

# The presentation of the Arabic character in Shakespeare's *Othello*

-Dr. Amal Riyadh Kitishat(corresponding author) <sup>1</sup>/ Dr. Mohammad Akram Alzu'bi co-author <sup>2</sup>

1.Head of Department of English language and literature /Al- Balqa Applied university –Ajloun University  
College-Jordan

\*Email:Kitishat@gmail.com

2.An assistant professor in Department of English Language and Literature-. Al- Balqa Applied university –  
Ajloun University College-Jordan/

## Abstract

This study is mainly concerned with the investigation of the word choice that denotes racial significations. The nature of the signs attributed to form at the end a negative picture of the Oriental character. Though the Arabic character, represented by the Moor, acquires noble characteristics; yet the racial treatment of this figure is apparent. Most of his positive personal characters are ignored simply because he is "black". The study investigates the racial treatment of the Arabic character and its complicated implications which reflex the Elizabethan racial prejudice against the Arabs. The study concluded that most of the imagery and signs are of racial and negative implications.

**Keywords:** Drama, Renaissance, racism, the image of Arabs, English literature

## 1- Introduction

Shakespeare draws on the Oriental sources as one of the major sources for his plays. One feature of presenting the Orient is the presentation of the Arabic figures in his plays. Perhaps the most well-known Arabic figure that has ever presented in Shakespeare's plays is Othello "the Moor".

As presented in the play, a racial point of view reflects the European attitude toward the Oriental people in general and the Arabs in particular. Though the Orient is rich in its culture, civilization in addition to the natural wealth, the racial point of view erases any role a major role the former plays in different fields of knowledge, science and translation. It is this racial treatment of the Arabic character, as embodied in Othello's character which this study aims to investigate with a focus on its complicated implications.

## 2-The image of the Arabs in Othello

### 2.1- Racial discrimination.

By presenting Othello as an outsider or a stranger, Othello is converted into a presentation of the image of Oriental characters in general and the Arabs in particular in the Elizabethan audience mind. There are many references to the color; a great emphasis is laid on presenting imagery of darkness versus fairness or light. The choice of words heavily emphasizes the racial origin of Othello "The Moor" as a reminder to the Elizabethan audience that he is an outsider:

There are many references to Othello attending to complex presentation of race and revealing extreme dangers of racial conception and thinking. Racism is usually defined as "views, practices, and actions reflecting the belief that humanity is divided into distinct biological groups called races, and that members of certain race share certain attributes which make that group as a whole less desirable, inferior or superior ( <http://Wikipedia.1>)

Related to the definition of racism is the assumption that we can judge people according to the racial stereotypes, attributed to them. Othello the hero of the play enjoys positive personal characteristics as a military leader, but he is treated differently because he is simply different in race. Though Othello is the protagonist of the play; he is only referred to as "the Moor" which directly recalls a racial reference. Probably most racial references to Othello are reported by Iago and Rodrigo. For example in the first scene Iago uses the color as a reference to Othello; he excludes any other features and focuses on his color, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is upping your unite ewe"(I .i.112).

Moreover, imagery of darkness and light are recurrent through the whole play. The play begins in darkness with a dialogue between Iago and Rodrigo speaking about Othello who is mainly referred to as "the Moor". He is dehumanized, in many situations he is described as an animal, " You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you." (I.i.106-110) This dehumanization of Othello's character is also linked with sexual lasciviousness which marks animals.

The play heightens the racial tension and increases hatred to Othello's character when Iago speaks about the dangers of having sex between humans and animals. This hints the sexual union between Desdemona and Othello who is described as a "beast with two backs". (I.i.112) Even more, there are other associations between

Othello and savagery, vulgarity and barbarism.

Having in mind the Structuralism analysis of the binary opposites, this play is a clear example of such analogy. According to Saussure, words are arranged in pairs where a contradictory relationship links between them. The word to the left of the slash is more important and superior than the other (<http://Britanica.2011.1>). In this light, the treatment of the Arabic character falls in this analogy which is based on the opposition of darkness and light a contrast which is represented in the binary pair of (fair, dark) associations. Desdemona is a representative of fairness, and Othello on the other hand is a representative of darkness. The relation between the main characters is described to be contradictory from the beginning of the play until the end. This contrast between the fair Desdemona and the black Moor summarizes the main theme of the play which is based on contradiction between opposites. According to the Elizabethan audience, the connotation of the word "Moor" has nothing but negative implications. This may reflect the historical and religious hatred of the Christian Elizabethan Society toward Arabs and Muslims:

The word "Moor" inhabits a number of physical attributes which signify notorious qualities that ingrained deeply not only in Elizabethan society, but in the European culture. It occurs five times in the play having different grammatical forms and function. (Jansiz, 2005, 49).

## 2.2- Thematic and historical analysis

The recurrent reference to Othello as the Moor indirectly presents the Renaissance context which affords an "inconsistent" and "vague" contradictory vision of the Arabs and Muslims. (Ibid.) Othello is sometimes described as noble and brave; yet his race is still the major marker of his identity. There are many instances that clarify this point from the text of the play when they addressed Othello as "valiant Moor", "brave Moor" and "noble Moor". The emphasis on the fact that he is a stranger, or as mentioned in the play as a Moor, is apparent. A fact which reveals his being an outsider, a strange member in the Venetian society. All his noble and positive features couldn't convince the Venetian society to accept him away from any racial discrimination. With regard to this point Brabantio hints at this fact when he objects Othello's marriage from his daughter. He says:

So opposite to marriage shunned  
The wealthy, curled darlings of our nations,  
Would ever have 'near a general mock,  
Run from her guard age to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou-to fear, not to delight.(I.ii.67-71)

In "Making more of the Moor", the writer states that there is a contradictory vision of the Moor;" the Moor was characterized simultaneously in contradictly extremes, as noble or monstrous, civil or Savage." (Bartels,1990,434) The heavily emphasis of Othello's darkness implicitly hints his otherness. If the people of Venice represent the self, Othello, on the other hand, represents the other. We can put it in another binary pair "the insider/ the outsider" which parallels the pair "the self / the other, or more direct"( white / black). According to the Structuralism criticism, especially Saussure's theories, the positive word is placed to the left of the slash because it is more superior and important than the word to the right of the slash.

## 3-Othello and religious discrimination

Another dimension of discrimination is of religious significance. Shakespeare aspires to remind his audience that the Moor is not a Christian. To do so, he presents many words that signify anti-Christian associations. The religious difference is a recurrent and central to the embodiment of Othello's character the fact that he doesn't believe in Christianity is presented in many places in the play. For example he is described as " devil" or even more he is related to " sin", all these signs reveal a religious hatred and insularity a gains the Muslim Moor:

Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,  
I say again, hath made a gross revolt  
Tying her duty, beauty, wi, and fortunes  
In an extravagant and wheeling stranger of her and everywhere.(I.i.131-35)

This religious discrimination is stuck to Othello's character. He is treated with a great bias and prejudice for his religious beliefs," Divinity of hell ! When devils will blackest sins put on". ( II.iii.328-29)

Highlighting the religious contrast, it is obvious that Othello's character was associated with negative morals. Therefore, we can conclude that Shakespeare's racial representations of the Arabic character reflects the attitude toward Arabs in the Elizabethan period .The moors (i.e. the Arabs) were looked upon by the Europeans as barbaric ; while the Westerners or the Europeans were looked upon as highly civilized. Othello believed that changing his religion from Islam to Christianity would give him a privilege to be accepted in a more civilized society like the Venetian society. Ironically, his conversion to Christianity did not change the fact he is a " Moor" an "Arab" or in other words an outsider!!Not only this, he was always seen as "primarily...a noble barbarian who had become Christian ...but who had retains the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood...".(Bradley1905, 186-7)

#### 4- Moral Values of the Arabic character as presented in *Othello*

Though Othello enjoys many positive features, still he is represented as "exotic" character. Among the positive features he has is the fact that he is a brave military leader. He is considered as an "honourable murder" (V.ii.290). There are many references throughout the whole play that emphasize the extraordinary bravery that Othello acquired. Even more, Othello identifies himself in the first place as a warrior, a brave leader, "My services which I have done the Signiory/shall out tongue his complaint" (I.ii.18-19). Othello at the end of the play, in a moment of regret and agony, describes himself saying:

Farewell the plum'd troops and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, Farewell,  
Farewell the neighing steel and shrill trump,  
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing life,  
The royal banner, and all quality  
Pride, pomp, and circumstances of glorious war. (III.iii. 348-353)

Another positive feature that is associated with Othello is his romantic nature, a feature that surprised us if we take into consideration the fact that he is an eminent military leader who is supposed to be tough! This point, Bradley in *Shakespearean Imagery* states that he is the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes; however even his romantic nature is described negatively by Shakespeare because "emotions excites his imaginations, but it confuses and dulls his intellect". (Bradley, 1905, 186). He is deliberately introduced as an exotic figure, "he does not belong to our world, and he seems to enter it we know not whence... almost as if from wonderland. There is something mysterious in his descent from men of royal siege". (Bradley, 186-7)

Among the features attributed to Othello's exotic nature is the fact that he deals with magic and black art, a misleading stereotype associated with the Oriental figure. In fact, there are many recurrent references to magic to give an explanation of Othello's love to Desdemona. Desdemona's father thinks only of magic as the only justification for his daughter's marriage from the Moor, "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter? Damned 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..." (I.iii.63-66). Moreover, in another extract Brabantio repeated that his daughter is bewitched:

She is abused and stolen from me,  
and corrupted by spells and medicines brought of mount  
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense  
Sans witchcraft could not. (I.iii.63-66)

Not only his mysterious nature is emphasized, but there are also many negative characteristics that describe his personality. Probably the most striking fact is his cruel nature. Moreover, Othello is seen as not deserving the noble fair Desdemona because he does not know how to deal with Venetian women, mainly because he "is not Italian, nor even European; that he is totally ignorant of the thoughts and customary morality of Venetian women". (Bradley, 186) Taking this fact in mind, Othello develops another negative feature which is his jealousy. Jealousy is another negative representation of the Oriental figures in general and the Arabic in particular. Having the attitude of the Venetian society in mind of the Moor, though he has a positive and noble grand personality, he is still seen unequal to marry a European woman of a high rank in society like Desdemona.

This sense of inferiority is due to the racial attitude of the Venetian society toward the Eastern figure. This could be an explanation of Othello's constant feeling that he is a stranger. His questions about Desdemona's love and his suspicions increased to the degree of madness. The best example of Othello's jealousy is said by Othello describing his miserable situation. He presented a very expressive image of his jealousy by comparing it to "the Pontic Sea, /Whose icy current and compulsive course/ Nev'r keeps retiring ebb, but keeps due on / to the Prentice and Hellespont, /Even so my bloody thought. (III.iii.450-454)

Deliberately or not, the sexual nature of Othello is emphasized in many parts in the play. For instance, Rodrigo refers to him as a "lascivious Moor". (I.i.124) The recurrent reference to Othello's "lust" is a proof of this attitude. For example to justify his hatred for Othello, Iago suspects that "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/H'as done my office" (I.iii.378-9). Another instance when he declares his suspicions saying "I do suspect the lusty Moor /Hath leap into my seat". (II.i.298-96) He also claims that there is "nothing can or shall content my soul /Till I am evened with him, wife for wife". (II.i.298-9)

Many critics refer to Othello's jealousy as sexual in its nature; "There is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion, and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of his passion, and driven by it to a crime a hideous blunder". (Bradley, 178)

The moral values of the hero pose many questions about Othello's moral enigma. With regard to this point Crawford comments saying: all critics of name have been perplexed by the moral enigma which lies under this

tragic tale...the enigma of this play, and of many others ;is 'moral', so the true interpretation must likewise to be 'moral enigma' must come if it comes from a solution of the moral aspects of the play , which can be reached only by a due consideration of all the moral relations of the various persons of the drama.( Crawford, 2013. 1)

Moreover, other critics discuss the fact that Shakespeare ignored "the poetic justice ". Dr. Johnson ,for example in his preface to his edition of Shakespeare, he points out to many defects concerning Shakespeare's representation of Othello's character. He says :

His first defect is that ... he sacrifices virtue to convenience , is so much more careful to please than to instruct , that he seems to write without any moral purpose ...he makes no just distribution of good and evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtues a disapprobation of the wicked.... (Johnson, 1909,18)

## 5- Conclusion

In light of the discussion of the image of the Arabs in Othello; the study proved a racial point of view that reflects the European attitude toward the Oriental people in general and the Arabs in particular. The study concluded that the imagery and the choice of words reveal an apparent racial attitude in describing the Arabic character. Othello is associated with animal imagery ,a sign which signifies a sense of dehumanization of the Arabic character who is seen as a beast who does not worth any respect or even mercy.

Besides, the study approved an identification with the racial stereo type of the Arabic/Oriental character which was dominant in the Elizabethan period. Among the main presentations of these images is the treatment of the Arabic character as an exotic person who is barbarian , not civilized , vulgar. Moreover , the Arabic character is introduced as superstitious who deals with black magic and naïve who could easily be tricked. This fact is embodied when Iago succeeded in tricking Othello to believe that his wife is unfaithful to him . Iago did his dirty trick easily because the Moor is of an open nature and trust people according to appearance which is in most cases deceptive.

Another negative presentation of the Arabic character is related to the religious and ideological racism. The study concluded that though Othello converted into Christianity to have the respect of the Christian Venetian society, yet they never forget that he is an outsider .Ironically enough , adopting Christianity doesn't give Othello the equality with the Venetians who are not as brave as him!! Not only this ,but the study also proved that Islam phobia was dominant through the whole play. The Turks ,though not Arabs, but represent Islam ,were a source of threat throughout the whole play. Though we do not see them, but their news were reported to us as a background of the play. Even more, the Venetians did not forget the first religion of Othello which is Islam .They describe him as a devilish anti Christian figure , a heathen or infidel. Finally, even Othello's image was morally distorted. Many negative moral values were attributed to him .Perhaps the most serious one is his lust and sexual jealousy. Another biased presentation which is in accord with the racial stereo type of the Oriental character in general and the Arabs in particular. In other words, the play proved that the Western society in general , and the Venetian society in particular were hostile against the Arabs and show no chance for mutual understanding and acceptance of the other .

## References

- Alden, R.M (1910). *The Decline of Poetic Justice*. Atlantic Monthly . February, 260 -7
- Bradely, A.c. (1905) *Shakespearean tragedy*. 2nd edition. New York: CUP
- Britannica (2011) .Binary opposition.<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/65552/binary-opposition.htm>(23April , 2013)
- Crawford, Alexander W . *Hamlet, an ideal prince, and other essays in Shakespearean Interpretation :Hamlet, Merchant of Venice; Othello; King Lear*> <http://www.Shakespeare-online.Com> Boston R.G <
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000. ISBN 0-19-285383-X
- Culler, Jonathan. *Saussure*. Fontana. 1976. ISBN 0-00-633743-0.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers. 1999. ISBN 0-631-20188-2.
- Harris, Roy. Reading Saussure:. 1987. générale. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 0-8126-9049-4
- Jansiz . Othello . Retrieved, from[Http://www.Singet.com.seg/Yisheng/not.htm](http://www.Singet.com.seg/Yisheng/not.htm) (April 24, 2013)
- Racism. In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 24, 2013, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/racism>
- Perceptions of Race in Othello. [Http://www.articlemyriad.com/perception-race-Othello-Shakespeare.htm](http://www.articlemyriad.com/perception-race-Othello-Shakespeare.htm) (April 24, 2013)
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in Literary Theory: An Anthology* ed. by Michael Ryan and Julie Rivkin. Blackwell Publishers. 2001.ISBN 1-4051-0696-4.
- Shafieyan, Mahdi (2011) *Binary Oppositions and Binary Pairs: From Derrida to the Islamic Philosophy*. 2nd International Conference on Humanities, Historical and Social IPEDR vol.17 (2011)

---

Singapore:© IACSIT Press.  
Shakespeare, William.(1993) *Othello*. Beirut: Press.

### **Short biography**

**Dr Amal Riyadh Kitishat** is the head of department of English Language and Literature. Formerly, the head of Basic Sciences Department at Al-Balqa Applied University –Jordan –Ajloun university college. she was born on 26of May1970 .She has got her PhD in English Language and Literature from Cairo University with the first honor degree. She has a long experience in teaching English language and literature inside and outside Jordan. e.g.( an assistant professor in al-Balqa Applied university& a part time lecturer in Yarmouk University and University of Jordan of science and technology(just))  
.In addition to her experience in teaching in Saudi Arabian Universities.( e.g. UOH & al Dawadmi).  
Dr Amal Kitishat has published many articles in national and International journals.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

