

Gender and Color in Shakespeare: A Study of absent women and Racism in The Tempest and Othello.

Aditi Chakraverty

Research Scholar

Abstract - Both sexism and racism, two dominant concepts of the twentieth century, are central themes in many of Shakespeare's plays. In William Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, the character of Othello is used as the target of prejudice, and his wife, Desdemona, is the victim of bigotry. Shakespeare makes fun of Elizabethan society's belief that Black and White relationships are arranged by the devil and also raises the possibility that mixed-race marriages would result in mixed-race offspring. Shakespeare lived in a patriarchal society where fathers and men held control over one another, with women serving primarily as a means of exchange. Gender connections, family structures, and marriage and courtship traditions are all important topics in feminist criticism. Feminist interest often focuses on Prospero's dominant role as the parent in *The Tempest* as well as Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement and subsequent marriage when they declare their love for one another in front of Miranda's father as a witness.

Index Terms – Shakespeare, Gender, Tempest, Othello, Race, Women, Sycorax, Discrimination

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper delves into the deeper realms of Shakespeare's plays, looking closely into the treatment of women and race in his plays. The Bard of Avon was one of the torchbearers of the Elizabethan era. The queen herself was a great supporter of arts mainly plays and masques. Despite being ruled over by a woman a gender which according to Shakespeare "weaker vessel, he never gave power to his female characters.

Women in the Elizabethan era were subservient to men. They were forced to believe was upon their inferiority. Disobedience was seen as a crime against their religion. Shakespeare too in his works condemned the disobedience of a woman, linking it to the ill-fate of either herself (Desdemona – Othello) or others (Claribel – Tempest). While the former went against her father, married a Moor, and was killed by her husband; the latter was blamed for a shipwreck as she showed her discontent to marry an African, a decision 'bestowed' upon her by her father (Male Dominance).

The effects of racism on the minds and hearts of black men and women who came to internalize the oppressors' inhumane attitudes and thought of themselves in the same brutish terms were explored by writers like Frantz Fanon in the context of the anticolonial struggles being fought throughout Africa and the Caribbean in the middle of this century. Derek Walcott has lately spoken about having black skin but seeing the world through blue eyes—perceiving oneself and others through the warped lenses of white racism. The latter stems from the belief that one's sin is too vast for God, who is infinitely forgiving, to pardon, and that this sin blots out one's soul. A secular offshoot of spiritual sorrow is racial despair. The latter stems from the belief that one's sin is too vast for God, who is infinitely forgiving, to pardon, and that this sin blots out one's soul. The former stems from the belief that one's skin makes one's spirit invisible and that no one will ever be able to forget or "forgive" one because of how dark their skin is. Furthermore, in his well-acclaimed comedy, *Merchant of Venice*, the way Shylock's character is treated and repeatedly degraded in provides a stark illustration of the dehumanization of Jewish society. The only character in the play with known Jewish origin is Shylock. His character is presented to us as readers right away. Shylock receives a conniving, irate, and psychologically disturbed approach right away. The drama has a constant sense of tension because of how the other main characters define him. The main character Antonio frequently disparages Shylock because he believes that because of his Jewish heritage, he is less than and disagreeable.

The paper to follow will investigate the other means of discrimination thematically dealt with by the Bard. Ranging from the negligible number of lines or importance bestowed upon the females to the animalistic treatment of colored characters irrespective of their post or work. In addition to gender and color, he has been called out by critics for his usage of the idea of 'bastardy' in one of his four greatest tragedies *King Lear*. Mario Digangi in his work 'Branded with Baseness: Bastardy and Race in King Lear, is an argument upon the mentioned type of discrimination. He asserts that bastardy acts as an intersection for the racializing forces of lineage, sexuality, and gender in *King Lear* by William Shakespeare. The experiences of Edgar and Edmond highlight the racial ramifications of bastardy.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Shakespeare's mind and the thoughts he had when writing *Othello* are examined in-depth by Doris Alder in her work titled "*The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello*." (1974) She reveals the various connotations that black and white have. Normally, red is used to describe hell, but in 249, Alder, black is referred to as the "black and scorching pit of hell." While "black is used to signify the soil of dirt and grime," black is frequently used interchangeably with the word foul.

Ann Thompson analyses *The Tempest* from the standpoint of feminist theory in her piece "*Miranda, Where Is Your Sister?*" (1991) Thompson focuses on *The Tempest* through Shakespeare's alarming emphasis on childbirth and virginity, the glaring absence of female characters, and the role that these themes have in upholding patriarchal dominance.

Elaine Showalter in her essay *Ophelia, Gender and Madness* (2016), asserts how the ideas of hysteria have been used recurrently by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* as well as *Macbeth*. Despite of being the counterpart of the eponymous character, Ophelia is the most mistreated character of the tragedy. Ophelia's flowers, according to the author, "convey the dissonant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish infection" (224). In Shakespeare's England, it was widely believed that "female crazy was a part of feminine nature" and that "female sexuality and female insanity were directly correlated" (Showalter 225). Ophelia's bawdy song singing and flower-giving fit with the idea of female lunacy brought on by adolescent sexual awakening or self-awareness.

III. DISCRIMINATION IN SHAKESPEARE

As widely read and researched works they are, Shakespeare's works are often accused of discrimination. Intersectionality, some of the most potent representations of Jewish-Christian relations can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, which was written during a time when Christian antisemitism predominated in European culture. It is one of the most difficult plays for Jews to watch because of the portrayal of Shylock's steady decline into violent retaliation, which causes him to be crushed, as well as his suffering from the abuse he receives, especially the Christian characters' unrelenting hatred for him. The speech's section about getting retribution is essential. Especially after treating Shylock with cruelty and contempt, the anti-Semites in the play subconsciously fear their victims. Especially after treating Shylock with cruelty and contempt, the anti-Semites in the play subconsciously fear their victims. The racists then project hatred, which makes them fear that Shylock will despise them, that he will get enraged, and that he will seek retribution that is much more heinous than what has been done to him. Shylock expresses the racialized person's anxiety and then wants to do it. Shakespeare's play uses Shylock as a pretext for enmity. Shakespeare personifies this unconscious in the figure of Shylock if we think of it as the unconscious of antisemitism. When viewed in this light, *The Merchant of Venice* serves as a dramatic portrayal of the destructive repercussions of antisemitism on the subjectivity and identity of both victims and those who perpetrate it. Shakespeare connects racial and commercial themes in *The Merchant of Venice* while also emphasizing Jewish distinctiveness.

Racism in *Othello* (1622) is one of its most recurring themes, with many critics studying and pointing out the same. The constant verbalization of "otherness" in the words of "*Moor*" and "*Black*" contributes to this harmony. Instead of the title of the main character, Othello, the phrases "*thick-lips*" (I.i.66) and "an old black ram" are spoken at the beginning of the play (I.i.87).

Early in the play, Othello, the patriarchal authorities of the female characters expose them to the audience. In other words, they are continually present in the talks among the male characters in Shakespeare's plays, whether they be their spouses, dads, relatives, servants, male acquaintances, etc. For instance, Iago's hatred for his marriage to a white woman effectively illustrates the play's central issue of racial prejudice against Othello. Richard III's depiction of gender roles is very representative of Elizabethan culture. Anne is furious with Richard for his awful actions, but she is so overcome with emotion that she is unable to make a rational choice. Shakespeare reframes sexuality by removing it from the social norm. Seduction for love, as opposed to seduction for sex, demonstrates that it is in fact a tool that can be dangerous if employed by the incorrect person, like Richard. The play's women have been moved, even if the gender roles themselves have not changed.

Hamlet, is similarly set in a patriarchal society. This is emphasized by Ophelia, who is dependent on men throughout the play and relies on her father and brother, Laertes. This is evident when she agrees to Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet with no indication of resistance and only responds to Gertrude with "*Madam, I wish it may*" (III.i.42) when she hopes that Ophelia is the cause of Hamlet's madness and that he will thus return "*to his wonted way again*" (III.i.41). Ophelia is thus told what to do rather than asked, and Polonius only needs to say, "*Ophelia, walk you here,*" (III.i.43) for her to do as she is told. Similarly, when Polonius says, "*You do not understand yourself so clearly As it behooves my daughter and your honor*" (I.iii.96) she agrees to return the love letters to Hamlet, and there is little evidence that she resists her father's orders. Instead, she says, "*I don't know what I should think, my lord*" (I.iii.104).

IV. ABSENT WOMEN IN TEMPEST

Treating his female characters in a derogatory manner, Shakespeare rarely bestowed any power or strong voice to any of his heroines. It is often noted by critics and readers, females in his plays who are clever, powerful, and more capable than men are either killed (Desdemona) or turn insane/depressed (Ophelia – Hamlet). One can also notice how the hero turns a deaf ear to the heroines' warnings, be it Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* women were neither allowed to think rationally nor to raise questions to their male heads. Moreover, women are never completely free in Shakespeare's plays; many low-class characters are owned by their employers if not by their families and husbands. Shakespeare's female characters sometimes suffer fatal outcomes as a result of their sexuality or attractiveness. Desdemona opted to defy her father and follow her heart by wedding Othello. The evil Iago eventually turns this devotion against her by persuading her husband that if she lied to her father, she would also lie to him. Nothing Desdemona says or does can dispel Othello's false accusation that she is an adulteress. She is killed by her envious boyfriend as a result of her bravery in choosing to disobey her father. In some of the Bards' works is sexual violence a major theme for the play's fame. The most notable example of this is in *Titus Andronicus*, where the character Lavinia is brutally raped and dismembered. To prevent her from identifying them, her attackers chopped away her tongue and took her hands. Her father kills her after she learns to write their names to protect her honor.

In *Tempest* too the major female characters have their voices crushed under the roars of patriarchy, and the sharp spears of colonization. The play has Prospero as a central figure, followed by Miranda (mouthpiece of patriarchal treatment), Caliban, and Ferdinand. There are other female characters in the work but we only hear about them being spoken about by a male in a rather derogatory and suspicious manner. The absence of a female voice is much more prominent in *The Tempest*. Metaphorically and literally, it has all the female voices hushed. Miranda's mother and Sycorax never actually appear in the play, their memories occupy a precarious position in Prospero's will for power. Invoking the memory of Miranda's mother to legitimize his lineage yet feels threatened by the control she exerts over it. His narration deftly his wife's presence from Miranda's memory, rendering him the sole purveyor of his daughter. Except for this moment, Prospero's wife is absent from his memory. She is also wholly absent from her daughter's memory too. Miranda can recall several women attending her in childhood but no mother.

"Prospero - Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and
She said thou wast my daughter,
and thy father was Duke of Milan and his only heir
And princess no worse issued."
(ACT 1 Scene-2)

Another female character following the Queen of Naples was the now Queen of Tunis, Claribel, the daughter of Alonso, who is recently married off to the King of Tunis. Although not much is known about Claribel, the conversation between Sebastian, Alonso, and other nobles suggests an unwilling marriage Sebastian also blames Alonso for his 'monstrous' choice of husband for her daughter. He goes on to accuse Alonso's choice and hints at it as the reason for the shipwreck.

Sebastian –“Sir -you may thank yourself for his great loss
That would not bless our European with your daughter,
But rather lose her to an African.
Where she, at least, is banished from your eye.
Who hath cause to wet the grief don't
(ACT 2, Scene 1)

The dialogue not only derogates Claribel to the position of cattle who have been deliberately let 'loose' as prey to a wild predator but also compares Africans to savage predators.

Colonization had a massive effect on both colonizers and the colonized. Shakespeare aptly showcased the minds of European concerning Africans. As the play progresses the readers are introduced to a character named Caliban (ACT 1, Sc-2) who is described as a half man- half monster He takes the play ahead giving it the angle of a White Man's Burden. Prospero left no stones unturned to train him, at least enough to slave under Prospero. Caliban is the son of Sycorax another female oppressed character of the play.

The male characters, especially Prospero, frequently retell and stress Sycorax's absence, yet The Tempest does not provide us enough information to study Sycorax in the same way that one analyses the male characters who are physically present on stage. Although there is only one lady mentioned in The Tempest's dramatis personae, women could hold positions of authority. Sycorax is a lady who may be of color, and Prospero is a patriarchal white male. Sycorax is the main catalyst of the play and she challenges Prospero and his powers despite being an absent woman. It is Prospero who first refers to an absent Sycorax to keep Ariel under his control. After establishing the fact that she was born in Algier, Prospero takes the charge of unfolding her tale with diligence best he fails to or deliberately does not give any details of her evil doings. Prospero and Sycorax are extreme ends in the spectrums of power and gender. With the absence of Sycorax, Prospero envisions her as his female opposite. As a powerful woman, Sycorax exemplifies anti-patriarchal ideas in early modern England, when it was the norm. Sycorax's absence is a metaphor for women's lack of representation and agency made them figuratively absent in early modern England. Moreover, her absence leads Prospero to sabotage his patriarchy. While she is a woman possibly of color, Prospero is a white patriarch who censures her rule. Because Prospero has never seen Sycorax, his detailed descriptions of her construction which are nothing but evil as Sycorax was a colored woman. Thus, his retelling emphasizes her supposed evilness as a contrast to his good and pure deeds. It is evident that he feels threatened by her power as he often comments on her magical abilities to be less powerful than his but it goes to his advantage that she is not present to prove him wrong, he continues to assure himself for the whole play. Only in opposition to Prospero and his manhood does Sycorax exist. Sycorax's absence allows Prospero to fully transform her into a representation of the wicked woman, the antithesis of himself; yet, this transformation also turns her into an enemy of Prospero and the patriarchy he stands for.

Her absence becomes the platform for Prospero's ideas of gender where she highlights both his desire for power and his fear of losing that power. When describing the men who betrayed him, his words never reached this extreme, but he uses languages such as 'foul witch,' 'damned which Sycorax', and 'hag' (Act 1. Sc-2); to describe a woman, he never met. According to a critic Prospero, outbursts reveal anger about women's potential power. In demonizing her and projecting his fears unto her, Prospero only creates her into something powerful to incite fear. It is hence clear that by the end of the play, Sycorax no longer stays just a female character but a symbol that can question Prosper (males, patriarchy.)

In The Tempest, the concept of strong female power and its undermining is portrayed using the names of Sycorax, Claribel, and Prospero's Wife as well as the mother. They become the mouthpiece of all the Elizabethan women who were alive yet no better than dead. Male supremacy is not only evident in Prospero but also the other male characters in the play. Shakespeare also brought the light the post-colonial problems with the help of characters such as Caliban, Sycorax, and the King of Tunis. Overall, the play aptly mirrored the inner and outer turmoil of the era.

V. THE 'COLOR' SUPREMACY IN OTHELLO

In the play '*Othello*' readers can see how Iago continuously provokes Brabantio regarding his daughter Desdemona's elopement with Othello by saying that "an old black ram is tugging your white ewe.". During the whole play, 'colored' dialogues have been recurrently used both for the eponymous character and as a tool to malign the reputation of the marital lives of Othello and Desdemona. The question of race has continued to be volatile, particularly when it involves desegregation and leads to avoidance in '*Othello*'. This union is the spark that lights racism's inferno. It becomes apparent during the defense night just how uncivilized Brabantio views Othello to be. He prevents all positive developments because he is black and a member of another race. He views his skin tone as such a terrible phenomenon that being black and loving someone else is incompatible. The unusual instance is that Desdemona's marriage to a black man is being questioned in addition to her covert union. Nothing exists on which Brabantio may base Desdemona's preference. He is so oblivious to Othello's darkness that he relies on beguiling her to have her daughter flee away. He believes that without the bewitching, his daughter would not be able to tolerate him and would not be able to stay with him because Desdemona would be horrified by Othello's ugliness.

Brabantio:
"O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?
Damn'd 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, to incur a general mock,
Run from her garage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight."

(ACT 1, Scene 2)

Also, it makes Iago, the villain, who already despises Othello, sow seeds of hatred in his heart. Iago bases his justifications for revenge on Othello's race because he is not selected as a lieutenant. Iago prepares the conclusion of Othello as a result of his resentment, which has a race-related element at its core. His sole objective going forward is to eliminate him. At that juncture, Othello's apparent blackness and reputation as the devil aid Iago in carrying out his plot. Moreover, Othello has traditionally been acted by several Black actors in the West. One can notice in the play that Othello's character likewise experiences cultural isolation at the hands of the artists too. The words "Moor" and "Black" are used frequently throughout the play to express verbalized racism. These terms are only connected with Othello, causing a sense of alienation and division. When Othello is first presented in the play, his name is not used; instead, he is referred to as "an old black man" and "thick-lips." The audience may perceive Iago's rising animosity towards Othello's race as the play progresses.

The seeds of bad schemes are sown by racial hatred. Othello becomes suspicious of his wife because of Iago. The inferiority mentality that Othello has is what fuels his ambition and his firm conviction that he will achieve. He does not just isolate Othello; he also makes others hate him and it symbolizes his beliefs about being black, thereby demonstrating the likelihood of being duped. Due to his origin, Othello feels alienated, and this alienation makes him more convinced that Desdemona may trick him. Othello and Desdemona's lives are significantly altered by racism's inescapable and negative impacts. Iago says offensive things about Moors right at the beginning of the play. It demonstrates how Shakespeare purposefully incorporated racism into the play. Thus race is important, even if it just plays a small part. Othello's dissatisfaction with his race is also one of his main flaws. Because it is a natural weakness, he will never be able to overcome it. Shakespeare does not specifically address racism in his play, but the poison it contains becomes more apparent. Iago introduces this racist poison into an otherwise healthy relationship and, as he had intended, ends the lives of the two lovers. It has been noticed that a racist society can stifle love and that sometimes there is no way to stop racists from hurting people's happiness. Iago's flawed character development progresses on the path towards endangering Othello with racial feelings and even dedicating himself to laboring under the oppressive influence of racism. Iago poisoned Othello against his wife one step at a time, but Othello insisted he was unconscious of it in front of his own eyes. In essence, Othello has animosity towards his family, which Iago is aware of, allowing him to wreck Othello's life. Othello feels aloof and his race has an impact on his psyche. This is Iago's most reliable weapon and the one that makes him believe that his wife might also betray him, just as others have done, ultimately leading Othello to give in to the luring words of Iago and kill his innocent wife, Desdemona.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The beauty of Shakespeare's presentation of racism in Othello, it must be admitted, was to show how pervasive and subtle it can be. Everyone is a victim of racism in a very real sense because both the victim and the racist exist in the same society. One of Othello's major undercurrents is the following, which completely eclipses any notion of a prejudiced Iago serving as the drama's pivotal character: "...to suggest that Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio desire simply love and honor in the play is to gloss over the ways in which they are themselves "flawed" by the racial systems. One needs to be careful not to consider any of them as easy counterarguments to a racist Iago" (McDonald 814). But Othello is aware that he is a member of a different race. In addition to being a black African and a tawny Moor, Othello is the "turbaned Turk" of his own description (Bloom 126). He thus constantly finds Desdemona's love to be amazing, and this is a manifestation of his own racism. Shakespeare's heroes have never been as moved by love as these characters are: "I cannot express enough of this content/ It stops me here/ It is too much joy" (Shakespeare 22).

The most thorough critiques of Othello acknowledge that it is incorrect to interpret the racism therein in terms of how racism is perceived now. It is in the greatest interests of any society to attempt to investigate all the shades of motive inside it, from the xenophobic to the sexual. The study of Othello presents a wealth of opportunities for a deeper understanding of what is a very difficult topic. Because racism has always reflected human interaction, whether for good or evil, understanding racism is very much a study of humanity. Two marriages that are meant to marginalize African people can be seen in Shakespeare's plays Othello and The Merchant of Venice. Also, we witness the clash between East and West. Shakespeare describes Portia as a jewel in The Merchant of Venice and Desdemona as being worth Othello's tribe in Othello. These two women are both from Europe. Shakespeare employs phrases like "stupid" and "thick lip" as well as many other races while referring to Othello and the prince of Morocco. Shakespeare effectively teaches his European audience through the failure of Othello and Desdemona's marriage that Africans and hence people of color are envious, irrational, and mad. If one views the existence of a female figure on stage as the only indication of her influence, then the idea of great female power in The Tempest is problematic.

Even though Sycorax only lives in the male characters' perceptions of her, how they see her has an impact on how they view power. Prospero represents patriarchy at one extreme, while Sycorax represents everything that challenges it at the other. Prospero creates Sycorax to stand in stark contrast to himself, but in doing so, he merely highlights the flaws in his patriarchal system. Instead of succeeding in his attempt to demonize Sycorax as a "witch" and a "whore," Prospero establishes the role model of a strong woman who defies gender norms. Sycorax reportedly lands on the island while pregnant and without mentioning a husband, according to Prospero. She must be perceived as sexual because of her pregnancy, yet the text provides no societal background for her sexual behavior. Miranda must stage a wedding in order to justify her planned sex with Ferdinand, but the details of Sycorax's pregnancy are left out of the story. The fundamental theme of The Tempest is how crucial it is for gender to be binary, and that anything that undermines that idea is a challenge to the patriarchy that should be neutralized or subdued. re considered to be the property of males. Brabantio protests that Othello has taken and "drugged" his daughter to the Duke of Venice and the Venetian state in the play's first act. The duke permits Desdemona to travel with Othello to Cyprus for the military expedition, and the Senate backs his position. Speaking to Iago, Othello tells the Duke that he will entrust the care of his wife to Iago, quoting, "To his conveyance, I shall assign my lady." Although Desdemona,

Othello's wife is implied to be a form of possession and that she must be guarded and transferred, this quote does not appear to be particularly noteworthy. This resembles Desdemona's early years before she became her wife. Adieu, gallant Moor; use Desdemona well. This argues that in the play, the term "use" substitutes the line "look after" when Othello leaves. This quotation can also be used to describe the Venetian ideal of a subservient wife who serves her husband at will. Othello and the military leaders returned to shore following the successful operation as the Turkish fleet was scuttled in the third act's scene 3 of the play. "Let me have discourse with you- Come, my dear love, the purchase completed, are the fruits to ensue," says Othello as he welcomes and enters the palace with Desdemona. In Shakespeare's day, what Othello has stated appears to be highly beautiful and full of loving phrases, as this

Given that Shakespeare's time supported the role of women after marriage, Othello's remarks appear to be highly romantic and full of loving sentiments. The issue of a woman's place in society is extensively examined in Shakespeare's Othello. Desdemona, a member of society's elite, can be seen through Emilia and Desdemona's eyes as she succumbs to social expectations. We may observe the social imbalances and the treatment of women throughout Shakespeare's period through Emilia. Desdemona is a powerful, intelligent lady who is praised by many writers and readers, but the stereotype and the fact that she is a woman limit what she may do.

Over the ages, Shakespeare has been undoubtedly the most widely-read dramatist. Although his works have been read critically by many researchers with different focal points ranging from the psychoanalysis of characters like Hamlet to the female leads' obsession with the 'white complexion' in the play As You Like It. The work is hence an addition to the huge rack of research works done on the various concepts of the portrayal of the world by Shakespeare, through his plays and sonnets.

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