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Racial and Cultural Conflicts in 'Othello': A Road to a Clash of Civilizations

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore racial and cultural conflicts in Shakespearean Tragedy 'Othello' and examines how these conflicts may lead to a clash of civilizations. During the sixteenth century Renaissance in Europe, different civilizations of the world were coming together for different purposes. For the first time man had stepped out of his house on such massive scale. There were explorations in every walk of life. Man was driven with ceaseless curiosity to explore more. New lands were being discovered. New seas were being explored. The map of the world was expanding as new lands were discovered but the lands and places themselves were shrinking into a global village. People from different countries with different races, nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, values and beliefs were gathering. Where it was a matchless positive development, at the same time it had its potential dangers as well. These differences in races, cultures, values, languages could easily be exploited by those who knew the difference among them and those foreigners who were ignorant of these differences could easily be victimized. So, there was a looming threat of civilizations, and this threat was very adeptly smelled by Shakespeare, and he came up with one of his great tragedies, Othello. To what extent cultural and racial differences are there in the play 'Othello' and how they can push to a clash of civilizations is the objective of this paper to explore.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, internalized racism, everyday racism, black, white, east, west, culture, race, clash, civilizations, Othello

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that Master William Shakespeare stands on the highest podium of literary world. Even though he died nearly 400 years ago he is still widely read and is immensely popular. The greatest quality of Shakespeare is that he raises questions and raises very pertinent questions. He tries to understand why there is so much evil in the world. He wrote about almost every aspect of human life. Sometimes he locates evil in human ambition, sometimes in human pride, and sometimes in the tendency of human beings to exploit others. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare is a master of human nature.

Othello was written in 1604 after Hamlet. This was the peak period of his writing. Othello's world is just opposite to the worlds of 'The winter's Tale', and 'The Tempest'. 'The winter's Tale' and 'The Tempest' have the world of forgiveness and reconciliation. While Othello's world is the world of prejudice and revenge. One very significant thing about 'Othello' is that it is the only play by Shakespeare which has been written in the contemporary issue. All other plays by Shakespeare are set in distant past or in the fairy lands. But this play deals with an incident that would still have been within the living memory of people of that age.

Around 1570, the Turks invaded Cyprus, and this play is connected to that historical background. However, nature intervened, and a big storm repelled the attack. So, there was really no conflict, no victory, and no defeat. Symbolically, this suggests that nature itself does not want any clash between civilizations; it is, to William Shakespeare, human nature that wants this clash to take place as it is convincingly manifested through the machinations of Iago.

Turkey was a major power at that time and exercised considerable control over the Mediterranean. For this reason, many weaker states lived in fear of Turkish expansion. A similar fear can be seen in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, where the threat of a Turkish attack on Malta is strongly felt. At the same time, science was making progress and world was shrinking and different civilizations were coming closer to each other. So, there was a threat of a clash between these civilizations. As every civilization has a different culture and it does not understand the culture of other civilizations so this clash can be made possible quite easily by exploiting the differences between the cultures of different civilizations. And in 'Othello' we see William Shakespeare ringing alarm bells against this possible exploitation of cultures that can lead to a devastating clash between East and West. Before this possible apocalypse takes place, Shakespeare seems to urge people to understand cultural differences before it is too late, and fellows like Iago who understand these differences and can exploit them so vilely, succeed.

Besides the power conflict, there were other conflicts as well, like the conflict between the white and the black. Incidentally, the blacks were largely Muslims and the whites were Christians. William Shakespeare had the insight to realize that these

differences might lead to serious conflicts in future. So, he wanted to hold out a warning to people that peace and prosperity in the world depend upon reconciliation, not on conflicts.

Research Questions:

1. How are racial and cultural conflicts represented in Shakespeare's *Othello*?
2. In what ways do these conflicts contribute to the idea of a clash of civilizations in the play?
3. How can *Othello* be interpreted through the lens of Critical Race Theory?

Scope of Study:

This study employs Critical Race Theory to explore cultural and racial differences in the play *Othello* and to examine how these differences can lead to a cataclysmic clash of civilizations. According to Brittini Taylor, "Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic discipline focused upon the application of critical theory, a critical examination of society and culture, to the intersection of race, law, and power." The concepts of this theory employed in the analysis of the play include everyday racism, internalized racism, interest convergence, differential racialization, and signifying.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A cornucopia of criticism is available on this great tragedy of Shakespeare and out of that plethora of critical works, one can single out the work on cultural and racial differences and on the different civilizations as well which were coming closer to one another:

"In the 16th century the knowledge about foreign cultures increased a lot. Not only did new maps of the world become available through explorers, but more importantly trading relations with other countries have become more common." (Anderson 3)

And the same author about the colour of his skin says: "In *Othello* skin colour and blackness stand for more than just physical appearance or cultural background." (Anderson 4)

Andrew Hadfield in his book 'William Shakespeare's *Othello*- A Source Book' comments on racist attitude of the western world as: "English writers often assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that God had made them in his own image – i.e. white – so black people must be either inferior or an aberration of some form." Hadfield comments on the marriage of a black man and a white woman: "*Othello* deals with one of the central scandals of Western thought and culture, the marriage of a black man and a white woman, and the fear of miscegenation – the production of children of mixed race who do not know where they belong. (Hadfield 2)

Neil Heim in 'Bloom's Shakespeare through Ages' says about culture of *Othello* as:

"*Othello*'s rhetoric is the rhetoric of a shame-culture. . . . *Othello*'s shame-

culture is more primitive, more thoroughly pre-Stoic than Coriolanus's, and his difference from the society around him is also greater. Othello is simpler than those around him. A shame-culture identifies glory and virtue."

Joel B. Altman in his work 'The Improbability of Othello-Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood' comments about inconsistent behavior of Othello that he has inherited from his culture:

"To the extent that he shared the schizoid misogyny of his culture—at once exalting and degrading the female—the satisfactions of declaring, "O, the world hath not a sweeter creature: she might lie by an emperor's side and command him tasks" (4.1.180–82)—followed by "I will chop her into messes" (4.1.196)—must have been actual and not simply actural for him, corresponding to his own deeply bred intimations."

Norman Sanders in 'Othello-The New Cambridge Shakespeare' passes his remarks about the cultural racism of the Venetians against Othello as:

"The racism is at the heart of the play. Othello falls victim to the strident prejudice which helps to found the dominant Venetian culture. By the end, 'Othello "recognizes" himself as what Venetian culture has really believed him to be: an ignorant, barbaric outsider . . . Venice hails Othello as a barbarian, and he acknowledges that it is he they mean" (p. 31).

A.C. Bradley in his masterpiece critical work 'Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth' comments:

[Othello] retains beneath the surface of the savage passions of his Moorish blood and the suspiciousness regarding female chastity common among Oriental peoples and that the last three Acts depict the outburst of these original feelings through the thin crust of Venetian culture. (pg. 187)

And about clash of cultures, Tony Bromham quotes Robeson in his book 'Othello by William Shakespeare' as:

"American audiences found the play strikingly contemporary in its overtones of a clash of cultures, of the partial acceptance of and consequent effect upon one of a minority group. Against this background the jealousy of the protagonist becomes more credible, the blows to his pride more understandable, the final collapse of his personal, individual world, more inevitable."

Discussion and Analysis:

Othello, the protagonist of the play 'Othello' is a Negro and has come from an eastern background, where the traditions and values are very much different from those in western world.

This eastern man, Othello is appointed as the commander of the European state Venice and his valour and strong character win him a noble lady, Desdemona. She loves Othello's adventures a lot but there is a vast difference between two of them. One is white and the other is black. The one is free as an individual and the other is bound by traditions. In the West woman enjoys the equal rights with men. In the East woman is subservient to man. In the West woman lives independent life of her own. In the East, woman is the honor of man. She is guardian of her honour.

There is no gender discrimination in the west. But in the East, woman is restricted within the boundary walls of house. There is no opportunity to grow her capabilities in the East.

In the West woman is free to choose her life partner. In the East she is bound by the choice of her parents and elders. Despite all these differences there develops a strong bond of love between Desdemona and Othello and this is the basic thesis of William Shakespeare in this play that having counted all the differences between the cultures of east and west which apparently cannot be bridged, Shakespeare refers that there is one force that is above all these differences and can overcome all the differences and this is the force of love. Shakespeare goes on counting the differences between Desdemona and Othello: she is white; Othello is black, she is young; Othello is aged, she is western; Othello is eastern, she is rational; Othello is emotional, she is liberal; Othello is conservative and the list goes on. One is dumbfounded how these grave differences can be done away with. And according to Critical Race Theory, these differences come in the category of internalized racism according to which things about different races are internalized in minds of the members of those races.

But we see that once Desdemona is in love with Othello, she throws back all the differences between herself and Othello and enters a love marriage with him. John Donne also points to the same magic of love in his poem 'Good Morrow':

'For love, all love of other sights controules'

But at the same time Shakespeare also throws light on a villain like Iago who tries to fan the differences between the two lovers who belong to two different cultures and races. What Shakespeare insists on here is that there should not be such misunderstandings between races, cultures, peoples and nations. People should understand each other and avoid prejudices or else a horrible clash is inevitable. He was a visionary and could see into future. In today's world what do we not see in the name of different cultures and races. How human beings are butchering other human beings on these differences. The sooner we pay heed to Shakespeare's warning of understanding and bridging these differences, the better it is! Or else the devils incarnate like Iago will ignite such fire that will incinerate everything ranging from domestic peace to national and international as well.

Ivo Kamps in his book 'Materialist Shakespeare: A History' quoting Derrida opines: "'racism is a cultural virus' that lives and reproduces in languages: the names, the jokes, the plays, the speeches, the casual exchanges, the novels."

Like Iago while shouting in the street about Othello and Desdemona says:

'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe. Arise, arise;
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.
Arise, I say!' (Act I Scene I)

Here Iago's hatred for Othello is quite manifest in the choice of his words. Iago calls him 'old black ram'. Iago's use of animal imagery during his abusive tirade against Othello stands for this internalized belief that black people are inhuman. They are

animals. To Critical Race Theory, it is 'Everyday Racism' as well according to which it is a routine practice of the whites to call black people names like 'thick lipped', 'black ram', 'moor', 'Nigor' etc. Then he calls Othello a devil and here the point that is worth pondering over is why Iago equates Othello to a devil? It is just because of the black colour of his skin. Because according to Critical Race Theory, it is internalized in the minds of the whites that colour black is an inferior colour and it is detestable because it is the colour of devil. So, in a way all people who have black colour have something to do with devil. And mostly the people who have black colour, they hail from east. As they have link with devil, they are magicians. They are uncivilized. They are savages and brutes who don't deserve any position of higher rank.

Iago shouting to Brabantio goes on in his diatribe against Othello:

'You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary
Horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have
cousers for cousins, and jennets for germans.'

Here the abhorrence that Iago harbours in his heart against the coloured Othello is manifest by itself. He leaves no stone unturned to prove Othello, an animal by calling him sometimes an old black ram and sometimes a Barbary horse who will beget 'jennets' who will neigh to Brabantio. This portrayal of one's character through this use of words is enough to create a sense of repugnance in the heart of a listener.

It is not only Iago but even Rodrigo, the cowardly fellow, as well who calls Othello names by calling him 'a lascivious Moor'. His choice of words 'Moor' and 'lascivious' again hints at the racist grudge emanating from the colour black and the inferior culture of the Moor. The use of the phrase 'a lascivious Moor' implies that the 'Moors', People from north Africa, are black in colour and due to the black colour of their skin, they are not human beings, rather they are black beasts of jungle who know nothing cultured or civilized except lusting after bodily pleasures.

Likewise, Brabantio, the Magnifico, when is assured by Iago that his daughter has eloped with Othello, does not stay back in reviling against Othello:

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou - to fear, not to delight. (1.2.71)

According to 'Differential Realization' tool of Critical Race Theory, black people are magicians, savages, pagans, heathens, uncultured and uncivilized. And in the quote cited above differential realization is quite manifest and it is again evident that Shakespeare is dealing with racial and cultural problems. He brings into limelight a very big problem. Brabantio uses the phrase about Othello 'thou hast enchanted

her'. It speaks volumes about the internalized bias of the whites against the blacks or of the westerns against the East. The western white people think that the eastern black people are savage and pagan people who practice magic. They are so ugly that they do not deserve anything beautiful and if they ever attain anything extraordinary or beautiful, it becomes possible just because of the power of magic which they are adept in. So, racism is not genetic, according to Critical Race theory, it is a social construct. So it is hard to believe for Brabantio and he bursts into an abusive tirade against Othello that he must have worked black magic on his daughter Desdemona or she could never have thought of even looking at her let alone marrying and living her whole life by reclining her head on the 'sooty bosom' of the 'devil' whose very sight is enough to fright the beholder.

Even in court of the duke of Venice Brabantio speaks about Othello thus:

She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60)

So white people consider themselves rational and they think that they are the followers of reason while the black people are superstitious and they practice magic and witchcraft. This attitude according to Shakespeare is a lethal attitude that will give birth to hatreds and misconceptions which will ultimately lead to clash of civilizations. As in today's world, it is the order of the day. Shakespeare wants to say that we should remove all these prejudices. All human beings are human beings. There should be no prejudice based on race, culture, nation, geography and religion.

And it is ironic that the diction with which Othello replies, speaks about his internalized lowliness: 'Rude am I in my speech/ And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.' (1.3.81)

Then Shakespeare puts such words in the mouth of Brabantio that speak volumes about the cultural differences between east and west: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father and may thee.' (1.3.288)

The west is marked by liberalism while the east is marked by conservatism. In the west females enjoy liberty in the choice of their marriage partners. Brabantio, father of Desdemona, put marriage choices before Desdemona but she kept turning them down: '...she shunned/ The wealthy curled darlings of our nation.' (1.2.67) And in the west if a female elopes after her heart's desire with the man with whom she wants to marry, as it happens in case of Desdemona, the state guarantees her so much protection that her father in spite of being as powerful a statesman as is Brabantio can do nothing. No doubt, Brabantio is angry but before the power of state his power is nothing and he cannot vent his anger just because of the individualism of the west and this individualism was very much there in the Renaissance age when the play 'Othello' was written. But so far as East is concerned, here females can never have the liberty in the choice of their marriage partners. Their marriage partners are chosen either by their fathers or brothers or other elderly male relatives of her family, and

she has no choice of her own in the patriarchal oriental society. If she does not follow their choice and tries to go after the desire of her heart, the consequences appear in the form of honour killings. A woman in the east is believed to be the honour of her father, brother, husband, son and of other male relatives in the family. Now this is a very wide cultural difference between east and west. Brabantio passing his warning comment to Othello sows seed of questioning the oriental rigid concept of female character in Othello's mind of whose poisonous nature he is unaware of at that moment.

Here according to Critical Race Theory, if Othello were not a powerful general in Venetian army, then what would his fate be after this act of his despite all the liberalism of their society? As Othello is indispensable for the government of Venice, they don't take any stern action against him. Here we have 'Interest Convergence' tool of Critical Race Theory according to which you compromise over many things if your bigger interests are involved.

Another glaring example of cultural difference between east and west comes before a keen observer when Desdemona reaches Cyprus and Cassio receives her with his men on their knees before her:

O, behold,

The riches of the ship is come on shore!
You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.
Hail to thee, lady! And the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand,
En wheel thee round. (2.1.82)

This citation from the play reveals that the men in the west glorify their ladies on their bent knees as worshippers do before their goddesses. It is marked by one's gentility to pay such tribute to a lady in the west. But such sort of tribute can never be paid to a lady in male dominated societies of the east. In the east bending on knees before a female can never be even thought of where female is considered a mere property of man. And then Cassio kisses on the back of her hand. This is another mark of genteelness of a male in the west. If a male does not give this sort of tribute to a lady in the west, he is thought uncultured and uncivilized but if someone tries to do the same thing in the east he might be killed in the name of honour. So this is the wide gulf between cultures of east and west and Shakespeare is pointing to this vast difference between the cultures which common people may not know and the devils like Iago may exploit their ignorance and cause that calamity that even 'Nature' does not want as it intervenes between the Turks and the Venetians and no war takes place. But exploitation of the cultural and racial differences between different peoples of the world, for sure, will cause a clash of civilizations.

Iago knows these cultural and racial differences, and he starts fanning them in an implicit manner and causes great tragedy. On Iago's advice Cassio meets Desdemona to request her to plead his case with Othello. Othello is man of East and the people of East are very passionate. Desdemona is a European woman, and Europeans are generally very cool and passionless. Secondly, they do not get involved

with others. A woman meeting with a man in the west is quite a normal thing. But it is very abnormal in the east. Western love is never possessive, eastern love is very possessive. And Iago at several places, according to Critical Race Theory, does 'signifying' that Othello is jealous, emotional and above all bloody stupid because of his eastern background.

In western society even after falling in love, lovers retain their individuality. They do not surrender their equality. Right from the beginning they are trained to be independent. It is the character of the West while involvement is the character of the East.

Desdemona very strongly recommends the case of Cassio, but Othello is persistent. She insists that Othello must commit and give a time when he restores Cassio and this irritates Othello, because his mind is already poisoned by Iago.

So, when Iago has made Othello suspicious about Cassio's meeting with Desdemona, he exploits Othello's ignorance about the cultural differences of East and West by passing comments like:

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands. Their best

Conscience

Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (3.3.203)

As Othello is a foreigner and is not cognizant of Venetian culture, Iago exploits this ignorance of Othello and Othello trusts Iago that he is Venetian and has reputation of an honest man. Shakespeare's warning is about the fellows like Iago who know the racial and cultural difference and can exploit this difference to cause tragedies. Iago is also equipped with this knowledge that eastern people are emotional people and are very touchy about the character of their wives. Iago talks about Desdemona and Cassio in such a way that it not only enrages Othello, but it also creates inferiority complex in Othello. According to Critical Race Theory, the coloured people think themselves inferior, ugly and outcast. We can see same happens with Othello as well. Othello has started looking out at his weakness. He thinks that is black. He is not well mannered, and he is not a civilized person and he is growing old. Iago has succeeded in creating inferiority complex in Othello

Those who know eastern culture know that in eastern culture wedding night gifts are thought most important and bride is expected to keep wedding night gift with her throughout her life as proof of her loyalty to her husband. Desdemona does value her wedding gift, a handkerchief, but she does not know that her whole marriage life can be jolted by the loss of it. Because in the west she does not know about this much importance of such gifts because her country has a different culture. After too much insistence of Othello about handkerchief with marked disturbance in his behavior, Desdemona is convinced: 'I never saw this before. Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief.' (3.4.95)

This declaration of Desdemona talks about her that she is not aware of this much importance of 'her gift' that is culturally internalized in Othello's mind. So,

when Othello sees that handkerchief in the hand of Cassio, he says, 'I will chop her into messes.' Cuckold me!

And then comes the climactic moment when Othello out of his rage slaps Desdemona publically before her cousin Lodovico:

OTHELLO: I am glad to see you mad.

DESDEMONA: Why, sweet Othello?

OTHELLO: Devil!

[He strikes her.]

DESDEMONA: I have not deserved this.

LODOVICO: My lord, this would not be believed in Venice,

Though I should swear I saw't. 'Tis very much.

Make her amends; she weeps. (4.1.230)

This is the climax. Othello slaps Desdemona that is quite a normal thing in eastern culture. A husband may hit his wife, and nobody will question. But in western culture, it is unusual and very offensive. In western culture a woman is equal to a man. In oriental culture, a woman is a property of man. After hitting her, very naturally Othello expects that she will apologize but as a western woman she does not do anything and this thing gives Othello the impression that she is loose character because she is not apologizing.

Othello wants to kill Desdemona to purify her. He is an oriental man who believes in transmigration of souls. He believes in life after death that will begin when this life ends. In Othello's mind, killing of Desdemona is a ritual belief. It is a ritual killing. He worries about Desdemona's life after death. She has no idea of this kind of religion. He does all this with a religious commitment.

CONCLUSION

So, Shakespeare wants to say that we must try to understand each other's culture. We should not judge the other's culture according to our own values. According to him a time is coming when civilizations will be brought together. When the world will turn into a global village. In that situation we should try to understand each other instead of having prejudice against each other. So, there should be more contact with different civilizations. There must be dialogue on civilization. Otherwise, the western civilization will be destroyed. Eastern civilization will be destroyed. There will be left only evil then. This is a very pragmatic approach of Shakespeare, and this term paper proves the research question raised in the beginning as to how cultural and racial differences lead to a clash of civilizations. This is not the tragedy of two human beings. It is a tragedy on a microcosmic level that is an example that how if this misunderstanding between different civilizations is not done away with it will lead to a macrocosmic clash of civilizations.

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