

**THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO: FORGING AN IDENTITY****Maria Botnari, PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: The case of Othello as a tragic character becomes especially problematic in the light of a racial discourse. Not only is Othello a tragic character, but he is a black tragic character as well. The implications of his "blackness" upon himself (and those around him) are equally important in bringing about his tragic fall. Yet, his tragedy cannot be limited only to the problem of his skin-colour. As far as Othello's identity is concerned, it is clear from the text that it undergoes a continual process of changes before the hero arrives at a final state of awareness of himself as what he is. Before his tragic collapse, there are only moments of self-identification on the background of a general inner crisis determined by the same fact that Othello lacks identity and struggles to build one. This process exerts intolerable pressure on the hero's life especially because of his colour and race, and because Othello is the instrument of two different cultural contexts and beliefs. The central aspects I discuss in this paper—Othello's race, status and identity—ultimately turn to be important elements of an algorithm that would describe the tragic character's existence in-between two opposite cultures.*

*Keywords: tragic, race, status, identity, cultural conflict.*

*The Tragedy of Othello* can be included among the plays in which the protagonist's identity and its perception have a major role in the development of the tragedy as such. It is important to understand that Othello *becomes* tragic in the context of a world where he pretends to be something that he is not. But who *is* Othello after all? He can be regarded as the instrument of two opposing cultures: one from which the hero comes—a dark, primitive, savage world—and the European civilization—educated, sophisticated, elegant.<sup>1</sup> Within this cultural captivity, Othello is involved in a protest of his own being, present in his attempt to annihilate the "savagery" and integrate into the "civilized" world. Being the instrument of both "savagery" and "civility", the Moor's identity is to be sought between the two.

Othello's process of identity forging is only one aspect of a much more complex problem, and the Moor's tragedy cannot and should not be reduced strictly to the issue of race. My intention is to use the concepts of *race*, *status*, and *identity* in order to show that, as a tragic character, the protagonist cannot be fully portrayed in the absence of these *external* features or labels. In fact, whoever he is *inside*, for the audience, as well as for the characters in the play, Othello remains a black man. In writing this tragedy, Shakespeare has sealed for ever Othello's fate as being the *Moor* of Venice, and thus incarcerated him within this vision of Moors. Othello, 'the Moor of Venice', cannot truly become part of Venice. His jealousy is rooted in this fact and in his difference from Desdemona, a difference that Iago plays upon in order to accomplish his evil pursuits. Among other things, in Shakespeare criticism Othello is

<sup>1</sup> The idea of tragedy as a war of cultural forms is first presented in Codrin Liviu Cutitaru's article, *Tragedia ca Razboi cultural*, published in *Vatra*, nr. 6-7, 2013.

often regarded as ultimately embodying the stereotype of Moorish lust and violence, being a jealous, murderous husband of a Christian lady.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of identity concerns Othello as a tragic character because it isolates him as foreign to the European system. Not belonging to the class, he is always aware that he is apart. Yet, Othello desperately has to fit in a society within the borders of which he is thought not to belong to. Because the title of hero is something tangible, it offers him a sense of identity. Although happy with his military role, the title of general and of hero is insufficient to offer him *an identity within the civilian realm*, where his image remains that of a barbarian. Throughout the play, Othello remains ‘the Moor’, surrounded by suspicion, prejudice, fear and hatred. Being aware of this fact, and at the same time trying to ignore it, Othello attempts in vain to be accepted in a European society. Since Othello’s image of himself is largely constructed by others, he constantly needs somebody to appreciate his merits and thus keep his identity alive. The two pole-characters in this sense are Desdemona and Iago. Therefore, the Moor’s tragedy holds in itself, to a great extent, the tragedy of a black man, caught inside the Empire, but not belonging there. As A. C. Bradley wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, of all Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible.<sup>3</sup>

Othello’s identity is considerably designed from the outside by all those characters that the Moor comes in contact with. That is why critics have often regarded Othello’s social and textual construction as a collective activity, or “a community project”, in Imtiaz Habib’s words<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Othello’s image is differently built by various characters in the play. Thus, for the Duke, for instance, the Moor general is “the strength of rulership, the image of power with which authority savages its subjects that the Duke needs” while for Brabantio, Othello stands for “the heathen with potions and charms that exercise mind control, the secret power that the senator seeks.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of post-colonial criticism, Othello becomes “the completely re-written subaltern subject. [...] the blank that Venice’s nationhood needs to complete itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Proper names play a significant role in fixing a sense of identity.<sup>7</sup> In Othello’s case this identity is ‘unfixed’ when he says, “That’s he that was Othello. Here I am.” One way or another, Othello unnames himself. He no longer identifies with his former person, and still he holds within himself both “he” and “I”. Othello speaks of himself in the third person even earlier, when he announces “Othello’s occupation’s gone” (III. 3. 362) and in the Brothel Scene when he said,

I cry you mercy, then.  
I took you for that cunning whore of Venice  
That married with Othello.

(IV. ii. 88)

Thus, Othello puts a distance between himself and his name. The ‘self’ is divided. After the murder of Desdemona, he refers to himself again as Othello:

<sup>2</sup> Very many studies of *Othello* are dedicated to the problem of jealousy, and in the context of a racial discourse it is tightly connected to Othello’s origin and race. Some texts in Renaissance England spoke about lust and jealousy as well as black skin as being the result of a hot climate.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Imtiaz Habib, “‘Speak of me as I am’: T.S. Eliot, *Othello*’s Subaltern Voice and the Politics of Ethnic Mimesis”. *Shakespeare and Race. Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period*. New York: University Press of America, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Habib Imtiaz, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> James A. Calderwood. *The Properties of Othello*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. p. 50.

Do you go back dismayed? 'tis a lost fear;  
 Man but a rush against Othello's breast,  
 And he retires. Where should Othello go?

Calderwood asserts that the Othello of the Murder Scene is only "an uncomfortable role that the protagonist is trying to play, a once natural identity he reasserts but can keep intact only momentarily before the old rage is upon him"<sup>8</sup>.

By Act III, Desdemona herself has started to see in Othello that which she "nev'r saw... before" (III. Iv. 100), and by Act IV she has totally lost sight of him:

*Emil.* Good madam, what's the matter with my lord?  
*Des.* With who?  
*Emil.* Why, with thy lord, madam.  
*Des.* Who is thy lord?  
*Emil.* He that is yours, sweet lady.  
*Des.* I have none.

(IV. ii. 98-103)

When Lodovico arrives at the battlefield (Cyprus), he begins his study of events mainly by questioning his knowledge of Othello: "Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate/ Call all in all sufficient? .... I am sorry that I am deceiv'd in him." (IV. i. 264). Othello "that was once so good" has "fall'n in the practice of a damned slave" (V. ii. 291-92). At this moment, Othello's confidence vanishes and he believes his wife to be a prostitute; he becomes violent, roars out loud, falls down in a fit, and repeatedly calls himself fool. The man who had been "all in all sufficient" (IV. i. 265) becomes a murderer as if yielding to some inner compulsion.

At the very opening of the play, Iago speaks to Othello about Brabantio's important status in Venice:

Be assured of this,  
 That the magnifico is much beloved,  
 And hath in his effect a voice potential  
 As double as the Duke's. He will divorce you,  
 Or put upon you what restraint and grievance  
 The law, with all his might to enforce it on,  
 Will give him cable.

(I. ii. 11-17)

Othello's answer to Iago reveals his certainty that the service he has done to the state will outweigh Brabantio's complaints. A sort of eagerness to prove his merits is discerned in his lines:

Let him do his spite.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*

My services which I have done the signiory  
 Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know—  
 Which, when I know that boasting is an honor,  
 I shall promulgate—I fetch my life and being  
 From men of royal siege, and my demerits  
 May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune  
 As this that I have reached.

Therefore, whether Othello represents as much in Venice as Brabantio does and whether he deserves to marry Desdemona is, without a doubt, a question of status. Othello is right in his affirmations above. His military merits allow him to integrate into an otherwise inaccessible society. His status derives from his “martial” services and royal ancestry. It is with the help of these that he can claim further access to “as proud a fortune/As this that I have reached.” According to James Calderwood, “To win Desdemona is to acquire an external property that will reflect his internal worth: he will be what he owns.”<sup>9</sup> In this case, property equals identity and external recognition.

Moreover, in Venice status is life. To Brabantio, Desdemona would be “Better dead or never born than so ignominiously lost” (I. 3. 194). After all, Othello celebrates another victory when he takes Brabantio’s daughter, which was half his soul, and he celebrates it publicly. To quote Calderwood, “Even being a winner is not enough; you must be a proclaimed winner.”<sup>10</sup>

However, Othello’s ‘blackness’ is not annihilated in the process of this victory over Brabantio. It is from this external, physical feature that an internal insecurity springs. In Act III, when Othello looks within himself to find the cause of Desdemona’s supposed attitude towards him, he rests on the following explanation:

Haply, for I am black  
 And have not those soft parts of conversation  
 That chamberers have, or for I am declin’d  
 Into the vale of years. . . .

(III. iii. 263-266)

Still, in the following line, Othello tries to ignore the facts. Therefore, he makes the remark “yet that’s not much.” These lines are proof to the fact that the protagonist is constantly aware that he is in a society where he is regarded as a stranger, despite his efforts to desperately fit there. Desdemona and Iago are individuals belonging to the white race that would accept and value him for what he is. They represent the “passages” from the culture of “savagery” to that of “civility.”

From behind the title of hero, Othello looks at the world somehow confident and secure. Nonetheless, he never identifies with the fine man of European Culture. In his attempt to adjust to the Venetian society, he also loses access to the Egyptian world to which he had belonged. Therefore, losing all sense of direction, Othello becomes vulnerable and easily controlled by Iago, who gains an important role in the moor’s ‘making’. Furthermore, Iago has both the function of constructing and of destroying Othello’s image in the Venetian

<sup>9</sup> James A. Calderwood. *The Properties of Othello*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

society. In post-colonial criticism, Iago is regarded not only as the generalized vehicle of the irrationality of racism, but also the particular metaphor of Elizabethan colonial discourse's clueless writing out of its black other. Iago's writing of Othello is his erasure of Othello.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, Othello proves capable of violent and destructive feelings, which seem to have been hidden by the accepted military forms. In this context, Robert Heilman describes Othello as having the kind of mind which cannot penetrate the secret of its violence because it has gone rigid with self-approbation.<sup>12</sup> To Othello, all men, including himself, "are what they seem to be." After all, if one seems to be a hero, if all one's community agrees one is a hero, the awareness of this title can give him "positional assurance", to use one of Robert Heilman's terms. The flaw that is identified here by the critic is that the soldier fails to recognize that the title of hero does not cover all of him as a human being. How Othello finally chooses to act upon the supposed infidelity of his wife becomes a measure of his failure, not simply as soldier, but as man.<sup>13</sup>

As is common in tragedy, Othello is his own worst enemy. By the end of the play he sees himself as such. A final moment of identification is realized before he commits suicide. Not only does he identify with Venice's traditional enemy, the Turk, but with that "Spartan dog", Iago:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by th' throat the circumsized dog,  
 And smote him—thus. [stabs himself.]

(V. ii. 352-356)

Othello cancels his title of hero in a *reunification* with himself, only after he has murdered Desdemona. He commits suicide being consoled by the fact that "I have done the state some service, and they know't." (Act V, ii.). Therefore, he reconciles with himself nurturing the idea of at least a partial affiliation to the culture of "civility", even though he ultimately identifies with a malicious Turk he once killed in Aleppo.

All in all, along the play, *Othello* is involved in a process of identity forging that takes place within the boundaries of two conflicting cultural representations, "savagery" and "civility". The Shakespearean tragic character remains trapped, confined in the area of interaction of both these cultural forces, the insoluble contradictions of which overcome him to the point of collapse. In other words, these two conflicting dimensions contain him. Moreover, he cannot dispense with either as well as he cannot identify with either. None of them is to be annihilated, the only possible solution out of their deadly grapple entailing the destruction of the protagonist. Being at the same time the hero and the barbarian, the Moor's tragedy lies at least to a certain extent in this failed act of self-creation.

Within Shakespeare studies, Othello is often regarded as a victim of cultural and racial discrimination.<sup>14</sup> Although, due to his military skills, Othello earned the title of general, culturally speaking the Moor of Venice remains an outcast. In this sense, Europe becomes for

<sup>11</sup> Habib Imtiaz, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web*. Lexington, Ky., 1956, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew N. Proser. *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965.

<sup>14</sup> The works of critics such as Ania Loomba, Virginia Mason Vaughan and others speak in this respect, and point to the fact that Othello's race is an important factor in the unfolding of his tragedy.

him a hostile and alien place where, beyond the superficial shining of political glory, his basic perception is that of a barbarian. In an educated, sophisticated, elegant Venice, Othello is regarded as a dark, primitive savage. Thus, the tragedy of Othello turns into “a nightmare of racial hatred and male violence”<sup>15</sup> where its protagonist is not only the product of a cultural milieu but also a maker of cultural meanings.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ania Loomba. *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Othello: A Contextual History*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1994, p. 27.