the right and only choice in the life of Desdemona. Till then, Othello had never been reminded of the fact that he was a Moor whom Desdemona was supposed to be afraid of. Basically, Othello was not a craven fellow, whose spirits could easily dampen

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on futile grounds. Othello wished not to doubt Desdemona but he never could brook the presence of any other lover in the life of Desdemona, whom he loved to the point of distraction. He blurted out at one point, “ Cassio, I love the; But never more be officer of mine.”

Regarding Othello, we come across a myriad points of view. Critics have labeled Othello as a play of ‘ sexual jealousy’ a play of motive and temptations , so on, so forth. But here we see that Othello being unaware of the socio-economic picture of Venice treads the wrong path and gulps the dangerous bait. He , like a fool, yields to Iago’s repeated insinuations. If Desdemona would have been a Moor herself , the disaster hardly would have followed.

Being a Moor, he won the love and undivided attention of Desdemona. When Iago crept in between them and strove heart and soul to malign the relationship, Othello lent him credulous ears. Didn’t he understand that Iago was keen on creating a rift in their unflinching alliance? Of course, in the subconscious of the protagonist, he made a dent surreptitiously and without Othello’s cognizance.

Othello felt perplexed to find that even his truest and unalloyed love could not keep Desdemona ‘ loyal’ to him! Was it simply because he was a Moor? Or, did Desdemona have to lose her life to Othello, only because the Black-and-White conflict caught hold of his mind unawares? We hear Othello recounting his shortcomings in a soliloquy in Act III , Sc iii, lines-263-7: “ Haply for I am black, /And have not those soft parts of conversation/.... She’s gone, I am abused.”

His distrust lay rooted in himself , in the society in which he feared himself ' unaccepted', though his love had fully been requited, reciprocated. Why did then ' uncertainty' gnaw at his entrails? It was possibly because , Othello could never forget the acrimonious warning of Brabantio: " Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:/She has deceived her father, and may thee."