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William Shakespeare's Othello: A Tale of Jealousy

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Received-08.04.2023, Revised-12.04.2023, Accepted-17.04.2023 E-mail: shrutichaudhary775@gmail.com

Abstract: *The present research paper tries to depict the ill effects of jealousy. Jealousy is natural in everyone. But its worst form destroys humanity. Shakespeare through his play Othello describes how jealousy destroys the happy married life of Othello and Desdemona. It brings the downfall of Othello and he at the end of the play kills himself due to remorse, when he comes to know the truth that Desdemona was a pure lady. Shakespeare also warns his readers of the people like Iago, who due to their evil desire do not hesitate to ruin the life of others.*

Key Words: : Jealousy, Handkerchief, faithfulness, tragedy, suspicion, humanity, describes, downfall, remorse.

Human beings have various emotions and jealousy is one of the most important emotion of humans. The word jealousy stems from the French jalousie formed from jaloux and further from low Latin zelus.

Jealousy consists of one or more emotions like anger, resentment, inadequacy, disgust and revenge. Jealousy is a natural emotion of a person. Every person feels jealousy at one or more times in their life. But when jealousy takes a weird form, it makes a person insane. William Shakespeare in his play Othello has shown this insanity arose from jealousy. Shakespeare is a universal writer. He writes not about British people but for the whole world. William Shakespeare (23rd April 1564-23rd April 1616) began his career as an actor and writer. He was known as the 'Bard of Avon'. He has written comedies, poems, History plays and tragedies. Though every form of his writing became popular. But his tragedies gave him a distinct place in English Literature. He has written many famous tragedies like Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Othello and so on. Othello is a story of the eponymous character, who is in service of the Venetian Republic. On the instigation of Iago, he kills his wife, Desdemona. Shakespeare is adept in portraying the human emotions beautifully. Othello was published in 1603. The major characters of the play are Iago, Desdemona, Othello, Cassio, Roderigo, Brabantio, Emilia and more.

The play depicts how the emotion of jealousy can bring the downfall of a person. Othello who is a brave General becomes a merciless murderer. The moral purpose of tragedy was stressed by the Elizabethan writers because of the attacks on theatre. Shakespeare was aware of this idea, so in his tragedies we find warning his readers against sin, tyranny, greed, jealousy and other vices. Shakespeare found the plot of Othello in the collection of stories by Cinthio which also contained a variant of the Measure for Measure plot.

In the opening scene of the play, we find Iago confessing his hatred for Othello to Roderigo. Iago is hurt that Othello chose Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of Iago. Iago is jealous of Cassio. He says:

**Our Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;
...But he, Sir, had the election
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds
Christian and heathen, must be lee'd and calm'd¹**

The dialogue of Iago not only shows his jealousy towards Cassio but his own frustration. He thinks that injustice is done to him by denying him his right as a man, who has participated in wars with Othello, while Cassio doesn't have practical knowledge of battle field. This is the seed of jealousy that is sown in the heart of Iago. The feeling of jealousy instigates him to take revenge from Othello and Cassio. He exploits Roderigo for his purpose. Roderigo is an innocent man who wants to marry Desdemona. Iago makes him fool by making him believe that Desdemona will be his in future. Iago's first step of revenge is seen in Act I when he asks Roderigo to inform Brabantio about his daughter's elopement. Iago is depicted as an evil character by Shakespeare. When he sees that Brabantio is going in search of Othello, he leaves the place so that Othello should not doubt him. This behaviour displays the cunningness of his character.

Brabantio, hates Othello for marrying his daughter because Othello is black. Brabantio is also jealous that his daughter has taken her husband's side. Brabantio blames Othello for using witchcraft to control his daughter which Desdemona denies. At last, with heavy heart Brabantio accepts the marriage but he poisons Othello's ear by saying:

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

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She has deceived her father, and may thee.²

Brabantio is not able to imagine that his curse will change his daughter's life. He has sown a seed of distrust in Othello's mind towards his own daughter. Othello does not pay attention to his words but afterwards when he falls in Iago's trap, he starts doubting his wife character. Iago hates Othello and doubts that he has seduced his wife, so he wants to take revenge. He says:

**And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife,
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure.³**

Iago chooses a simple way to take revenge from Othello. He knows that he cannot win Othello physically, so he makes him mentally weak. He wants to ruin Othello's married life. His poisonous mind makes a plan. He chooses Cassio because he is a handsome man and women easily fall prey to his personality. Iago is intelligent enough to know that Othello will agree to his point that Desdemona has fallen for this handsome man. He also makes plan to dismiss Cassio from his post and gets success. Cassio is not able to control himself after drinking. Iago knows it and utilise this weakness of Cassio against him. He with the help of Roderigo instigates him and he quarrels with Montano and Roderigo. This behaviour of Cassio upsets Othello and he dismiss him.

Iago, is the culprit but he shows himself as if he wishes to save Cassio. He even suggests him to take help of Desdemona to regain his position. The innocent Cassio agrees to his suggestion and Iago finds enough material to poison the mind of Othello. Iago has been presented as a snake whose poison is lethal.

Shakespeare is a master in revealing his characters in their true self. We notice that the subject which makes most dramatic use of the unfolding of depth of character is the question of voluntary evil. The way Iago gradually trap Othello's mind is superb.

It seems that individuals merge in the universe of the Shakespeare plays when we see the effects of evil upon them follow according to the nature of things, to what is manifest in the course of history itself.⁴

Iago seems to be jealous of Othello that he is enjoying his married life, while Iago suffers from the suspicion that his wife, Emilia has cheated him for Othello. He wants Othello to suffer like him. As Kittredge said:

Iago's jealousy is a 'raging torment', and if he cannot revenge himself by seducing Desdemona, which he must realise is impossible, he is determined to make Othello suffer from his torments of jealousy, the green-eyed monster he knows from personal experience.⁵

Iago weakens the mind of Othello. He projects the relationship of Desdemona and Cassio in such a suspicious way that Othello believes him. Iago gives reason of Desdemona's liking of Cassio. Othello has blind faith on Iago. Iago never say anything directly to Othello. He only creates suspicion in Othello's mind. He even procures the handkerchief of Desdemona. That handkerchief was the first gift of Othello to Desdemona. Desdemona though takes proper care of that handkerchief but one day by mistake the handkerchief drops down on the floor and Emilia, wife of Iago gives it to him. Emilia has no knowledge why her husband always asks her to steal the handkerchief. Though it is an object only but it plays a significant role in the play. When Othello ask Iago to give ample proof of Desdemona's cheating, he tells Othello that the handkerchief is with Cassio, who wipes his beard with it. On hearing this, Othello becomes angry and gives order to Iago to kill him. Iago excites Othello and is satisfied to see him in anger. He says:

Work on, My medicine, work! Thus, credulous fools are caught; And many worthy and chaste dames even, thus All guiltless, meet reproach. What' Ho! my lord! My lord! Isay! Othello!⁶

In the play, we find how the emotion slowly works and once the doubt comes there is no solution for it. This happens with Othello. Othello is not able to perceive the truth. Othello loves his wife and asks Iago to bring proof. Iago uses the handkerchief as a proof to convince Othello. He also says ugly things about Desdemona. Othello, though a sensible man loses his power to distinguish between right or wrong. He due to his jealous nature believes Iago and decides to kill Desdemona for her unfaithfulness. He says:

Get me some poison, Iago; this night: I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovided my mind again: this night.⁷



But Iago suggest him another way to punish Desdemona. He advises him to strangle her in her bed which she has contaminated. Shakespeare beautifully describes the mental condition of Othello after he doubts Desdemona. He is shattered to know that his wife is cheating. Othello's life is destroyed. Tolstoy writes:

Man can endure earthquake, epidemic Dreadful disease, every form of spiritual Torment, but the most dreadful tragedy that Can befall him is and will remain The tragedy of the bedroom.⁸

The statement of Tolstoy is best described by Shakespeare in his play Othello. Iago, is restless because he thinks his wife is unfaithful. Othello also suffers from this mental trauma. Othello is a strong man whose childhood has been tough. He survived in many adverse situations but he was not able to endure the unfaithfulness of his wife. We witness how jealousy makes a man base and mean. Othello in Act V confesses his distress to Desdemona. He says:

By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in's hand O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart And makes me call what I intend to do A murder, which I thought a sacrifice I saw the handkerchief.⁹

Desdemona on listening this ,request her husband to bring Cassio, so that his doubts should be cleared. But Othello has become blind in jealousy and anger. He believes what Iago says. Iago has wrongly reported Othello that Cassio has accepted his guilt. After the murder of Desdemona, Emilia reveals the truth of handkerchief and the following events proves that Desdemona was innocent and the whole plan was made by Iago. Othello feels sorry for what he has done and at last kills himself in a remorse. Andthus, the play comes to an end.

To conclude, we can say that through Othello Shakespeare has depicted one of the most powerful emotions. He has shown that jealousy can reflect in an extreme manner. We see that Othello is betrayed by what is false with, projected into the figure of the villain. For Iago is the intellect divorced from the imagination, the acid which eats away love and trust. So, we do not merely watch a perfect marriage destroyed by a demi devil, we watch our? own divided heart?.

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