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## Racial Othering in *Othello*: Colonial Gaze and Racial Anxiety in the Venetian Society

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the theme of racial othering in Shakespeare's *Othello*, and focuses on the ways in which the colonial gaze and racial anxiety have shaped the representation of the Moor in Venetian society. The language and attitudes of the dominant white people consistently degrade Othello and reduce him to a racial outcast, despite the elevation as a military hero. Through an analysis of Othello's identity crisis and final downfall, argument is that the play reveals deep-rooted fears and contradictions within a society that relies on colonial subjects while simultaneously rejecting them. Drawing on postcolonial theory, especially the works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Ania Loomba, the analysis shows how Othello anticipates modern discourses on race, identity, and cultural exclusion.

**Keywords:** Othering, Colonialism, Identity, Postcolonialism Exclusion

Shakespeare's *Othello* is one of the most important literary examinations of race and identity in Western literature. The tragic plot of the play revolves around Othello, who is an outsider in Venice. The story reveals the rise and downfall of Othello in Venetian society. One of the primary factors contributing to his tragic downfall was his identity. He was a successful military leader and a public figure in Venice but always suspected as an outsider. Several characters in the plays make derogatory remarks about him. They allowed his him to serve as a soldier and hold strong position in Venetian army but never wanted to allow him to marry a Venetian woman. Perhaps they consider him less virtuous to marry a Venetian woman. Thus, all the virtuous qualities of Othello was not enough to win the hearts of the people of Venice but Desdemona who sees Othello's visage in his mind. She is the one who never judge Othello for his looks.

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Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello offers a vivid picture of race and racial identity within a white dominated world. The audience of Othello experience the dynamics of race relations and its impact on the character who suffers at last just because of his identity. Othello's identity often invites the Venetians to examine Othello's character through the lens of fear and suspicion. Iago was confident that he could manipulate Othello and invoke sexual jealousy because of Othello's racial identity. He says:

Let's see.

After some time, to abuse Othello's ear

That he is too familiar with his wife.

He hath a person and a smooth dispose

To be suspected, framed to make women false.

The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,

And will as tenderly be led by th' nose

As asses are.

I have't. It is engendered. (I.iii.437-446)

The play reflects the early modern European notion of race and more specifically the fear of the 'Other.' At the time, European countries were trying to expand their colonial reach and power. In that process they came in contact with several other culture and people. Thus, the figure of the black man was a central concern in the discourse on race and power.

Othello's status as an outsider is worsen because of his cultural background. He is a Moor and his Moorish identity is linked to Africa. His identity positions him as a foreigner in the Venetian society, a society that prides itself on its refined culture, art, and intellectual traditions. Most of the powerful countries believe that their culture and tradition is the best and other culture and tradition are substandard. This cultural difference is crucial to understanding Othello's internal conflict throughout the play. Despite his achievements, Othello's acceptance into Venetian society remains partial. The Duke exceptionally consider him noble but most of the people have some doubt on him. He says, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack/Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I.iii.330-331). He was of the opinion that the qualities of Othello and story of his life and struggle could win his daughter too. He was true admirer of Othello and was able to see virtuous qualities of Othello apart from Desdemona. But the white Venetian society cannot fully accept and embrace him despite his significant contributions to them because of his blackness which marks him as a symbol of the racial and cultural other. From very beginning of the play, they start abusing Othello for his colour and looks. They continuously trying to insult Othello. Iago calls him, "an old black ram", "a Barbary horse", to degrade his status in Venice. According to Iago, Othello is a thief who has stolen a Venetian woman. Othello is not worthy of marring a white woman. Later in the play, Brabantio falsely accuses Othello of using witchcraft for winning Desdemona's heart. This happens because of the cultural difference in Othello and the whites. This difference leads to fear of unknown.

The most important theme in *Othello* is the conflict between fear of the racial "Other" and adoration for them, which highlights the prevalent racial biases in early modern

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Europe. Othello's story is a tragic illustration of the psychological and social consequences of racial difference, particularly when considering power relations. Two important characters in the play Desdemona and Iago represent the inconsistencies of early modern views on race. Both of them are very close to Othello, have different opinion about him. For Desdomona, Othello is gentle but for Iago Othello is subhuman. Further Desdemona's love for Othello seems genuine, but she too sometimes reveals a tendency to view Othello as different and exotic, an object of fascination rather than an equal partner. Even Desdemona was not able to understand the importance of handkerchief because of cultural difference with Othello. On the other hand, through his manipulation of Othello, Iago take advantages of racial anxieties, using Othello's insecurities about his racial identity to sow doubt and jealousy in his mind, ultimately leading to his tragic demise.

In a broader sense, Othello engages with the concern of early modern Europe as it struggles with the increasing influence of colonialism. The play was written during a time when European powers were expanding their colonial empires, bringing into contact societies and cultures that had previously been isolated from one another. Othello, a black man in a position of power, symbolizes both the promise of assimilation and the fear of subjugation that came with the integration of colonized peoples into European societies. His downfall is, in many ways, a commentary on the fragility of the racial hierarchy, where even the most successful individuals of the colonized and marginalized groups could never fully escape the prejudices and limitations imposed by the dominant race. Thus, Othello reflects the racial and colonial anxieties of early modern Europe. It also illustrates how admiration and fear of the "Other" combine to shape the identity and fate of individuals in a racially stratified world.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* offers a valuable framework for understanding the racial dynamics in Shakespeare's Othello. Said's theory posits that the colonial gaze constructs the "Other" as both an object of fascination and fear, often reducing the colonized individual to an exotic and dangerous entity. In *Othello*, this dynamic is evident as Othello was constantly marked as an outsider in the Venetian society. Despite his outstanding military service, Othello is referred to by derogatory terms such as "the Moor." Characters such as Iago and Brabantio consistently highlight his race as a significant factor. This distances him from the "civilized" Venetian world. The language used to describe Othello, including references to his "sooty bosom," serves to reinforce the racial boundary between him and the white Venetian elite, framing him as a figure to be both feared and admired. Even Iago's comment, "We cannot all be masters, nor all masters/ Cannot be truly followed" (I.i.46-47) reveals his intent and attitude towards Othello.

Othello's military achievements elevate him within Venetian society, but does not protect him from this racial othering. People around him never fully accept him because of his blackness, which continuously marks him as alien and unreliable. His rise within the social and political hierarchy of Venice is tolerated only as long as it serves their needs. However, once Othello marries Desdemona, a white woman, the alleged racial boundary becomes intolerable. This marriage triggers a backlash that reveals the underlying racial anxiety of Venetian society. The response to Othello's union with Desdemona exemplifies Said's concept of the colonial

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gaze: a perspective that views the colonized as both necessary to the colonial project yet fundamentally inferior and alien. This racialized lens ultimately contributes to Othello's tragic fall, as it amplifies his insecurities and isolates him from the very society that once revered him.

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity offers a compelling lens through which to understand Othello's internal conflict and his struggle for identity. Othello, as a Black man who has adopted European values, including Christianity, exemplifies cultural hybridity. He tries to reconcile the expectations of Venetian culture with his African origin after rising to a prominent position in a largely white society. Yet, despite his best efforts to assimilate, Othello's racial identity remains a source of tension, and he is met with constant resistance from those around him. The society that initially values his military prowess still cannot accept him fully, and this exclusion marks the impossibility of complete integration into a racially exclusive society. Othello's efforts to navigate this tension expose the painful contradictions of colonialism and the limitations of hybridity in a world that demands racial purity.

Othello's language throughout the play is a powerful reflection of his evolving sense of self. In the early scenes, he speaks with dignity, control, and eloquence, confident in his position within Venetian society. When he says: "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them./Good signior, you shall more command with years/Than with your weapons", (I.ii.76-77) he seems so confident in himself that he is prepared to follow Brabantio and go to the Senate. However, as Iago manipulates him, particularly regarding Desdemona's supposed infidelity, Othello's speech undergoes a dramatic shift. His language becomes fragmented, erratic, and increasingly violent, mirroring the disintegration of his psychological state. This linguistic decline underscores his internal crisis and the unraveling of his identity as he succumbs to jealousy and self-doubt. Othello's changing language is not merely a result of emotional turmoil but also a symptom of the internalized racism he experiences. His transformation from a composed leader to a vengeful figure illustrates the devastating psychological effects of racial othering and the complexities of identity formation in a colonial context. Through Othello's struggle, Shakespeare highlights the tension between the desire to belong and the inevitable exclusion that comes with racial difference.

The intersection of gender and race in *Othello* is a critical aspect of the play's exploration of power dynamics, as discussed by Ania Loomba and Kim F. Hall. Ania Loomba in her *Shakespeare, race and Colonialism* says, "*Othello* allows us to see that skin colour, religion, and location were often contradictory yoked together within ideologies of 'race', and that all of these attributes were animated by notions of sexual and gender difference" (93).

Desdemona's whiteness is constructed as a symbol of purity, virtue, and innocence, while Othello's blackness is associated with animalistic lust, danger, and threat. This racialized view of Othello is compounded by the gendered expectations placed upon both him and Desdemona. Desdemona's perceived sexual purity contrasts sharply with the sexualized threat that Othello is assumed to pose. This racial and gendered dichotomy underscores the anxieties surrounding miscegenation—fear of interracial unions—which plays a central role in the tragedy. The characters' obsession with Othello's supposed sexual threat reveals deep-rooted prejudices and

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reflects the societal anxieties about the destabilization of traditional racial and gender boundaries.

Othello's marriage to Desdemona also reflects the broader colonial power structures at play. Despite his accomplishments and high military rank, Venetian society never fully accepts Othello. His status as an outsider, both racially and culturally, positions him as a subject of colonial domination, even as he occupies a position of power. His marriage to a white woman is viewed as a violation of racial hierarchy and fuels the tensions and insecurities in the play. Desdemona's autonomy is consistently undermined, first by her father, Brabantio, and later by Othello, who increasingly isolates her from any agency. In the beginning of the play Desdemona seems to be confident enough to stand against her father to save her secret marriage but later she was not able to make her points to Othello, her husband. She was not even aware of the charges laid against her by Othello. Unaware of social conventions, she was attempting to live her life in her imagination. In those cultures women must be attentive to her husband and his surroundings. Othello's eventual murder of Desdemona is the tragic culmination of these intersecting forces of racial, gendered, and colonial power. His act of violence can be seen as the ultimate expression of his internalized sense of racial inferiority and the rejection he faces from Venetian society. In this way, Shakespeare highlights the destructive impact of colonial and patriarchal ideologies on both personal relationships and broader societal structures.

*Othello* reveals the complexities of racial othering in early modern Europe. Through the figure of Othello, the play exposes the contradictions of a society that simultaneously exploits and excludes the racial "Other." The colonial gaze, internalized racism, and societal anxiety over racial and cultural boundaries are all at play in Othello's tragic fall. By applying postcolonial theory, this paper has shown how *Othello* remains a powerful text for understanding the enduring dynamics of race, identity, and exclusion.

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