

Contemporary social issues as portrayed in othello research paper examples

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In the full title of his tragedy, *Othello, The Moor of Venice*, Shakespeare announces the place of origin and race of the titular character. The two matters of such important significance as is later demonstrated. Notably the actions in this play unfold in two distinct geographical areas, the cities of Venice and Cypress. There is also frequent reference to two types of outsiders, 'the Moor' and 'the Turks'. An understanding of the inherent opinions and prejudices of his Jacobean audience is obviously reflected in Shakespeare's setting of the play. He understands and so does his audience, the significance of these factors.

The modern day Venice stretches across several small islands along the Adriatic Sea in northeast Italy. In the middle Ages, Venice became extremely wealthy and established itself as an imperial power annexing Cyprus and several other crusader states. This quest for expansion was to bring Venice in conflict with the Turks who ultimately conquered Cypress by 1571. To the English Venice was a place of wealth and violence, culture and treachery.

Racial Prejudice in Othello

The term Moors was widely used to describes the medieval Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa, whose culture was often derivatively called 'Moorish'. At this time, the English would have considered any dark-skinned Muslim person a Moor. This prejudice and the notions of their savagery rendered them an abhorred race of villains.

The title character is a noble Moor who commands a Venetian army in Cyprus, a depiction of his allegiance and commitment to Venice. This scenario presents a somewhat ironical situation because in *Othello*, the audience gets an unexpected and unprecedented tragic hero. But his

nobleness does not seem to absolve him from the prevailing prejudice against his ilk. They still consider him a fierce and frightening character. It is no surprise to them that he is sent to Cyprus to go and fight the Turks. The perceived differences are glaring to most of Shakespeare's readers at the time, that they probably shared Brabantio's disappointment and Iago's prejudice against Othello.

Whilst Iago's determination to bring ruin to Othello is attributed to his disappointment at being passed for the lieutenant position in favor of Cassio, his strong hatred for the Moor is apparently evident. But to Othello, his perceived class is best expressed when he elopes Desdemona, the young and beautiful white girl, and the daughter of Senator Brabantio. So surprising is this turn of events to the senator that he thinks Othello must have used witchcraft to lure his daughter. As it stands, Iago sees an excellent opportunity to ruin his enemy using his 'illicit' relationship with Desdemona. Gathering Roderigo, he goes to the senator early in the morning to report; 'Zounds, Sir, you're robb'd; for shame, put on your gown; your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. We can assume that Iago's words are a depiction of how the 17th century Venice regarded other races. They are even compared to animals and the devil in disguise.

As a revered senator, and the fact that Othello is a respected general, one would expect that he would not equally raise a fuss. However, in utter dismay he confronts Othello about the marriage. His demands to have his daughter amidst the denial that she concisely chose to marry him reeks of racism. To him she would have remained unmarried than marry a black man.

The meaning here is that other races will be accepted while they are useful and so long as they remember their rightful place in the order of racial significance.

Racism in the Modern World

In their well collected book, *Racism in the Modern World* Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt give a historical perspective on the development of racism throughout reported history to the recent tensions that are racial in nature. This arguably makes racism one of the biggest social problems the world has had to contend with. From the Nazi torture chambers, to the civil rights campaigns in the USA to Apartheid in South Africa, racial segregation has been with us for as long as civilization emerged. The manifestation of this social problem has generally remained the same from the time before Othello, to the present. While the grandiose atrocities such as the Nazi campaigns are long gone, the motivational factors remain the same; the notion that one race is superior to the other thus making subjugation a necessity.

Conclusion

Othello's treatment of race makes it one of Shakespeare's most relevant and controversial plays. For some, the portrayal of the black man of foreign decent who marries a white woman of noble class, then brutally murdering her in a fit of rage; is enough hint of racism. All through the play, Shakespeare weaves a general abhorrence of the 'Turks' and the 'Moors'. For some critics, Shakespeare seems to endorse xenophobia. Further, there is the feeling that the play enacts racist stereotypes like savagery of the

Moors. But others have argued that the play is crafted to provoke a rethinking of the ideas about racial differences. Ideally the controversy inherent remains with us to date. If Shakespeare sought to bring out attention to this social disorder, then we are yet to come out of the wood.

Works Cited

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