

# Women vs. men in othello

Literature, Russian Literature



Whether intentional or not, William Shakespeare's Othello can be viewed (help) from a feminist perspective. Many scholars continually argue that Othello consists of a male dominated society in which the women play an insignificant role. While this argument proves mostly accurate in the political realm, women control society and love in ways that overwhelm the strengths of men, ultimately leading to the disgraceful downfalls of men. In Venetian society at this particular time in history, women are perceived as weak, subordinate, and even prostitutes.

Shakespeare presents the reader with three main women characters:

Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. The men of this society view women as possessions. For example, Iago seems to believe that "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/He's done my office" (I. 3. 381-2). This suggests that Othello has slept with his wife; however in reality, Iago displays little affection towards her. Just the thought that "the lusty Moor/hath leaped into [his] seat" drives Iago to insanity (II.

1. 286-7). With this point of view, Emilia is stripped of her humanity as her husband metaphorically describes her as his "office" and "seat."

The women are evidently used by the men to fulfill their desire, but this turns against them as strong women begin to resist the requirements of this patriarchal society. A limited number of people, such as Carol Thomas Neely, introduce the idea that Desdemona "is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute"(Neely). However, while professing her love for Othello "before the senators, she answers her father's charges forcefully and persuasively, without shyness or reticence"(Garner).

Desdemona proves to be a strong woman, who knows her desires and the methods in which she will use to achieve them. The women of this play fail to comply with the well-known social norms of their gender role. Emilia “combines sharp-tongue honesty with warm affection”(Neely). With her understanding of human mentality, Emilia does not fail “to discern her husband’s true nature,” as some scholars believe, but actually becomes suspicious of his actions, never refraining from revealing his plans (). It is evident that Bianca allows her “jealousy over Cassio [motivate] her every word and action,” but she remains true to her love and does not let her role in society dictate her romance (Godfrey).

These women overcome the gender stereotypes through their enduring audacity, prevailing knowledge, and realistic stance on relationships. Beneath the masculine facade of Othello, lies a powerful matriarchal presence. Male bonds and their power are eradicated by romantic love. John Alexander Allen wrote about how “Shakespeare’s women use and control sexuality, while his men cannot”(Allen). The men of Othello allow their emotions to be warped causing their ignorance and confusion throughout most of the play. On the other hand, the women maintain their assurance in love. In a “male-oriented world,” many “dangers, inequalities, frustrations and limitations” exist, therefore the women adapt by keeping a rational mind in their relationships (Allen). Most critics seem mostly interested in the relationship between Othello and Iago (Garner). Yet, as one takes a deeper look into Othello’s mind, one will discover the immense power his wife, Desdemona, holds over him. Desdemona’s alleged affair leaves Othello weakened by heartbreak. Many portray the men of this play as the “

embodiment of courage, honor and power,” but Othello’s strength is threatened by letting his emotions overcome his senses (Allen).

Garner accepts the idea that “ as soon as Othello’s jealousy and rage begin to manifest themselves, Desdemona’s forthrightness and courage starts to desert her”(Garner). However, even in the midst of her murder, Desdemona reveals virtue and honesty as she continues to uphold her marital promises. The loyal Emilia uses her insight to destroy Iago’s bond with Othello (Neely). This is an example of female intuition and logic prevailing over men’s misconception of passion. Each man suffers for his mistakes in varying ways, but each consequence leads back to women’s romantic superiority. The envious behavior of the men in Othello differs completely from the trustworthy women. Carol Thomas Neely skillfully proves this point by representing the women as “ free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness”(Neely). Women, especially Bianca and Desdemona, love purely, and respect their partners while also maintaining their moral standards.

Throughout the play, men become obsessive over the idea of reputation; they lose sight of their sanity. The men often blame those inferior to them for their own actions (Neely). However, the women “ lack... the class consciousness” that seems to dominate the minds of the men. Unlike the men, the women have faith in each other despite of their individual roles in society, never failing to defend their fellow women. Regardless of the actions of these powerful women, it is hard to argue with the fact that men dominate the political and military part of this Venetian society. Some scholars suggest that Othello and Iago “ assert their authority by addressing situations from a

position of concealed power”(Zott). The men are at the top of their society and families. Their knowledge, such as Othello’s eloquent speaking skills, is unattainable by the uneducated women who serve as merely objects in the eyes of men (Zott). The critics who defend this traditional attitude often “implicitly demean Desdemona,” as well as the other women of the play (Neely).