

Aspects of a Shakespearean tragedy in Othello

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Abstract: *Elizabethan era was an iconic time period which produced different genres of work, out of which 'tragedy' stands out prominently. It is, usually, said to be a tale of suffering, stirring pity and dread in the spectators, leading to catharsis- purgation of emotions. This concept was largely influenced by Aristotle's concept of tragedy. This paper aims to delve into the elements that lead to tragedy in the famous Shakespearean tragic play- 'Othello' as per the fundamentals of the essay - "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy" written by A.C Bradley, an eminent literary scholar best known for his work on Shakespeare.*

Key Words: *Tragedy, Othello, Shakespeare, Suffering, Tragic flaw, Catharsis, Fate, Misfortune.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), an eminent playwright, was a product of the Elizabethan era (1558-1603),- a period in office of Queen Elizabeth I in England, followed by Jacobean era ,under James I, in 1603.Shakespeare lived, produced his works at this time. Elizabethan era was represented as the zenith of English renaissance period, between early 16th - 17th century, during which England experienced Protestant reformation after repulsion of Spanish Armada, Wars of the Roses; outbreak of Bubonic plague - Black Death; revival of music, theatre, art and literature of ancient Greece and Rome .Besides Shakespeare, some other seminal writers of the time were Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, John Webster, Christopher Marlowe .The production of these playwrights were staged in the English renaissance theatre in London(the globe). Common genres of this period included historic, comic, and tragic plays.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Tragedy, as a genre is embedded in Greek origin, essentially in the Greek dramas of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles .In primeval times, 'tragedy' meant 'goat song' (Greek: *tragōidia*)or might have been related to a calamity leading to huge loss of the protagonist. In general, tragedy is a tale of suffering, stirring pity and dread in the spectators, leading to catharsis- purgation of emotions. In 'Poetics', Aristotle classifies tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself..." Elizabethan tragedy arose out of a confluence of a roman playwright, Seneca and renaissance tragedy - where the tragic mistake of the protagonist causes his fall, both of which were influenced by Aristotle's concept of tragedy. A.C Bradley's essay "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy", advocates that a Shakespearean tragedy, "may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate. But it is clearly much more than this..." Indeed, it is much more than just a calamity leading to death, as merely a mishap cannot direct the dishonor and defeat of a protagonist, but his own actions, follies, circumstances, chance etc. also account for his ruin, thus providing the essence of the plot. Further on, these other aspects of a Shakespearean tragedy, as integrated in "Othello"- one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, will be discovered in this paper.

3. Discussion of Shakespeare's tragedies:

Shakespeare's tragedies are an outcome of the initial 16th century tragedies of medieval verse, which precede the verse details of suffering, calamity, fatality etc. They emphasize on the fact that death and agony are inevitable for all alike, as a roman critic, Aelius Donatus uttered, "The moral of tragedy is that life should be rejected". Shakespeare contributed remarkably to the art of tragedy during different phases of his vocation, with plays like Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth etc., among which the last four were his major tragedies. The structure of a Shakespearean tragedy consists of five acts; division of the tragic plot into three parts - setting forth the situation (exposition), out of which the conflict arises and develops, until it culminates into a catastrophe, in the concluding stages.

A Shakespearean tragedy is an account of suffering of an individual- central ,greater than life figure, often someone of 'high degree' like kings, princes or leaders of the state like Brutus, Antony, leading to his death (ruin).The tragic protagonist, is eminently placed within the society, noticeable for his diverse qualities and virtues. His falls from a high level and its consequences on his society are clearly portrayed. In Shakespeare's play "Othello", the tragic protagonist is Othello, the moor - a powerful, martially competent General of the Republic of Venice. He is a man of

great repute, as he is revered by the populace of Venice and is mindful of his high social stature. For instance, in Act I, Scene III, the Duke of Venice and his council request that he be appointed the governor of Cyprus so as to heroically defend the island from the Turkish fleet. His ability as a General is acknowledged by the Duke:

“The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus: Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you...” (1.3.221-23)

Othello is of “a free and open nature too”, as Iago remarks (1.3.397). Also, he is accustomed to hardships of military life, is endowed with the gift of poetic speech as we see him uttering “keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” (1.2.58-59), he loves his “soul’s joy”, Desdemona. Even at the end, in act V scene II when Lodovico says that his power is taken off, as Cassio rules in Cyprus, we learn that Othello is a heroic, determined gentleman as he tells his prisoners, “I have done the state some service, and they know’t.” (5.2.340)

The story depicts a disturbed phase of the protagonist’s life which precedes and culminates in his tragic end, and this unforeseen suffering is compared to prior bliss. “Othello” seems to meet this prerequisite as Othello has a successful career as a brave warrior, General of Venice, earns the gratitude of Venice, and a beautiful, loving wife, Desdemona. But all is shattered suddenly because of the “motiveless malignity” of the wicked hypocrite - Iago, as he declares “I am not what I am” (1.1.65). His maneuverings advances Othello’s ruin, as he hates the Moor for not considering him for the post of lieutenant and wants to seek revenge, destroy others in his lust for power, recognition. He traps, exploits innocent people like Roderigo, Desdemona, Cassio, Emilia in his trickery with falsehood and misinformation, thus turning Othello against them. Othello is deceived by Iago, becomes a victim of his scheming and is consequently ruined: “Why he hath thus ensnar’d my soul and body?” (5.2.303)

The suffering and tragic waste of the protagonist is not just confined to himself but widens across others too. In “Othello” the most evident sufferer of Othello’s fall is his wife, Desdemona and some other innocents also. He casts her off for the sake of justice and calls himself “an honourable murderer, if you will: / for nought did I in hate, but all in honour.” (5.2.295-96). Othello is enraged with Cassio because of suspicion of his adultery with Desdemona. Emilia is seen in a gloomy state after losing her righteous mistress and, even Iago falls prey to Othello’s wrath, when the Moor demands an “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity “No, Iago, / I’ll see before I doubt...” (3.3.193-94), “Give me a living reason, that she’s disloyal” (3.3.415). Likewise, his fate had an effect on the safety, interests of Venice, which had lost a great General, a protection against the rival forces. He “threw a pearl away” (Desdemona) killing himself, “to die upon a kiss”. (5.2.360). Moreover, the transparency, purity of Desdemona is such, that she is not able to understand the full import of his actions, as she utters “I understand a fury in your words, / but not the words” (4.2.32-33). Hence, the ending of a tragedy depicts evil expelled at the cost of good.

The misfortune, in “Othello”, advances primarily from “hamartia” –errors, miscalculations of men, which shape their destiny. The tragic protagonist tends to proceed, behave in a particular way- a “tragic flaw” in his character, owing which he descends from greatness. Essentially, Othello’s doom is due to initiation of his own actions and flaws, besides their exploitation by Iago. Othello is on the trail of jealousy, suspicion, initial faith in Desdemona, as he says “my life upon her faith” (1.3.294) and “one not easily jealous, but being wrought/Perplex’d in the extreme” (5.2.346-47). Although Iago is often recognized for bringing about the Moor’s downfall, it could be asserted that primarily, Othello’s actions were responsible for it - doubting Desdemona, appointing Cassio as his lieutenant and not considering Iago for the post. Moreover, Desdemona’s doom is correlated to the actions of Othello. Emilia -who steals her handkerchief, exposes Iago, later dies at his hands, Roderigo is killed, and Cassio loses his service and Othello’s compassion due to Iago’s cruel deception. Undeniably, Iago is also doomed shortly, because of the true revelation by Emilia. Thus, ‘character is destiny’ is true to Shakespearean tragedy, as Bradley articulates that the centre of a tragedy lies “in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.” Also a complete overturn of fortune is an evident ending, when, to save his honour, he stabs himself.

Furthermore, external and internal conflict is necessary in developing the action. In “Othello”, the external conflict is amongst Othello, Desdemona, Cassio as opposed to Iago, Roderigo. Othello, unaware of their genuineness, often assume them to be the contrary of what they are. The actual argument –internal, through which the soul of protagonist is laid before us, is due to different forces struggling in Othello’s mind. He is torn within himself as his jealousy and temper, prompted by Iago, as he says to Othello “O, beware jealousy...green-ey’d monster” (3.3.169-70), is constantly clashing with his reasoning faculties, honour and love for Desdemona. At one instant- Act IV scene I, Othello describes Desdemona “...a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!” (4.1.174-75) and at another he says “And let her rot, and perish, and be damned to-night, / for she shall not live: no, my heart is turn’d to stone” (4.1.177-78). It arouses emotions of sympathy and terror in the spectators as they could relate to his natural emotions of jealousy, suspicion in love, as such feelings, pertaining to our loved ones come naturally to all. It may also be noted that before the eternal ruin, the protagonist realizes, discovers his mistakes – “anagnorisis”, recovers some of his nobleness, which brings him relief in death. Othello is seen committing suicide after discovering the horrifying truth of the handkerchief and the “motiveless malignity” of Iago at the same time.

Shakespearean tragedy allows 'chance' or 'accident' to advance the plot of the play. In "Othello", a prominent accident occurs in Act III, Scene III when Desdemona coincidentally drops her "too little" napkin while trying to "bind it hard" on Othello's aching forehead and subsequently it is picked up by Emilia as she states "I am glad I have found this napkin,/
This was her first remembrance from the Moor."(3.3.294-95)

She gives it to her "wayward husband" Iago "to please his fantasy", oblivious of his stratagem and manipulation, which affected all. Meanwhile, Cassio arrives while Othello was about to faint, therefore Iago lodges her napkin secretly in Cassio's room. He tricks Othello

"...such a handkerchief—

I am sure it was your wife's—did I to-day

See Cassio wipe his beard with."(3.3.444-46)

A soliloquy is an important aspect whereby, a multifaceted, complicated character expresses his thoughts, motives, alone on stage, which serves to provide information to the audience and reveals his true character. Throughout "Othello", one observes a major portion of soliloquies attributed to the cunning Iago, who is seen talking of hatred and vengeance on Othello "to get this place...a double knavery" (1.3.391-92), putting the Moor "into a jealousy so strong/ that judgement cannot cure..." (2.1.296-97) by deceiving and exploiting Roderigo as an instrument to carry out his plans; contempt for Cassio who has "a daily beauty in his life/ That makes me ugly" etc.(5.1. 19-20) Thus he unravels the storyline and his designs through his soliloquies.

Shakespearean tragedies incorporate "abnormal conditions of mind" like madness, hallucination, sleepwalking. In "Othello" one notices that Iago's deluded vision of Desdemona lying with Cassio, unquestionably seems to have made Othello insane, insecure. Shakespeare illustrates Othello's state of mind in Act IV, Scene I, wherein the Moor falls into a trance, as Iago expresses to Cassio, "My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy,/
This is his second fit. He had one yesterday."(4.1.50-51)

He even warned him that Othello could break out to "savage madness."

The supernatural element is manifest in his tragedies, seen chiefly in "Macbeth" or "Hamlet", but noticeable in "Othello" too. In Act I, Scene III, Brabantio blames Othello of using magic spells to enchant Desdemona.

She is abus'd, stol'n from me and corrupted,
By spells and medicines, bought of mountebanks,
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60-64)

This blame gives Desdemona a chance to convince others that her love for Othello is genuine and not based on spells. He, too, loved her truly and, had he really enchanted Desdemona, then his ruin would not have been so tragic, as there would have been no true fondness and ensuing concern between the two. The supernatural element reappears in Act III, Scene IV, where Othello tells Desdemona that the handkerchief he gave her was mystifying: "'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it" (3.4.67) and,

That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love [...] (3.4.54-58)

Here, Othello might be invoking guilt of losing the handkerchief in Desdemona, thus making the situation dreadful, mystifying.

The clash amidst "good" and "evil" resulting in agony is another aspect depicted here. The key basis of suffering is evil- negative and destructive in every case. Though it ultimately annihilates itself, those who resist and triumph over it (good) get no benefits per se. As for Othello, it is a greater victory - at the cost of Desdemona, his blemished career and status – a total "waste" of the good. Yet if Iago's scheming had been disallowed before Desdemona's death, "Othello" would not have been a tragedy. Dwelling upon this element of Shakespearean tragedy, Edward Dowden says, "Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or restoration of the soul, and the life of Man. In other words, its subject is the struggle of good and evil in the world."

Thus, an "impression of waste" comes into view in Shakespeare's tragedies. At the closing stages of "Othello", we encounter that Othello, who had been an enormous figure in society, is doomed; dragging along the dreadful fate of the virtuous ones - Emilia, Desdemona, Roderigo; and Cassio unnecessarily. But one experiences mercy for Iago, whose sharp evil skill and substantial intellectual grasp of human nature were wiped out in such a trivial endeavour. The good and virtuous ones are trampled upon, as we see Desdemona's torment is more appalling than she deserves. In poetic justice "prosperity and adversity are distributed in proportion to the merits of the agents" (Bradley). At the time of death, Desdemona, takes upon herself all the blame of her "guiltless death" saying "Nobody; I myself. Farewell" (5.2.125). Thus no poetic, but partial justice is done, because it involves the waste of much that is good, as virtue is not rewarded but evil is constantly destroyed.

4. CONCLUSION:

Thus, one concludes that tragedy occurs to everybody at some point of time in their lives and consequently affects us when we perceive it on the stage or while reading a play, hence enabling us to identify with the protagonist's sufferings (an agent of his own despair) by revealing tragic factors, inspiring pity, grief, terror, sympathy and purging us of emotions. His effort to construct his own social standing, character through experience, ability, and self discovery is outlined. Shakespearean tragedies also consider other important aspects such as suffering, strengths and weaknesses, wielding power in society, emotions, gullibility of the characters like Othello who easily took the bait from Iago and acted accordingly. These aspects, indeed, shape a tragedy as is described above. At the end, full justice should be meted out to the good and they should not be tormented besides the wicked. The plot is essential but characters are equally important and not secondary as Aristotle states "there may be one without character" as they make a tragedy work. Although "Othello" nearly follows the aspects of a Shakespearean tragedy but violates the unity of time and place as the action is not confined to a single day and is not concentrated at one place but keeps shifting from Venice to Cyprus. Therefore, through the mentioned characteristics as examined in "Othello", one forms an idea of Shakespeare's tragic perception, outlook of human plight.

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