

**OTHELLO – A TRAGEDY WITH COMIC CHINKS IN PORCELAIN LOVE**

**Shweta Chaudhary**

M.A. English NET (UGC)

Civil Lines, Near Rajeev Chauk

Gurgaon ( Haryana)

**Abstract**

In this paper, the focus will remain on comic implication in tragedy of *Othello*. Tragedy of *Othello* triggers from clownish antics of main characters, comic situation twisted and convoluted in favour of suspicion, mistrust by a foolish villain who has no realistic appraisal either of his 'prey' or of circumstances. A game initiated by Iago in wantonness with frolicsome, playful tactics ultimately diverges into a way, he himself could not imagine. Iago, being a psychopant himself, fails to assess the wounded pride of a soldier and his consequent reaction to Iago's malevolent design. The progression of paper will reveal layer by layer how comic foolishness, vulnerability of love, misguided suspicion, credulous disposition, impulsive demeanor lead to a painful tragedy which nobody could avert. Iago is a comic villain who earns success, working upon an over simple, naive credulous hero who accepts misgivings as ultimate truth. Othello's failure to debunk fabricated charges, failure to assess the situation and cross examine evidences and witnesses dragged him into whirlpool of tragedy. Power of love assumed and proved its worth in death. Barbara sums up Iago's intention of revenge, "Of course, it is revenge but revenge on a petty comic level"(Barbara 94)

**Keywords:** Fond pageant – affectionate parade, Friars – a religious priest, Don Juan – A philanderer , Proxy – Indirect, Courtship – Wooing, Seeking affection of a woman

In *Othello*, the love and union of Desdemona and Moor – a passion, irrationally impetuous with all its varied dimensions is subjected to comic assumptions because rashness on part of Othello and 'double knavery' of Iago is not enough to precipitate tragedy. A logical scrutiny reveals that *Othello* is deliberately set up in a comic setup. Right from secret courtship, ratified marriage, elopement of daughter, funny narration about elopement – all comic stuff is preliminary to tragedy. The way Othello and Desdemona describe their respective choice of life partners in Venetian Council scene, (I (iii) 3) how marriage is solemnized despite disparity of age, colour, conditions of life, background & lineage; despite uproar initiated by machination of villains and doltish rival, even serious objections of father : "*She is abus'd, stolen ...*"(I iii 60 *Othello*) are overruled by impartial duke, all incidents are necessarily comic. Mother nature also extends its cooperation with the dispersal of last external threat from the turks and thus approves the favoured lovebirds. Othello's reunion conversation with his beloved hints at a movement

accomplished in terms of peace assured for their relationship like a final scene of comedy:

*If it were now to die .... succeeds in unknown fate (II(i) 187-91 Othello )*

How does a comedy turn out to be tragedy? Basically, it's a play of domestic affair, the core of the play is not this character or that, but a love-relationship, and in this relationship passion and reason become suspicion and trust. The trust of Othello on Iago is misused by the latter. About Iago Barbara says, "He took a savage delight in scoring off a friend or an enemy in making troubles, in committing crimes." (Barbara 94)

As Desdemona is trust and Othello is suspicion, so – strangely – Othello is the human soul as it strives to be and Iago is that which corrodes or subverts it from within.

The entire journey is the transformation of or degeneration of a noble moor to Iago's committed dupe. Since the marriage is incompatible and an emotional decision too, perhaps the imminent danger of its failure is lurking in Othello's mind. That's why at the peak of joy he is apprehensive about enigmatic fate; graceful death is his desire; even Desdemona shares equally negative mode of agreement (*The heaven forbid but that our loves and comforts should increase...*)(II i 89-90 *Othello*)

Both sensed inhospitable & hostile surrounding all set to spoil the broth. All these doubts and fears are also dramatic devices to make audience prepared for something unexpected since the theme of play is domestic, narrow love relationship, all initial comic movements are channelled to make audience aware of unresolved tensions in this successful love, that too, in varied ways. Othello's narration of his courtship is very shy, story- telling, undoubtedly, beautiful and captivating but flimsy, bubbling and lack solid ground and sentiments, definitely, in retrospect disturbing, for instance:

*She loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them (I (iii) 167-168 Othello)*

Their love, if not shallow or deep-dyed, has a proxy quality. Shakespeare, in his comedies, explore the inadequacies of romantic courtship, as in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Claudio and Hero move through the paces of courtship mobilized by rumours and mediators, without having a deep and authentic knowledge about each other. Hero, the protagonist can be traduced much to the belief of Claudio, and his heart fails of belie the 'ocular proof'.

Both set of hero, heroine *In Much Ado ...* and *Othello* respectively face same vulnerability but *In Much Ado ...*, being a comedy, the matter is resolved by deities, Dogberry's meticulous detective work and a benevolent friar to checkmate Don Juan but in *Othello* all these divine and good human agents are not stationed so it diverges into tragedy with potential force of villainy sped up by Iago, unchecked and unbridled.

Iago keeps on plotting against Othello, this allegory of evil, both in his overt and covert statements, imagery and iteration (*put money enough in thy purse*) (*I iii 376 Othello*) reveals the germination of a deeper evil.

"A.C. Bradley, finds Iago drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work." (Qtd in Snyder 25) Unexpectedly and unknowingly, Bradley highlights a kind of kinship between Iago and friars of comedy, who introduce 'Fond pageants' in which character without reading or analyzing their script, first play the part assigned to them and events flow down into a desired pool of drama.

Unlike comedy, the person, here, who single-handedly controls people & manipulate situation creating illusion into reality by his oratory, amusing within parameters of comedy, has a sinister purpose if not of tragedy or death, surely of disgrace, unpleasantness and bitterness, if

not checked or cross checked well in time; comedy in romantic love erupts when reason prefers its absence. Iago is reason incarnate and, that too, unscrupulous with a power to govern people, positions them at desired places, knows their weaknesses; so the substance, easily worthy to be dispersed or dismissed in humour or overruled by emotion, is misused by Iago's accurate estimates about people, for instance :

*The Moor is of a free and open nature .....be led by the nose ...*  
 (I (iii) 393-95).

His plausible hypotheses, his misgivings from past experiences:

*She did deceive her father, marrying you. (III (iii), 210)*

mislead people to the direction of his choice.

He substantiates his arguments and hypotheses by 'ocular proof', 'fortuitous embellishment' of Desdemona's handkerchief especially, at a time when bond of mutual trust between couple was not strengthened, (Iago has serious doubts even about consummation of their marriage).

The tender aspect of their love was in its origin, the love of couple was rooted not in rational, intellectual evaluation of empirical knowledge or mutual understanding expressed in terms of age, colour and background but in instinctive or impulsive sympathy or infatuation. Desdemona's love hinges upon liberalness of Othello and Othello's upon her faith. Tragedy gains shape when both props dash to ground. The peculiar strength of their love is their ultimate weakness.

*Desdemona: I saw Othello's visage in his mind. (I, 252).*

*Othello: My life upon her faith! (I, 294).*

Despite disparity in couple, this peculiar strength of instinctive or intuitive mutual recognition that triumphs over Iago's logical poison, lethal counseling, proves itself but only in death. Role of Iago helps us know how a conventional dichotomy between reason and love, common sense divorced from reason can involve deep tragic implications. This instinctual rightness becomes abstract concept, vulnerable to any kind of distortion & misapplication. It is presumed that Othello should have trusted Desdemona working upon his instinct of love for her but abstract concept of her being Venetian and disloyal to her father worked upon Othello.

All cardinal characters in play find love of couple as unnatural –

*"nature erring from itself." (III (iii) 231*

In *Othello* tension leading to tragedy develops between two sets of nature – one is common and other is personal and individual.

General nature – an amalgamation of common experience & prejudice guided by which Brabantio appeals in Venetian Council against marriage of his daughter – It is against general nature to believe that there can be any attraction between young white Venetian girl and aging black foreigner – as it is against 'observed law of nature' Brabantio feels that love has been 'wrought' by unnatural means:

*She is abused, .... corrupted by spells & medicines.... san witchcraft.*

(I (iii) 60-64)

He argues that she is timid and cannot love fearsome Moor. She who 'blushed at herself' proves him wrong by her personal nature, referring to her mother who earlier chose Brabantio over her father and subsides the charges on 'fearsome Moor' declaring that she "saw Othello's true visage in his mind."(I (iii) 252 *Othello*) Same way, Iago believes in 'liberal & free' personal nature of Othello: "*Moor is of a free & open nature*"(I (iii) 393 *Othello*) this very personal generosity of Othello allows Iago takes pretence of honesty. Iago also knows Othello's personal

nature to act instinctively rather than with reasoned evaluation (taking into consideration what kind of person Iago is in general, his real reputation, feedback about his nature). But general nature of soldier, Iago fails to comprehend; Othello being a soldier, and a general fails to accept defeat rather than deception in love, his general nature of soldier and general prompts him to dispense justice by sword.

From this parallel of personal and general nature precipitates comedy and diverges to tragedy; Iago, his general nature is that of a man and a soldier but his personal, private nature is of determined animalism, for him love is “*a lust of blood and a permission of will*”(I iii 331). All this filthy imagination of him is clownish; clowns of comedy generally utter such words to amuse audience with cheap remarks but all statements of this clown are without humour, bring destruction when acted out against idealized love of Othello and Desdemona. Like villains, Iago lacks in self-sufficiency: for movement of his malevolence, he proves his theories on other people & hence plays the part of official clowns.

Iago, by his own part, not just a jealous spoiler; he is ‘symbolic enemy of love itself’. He relishes spots or creates filth even in purest things.

At the end of play, in his analysis of his nature, Othello declares that he was ‘wrought’ from his original nature. If we probe into his statement we find, he truly, owns a noble and trusting nature which brings forth instinctive perception of Desdemona; despite venomous thoughts injected in him by Iago, he fails to believe infidelity of Desdemona:

*“If she be false ..... I’ll not believe it.” (III (iii)280-281)*

But this unflinching trust of Othello is undermined by Iago’s oratory, her background – societal and familial, above all, the false rationality of ‘ocular proof’ (just a handkerchief but stationed in a sensitive condition & tender time). Where Brabantio fails, Iago wins making Desdemona’s honour – ‘an essence that’s not seen’ susceptible of fortuitous embellishment (handkerchief). This ‘self bounteous’ nature of moor makes him abused. Constant pecking of Iago compels Othello to look at relationship from former’s perspectives, to feel himself a mismatch for her – an aberration; nature erring from itself; at this crucial time, Iago continues his pestering over Othello to tell him, how alien he is to her in basic nature:

*“... her own clime, complexion and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends – foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.”(III (iii)232 Othello)*

Iago makes ‘differences’ unnatural, incompatible and unharmonious, reinforcing paradigmatic separation makes Othello more alien and widely different, and forces him violate his own peculiar essence. Iago, himself not true in love, fails to weigh the soul deep love of Othello and continues to play with fire. Protagonist, In *Othello*, unlike comedies, is vulnerable to attacks of reason, false and fabricated argument. Vulnerability is the heart of play; love in comedies yield a liberating completeness to lovers; in *Othello* the hero, a self-sufficient master of himself & battlefield, yields his separate status and independence to love. This potentially dangerous dependency and consequent vulnerability twinkles even in comic phase of play. Othello’s concept of love, after relationship, or commitment is not of expansion but of confining, infringement of his liberty his ‘unhoused free condition’ are ‘put into circumscription’ (I (ii), 26-27).

‘House’ for him does not mean celebration or sharing but confinement and control. The very statement of him ‘My life upon her faith’ establish the fact that Desdemona has become his world, a centre point of all events and activities; that is why Othello is provoked by Iago’s insinuations about Desdemona by renouncing his profession. Othello is a soldier, for him war

and military does not arouse or affect carnage, chaos or destruction but military regimen he thinks, restores order and transparency.

A.D. Nuttall is right to say that Iago “Chooses which emotions he will experience ... He decides to be motivated.”(1)

Order and transparency cannot afford compromised identity, as suggested by Iago- a practice in Venetian beauties:

*Iago: In Venice they do let God see the pranks. They dare not show their husband.*  
 (III (iii), 206-207)

Othello wants Desdemona as entirely-chaste, pure, and committed; it may be the reason why he gets seriously infuriated when the handkerchief with spotted strawberries goes missing. When this order of ‘chastity and purity’ is narrated as disturbed, Othello takes upon himself the responsibility to dispense justice. His duty involves *martial* harmony, formal pageantry, imitation of divine judgment. Since order, trust & faith are gone so ‘*Othello’s occupation is gone*’. (III (iii), 61)

Othello’s disintegration of self is the dark side of comedy’s rejection of singleness. Shakespeare explores comic assumption by showing that the desired merging of self and others is in any case beyond imagination. Comedies, especially Shakespearian, combine necessary opposition (male/female) with sympathies in age, background and temperament, in comedy compatibility is arranged by outward signs and look no farther than the formal union and no living together to test and experience love. In *Othello*, tragedy, out of comic arrangement, taps out because of over stressed incompatibility. More than Cinthio’s story, Shakespeare allows black-white combination as well as its opposition weave continually rather parallel into the verbal fabric of *Othello*.

Roderigo comments upon Othello ‘thick lipped’ and Iago’s obscene remarks ‘old black ram topping white ewe’, show the racial prejudice heightened in play.

Comic streak becomes sharp and more noticeable when Iago an envious, insecure man governed by racial prejudice serves as a perverted magician – manipulator cunningly prove his imagination real to Othello. But he works as catalyst who stimulates dormant destructive energy in Othello. Iago say, “*It is engendered*” it means the ‘*monstrous plot of tragedy*’ was carried by him not created by him. Tragedy could be averted, ending could be happy like tragic-comedies, had Othello could really repose faith’ in Desdemona.

Shakespeare discusses in all his work the concept of unity and true love. Even in his sonnets he discusses fidelity, he discusses selfless love to be ultimately single. Even in ‘*The Phoenix and Turtle*’ the phoenix and turtle dove are perfectly united but after death. Shakespeare upholds the idea of annihilation implicit in every perfect union ideal of true love with its sustenance can never be realized on earth. So this idea of completeness after death erupts and propelled in Othello.

In Sonnet – 138, lover speaks about her beloved:

*I do believe her, though I know she lies.()*

This response to the problem of integrity, faith compromised by dependence on another is comic but in *Othello* suspicion eclipse trust, response in tragic.

In Comedies, Shakespeare deliberates upon the coming together of incomplete opposites from certain intellectual distance, issue and misunderstanding resolved either by mature attitude of lovers or by favourable situation or intervention of some agencies of good. *Othello* shaped into tragedy by dominance of contradiction within such a conception – covers impulsive, situation unfavourable and instead of agencies of good, allegory of evil writes the script. Othello

suffers tragedy because of denial of self-sufficiency combined with continued isolation in the self.

The initial situation of comedy in *Othello* does not, as in *Romeo and Juliet* arouse comic expectations. Despite comedy in situation, dialogues and foolish characters no one can deny the fact that *Othello* is a tragic play with tragic action and situation perfectly blended and it is pointless, needless to separate them.

In *Othello*, the seeds of tragedy are sown in incompatibility of marriage, simmering anger and vindictiveness of Iago; the rather neat comic pattern, glossing over the vulnerabilities and ambiguities in love of couple, at every opportune time disposes of the implacable energy of Iago, the villain. Tragedy intensifies because it is painful to see the power and beauty of love go waste so tragically.

Vulnerability of love has been a dominant theme in Shakespearian Italian tragedies; love threatened from outside in *Romeo and Juliet* and from inside in other Italian tragedy i.e. *Othello*. In both the romantic principles are presented with considerable comic distancing and deflation.

To be more particular, it can be suggested that in *Othello*, the mismatch of couple is humourly, ludicrously portrayed but cunningly protested, manipulated and dragged to tragedy. All dialogues of Iago hint at the fact that he was inherently against this pious relationship or makes best of his efforts to disgrace this noble moor as an '*obscurely motivated villain*' (36 Susan)

#### **Citation:**

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