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SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO: A REPRESENTATION OF THE CLASH BETWEEN THE ORIENT AND THE OCCIDENT

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to trace how Shakespeare's Othello reflects the deep-rooted Eurocentric ideology of the Elizabethan people and show how such views created distinctions between self and other, master and slave, civilized and savage, white and black, good and evil, strong and weak, occident and orient. These views had such a deep impact that many writers have portrayed the Europeans as superior and the 'self' as belonging to the 'centre' or 'Occident,' whereas people in far-away lands are shown as inferior and the 'other' belonging to the 'margin' or 'Orient'. However, in the play Othello Shakespeare breaks away from these beliefs and introduces an African man who disregards such stereotypical views thus shocking his audience with this deviation from the norm. He presents, in Othello's person, a reality that African men are polite, educated, loyal and brave warriors. Shakespeare even makes Othello more prejudiced against his own culture than against another race. Here is a Black man who is not against white people, but against people belonging to other religions.

Keywords: African, Other, Orient, Occident, Black Man

SHAKESPEARE'İN OTHELLO'SU: DOĞU İLE BATI ARARASINDAKİ ÇATIŞMANIN BİR TEMSİLİ

ÖZET

Bu yazı, Shakespeare'in Othello'sunun Elizabeth dönemi insanların kökleşmiş Avrupa-merkezci ideolojilerinin nasıl yansıttığını bulmaya ve bu gibi görüşlerin kendi ve diğer, sahip ve köle, medeni ve vahşi, beyaz ve siyah, iyi ve kötü, güçlü ve zayıf, doğu ve batı arasında nasıl bir ayrım yarattığını göstermeye yönelik bir girişimdir. Bu görüşlerin öyle derin bir etkisi oldu ki birçok yazar Avrupalıları 'merkez' veya 'Batı' ya ait olan üstün ve 'kendi' olarak tasvir ederken, uzak ülkelerde yaşayan insanları 'uç' veya 'Doğu' ya ait bayağı ve 'diğer' olarak göstermişlerdir. Ancak, Shakespeare, Othello adlı tiyatro eserinde, bu inanışlardan kaçınır ve bu tür basmakalıp görüşleri gözardı eden bir Afrikalı takdim eder, böylelikle ölçünden bu şekilde bir ayrılmayla kendi izleyicilerini şaşırtmıştır. Othello'nun şahsında, Afrikalı adamların nazik, eğitilmiş, sadık ve cesur savaşçılar olduğu gerçeğini ortaya koymaktadır. Shakespeare, hatta, Othello'yu diğer ırktan daha çok kendi kültürüne karşı önyargılı yapmıştır. Burada beyaz insanlara karşı olmayan ama diğer dinlere mensup insanlara karşı olan bir siyah adam mevcuttur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrikalı, Diğer, Doğu, Batı, Siyah Adam

1. INTRODUCTION (GİRİŞ)

European travelers have always been attracted to the geography of unknown 'dark' worlds. This appeal led to the exploration of the East via land routes and across the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic Ocean. These discoveries made in search of gold, ivory, slaves and agricultural resources established imperial attitude through trade and travel through those lands. These notions of travel, trade and settlement are absolutely Eurocentric that made the Europeans sole discoverer and narrator of the rest of the world. These European colonizers established two different segments of the world - the West or the Occident and the East or the Orient. This relationship between the Occident and the Orient reflected a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said, 2001: 5). Therefore, the imaginary fraction and geographical breach between the imperial center and its peripheries constructed the notions of imperial superiority, attitudes and experiences.

The Elizabethan people considered the far-away lands, its people and culture as exotic, mysterious and enigmatic with all the negative attributes of darkness. Said also points out the generalized conceptions of the Orient, "its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness and so forth" (Said, 2001: 72) that shapes the history and perceptions of the world. Othello's tales are very much appealing and are laden with the mystery and exotic pleasures of the Orient. Not only do we learn he was 'sold to slavery', but also he encountered

...cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men who heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders(1,2.143-145).

Ironically enough, Othello is describing his own features observed by the Elizabethans. However, it is at this very point that Desdemona does 'seriously incline', and at this very point, Othello turns his focus from himself to Desdemona. The temptation lies, as Kim F. Hall has identified in her discussion of travelers' tales in early modern England, in "not only...the mysteries and 'strangeness' they describe but in the yet-untold wonders that they offer the future travelers"(Hall,1995:60)wonders which reveal the forbidden attitudes to the body. When Desdemona comes to tell the Venetian senate her version of their wooing, she says: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1,3.604). There is certainly an allusion to the prejudice of her audience against the black 'visage' both Shakespeare's audience as well as senators see in Othello, but Desdemona managed to see his true his visage through the tales he told of the past, tales which undeniably confirm Othello's connection with Oriental Africa and its legendary wild creatures. Othello himself, in the play, can be interpreted as Desdemona's 'newfoundland' - an embodiment of the exotic cultures which he describes. Said, too, calls attention to the allure and the charm of those mysterious lands and further says that

Oriental mysteries will be taken seriously, not least because they challenge the rational mind to new exercises of its enduring ambition and power (Said, 2001: 57).

Said states that there is an imaginary line drawn between the East and the West (Said, 2001: 57). Said and his followers voiced that the East and the West are set in a two-fold vicious circle: civilization versus backwardness, humanity versus barbarism, religiosity versus heathenism and so on. In history and culture, we get to see "European superiority over Oriental backwardness" (Said, 2001: 57) as the so-called



advanced Europeans held the opinion that the Oriental lands cannot have independent history or culture. Therefore, the uncivilized territories deserved to be ruled and be under the hegemony of the Occidentals who took up the challenge of bringing civilization to those backward lands of the Orient:

It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far. Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness (Said, 2001: 7).

The white Europeans undertook 'the burden' of writing the history and defining the identity of the undeveloped Orient. Through the process of 'otherization,' Europeans formulated a powerful discourse which was used to teach these regressed people to view themselves through the eyes of the advanced west and adopt their ideology. In other words, the Occident shouldered the sacred task of teaching and enlightening the Orient, in that sense, they were doing a favor.

Othello's oriental characteristics and physical aura have kindled various divisions among the masters of English Literature. These Shakespearean critics have notably diverged in their views with regard to Othello's depiction in the play. Some have seen his portrayal as eloquent, civilized, sober, trustworthy, and in particular a sexually restrained and not easily jealous Moor as an instance of Shakespeare's own ethical deviation. Others have argued that this portrayal was driven by Shakespeare's aim to disrupt provocatively the reigning constructions or stereotypes of Blackness. A.C. Bradley, for example, asserts that "in regard to the essentials of his character' Othello's race is unimportant, and that Shakespeare would have laughed if anyone had congratulated him on 'the accuracy of his racial psychology'"(Bradley, 1947:187). Robert Heilman calls *Othello* a "drama about Everyman, with the modifications necessary to individualize him"(Heilman,1956:139). Harold Clarke Goddard argues that Othello is "neither a Negro nor a Moor' but 'any man who is more beautiful within than he is without"(Goddard,1974:81). William Hazlitt, one of the most prominent Shakespeare researchers of the early nineteenth century, seems to suggest a reason as to why Othello's character changes throughout the course of the play. He states that "the nature of the Moor is noble, confiding, tender, and generous but his blood is of the most inflammable kind"(Hazlitt,2006:62)

This paper will exhibit Shakespeare's depiction of Othello by departing from the stereotype established by his cultural predecessors. But in order to do that, we will first try to define the word 'Moor', explore how these oriental people, who frequently singled out for their unusual dress, bizarre behavior and complicated customs, were regarded in the Elizabethan England and finally conclude it by presenting Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello and pointing out how he differed from the stereotypical views and attitudes of his own society and culture.

2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICIANCE (ÇALIŞMANIN ÖNEMİ)

This paper attempts to trace how Shakespeare's Othello reflects the deep-rooted Eurocentric ideology of the Elizabethan people and show how such views created distinctions between self and other, master and slave, civilized and savage, white and black, good and evil, strong and weak, occident and orient. These views had such a deep impact that many writers have portrayed the Europeans as superior and the 'self' as belonging to the 'centre' or 'Occident,' whereas people in far-away lands are shown as inferior and the 'other' belonging to the 'margin' or 'Orient'. In Elizabethan England, African men were regarded as illiterate, barbaric, lustful womanizers who were the white man's property and apt to be used as servants. These views have been handed down century after century. Africans living in England were often noticed with their odd outfit, bizarre behavior and customs and were usually considered as "devils" or "villains." However, in the play Othello Shakespeare breaks away from these beliefs and introduces an African man who disregards such stereotypical views thus shocking his audience with this deviation from the norm. He presents, in Othello's person, a reality that African men are polite, educated, loyal and brave warriors. Shakespeare even makes Othello more prejudiced against his own culture than against another race. Here is a Black man who is not against white people, but against people belonging to other religions.

3. MOOR DEFINED (MOOR TANIMLAMA)

The question of Othello's exact race is under debate. Historians have had trouble determining exactly who the Moors were. It is suspected that the Moors were a people, possibly of Berber and Arab descent, living in northern Africa. It is known that in the eighth century, people called Moors conquered the Iberian Peninsula, which contains both Spain and Portugal today. At that time they were Muslim, although earlier the people had followed other religions. The Moors brought the Islamic religion to the Iberian Peninsula, which until then had been a Christian area. The Moors ruled most, and later only parts, of the peninsula for seven centuries. Eventually, in 732, with the battle fought between forces under the Frankish leader Charles Martel and a huge Islamic army commanded by Emir Abdul Rahman, the Frank forces defeated the Islamic army and stopped the advance of Islam into the inner parts of Europe, and this battle is considered to be of historical importance, since it put an end to the Islamic conquests, and safeguarded Christianity as the dominating faith in Europe.

The word 'Moor' is a loose term that was used in Medieval and Renaissance England to refer to the 'Moors', 'blackmoors', 'Negroes', 'Indians', or 'Muslims'. As critics have established, these terms were more often used interchangeably in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in spite of the fact that the English became aware of the distinctions between different types of blacks (Barthelemy, 1987; 5-17). The word 'Moor' was commonly used to refer to Muslims in general whether they came from Africa or Asia (p.3). The origin of the word Moor has been traced to Greek as well as Latin words that translate as 'black' or 'very dark'. Some sources refer to Moors as being Berbers, who, for the most part, were light skinned and blue-eyed. The names Morocco and Mauritania are said to be derivatives of the word Moor. The people of the region were noted in Classical literature as the *Mauri*. The term *Mauri*, or variations, was later used by European traders and explorers of the

sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to designate ethnic Berber and Arab groups. A number of similar tribal groups have been historically labeled as 'Moors' by the speakers of European languages. Colloquially, the word 'Moor' is sometimes used for any person with North African origin. Therefore some people, who have been subjected to the application of this word, consider it to be pejorative and racist. In his introduction to *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, Jack D'Amico mentions that "as an opposite in race, religion, and disposition, the Moor can be used to confirm the superiority of Western values" (D'Amico, 1991: 2).

However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'Moor' as a word originating from the Old French word 'More', and as having the meaning of 'a member of a North-West African Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent. Additionally, the word 'black' is specified as "having an extremely dark skin; strictly applied to negroes and negritos, and other dark-skinned races; often, loosely, to non-European races, little darker than many Europeans" (sense I.1.c). Therefore, it may be suitable to suggest that, in the light of these word entries, the Other's specific race is of no particular importance in the eyes of European people, anyone having dark skin is not welcomed and accepted in the European community.

Moreover, yet another word, which was used alongside with 'Moor' to associate with the Other was the term *Saracen*. It was first used by ancient Romans to refer to people living in dessert areas in and around the Syrian borders of the Roman Empire, and who were distinguished from Arabs with no difficulties, but, during the Middle Ages in Europe, the word was expanded to include Arabs and then all who proclaimed the Islamic religion. The term 'Saracen' was used to describe a Muslim during the time of the Crusades. The initial objective of the Crusades was to release the Holy Lands, Jerusalem in particular, from the invasion of the Saracens, but, eventually, they were carried out to re-capturing Spain and putting an end to the Moor dominance there.

The Elizabethan playwrights and audiences were equally attracted by exotic stories about the Orient and its people (Jones, 1965:37). The idea of using Africa as a setting by the dramatists would have expectedly added more excitement to the theatre. The Elizabethan theatre-goers must have enjoyed the stories about the "harem of North African rulers and description of the courts of the West African Negro kings" or slave trade fascinating (Jones, 1965: 87).

The theme of the other was consistently made use of throughout Shakespeare's plays. Generally, this Other is depicted as a character who is somewhat isolated, branded, with deeper roots in the Orient or perceived as someone not belonging to the predominant moral beliefs. Shakespeare, apart from *Othello*, includes other Moorish characters in his plays. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare introduces an evil Moor named Aaron whom we see changed towards the end when he pleads for his child's life. A Moor also appears in *The Merchant of Venice*. He comes from the Oriental country, Morocco. He is the Prince and a potential suitor for the Portia's hand in marriage. Even before he arrives to make his bid for her, Portia, a racist arrogant, says,

If he have the condition
of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had
rather he should shrive me than wive me. (1.2.129-131)

Here in these lines, we witness, through Portia's eyes, the typical stereotyped images associated with the Orient such as inferiority,

otherness and backwardness. The dichotomy between East or the Orient and West or the Occident is emphasized once again.

In the play, Othello is often addressed as 'the Moor', without his actual name, which on the one hand undermines Shakespeare's effort to emphasize Othello's race and origin, and, on the other hand, makes Othello suitable into the scheme of the stereotype, despite his honorable and special nature. Othello is a Moor with his brownish skin and thick lips. Even though he manages to obtain the respect of the Venetians through his acts of courage in the battlefield, thus he has been granted the privilege to mingle with the city-dwellers. Othello is still an outsider and alienated individual. He is only tolerated in the city due to his military potency. He only becomes an unwanted and undesirable person when he tries to cross his boundaries and seek a marital bliss with a white Venetian girl.

4. THE MOORS IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND (ELIZABETH İNGİLTERE'SİNDE MOORS)

Shakespeare was writing in a period when the age-old European interest in the Orient and the far distant lands was increasingly cropping up largely because of the discovery of the trade routes to the East and the Virgin territories. In this connection, Renaissance Humanism had a great role to play, too; it had opened up an entirely new horizon in thought and culture as far as the parameters of Western civilization were concerned. The philosophy of Humanism rendered Europe's claim to be culturally rich and potent because it was conditioned in a rapidly changing historical milieu marked by secular learning and knowledge. Due to the newly-found epistemology, the normal enterprises of civilization provoked activities such as travel, conquest and new experiences of 'knowing' the alien lands and their inhabitants.

In the sixteenth century England, the terms 'Moor' and 'blackness' were used in broader sense. Elizabethans considered Moors to be dark strangers. Shakespeare and his contemporaries already described people having brownish or darker skins than average Europeans as black and, therefore, Elizabethans did not have one clear picture in their minds. But it is a fact that they became pretty much aware of the distinctions between different types of blacks. Virginia M. Vaughan, in her book entitled *Othello. A contextual history*, points out that

blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed a black man,...the terms Moor and Negro used almost interchangeably (Vaughan,1996:52).

Therefore it is very confusing and utterly unclear how dark the color of the Moor's skin in *Othello* has actually been described in Shakespeare's time, black or tawny.

However, it does not matter whether Othello is performed on stage as a tawny or as a black Moor, nevertheless, he generates sufficient visual signs to show his otherness. And as "any familiarities most Londoners had with 'blackamoors' probably came from slaves and servants" (Vaughan,1996:59). Without any doubt, Moors were regarded as being exotic, enigmatic and different from fellow Londoners. It is important to remember that the Elizabethan audience already had a stereotype in mind when they saw *Othello* on the stage.

The playwrights of Elizabethan period obtained their stories about the Orient from four main sources: from fighters who fought; history books and available travel accounts of that time; merchants and traders

who travelled to the Orient; and, most importantly, the stories told by the captives who were imprisoned by Moorish and Turkish pirates through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Establishing contact between travelers, merchants, and men writing their travel accounts were in fashion in the 16th and the 17th centuries. Kim Hall, dwelling on the relationship between above-mentioned group of men in the Elizabethan period, asserts that that all of these were "connected in court and diplomatic politics and many sought to enrich themselves through encroaching on the Portuguese monopoly of African trade" (Hall, 1995:18).

Shakespeare tried to describe a realistic and an astute portrait of a Moor in choosing Othello for his protagonist. He used Cinthio's novella called the *Hecatommithi* as his source. Cinthio's protagonist is a mere stereotype, only noticeable in Venice for his blackness, jealousy, and vengefulness. On the contrary, Shakespeare's protagonist is not only individualized but also lavishly complicated. He is different from Venetian society in almost every respect. He sets apart from them in his blackness, his past, his bearing, and, most importantly, in his language, which is abundant with unusual rhythms, grandeur, and exoticism. Moreover, Lois Whitney, in her article entitled "Did Shakespeare Know Leo Africanus", asserts that many of the specific attributes we see in Othello probably resulted from Shakespeare's reading of Leo Africanus's, *Geographical Historie of Africa*. Whitney states that Pory's description of Leo's life shows incredible resemblance to that of Othello's. Like Othello, he, too, was a noble Moor, a Christian convert, a wanderer in mysterious lands; he was also sold into slavery once and released. In addition, Leo's descriptions of the Moors resembles to the many attributes which critics have identified in Othello: pride, simplicity, courage in war, proneness to extreme jealousy and anger, and loyalty. The predominantly white European characters, as well as the audience, were amused by Othello's oriental otherness. Similarly, Abdel Ouahed bin Messaoud, the Barbary ambassador to the Queen, along with his sixteen delegates used to attract the attention of Londoners with their indigenous dresses, customs and bizarre behavior. Sometimes, the ambassador himself, "a bearded, hawk-faced, cunning Arab complete with turban, flowing robes and elaborately ornamented scimitar" angered the Queen, too (Sanders, 1997:11). This Moorish ambassador sometimes was claimed as an inspiration for Othello.

Venice served as a democratic and transparent city, where 'foreigners' and 'strangers' had been given the opportunity to appreciate the privileges of working, trading, or enlisting in its army. It is no wonder then that a Moor manages to rise to the status of the General of the Venetian army, or where a Jew achieves the means to be one of its influential brokers and money-lenders. Venice, according to Felix Gilbert, was a place where all city-dwellers could live in accordance with his or her own convictions and in which peace, not armed invasion of distant lands, was considered to be the "highest goal" (Gilbert, 1987:37). The socio-political situations described in the play are features of modernism which had started to appear in England and Europe during this era. However, Sandra Logan suggests that Venice, "despite its embodiments of elements of emergent modernity in this play, is not a unified space" (Logan, 2004: 352). The play *Othello* is one of two plays in which Shakespeare uses Venice as a setting, and the other is *The Merchant of Venice*. In both cases, Shakespeare portrays a blooming trading society in which the dwellers are after splendor and view the world they reside in

commercial terms. In both plays, focus is on the integral function of outsiders in Venetian society; Venice needs to make use of Shylock's loans against the harsh economical conditions and the military expertise of Othello at the time of possible invasion attempts. Above all, Venice has a duke and a council of senators, but it has no gallant warrior to be in charge of its army and a Jew to conduct the dirty business of conducting money-lending. Both Othello and Shylock desire to be recognized as equals, secure integration into this society and lead a life like that of its citizens. Venetians are expert diplomats and masters of schemes. They efficiently handle political issues. But Othello has a mind of child even though he has a fully-grown physical structure. He is naïve, and believes in the goodness of the people. That is the reason he becomes an easy prey for Iago, who is the representative of Venetian diplomacy and mastery on shrewdness.

The Venetian society is representative of Shakespeare's own context. The temperaments and attitudes which were revealed by Shakespeare in the text are similar to those temperaments and attitudes of Elizabethan society in England in the sixteenth-century. Even though *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, the temperament and attitudes displayed in the text are probably reflection of the enduring attitudes and values of Shakespeare's own society. It is difficult to make a clear assessment of the temperaments and values of English people in sixteenth-century to comparatively only few blacks residing amongst them. The audiences as well as readers have been offered an acute understanding into those attitudes and values through the themes of race and gender in *Othello*. These temperaments and attitudes are indication of what a society firmly believes in and cherishes. By the time *Othello* was written, the English were growing more and more alert about the presence of people from other races in the world as well as in their country. Travelling had become easier and blacks were beginning to be used as commodities in Europe for the slave trade. It is also at the same time the play was written that the Queen of England had restricted the entrance of blacks from entering the city.

The play *Othello* includes one of the most impressive, questionable performances of the black other in Elizabethan theater. The portrayal of the Moor in *Othello*, often contradictory, unfolds the prevailing racial attitudes of the period, and has continued to present insight into transforming social conflicts throughout the centuries since its first performance. Even though evidence suggests that the Venetian general was both an African and an Arab, the question on Othello's true origin has never been settled. But, actually, the racial repercussions of the play are set off through his status as a foreigner or outsider. Being from a different origin came to mean, mainly, being an other, non-English, as well as non-Christian. This utter otherness can also be traced in the subtitle of the play itself (*The Moor of Venice*), which sets the character not with regard to his role in society but entirely with regard to his race. Interestingly, Othello is, in spite of his background, at first regarded as a man of honor; but only when race is associated with interracial marriages involving white female and black male that it becomes a glowing sentimental problem for the Venetians, and for the members of audience from the seventeenth century to the present.

In Elizabethan literature, a man with African background is typically depicted in a negative light, yet is permitted to come into prominence in *Othello*. From the onset of this story, Othello is portrayed

as a true hero. He is a valiant army general and an admirable man. Like any other Elizabethan tragic hero, he is flawed; his noble nature and honesty allow Iago to work his deceitful ways on him. Although a black person would usually be employed to represent the darkness in Elizabethan literature, this role was taken over by Iago's utter evil nature. The idea of purity is one idea that does not change at all. Desdemona is a symbol of purity in its most accurate form; a young beautiful white female.

5. OTHELLO: SHAKESPEARE'S MOOR (OTHELLO: SHAKESPEARE' IN MOOR)

In *Othello*, Shakespeare is dwelling on color prejudice and, further, is consciously working against the color prejudice reflected in the language of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. He, as a matter of fact, reverts the connotations fastened to the colors white and black which are the results of racist stereotyping. It is Iago, the white man, who is depicted as immoral and anti-Christian, and cynical in his attitude to love. Perhaps, the interpretations of critics have not differed so radically at present time about a Shakespeare's play as much as about *Othello*. The play itself has already attracted serious disagreements and continues to do so. Historically, there is a critical record showing that audience and readers alike have been greatly disturbed, if not completely shocked or aggravated, by the marital union taking place between a black man and a white woman.

Othello's entire life apparently is defined by a society just like Shakespeare's England where the transformation of self or the other transformations triggered by the forces of social change, act on to adjust what one already is, or rearrange his own selfhood from one platform to another. Othello, prior to becoming a hero who managed to win the respect of the Venetian state and the heart of Desdemona, had been someone we can only hardly take notice of. His career, somehow, began by exile from his native origin we never exactly contemplate. We only can assume its great difference from his current condition. We will never know what his personal station had been in his native place.

It is not difficult to assume that Othello is as much as a victim of Iago's evil ways as Desdemona is of Othello's anger, because Othello only kills his beloved wife due to the shrewd plots of Iago. Many people might be in the opinion that Iago's sin, which is to devise the Moor's downfall, is far more evil because it springs out of a devilish, cunning mind, as opposed to Othello's sin, which is perpetrated because he has become a sheer pawn in the hands of Iago, blinded by anguish, destroyed by his own credulity. However, it should be kept in mind that Othello, by his own freewill, allows himself to be deceived. Iago's implications of Desdemona's unfaithfulness present the alibi Othello requires for the justification of his wife's destruction, because he is of the opinion that she cannot truly love him. It can be asserted that Desdemona's murder is due to Othello's excessive pride and rush to judgment and, as a result, he must be held responsible for his actions.

Unlike Iago, Othello proves himself to be efficient in forming healthy, powerful and loving relationships; it is affirmed by his true friendship with Iago. Nevertheless, Othello lets himself to be influenced by Iago, and further lets him to draw out his most evil inner characteristics. Even though Iago might actually be the more intrinsically vicious one, Othello does almost nothing to stop his basic evil instincts taking over himself. We must consider his real motive in

order to figure out why Othello commits his act of crime and why he should be held accountable for this act. It can be suggested that the real reason behind Othello's act of murder is not his unstable and weakened mental health or the manipulations of Iago, but rather his own pride and loss of self-confidence which he lets to be dominant over himself. The sterling professor of Humanities and famous literary critic, Harold Bloom maintains that, even though, Iago dominates the play with his cunning aspirations blended with his ingenious mind, "it is still Othello's tragedy, even if it is Iago's play" (Bloom, 2008:5). Othello is a well-made leader, aware of his capability to deal with military issues, but he is pretty much apprehensive and insecure when it comes to his individual and domestic qualities. When called by the Duke upon the complaint of Brabantio, he is quite convinced of his capability as a commander and utters, "My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints" (1.2. 18-19). He has ended up in a new city having unfamiliar modes. He has a pure and beautiful bride, whom he loves affectionately but does not know well enough. He keeps on wondering why a beautiful young girl like Desdemona would pick him as for her companion, can only come up with the following explanation, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd" (1.3.167).

Shakespeare brings the fact into attention that Othello is quite different from the society he resides in. His cultural/racial background alienates him from Venetian. Desdemona's brutal murder is significant, as critics say, to highlight the savage and barbaric nature of Othello. It is an acknowledged fact that Othello is an 'honorary white'. He is completely conscious of the prevailing prejudice wandering around in Venice and must certainly inquire why Desdemona, in order to marry a black man, would go against her customs and fellow white Venetian residents. Author Welker Given applauds Shakespeare's courage in depicting his protagonist as black. He asserts that "It is a bold thing to bring a coal-black Moor on the stage as the husband of a delicate, loving white bride" (Given, 1899:13). On the other hand Laurence Lerner claims that "Shakespeare has suffered from colour prejudice" (Lerner, 1959:358). In addition, Paul Robeson asserts that Othello's "color is essentially secondary-except as it emphasizes the difference in culture" (cited in Rosenberg, 1961:195). Othello has his suspicions about Desdemona's nature of love towards him even before Iago begins his machination. Although what Desdemona feels for him, is nothing but pure and genuine love, Othello earnestly fails to believe in her love. Initially, the answer he comes up with to his doubts is to set Desdemona on a pedestal, and thus making her an "emblem of purity and trustworthiness" (Muir, 1977: 17).

'Tis not to make me jealous
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well.
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me (3.3.208-14)

Othello is going to arrive at the ambiguous and dubious realization that the tenderness and virtue of Desdemona empowers her to feel affection for the unlikeable and undesirable. When Iago starts working on his scheme to demolish the Moor's romantic image of Desdemona, he simply heightens what Othello truly believes within to be likely: that Desdemona

would be capable to love another man. Iago shrewdly interferes and argues that Desdemona is perfectly capable of betrayal since she has already betrayed her own race. This reminds us of the lines Brabantio uttered:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:

She has deceived her father, and may thee (1.3.292-293)

The Moor's savage nature can emerge through Iago's affirmation of his doubts. His soldier instincts can take hold of himself, which is precisely what Othello had yearned for the whole time. He can only find comfort in the role of an assailant. Why does Othello not try effectively to encounter Iago's accusations? It should be kept in mind that he asks for some substantial proof of his wife's betrayal, but, however, he does not question the validity of the evidence laid before him. As far as Othello is concerned, an honest friend and a fellow soldier has substantiated what he has been suspecting about the whole time and that is sufficient enough - reason enough to sentence her to death.

We have been informed, in the beginning of the play, that Desdemona's father, Brabantio gratefully welcomed Othello at his mansion before he runs away with Desdemona. He only assumes a discriminatory attitude after their marital union. Therefore, it is Desdemona who becomes the reason of his discrimination and marginalization. The marital union between a black man and a white woman is not admissible and tolerable in Venetian society. Desdemona ruined Othello's ambiguous entry into the world of white people. This can also explain why Iago attacks Desdemona and aids the process of racism. Othello compares himself to a Turk in his last speech. He conceives the fact that he has become a symbolical Turk; he has turned his back away from the civility of Christianity and shown his innate brutal and savage nature.

Nonetheless, Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello's character stands in stark contrast with the previously held conventional European views of the Moor. He does not only refrain from introducing Othello as the evil Moor, but presents him as the Commander of Venetian army. Othello is a converted Christian. He is assigned to defend Cyprus against the "General enemy Ottoman" (I,3,49). Subsequently, Shakespeare constructed the main character Othello as Moor in order not to indicate knavery and wickedness. As G.K. Hunter has put it, "Othello may be the devil in appearance, but it is the 'fair' Iago who gives birth to the dark realities of sin and death in the play" (Hunter,1967:255). Iago invites the language of darkness in the play. He is the first character to note, "It is engender'd. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.2.402-405).

Shakespeare, when modifying Cinthio's story, attributes racial stereotypes to the characters such as Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio at the outset of the play and includes these into the dialogue. Their insults and derogatory words set the background against which audiences must forge their impressions of a man they have no prior knowledge of. However, when Othello enters, the audience should assess his premeditated actions, vivid and passionate speech, not in the abstract, but in person. Shakespeare, through the medium of theatrical performance, enables his audience to view his protagonist in three dimensions: the Moor in Cinthio's story was transformed from a mysterious and fierce passionate stereotype into a tragic character in flesh and blood. The action of the play clearly demonstrates how deep-rooted is the passion of Othello and Desdemona, the eloquence of Othello's speeches and Shakespeare, through Iago's betrayal and disloyalty, encourages his audience to pinpoint the

true color of villainy. Marjorie Garber, in her book *Shakespeare After All*, comments on how Shakespeare constructed his Moor, first giving him noble qualities then making him boil with jealousy and rage afterwards. She goes on to say that

here then is the key dramatic point, one typically Shakespearean at the same time establishing and critiquing a stereotype: Othello looks black, but it is Iago who becomes the pole of moral negativity (conventionally, blackness) in the play (Garber, 2004: 592).

Othello brutally slays Desdemona with the pretence of virtuous and upright wrath and will not unveil his true intention. Othello, as the implementer of justice, has no other option but to take his own life when he discovers Desdemona's chastity and innocence. Justice must be rendered and served, but this time upon himself. However, we should not place Othello on the same diabolical and vicious level as Iago owing to his heart-felt repentance and successive suicide. On the other hand, the feelings of repentance and regret that he displays after the brutal act of murder, in the meantime, cannot be sufficient to pardon or vindicate him. As a lawful husband, Othello has a responsibility to let Desdemona to resist the charge of infidelity. He opts to disregard that responsibility in order to satisfy his personal infatuations. Othello's nobility returns as well when his love is restored, although a little too late. Naturally, one must ponder then why Othello decides to murder himself. It is arguable that while Othello possessed all that he did, he was not endowed with the skill to hold on to what he had. Love would have been sufficient enough for Othello to lead a blissful life in a perfect world. However, such world is hardly depicted in Elizabethan literature.

Many critics have argued that Othello, by slaying Desdemona, has experienced a metamorphosis. He shifts, according to Geoffrey Bullough, Daniel J. Vitkus and many other critics, from the noble Moor and a devoted Christian to a brutal, inhuman and merciless barbarian. This transformation occurring in Othello's character places him in the same line with stereotypical savage and brutal characters like Aaron and Caliban. He proves to be efficient in professional matters and feels comfortable on the battlefield. It is a familiar territory. But he feels quite uncomfortable and miserable in his personal and civil life. He has a mind of a child when dealing with other people. He unconditionally believes in them. It is the reason Othello kept calling Iago 'honest'.

6. CONCLUSION (SONUÇ)

Shakespeare's masterpiece *Othello*, in the end, is a play about an eminent man whose tragedy is resulted due to his assertive belief that the world is entirely good, that his 'perfect soul' will safeguard him from discrimination, and that Iago could, in any way, be corrupt and crooked. Yet, he acknowledges, even though too late, that a devilish person like Iago can never be killed. Othello is permitted to be a part of the Venetian society and took pleasure from the words of praises and bravery such as 'valiant Moor', 'brave Moor', 'warlike Moor', 'the Moor my lord' and "Moor ... a full soldier", uttered by the leading figures of the society. Emily Bartels holds that Othello is 'so integrated into Venetian society that he can set the terms of both military and social action'(Bartels, 1997). However, it is when he dares to marry a white woman that he becomes subject to discriminatory behavior from the very

people who praised him with their words of flattery. He thought he could blend into this white Occidental society, but, it is when he becomes a pawn in Iago's hands, boils with rage and jealousy that his barbaric nature surfaces and he becomes the stereotyped Oriental character that Shakespeare tries very hard to keep him away from. Othello surrendered himself to the prison of race he thought he had escaped.

Othello is a professional soldier and he is well aware of his responsibilities as the Commander of the Venetian military. Othello himself, as Shakespeare provides evidence in the play, is truly the antithesis of the stereotyped 'lusty Moor.' In order to respond to the call of duty, he does not hesitate to delay the celebrations of his wedding-night, even, in a way, almost gladly receives it. Shakespeare is advocating his steadfast belief in virtue and in the likeness of pure and sincere minds, but the play also acknowledges that a blissful end should not be expected in a pragmatic and realistic world. The two eminent Shakespearean critics, G.K. Hunter and Eldred Jones have contended that Shakespeare only implores the negative conventional views of Elizabethans on people with African origin in order to degrade and expose them. The play *Othello*, according to Hunter, "manipulates our sympathies, supposing that we will have brought to the theater a set of careless assumptions about Moors" (Hunter, 1967: 152). Jones hails Shakespeare for his portrayal of "complete humanization of a type character" (Jones, 1965:109).

Shakespeare's text reveals the social conflicts of the time, and performance records of the play track shifts in racial biases and interpretations over centuries. Studying Othello provides insight into the role of the African/Arab as an Other to the West, and to the enduring nature of this Othering. Shakespeare's black/devil imagery causes modern readers to question their own moral centers and ask themselves why the dark Other or the representative of the Orient is consistently seen as evil in the eyes of the Occidental white people. Charles Lamb frankly admits that he considered Othello to be an admirable person when he read it but, however, he felt sickened by the character of "coal-black Moor" on the stage; he inferred that the play should be worth reading, but not be watched (as cited in Lucas, 1903: 108). Margaret Webster also expressed her astonishment by Paul Robeson's performance in the role and stated that "Here was a great man, a man of simplicity and strength; here also was a black man. We believed that he could command the armies of Venice; we knew that he would always be alien to its society" (Webster, 1942:236).

In spite of the fact that the theme of racism remains to be one of the most prominent and prevailing issues about the play, Shakespearean critics have still failed to form any sort of general agreement regarding to the role of race in *Othello*. The scholars extensively deviate in their treatment of Othello. Ania Loomba considers the play as "a tragedy of race" (Loomba, 1989: 61). Samuel T. Coleridge admired Othello as "noble, generous, open-hearted, unsuspecting and unsuspecting" (Raysor, 1930:227). Indebted to Coleridge, A.C. Bradley's character analysis, even though it is a very much contested assessment of *Othello*, has been pretty central. Bradley excessively idealizes the Moor as a romantic figure:

Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes; and he is so partly from the strange life of war and adventure which he has lived from childhood. He does not belong to our world,



and he seems to enter it we know not whence - almost as if from wonderland. There is something mysterious in his descent from men of royal siege; in his wanderings in vast deserts and among marvelous peoples... (Bradley, 1991: 14).

Virginia M. Vaughan states her admiration and brings a plausible and persuasive explanation to his predicament in Venice. She puts her fondness in the following words:

Othello's sense of self must come from his occupation ... [T]he hero is an alien in Venice and his unfamiliarity with its customs contributes to his vulnerability. Set apart by his colour and life history, he can never be completely secure in the city he serves (Vaughan, 1994: 21).

On the other hand, the eminent critic and poet, T.S. Eliot, in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", accused Othello of brutal selfishness and deep dishonesty. Eliot declared, analyzing Othello's last speech:

I have always felt that I have never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness - of universal human weakness - than the last great speech of Othello...What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavoring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment... (Eliot, 1970: 110).

However, through his tender and caring portrayal of Othello, Martin Orkin and Emily C. Bartels assert that Shakespeare was criticizing racism, and putting the blame on his society for its racist behavior. Orkin contends that *Othello* "in its fine scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying Iago's use of racism, and in its reflection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play as it always had done, continues to oppose racism" (Orkin, 1987: 188). Bartels, on the other hand, concludes that Shakespeare, in *Othello*, "invokes the stereotype of the Moor as a means of subverting it, of exposing its terms as strategic constructions of the self and not empirical depictions of the Other" (Bartels, 1990: 447)

It is safe to say as we are drawing our conclusion that Shakespeare made daring and intrepid attempts to bridge the gap between the Orient and the Occident by bestowing on his hero qualities like nobility, eloquent diction, sobriety, and trustworthy that were only thought possible in white men. He also places in an important position as a commander of the Venetian military. Due to Iago's cunning schemes and manipulations, he became an easy prey and lets his barbaric qualities which he had successfully managed to suppress and which were thought to be found in the people residing in the Oriental lands. He enters the play as 'noble' and 'valiant' Moor and exits as a 'blacker devil' and 'erring Barbarian.' Despite the transformation taking place in Othello at the end of the play, Harold Clarke Goddard states that Othello "neither a Negro nor a Moor" but "any man who is more beautiful within than he is without" (Goddard, 1974: 81).

NOTICE (NOT)

Bu makalenin kısaltılmış şekli Uluslararası Burç Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü tarafından düzenlenen "1. Uluslararası İngiliz Dili Öğretimi ve Uygulamalı Dilbilimi Konferansı" 'nda bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

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