Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 3, January 2015
Pp. 92-98

'Identity' and 'Culture' as Postcolonial Issues in Shakespeare's *Othello*

*–Sandeep Kumar Dubey**

Abstract

The Identity and Culture are very important issues in Postcolonial studies. In Shakespeare's play *Othello* it seems that Othello tries hard to be accepted in his host country as a native Venetian but he is always excluded. Being a black in a white society, he suffers from identity crisis. Moreover, he suffers from alienation too. His identity in Venice is completely vague. He thinks himself to be an insider to Venice but he is perceived by the Venetians as an outsider who is black in colour. Culture is another important postcolonial issue in *Othello*. In the play, a marked contrast has been shown between the Western Venice and the Eastern world, where Othello belongs to. It seems that Othello, being a cultural "other", neither can understand Venetian culture nor can adjust to it and so the tragedy happens.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Identity, Culture, Race, Black.

A very important postcolonial issue in the play *Othello* is the issue of identity. Othello is an outsider to Venice. His identity is always in question. It is ambiguous. He thinks himself to be a Venetian whereas the racist characters of the play believe that he is an alien in Venice. His condition, in reality is that of a very confused person.

In *Othello,* we can compare Othello's situation in Venice, with a migrant who has settled in a new country away from his own native country. About the condition of migrants, John MacLeod mentions, "Migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values. This can have consequences for the ways in which others may or may not make migrants feel 'at home' on arrival in a new place"(211-12).

About the condition of the migrants, he further writes, "The dominant discourses of 'race', ethnicity and gender may function to exclude them from being recognised as part of the nation's people. Migrants may well live in new places, but they can be

* *Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mangala Devi Smarak Degree College, Masika, Naini, Allahabad, UP.*

deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home. Instead, their home is seen to exist elsewhere, back across the border" (212). Migrants live, "'in-between' different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place" (214). Othello feels devoid of the 'rightful' claims to belong, Othello's, "grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of routes" (215).

In the course of the play, we see that Othello has been treated as racial 'other' in Venice by some racist white men who think that Othello is an alien in Venice. They think that he does not belong there. They always marginalise him as an inferior human being. One of the effects of racist ideologies is to produce a sense of national identity gained through the exclusion and denigration of others, as Balibar points out:

> racism always tends to operate in an inverted fashion . . . the racial cultural identity of 'true nationals' remains invisible, but it can be inferred (and is ensured) a contrario by the alleged, quasi-hallucinatory visibility of 'false nationals': the Jews, 'wogs', immigrants, 'Pakis, natives, Blacks. (qtd. in McLeod 112)

In the play, we see that Othello tries hard to be accepted in his host country as a native Venetian but he is always excluded.Othello's identity in Venice depends on his good reputation. He is a black man in a white society and if he wants respect and recognition in his host country, he has to be extraordinarily good, noble and worthy. Thus, we see in the entire course of the play, that Othello is over conscious of his reputation as that is the only way to create an identity in Venetian society, for him.

At the very beginning of the play, when Iago warns Othello against the dangers that Othello may have to face from Brabantio, by eloping with Desdemona; Othello seems confident, and says to Iago:

> Let him do his spite;
> 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 honour,
> I shall provulgate ¯ 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 reach'd; . . . (I, ii.17-24)

Othello seems to be confident of his reputation and so he does not fear any danger.

On Iago's suggestion to hide himself from Brabantio and his companions, Othello says:

> Not I, I must be found:
> My parts, my title, and my perfect soul,
> Shall manifest me rightly: . . . (I, ii. 30-32)

It is obvious that Othello thinks himself to be equal to any Venetian. This confidence is based on the good reputation that he has acquired in Venice. It is his worthiness and

competence as a general that generates respect and recognition for him in the eyes of the Venetians. It is due to his worth as a great general that the Duke asks him to go to Cyprus to handle the threat imposed by the Turks.

However, despite his good qualities, Othello unconsciously seems to be conscious of his racial "otherness". He seems to be conscious of his blackness. On some occasions in the play, we see him giving explanations that he is not like an Orientally stereotyped black man. On the issue of giving permission to Desdemona to go to Cyprus with him, Othello says to the Duke:

> Your voices, Lords: Beseech you, let her will
> Have a free way; I therefore beg it not
> To please the palate of my appetite,
> Nor to comply with heat, the young affects
> In my defunct, and proper satisfaction,
> But to be tree and bounteous of her mind;
> And heaven defend your good souls that you think
> I will your serious and great business scant,
> For she is with me; . . . no, when light-wing'd toys,
> And feather's Cupid, foils with wanton dullness
> My speculative and active instruments,
> That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
> Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
> And all indign and base adversities
> Make head against my reputation! (I, iii. 260-274)

Here, we see that Othello seems to be conscious of his blackness. He seems to fear that the Duke- and Senators may think that he is a lascivious moor who wants to enjoy sexual union with Desdemona on his trip to Cyprus. Commenting on this speech of Othello, Victor L. Cahn writes , "We cannot be certain if he wants to emphasize the spiritual qualities of their relationship or whether he downplays the physical aspect of the marriage to avoid offending anyone. In either case, we may assume that he is conscious of the racial difference between himself and Desdemona" (111). He further writes, "as a black man alone in a white society, Othello is self-conscious" (111).

Commenting on Othello's identity in Venice Victor L. Cahn mentions, "the early insults from Brabantio clarify that Othello's skin colour and background make him an alien in Venice. Consequently when Iago applies pressure, Othello is isolated, with no one to trust. He is therefore intensely vulnerable to hints of fallibility or weakness, and when he becomes suspicious of Desdemona, he can only turn his self-doubt inward, where it is intensified by an unspoken estrangement from the white environment" (111).

Thus, we see that Othello, being a black in a white society, suffers from identity crisis. Moreover, he suffers from alienation too. His identity in Venice is completely vague. He thinks himself to be an insider to Venice but he is perceived by the Venetians as an outsider who is black in color. He thinks himself to be a Christianized Venetian but he is made to realise that he is an African heathen. There seems to be only one way for his identity formation and that is his reputation. This is the reason, why he always

remains over-conscious for his reputation. His reputation is the only thing through which he can resist the racist attacks on his psyche, by the Eurocentric white Venetians. And when his reputation seems to be spoiled by Desdemona's alleged adultery with Cassio, he is shattered. His entire identity collapses.

Othello says to Iago:

> . . . O now for ever
> Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content:
> Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
> That makes ambition virtue: O farewell,
> Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
> The spirit - stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife;
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, Pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And, O ye mortal engines, whose wise throats
> The immortal Jove's great clamour counterfeit;
> Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone! (III, iii. 353-363)

Here, we see that Othello thinks that by making him a cuckold, Desdemona has spoiled his reputation that he had made through his heroism, bravery and his nobility of character, in the white Venetian society. In utter frustration, he says to Iago:

> . . . my name, that was fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black
> As mine own face: . . . (III, iii. 392-394)

Here, Othello seems to believe that by being unfaithful, Desdemona has blackened his name which was as fresh and spotless, earlier, as Diana's visage.

Othello thinks that due to him wife's adultery with Cassio, his identity in the Venetian society has declined to the zero. He thinks that, from "brave", "valiant" and "warlike Othello", he has now become, "a horned man, a monster and a beast." His entire identity has been changed. It has been degraded. Earlier, he was given respect and recognition in Venice; now he will be mocked at, as he has become a cuckold.

The identity crisis of Othello, is the identity crisis of a black man in a white society and it is created by a white woman. It has racial dimensions in it.

In Act V, sc. ii, Othello kills Desdemona and tries to justify his act as an act of honour-killing. Lodovico, who is present there expresses his shock and asks Othello what should be said to him? Othello says to him:

> Why, anything,
> An honourable murderer, if you will (V, ii. 294-295)

Here, Othello thinks himself to be an honourable murderer who has avenged for his lost reputation. He has killed Desdemona, a white woman, who, he thinks, had deserted him due to his blackness and had shifted her love to Cassio, a white man. He has avenged for his lost identity.

In Act v, sc.ii, when Lodovico informs Othello that he is relieved of his authority and his command, Othello says to him:

> Soft you, a word or two:
> I have done the state some service, and they know't;
> Nor more of that: I pray you in your letters,
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down ought in malice; then must you speak
> Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well:
> Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
> Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
> Richer than all his tribe: of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unused to the melting mood,
> Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinal gum; set you down this,
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian, and tradue'd the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him thus. (V, ii. 339-357)

Othello fears that Lodovico and Gratiano can defame him in Venice. They can do that due to the malice that they may bear for him as he, a black man, has killed a white woman, who belongs to their own race. Othello once again seems to be conscious of his blackness. About this colour-consciousness of Othello, Ania Loomba writes, "Not just Iago and Brabantio, but Othello himself makes many references to his blackness and status as outsider" (150).

Othello does not want that his good name in Venice, that he has made, while doing the state "some-service", should be spoiled by their biased report regarding Desdemona's murder. Othello repents for the murder of his wife. But he says that he killed Desdemona under unavoidable circumstances which were created due to his identity crisis. Finally, Othello kills himself, too.

Thus, we see that Othello identifies himself as a Turk, who has traduced the state for, by lapsing into barbarism, he has betrayed all the values of Venice. He is now both Venetian and Turk. Whereas he once defended the honour of Venice and punished the offending Turk, now, as a Venetian, he punishes the dishonour which the Turk in him has inflected on the Venetian in him. He repudiates the Othello who murdered Desdemona and identifies himself with the Othello who acted as a loyal servant of the state of Venice. The image of himself he leaves to the world is the image of a Christian warrior, defending the values of Christian civilisation and affirming the values he has betrayed.

Commenting on Othello's consciousness of his identity, Stephen Greenblatt writes that Othello's, "identity depends upon a constant performance, as we have seen, of

his story, a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture"(245).

Thus, we see that in the entire course of the play, Othello seems to fight for his identity.

Culture is another important postcolonial issue in *Othello*. In the play, a marked contrast has been shown between the Western Venice and the Eastern world, where Othello belongs to. Venice is shown as a place of order, law and good government contrary to the East which is considered lacking in these civilised things.

In the first scene of the play, Iago and Roderigo rouse Brabantio, Desdemona's father and inform him that his house has been "robbed" ¯ an ambiguous term which could refer to his goods, although it actually refers to his daughter. Brabantio is incredulous. He expresses his incredulity in interesting terms: "What, tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice, My house is not a grange" (I.i. 105-106). He takes the security and stability of Venice for granted. Such things do not happen in his well-ordered world.

When Brabantio discovers that he has indeed been "robbed", that his daughter Desdemona has married Othello, he goes straight to the Duke to denounce Othello. "For if such actions may have passage free", he says, "Bond-slaves, and pagans, shall our statesmenbe" (I.ii. 98-99). In other words, if Othello were allowed to get away with his actions, Venice would lose all that distinguishes it as a civilised city and would become as barbarous as pagan countries such as Turkey. Brabantio has a very strong sense of the difference between the way a Venetian should behave and the way a Turk behaves. I think that one of his functions in the play is to define the values which are associated with life in Venice - order, law and good government.

During the course of the play, we see that difference has been made between the Christian religion of Venice and the heathen. Christian religion is shown as superior to the heathen religion. Victor L. Cahn writes, "The contrast between Christian and heathen resounds during the play"(106). This attitude of the Venetians shows their Eurocentric mentality. Moreover, throughout the play the threat of the Turkish invaders in shown by the Venetians as, "the invasion of barbarism into civilization" (Cahn 109). This mentality of the Venetians shows their colonial attitude.

In the play we see that Othello comes from a different cultural background. Probably, he belongs to Africa. Though he has converted to Christianity, unconsciously he remains deeply rooted within his African culture.

Desdemona's act of losing the handkerchief and her indifference towards its significance shows that she does not understand the cultural roots of Othello. Thus, it shows her lack of understanding for her husband, who is from a different cultural background. Moreover, Desdemona's losing the handkerchief, becomes a proof of Iago's suggestions that she is a false and characterless woman. For Othello, she becomes the stereotypical example of Venetian women who have been described in the play by Iago as characterless women.

About the Venetian Women Iago says:

> . . . I know our country disposition well;
> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
> Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.(III, iii. 205-208)

Whatever Iago says to Othello about Venetian women's morality, Othello credulously believes. It seems that "he is not experienced in a cosmopolitan social setting, and his lack of sophistication proves part of his downfall"(Cahn 108). About Othello's understanding of Venetian culture and her women's morality, A.C. Bradley writes, "he has little experience of the corrupt products of civilised life, and is ignorant of European women"(190). He further says that, "he is totally ignorant of the thoughts and the customary morality of Venetian women"(193).

Thus, it seems that Othello being a cultural "other" neither can understand Venetian women's culture nor can adjust to it and so the tragedy happens. While analyzing the play in postcolonial light it is found that the issues of Identity and Culture prove to be of great significance. These issues play very decisive roles in the lives of Othello and Desdemona, as well.

Works Cited

- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy.* New Delhi: Atlantic, (rpt.) 2008. Print
- Cahn, Victor L. *Shakespeare The Playwright*. Westport: Praeger, 1996, Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. "Local-manufacture made-in-India Othello fellows": Issues of race, hybridity and location in post-colonial Shakespeares", *Post-colonial Shakespeares.* eds. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin. London & New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism.* Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.
- Newman, Karen. "Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*", *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. Emma Smith. London: Blackwell, 2004, Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello.* Ed. Ridley, M.R. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

❑❑❑