

Shakespeare's Othello and the Challenges of Multiculturalism

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Abstract

Though Shakespeare is an Elizabethan playwright, his plays still resonate with our contemporary world. The parallels between Othello and the failure of intercultural communication and integration of Muslim Diaspora in western countries are strikingly identical. This paper explores how and why in Shakespeare's time and ours a multicultural mindset and culture have not succeeded to eradicate ethnocentrism, stereotype and fanaticism. Thus conflict, violence and misunderstanding between individuals belonging to different cultural and religious communities are still ravaging multicultural societies. It also aims to promote a humanistic perception of the other that celebrates difference and diversity rather than sameness and uniformity.

Keywords: diversity, ethnocentrism, intercultural communication, multiculturalism, stereotype

Shakespeare is Still Our Contemporary

Four hundred years after the death of the bard, his work is still vibrant, inspiring and generating hot debates in academia, not only in the British island where he was born, but on a global level. No doubt, Ben Jonson's famous words of praise that Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time" are confirmed today in different cultural and political global contexts. Shakespeare is performed in Japan, taught in Iran, translated into Arabic, contested in Israel for anti-Semitic reasons, glorified in Nazi Germany, challenged by feminist and black readers, celebrated by some purist conservative English critics, filmed with hip hop characters, played by Syrian combatants in Homs and watched via Skype by refugees in Amman. The list of contexts and appropriations could be longer than that if one tried to provide all the situations where Shakespeare's texts are adapted to local needs. Thus it would be wiser to simply adopt Kott's (1965) claim that "Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see" (p. 5).

What Kott (1965) means by "Shakespeare our contemporary" is definitely opposing how, for example, Victorians glorified Shakespeare as a genius exploring the immutable, static and atemporal human nature. Such a definition of human nature is now challenged by modern criticism and new trends of thought. For instance, the feminists and the postcolonial critics have deconstructed many of Shakespeare's plays because deemed pro patriarchy and colonialism (Elsom, 1989). What Kott refers to when he employs the word "contemporary" is how modern contexts and cultures have modified our perception of Shakespeare. The text does not change but we change its meaning:

When we use this interesting little cliché, Shakespeare our Contemporary, we do not mean it in this sense. We mean that Shakespeare has become a contemporary to our changing times and that these times have affected our perception of Shakespeare. (Kott, 1989, p.12)

The fascinating power of the Shakespearean text lies in its multi-focal viewpoint and adaptability. The text has the exceptional ability and flexibility to mirror our own concerns regardless of time and place. Esslin (1989) underlined this quality:

That is one of the strengths of Shakespeare. His plays provide a kind of multi-focal viewpoint. You can look at the play as it was written. You can treat it as a historical document. You can consider what it means to you as an expression of continuing human emotions and you can look at it again as a myth which lives through its ability to be modified. (Elsom, 1989, p. 26)

One should also acknowledge that such a dynamics is not attributed solely to the text itself; our readings and interpretations enrich, appropriate and constantly modify the meaning of the plays. Shakespeare is endlessly buried and born again depending on the context and ideology where his work is situated. "The Victorians had an answer. Shakespeare was a genius; his plays depicted human nature in universal situations; and he inscribed timeless truths in immortal poetry" (Belsey, 2007, p. 3). Other critics claim that we bring to Shakespeare the meaning we want to impose on him. "We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values" (Taylor, 1990, p. 410-411). Indeed, Shakespeare

exemplifies at best Barthes' (1967) "the Death of the Author" and the birth of the reader who constantly revives, interprets and appropriates the text from different angles to serve our own needs and expectations. Every generation and every people have the right and duty to reappropriate Shakespeare in a manner that fits in with their new contexts and cultural values. Seen from this perspective, the reader is empowered to become an active agent and a postmodern producer of meaning independently from any "master narratives" favored by a certain class or ideology:

every act of interpretation can be seen as an act of appropriation-making sense of a literary artifact by fitting it into our own parameters. The literary work thus becomes ours; we possess it by reinventing it as surely as if we had secured its physical presence by force. (Marsden, 1991, p.1)

Still one should bear in mind Eco's *The Limits of Interpretation* to acknowledge that if the Shakespearean text allows multiple readings it should not, for example, today favor racist, anti-Semitic and misogynic discourse. *The Merchant of Venice* was once used to legitimize anti-Semitic ideology in Hitler's Germany; today it should be reinterpreted to serve tolerance and respect of the religious other. Sinfield claims that "He [Shakespeare] has been appropriated for certain practices and attitudes, and can be appropriated for others" (Sinfield, 1994, p. 137). The new interpretation of Shakespeare should be situated in a global, postmodern and humanistic world view favoring cross-cultural dialogue and communication between people. The bard should no longer be utilized to justify colonialism (*The Tempest*), misogyny (*The Taming of the Shrew*), racism (*Othello*), absolute rule (*King Lear*), anti-Semitism (*The Merchant of Venice*), etc. A Shakespearean text should be read in a dialectical manner so as to explore the past in the light of the present and to map a better future:

if the play does wholly or partly succeed in calling into question both its own and the present phase of our patriarchal class society, to what degree and in what respects can the text be seen to point towards the possibility of more desirable ways of organizing human life and relationships, beyond the horizon of the age in which it was written and even of our time too? (Kiernan, 1989, p. 1)

As a global and Arab reader and teacher of Shakespeare in a Moroccan university, Shakespeare is our contemporary for many possible parallels mentioned above. But if a play speaks to us and addresses some of our contemporary concerns, it is undoubtedly *Othello* which does that at best. In *Othello*, Shakespeare tackles intercultural issues between a Moorish character and the Venetian/European society. The power of this play lies in its ability to address multiple questions related to diversity and multiculturalism in a manner that is reflective of contemporary challenges facing Arab immigrants and Diaspora. Thus *Othello* could be defined as a dramatization of the rise of fanaticism, of Islamophobia, the failure of cultural dialogue, the limits of multiculturalism, the persistence of ethnocentrism and racism, among others. The play could also be addressing the failure of intercultural communication and integration of Arabs in the European society today, the obstacles and borders facing diasporic individuals in multicultural contexts, the violence generated by hate culture, and the problems of identity crisis that some individuals may face when culturally uprooted and forced to live in dehumanizing conditions.

The main objective of this paper is to explore and analyze Shakespeare's *Othello* from this perspective because it is the play that explicitly addresses intercultural issues, interethnic marriages, assimilation and integration. These issues are still pertinent today because the cultural divide between the two sides of the Mediterranean has not been bridged and because the societal and political barriers have not been overcome. Worse, Arab and Muslim individuals are systematically demonized and vilified across the Atlantic as demonstrated in the bulky work of Shaheen (2009).

Othello and the Multicultural Context

It should be stressed from the outset that Shakespeare's England was not a multicultural society as we would qualify, for example, England or Canada today. Therefore, if a parallel is established between Othello and the modern multicultural society, it is justified by the above theoretical possibilities of appropriation as well as the need to learn lessons from the errors of the past in order to build an open and diverse society celebrating difference and commonalities

Kiernan (1989) claims that "the tragedy arises first of all from the fact that Othello is black, and thus racially and culturally an alien -- an intensely vulnerable alien -- within a hierarchical predatory and therefore not yet fully human society" (p. 52). Historical records confirm that black Africans were hardly common in 17th England. But the Elizabethan age was also characterized by geographic exploration, trade with North African countries, and diplomatic exchanges with the kings of Morocco. Africans were also sold as slaves.¹ Othello's narrative of his tragedy as a captive sold in a slave market confirms this: "Of being taken by the insolent foe; and sold to slavery" (I.iii.37-38). By 1601, Queen Elizabeth decided that the "negars and black moors" should be transported out of the country because they were accused of evil, magic and devilry.

Shakespeare's plays refer to some characters whose blackness is synonym for the hellish and barbarous. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron is a wicked Moor who confesses that: "Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (III.i.206). The King in *Love's Labour's Lost* declares; "Black is the badge of hell" (IV.i.250). In *Othello* the references to blackness as evil and bestial are numerous. Because he is black, Othello is seen as "a Barbary horse", who would generate, when coupling with Desdemona, a "beast with two backs": "your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you will have coursers for cousins, gennets for Germans...your daughter and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs" (I.i.111-117). Such an extremely racist view of the "other" is amplified by the animal imagery used all along the play. Many characters refer to Othello with a language borrowed from the animal world as if to stress the bestial nature of the Moor and to deny him any human qualities. The dichotomy between the animal like Othello and the sophisticated Venice is intended to highlight the superiority of the European race and culture and the barbaric origins of the Moor. In the same vein, Brabantio could not accept or understand how a white delicate Venetian lady could take a black man for a husband; for him it is no doubt the work of magic and sorcery:

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
(If she in chains of magic were not bound)
Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,

So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd
 The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
 Would ever have (to incur a general mock)
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
 Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight. (I.ii.64-71)

Brabantio is even confident that if such an intercultural and interethnic marriage is authorized, the Venetian state and white civilization will collapse. Worse, the country will be ruled by slaves and pagans: "For if such actions may have passage free, Bond-slaves and pagans, shall our statesmen be" (I.iii.98-9). Curiously enough, such a language is identical to left wing political parties in Europe, such as The National Front in France or the Party for Freedom in Netherlands, which constantly demonize the immigrant and the foreigner. Geert Wilders has often campaigned against what he calls the "islamization" of Netherlands. His words in a political meeting in Australia last October 21, 2015 echo those of Brabantio and Iago in so many ways:

You will have millions of people coming to Australia, like we do in Europe, and you will not be able to handle it. You should be a sovereign country that closes your borders to those kinds of immigrants. I believe that one of the biggest diseases in Europe today is cultural relativism, [the belief] that cultures are equal. Well, they are not. People are equal, cultures are not. If you look at the Islamic culture [and] you compare it to, for example, Christianity, Judaism, you see a lot of differences. ²

The words and stereotypes used both in Shakespeare's text or in the declarations of actual extremist European politicians confirm the failure of the multicultural project in Europe, for multiculturalism was conceived as an assimilationist acceptance of the host culture and its values by the immigrant. The latter is expected to lose his identity and passively acquire a new one. Neulip (2009) defines this process as follows:

The individual loses his or her original cultural identity as he or she acquires a new identity in the host culture. During assimilation, the individual takes on the behaviors and language habits and practices the basic norms of the host culture. (p. 378)

To a great extent, Othello's professional success and seeming "integration" in the Venetian society is attributed to his willingness to acquire this new identity and forget his roots and origins. At the same time his tragedy is provoked by the inner divorce between his socially assimilated persona and his real identity that the host society is not willing to accept or recognize:

Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that
 Which heaven has forbid the Ottomites?
 For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl (II.iii.161-163).

His words and attitudes confirm his utter assimilation in the Christian society. He regards Italians as the model of civility and sophisticated manners, while the Turks and Ottomans are mere "barbarous" people. Thus he regards his marriage with Desdemona as the final stage of his

assimilation and a tangible confirmation of the social and cultural symbiosis between the foreign other and the host society.

At first sight, the marital relationship between the Moor and Desdemona might give the impression that intercultural marriage is possible even in ethnocentric societies. Indeed the two have loved each other because of the tales and narratives they used to share. Othello confesses that Desdemona:

Devour up my discourse; which I observing,
Took once a plaint hour, and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart,
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate. (I.iii.150-154)

Such tales seduced Desdemona and allowed her to know the man more and sympathize with his predicament. This confirms that intercultural communication breaks barriers and creates bridges. Desdemona was, therefore, ahead of her time and society. She openly sides up with the Moor in the senate trial scene when she declares that: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252). Unlike all the racial and biased words and thoughts used by the Venetian characters to demonize the Moor, Desdemona is the unique character who can see him beyond race and color. She discovered the fair and gentle person that the ethnocentric and racist Venice fails to do. Kiernan (1989) astutely describes this love relation that defies racial borders:

In loving and marrying each other, Othello and Desdemona instinctively act according to principles of racial equality and sexual freedom which are still not normative, still far from generally accepted and practiced even in our own day, left alone in Shakespeare's...The play's subversive potential resides in its capacity to dramatize the possibility of truly emancipated relations between men and women, beyond the institutionalized inequalities of past and present societies alike. (p. 51)

Shakespeare's strategy, as far as this intercultural marriage is concerned, is double edged. He challenges his audience with characters and situations that demystify stereotypical and racist perceptions. The positive portraits of Othello and Desdemona and their sincere love relation would undoubtedly deconstruct the judgmental and biased attitudes Iago stands for. Seen from this respect, the play adopts both a didactic and humanistic attitude vis-à-vis the audience. Objective readers and spectators of the play are expected to denounce racism. However, Shakespeare would deliberately construct the events in a tragic way, not only for cathartic purposes, but to raise our awareness to the detrimental effects of ethnocentrism on individuals and society. The play ends tragically because the thoughts and values of the society are not yet liberal and flexible enough to tolerate a "black a Moor" as a full citizen with different roots and cultural background. This society is not open enough to embrace interethnic marriage either. By so doing, Shakespeare has deliberately created a devilish Iago to voice "Venetian society's deeply racist and sexist ideology of power. Iago's strategies of fiction-making are based on his acute perception of what constitutes culture's "common sense" (Ganguly, 2012, p. 7). Shakespeare's objective is to challenge those who held such biased attitudes, not only then but

even now. The parallel between the Venetian society and our contemporary contexts is manifest in many similar situations in America during the civil rights movement, the Apartheid in South Africa or today in many European countries.

What the assimilationist model or mindset fails to recognize, both in Shakespeare's society or in the modern one, is that culture and religion are deeply rooted in the lives of the people coming from other origins. Therefore, they cannot abandon them as if it is a free willed choice. Culture and religion shape our social personas as well as our inner identities. Parekh (2006) analyzes this phenomenon as follows:

There are several reasons why the pressure to assimilate does not always succeed. Cultures are deeply woven into the lives of their members to be jettisoned at will. Most of them, further, are embedded in or at least intertwined with religion, and outsiders cannot assimilate into them without changing their religion, which they are often reluctant to do. (p. 198)

The tragic suicide of Othello in a religious like ritual underlines his sudden break with the Christian state he used to serve and identify with and his return to his Islamic identity:

Soft you, a word or two:
I have done the state some service, and they know't
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat and the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. [Stabs himself]. (V.ii.339-356)

Othello commits suicide, though it is forbidden both by Christianity and Islam. In his suicide he recalls certain events and items from his original culture: the sword is from Muslim Spain and the circumcised enemy was a Muslim Turk like him once. Othello now recognizes his Muslim origins and admits that his endeavor to integrate was pointless. Kiernan (1989) analyses this scene as follow:

Othello presents himself both as the servant and instrument of the Venetian state and as the Turk, 'the circumcised dog' whom Venice feels threatened by and whom it despises. He correctly perceives himself, in other words, to have been both the alien victim of Venetian society and the active though unwitting accomplice of its destruction of him. (p. 57)

The parallels between Othello's tragedy, his failure to integrate and contemporary multicultural contexts where the Other is denigrated and marginalized are multiple. Many Muslims living in western societies are torn between their cultural and religious values and the secular practices of the host societies. Many Muslims are otherized because of their religious identity.³ Many Muslims suffer from islamophobia, racism and exclusion.⁴ Paris (2008) is right when he diagnoses the failure of integration of new born Muslims in Europe:

The European Muslim feels a vague national identity with his host country. Given the confusion over the definition of a Frenchman or European, what European values should Muslim immigrants absorb? The second and third generations of Muslims in Europe have largely rejected the traditional ethnic roots of their parents, but have failed to become wholly accepted by the majorities in European states despite their linguistic and cultural education in their host countries. (p. 122)

Such ills cannot be fixed unless the multicultural society creates policies and principles that guarantee a balance between unity and diversity. According to Parekh, such policies are a structure of authority that guarantees the rights of all members, justice and finally a common culture that embraces diversity.⁵

One should also acknowledge that multiculturalism cannot succeed when it is one-sided and static. In a multicultural society, the Muslim Diaspora is also expected to engage in a cultural dialogue with the host society and to build bridges with the other constituents of the society. This entails a break with essentialist and absolute values that this community has not examined from a critical perspective now that they live in a multicultural context. "This requires them [Muslims] to rethink traditional views on their rights and obligations, their relationship to other religions and cultures, and their response to modernity" (Parekh, 2008, p. 123).

When Othello decided to judge and execute Desdemona he did not even allow her to defend her case. Othello believed that he had the right and the duty to kill his "unfaithful" wife because he symbolized religious ethics and morality, while the "immoral" Christian Desdemona stood for lust and infidelity. For him, killing Desdemona is a divine cause, an act of poetic justice that would cleanse her soul and purify her body from the sins she committed: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (V.ii.1). Kott (1965) explains the moral fallacy on which Othello's murder of his wife is based:

Othello kills Desdemona in order to save the moral order, to restore love and faith. He kills Desdemona to be able to forgive her, so that the accounts be settled and the world returned to its equilibrium. Othello does not mumble any more. He desperately wants to save the meaning of life, of his life, perhaps even the meaning of the world. (p. 98)

Othello is extremely confident that killing his wife is a mission he has to carry out not only out of jealousy, but rather out of a religious duty. He insists on the necessity of murder so as to restore chastity, love and all the noble values he used to believe in:

Oth. If you bethink yourself of any crime
 Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
 Solicit for it straight.
 Des. Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?
 Oth. Well, do it, and be brief, I will walk by,
 I would not kill thy unprepared spirit,
 No, heaven forbid, I would not kill thy soul. (V.ii.26-32)

We may read this tragic end as the failure of an intercultural marriage in a society that does not yet tolerate difference and diversity. Indeed Othello and Desdemona have failed to keep their marriage last and prosper for the two belong to two opposite cultures. It is such an opposite belonging that would ruin their love and marital relation and transform it into "the beast with two backs" (I.i.116). The gulf between the two lovers and the hostile societal and cultural contexts were the cause of their tragedy.

Toward a Multicultural Society

The tragic events of the play and their cathartic effect should normally raise our consciousness to the gains of intercultural dialogue in the global and multicultural society we belong to. Shakespeare's *Othello* might serve as a tragic reminder of the loss and conflict ethnocentrism could trigger even in our contemporary society. Biased and racist attitudes vis-à-vis the religious and cultural other that Iago diabolically personifies in the play are still resonating in many thoughts and images in our societies. Iago could be any individual who hates and denigrates Muslims simply because they are different. Equally dangerous are the fanatic discourses and deeds of some "Muslims" who would justify violence in the name of a fundamentalist interpretation of religion. Curiously enough, Othello's words and behavior, in the last act of the play, reminds us of some radicals who impose their one-sided definition of truth and morality on those who are culturally different.

Shakespeare is once again our contemporary as far as the ills of his Elizabethan society and ours are concerned. Islamophobia, racism, fanatic thoughts, violence, among others, are still causing conflict and dividing people. As citizens of the global and multicultural world we are expected to celebrate the humanistic values of his plays, to learn from the tragic errors of his characters, to go beyond the cultural and religious barriers of the rigid societies and characters he explored, to recognize the other, be it a Jewish, a female, a black other, as a citizen of the multicultural community. A multicultural education is the cornerstone of this multicultural mindset for it is based on freedom from ethnocentric prejudices and freedom to learn from and embrace other cultures and perspectives.⁶

Notes

¹ Orientalist painters depicted many scenes of slave markets in different contexts and this visually confirms the historical dimension of the slave trade between African, Arab and European countries.

² Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/oct/21/geert-wilders-tells-australia-to-abandon-multiculturalism-or-end-up-like-the-eunuchs>." on March 17, 2016.

³ The hijab controversy in some Western societies illustrates the opposite views and ideologies between Muslim definition of female identity and the secular one. For more details read Marie Mc Andrew's "The hijab controversy in Western public schools: Contrasting conceptions of ethnicity and ethnic relations" in *Muslim Diaspora. Gender, culture and identity*. Edt, Haideh Moghiss, Routledge, 2006.

⁴ Many European magazines have deliberately satirized Islamic icons and practices. The Danish newspaper Jylands-Posten's cartoons depicted the prophet Mohammed as a terrorist in 2005. Charlie Hebdo caricatured the prophet again in 2015. This was done in the name of freedom of expression but underneath there was also a lack of respect for the religious feelings of the Muslims. ⁵ Parekh, B. (2006). *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶ For more insightful thoughts about the reform of Islamic education in the West, read Ramadan's (2004) *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*, where he explains the whys and wherefores of this urgent reform to facilitate the integration of young Muslims in their global communities.

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