

Gender discrimination in othello essay sample



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Othello is a manifestation of gender discrimination prevailing at that time. It clearly refer to sexism that is not only inclined toward male chauvinism but also a degraded social status of women in the contemporary society. All three major female characters of the play epitomize this gender discrimination and manifest female victimization. These three characters represent three different classes and illustrate that gender discrimination and maltreatment of women were not subjected to social class as it prevalent from rascals to royals.

Shakespearean tragedy has two distinct portions with regard to gender bias and discrimination. In the first half of the play, women are portrayed with glowing colors and not negative terminology or abuses are attributed to them. Reader is little equipped to digest the abuses and gender discrimination in the second half and he become accustomed to eulogies and praises that are directed toward women. For example Cassio eulogize “divine” Desdemona while waiting for sips(2. 1. 60-73). He further shows regret and unwillingness to contribute to Iago’s “ gutter talk” about Desdemona. Later Othello speaks positively of his mistress at reunion and put across his elevated praise of her:

“ I cannot speak enough of this content,
It stops me here; it is too much of joy (1. 2. 196-197).”

The only character that shows malice against women is Iago. But it does not seem that gender discrimination is weaved in the patterns of the society but it seems coming out of Iago’s devious and diabolical figure. Again his sole objective seems to undermine Desdemona’s faithfulness. So no other

character verbalizes anything abusive about the female gender in the first two Acts.

The conversation between women characters (between Emilia and Desdemona) also symbolizes the social generalization about women and their status in the society. Emilia is in the tradition of the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet- a character who is coarse-minded, earthy but devotedly attached to her mistress. Her being a companion to Desdemona enables her to reveal not only her own wide experience of the world but also to highlight Desdemona's innocence and idealism. The commonsensical realism of Emilia provides a refreshing contrast to Desdemona's unpractical idealism.

Her very first dialogue in the play indicates the matrimonial and domestic she was suffering from. Her response to Iago's comments;

" I find it still, when I have list to sleep: /Marry, before your ladyship, I grant, /She puts her tongue a little in her heart, /And chides with thinking. (II. I 891-894) she says, " You have little cause to say so" (II. i. 895). The critic Adamson is of the view that " She knows. . . . it is less painful to suffer his scornful abuse than to challenge and try to change him" (247). So her silence and so short a reply is tool to hide herself in her own cocoon and an agonizing acknowledgement of triviality in the domestic sphere.

Desdemona believes that Emilia would not commit adultery for the whole world. Emilia replies that the world is a huge thing and a big reward for such a small vice. When Desdemona insists that she believes Emilia would not do any such thing, Emilia becomes more explicit.

Again in the fourth Act, it is Iago that set the impetus for gender discrimination and uses abusive language. For example he speaks to audience and uses insulting terminology about Bianca that smells of gender favoritism. He says;

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,

A huswife that by selling her desires/ Buys herself bread and clothes.

“ It is a creature/

That dotes on Cassio (as 'tis the strumpet's plague/ To beguile many and be beguil'd by one) (4. 1. 93-97).”

Earlier, Iago has used more subtle abuse against the queen. He says to Othello;

“ O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,

To lip a wanton in a secure couch, And to suppose her chaste (4. 1. 70-72)!”

This situation is further aggravated by the Othello slap and insult of

Desdemona in 4. 1. 240. In the same scene Cassio joins Iago to record his contempt and disapproval of women especially Bianca;

Alas, poor caitiff (4. 1. 108).

And “ Alas, poor rogue, I think, i' faith, she loves me (4. 1. 111).”

In the second scene of act, this abusive language becomes more harsh and it seems that royal fabrications of mannerism and etiquettes has been replaced by original social patterns of the contemporary world. Now the real men of society display their real nature and that is manifested by the language they use for women. For example, Othello condemn Desdemona in this way;

“ This is a subtle whore

A closet lock and key of villainous secrets (4. 2. 21-22).”

And

“ Was this fair paper [i. e., Desdemona], this most goodly book

Made to write ‘ whore’ upon? What committed?

Committed? O thou public commoner,

I should make very forges of my cheeks (4. 2. 71-74).”

This utterance is not only a reaction of the resentment that Iago has planted in the mind of Othello but it has deep roots too. The overall social pattern has contributed toward a psychological being that becomes skeptic of a woman’s fidelity without any reason. There are certain social generalizations about the nature of women that contribute toward men’s contempt for women and augments the gender discrimination. For example when Othello demands any ocular proof of Desdemona’s infidelity, Iago replies;

“ It is impossible you should see this,

Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys... (3. 3. 402-403).”

Emilia’s stout defense of Desdemona proves futile because Othello decides to regard her as Desdemona’s bawd. However, Emilia has other functions in the play. Another important point raised by M. R. Ridley is that although Shakespeare has created weak female in the play to emphasize the gender inequality and their minor status in the contemporary world, Emilia symbolize a reaction to that gender discrimination in the last scenes of the play. He says that “ in all the plays there is nothing more characteristic of Shakespeare than the way in which Desdemona’s death kindles in her

(Emilia) a bright flame of self-forgetful courage; it is not just that she faces the threats of both Othello and her husband(Iago), but rather that she neglects them, brushes them aside as irrelevant trivialities.”

A. C. Bradley remarks about this transformation;” Till close to the end she frequently sets one’s teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her” (p. 205). The only character to perform a complete transformation of character over the course of Othello’s action, Emilia progresses rapidly from her early role as coarse and subservient foil) to Iago (as depicted earlier) into a resolute and effective defender of Desdemona’s virtue.

References

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