

# **E-Content**

## **B.A. PART II (ENGLISH LITERATURE)**

### **PAPER I**

### **DRAMA**

### **UNIT II**

### **OTHELLO**

**Name of the Author: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

(26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616)

**Date of Publication: 1622-1623**

**Age to which it belongs: Elizabethan Age/Shakespearean Age**

**Literary Genre: Tragedy**

By

Dr.Jaba Kusum Singh

Associate Prifessor

Department of English

A.N.D.N.N.M.Mahavidyalaya

Kanpur

William Shakespeare's *Othello*, (written between 1602 and 1604 and printed in **quarto** in 1622 and thereafter in the **folio** of 1623 in a separate version) is a **tragedy**. It is one among the four best written tragedies by the bard.

It becomes necessary to explain what is a quarto and what does folio stands for because we are living in a world where books are easily available on the virtual portal. Let me inform you that it was not so in the times when Shakespeare was writing. Shakespeare's earliest published plays are referred to as folios and quartos according to the folding of the printed sheets and therefore the size of the book: folio being large, tall volumes and the quartos smaller and squarer.

( Companion.p.357)

Before concentrating on the text of *Othello*, we must first try to know what do we mean by drama, it is of course a literary form but it is primarily designed to be performed in a theatre, just like a movie. Thus, it has characters, story and of course a plot and theme. This genre of literature is subdivided into many forms depending upon its plot, theme, technique and structure.

English literature is highly influenced by classical Greek, French and Italian literature and drama as a form is no exception. When one tries to analyse any English drama, (here English drama means drama written by writers of English origin,) one cannot ignore the rules and regulations laid down by Greek philosopher Aristotle who has categorically discussed in his *Poetics*, a critical document on literary criticism, what is a drama and its different forms.

It is very important to note that according to Aristotle drama has two major division, one Tragedy and the other Comedy. During the Elizabethan time, when William Shakespeare was writing, drama was a major form of entertainment and writers followed the rules laid down by the Greek master Aristotle while writing a drama. William Shakespeare was no exception. Here we must give some time to understand the difference between tragedy and comedy as laid down by Aristotle because it shall make our study of *Othello* easy and understandable.

Aristotle says that comedy is chiefly a type of drama that arouse laughter by harmless and painless representation of the ugly and the disformed. He further elaborates that the plays that have a happy ending are comedies. In the chapter vi of his book *Poetics* Aristotle gives a detail description of Tragedy. According to him Tragedy is an imitation of action that "... is serious, complete, and have a certain magnitude; it is in language which is embellished with various artistic devices, separate devices being appropriate to several parts ; it is in the form of action, not narration ; and it arouses , by means of its incidents, the emotion of pity and fear so as , finally , to provide a *catharsis* or purgation of these emotions." (*Glossary*.P.408)

Students when we study the concerned drama in the light of the above-mentioned definition, we find that *Othello* is a tragedy. This is also a matter of knowledge that Shakespeare along with his contemporaries deviated radically from the Aristotelian principles of a well written Tragedy in many aspects. We must know the major differences for a better understanding of the genre we are studying. They are as follows:

Aristotelian tragedy has a single central plot but the English dramatist wrote tragedies with several sub plots. The Greek philosopher mentioned that the story must show either the reversal of fate or the death of the chief character whereas the English tragedies always ends in to the death of the protagonist. Chorus was the indispensable part of the Greek tragedy but Shakespeare replaced it with scenes of comic relief. The Greek tragedies are more didactic in nature as the protagonist learns the truth of the situation or comes to a realization about himself. It is not necessary that the tragic heroes of Shakespeare gain a self- knowledge.

This is also a truth that when we read *Othello* and compare it with other tragedies of the Bard of Avon, we realise that this tragedy is "...one of the few plays which accords closely with Aristotle's basic concepts of the tragic hero and plot". (*Glossary* p.410)

Before discussing the drama, we must focus on the dramatist too. William Shakespeare needs no introduction as such because all the students of English literature grows up studying his sonnets and his dramas. What follows is just to brush up our memory.

William Shakespeare (26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) belongs to 16<sup>th</sup> century English literature. He is considered to be the national poet of England, the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. (wikiwordbook.info) He has written as much as 39 plays and 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship.(blog.gps.ac.in)

His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. Shakespeare produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best work produced in these genres. From 1608, onwards he wrote many tragedies, among them *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, are considered to be the finest works of English Language. In the last phase of his life, he wrote tragicomedies (also known as romances) and collaborated with other playwrights.(www.askdifference.com)

His plays are written in blank verse with iambic pentameter lines. They are classified under four categories according to dramatic type. His plays have a universal appeal, which means, although written in 16<sup>th</sup> century, yet the characters of his plays seem to be life like even in today's society. They are studied and re interpreted till date.

Initially he was an actor but later on he started writing dramas.

While commenting upon the versatility of William Shakespeare George Pierce Baker states that the reader or the audience witnesses in his tragedies not only a tale of suffering and death, they are shaken to see how the protagonist writhes in the coils of insufferable agony.

In his tragedies Shakespeare portrays how his protagonist involves himself in a struggle, a clash of wills. In his drama we witness an individual who is caught in conflict with the will of the community or a man who may be torn by the conflict of his own emotions, the warring maybe of idealism and brutishness; or, he may be torn by the clash between his own desires and the will of the community. (*The Development*.P 283)

Students, now, we are going to discuss the plot and theme of *Othello*, but before that let me introduce you to the characters of the play.

- ✚ Othello- The Protagonist, a Christian Moor, the general of the armies of Venice
- ✚ Desdemona- the Daughter of the Venetian Senator and the wife of Othello
- ✚ Iago- The Villain of the play, a soldier
- ✚ Michael Cassio- Lieutenant and a true friend of Othello
- ✚ Emilia- Wife of Iago
- ✚ Roderigo- A jealous suitor of Desdemona
- ✚ Bianca- A prostitute who is infatuated to Cassio at Cyprus
- ✚ Brabantio- The venetian Senator and Father of Desdemona
- ✚ Duke of Venice- The Official Authority at Venice
- ✚ Montano- The Governor of Cyprus before Othello
- ✚ Lodovico- Brabantio's kinsman, a messenger from Venice to Cyprus
- ✚ Graziano- Brabantio's Kinsman who accompanies Lodovico from Venice to Cyprus
- ✚ Clown- Othello's Servant.

*Othello* is a story of a noble military general who has enjoyed many successes on the battle field but his mistakes of judgment and his status as an outsider in Italian society, damages his most intimate relationship and himself. His simplicity, his unjudged faith for Iago and his inability to differentiate between a friend and foe prevents him from recognizing the loyalty of Cassio, his lieutenant and true friend. The play begins on the grand scale of a military romance unfolding on the Mediterranean Sea. But the love that made Desdemona disobey her father ended into a disaster. Othello's inexperience and jealousy made him do what he has never have dreamt off. He stabs his wife under Iago's provocation. Nothing but his ignorance of domesticity and Iago's continuous attempt to make him believe that Desdemona is having illicit relationship with Cassio compels Othello to kill his innocent wife and kill himself.

The play begins with a backdrop of Othello's heroism, he is a brave general but a Moor. The word moor broadly means an African or a dark-skinned man who is not of Italian origin. He is one of the most respected persons of Venice because of his valour and bravery. Shakespeare has shown two strong human emotions in this drama one jealousy and the other bravery. He has projected how bravery in the exterior world gets defeated in the hand of jealousy because of ignorance and simplicity. The play contrasts an Othello who is confident and powerful in the exterior world of battle, but in the domestic spaces he is less secure, and is easily manipulated by his subordinate, Iago.

On the other hand, we see Iago the master manipulator the antagonist of the play. He hates Othello for two reasons. One because he is a moor not a native of Venice and secondly, he as a boss promotes Cassio in place of Iago. Iago has the capability to impress anybody by his words, he sounds so convincing that nobody in the play seems to disbelieve in what he says. But as he manipulates one and all in the drama but he is a very jealous fellow within. He suspects everybody to have slept with his wife, Emilia, who is a maid to Desdemona, wife of Othello. Iago suspects that not only Cassio but Othello might have also slept with his wife. Commenting on the character of Iago Bradley says "Evil has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago" (*Shakespearean*.p169)

The drama begins on the street of Venice, and we find that Roderigo and Iago are talking about Desdemona. Roderigo is upset as he wanted to marry Desdemona but now, he has come to know that she loves Othello. Iago expresses his grievances against the General and both decides to instigate Desdemona's father, Brabantio, the Venetian Senator, against Othello.

On the other hand, Cassio visits Othello and informs him that the duke wants to see him and he must rush to meet him.

The tension of the play rises once the audiences/readers meet Othello and realizes how disastrous Iago's plan will be. Shakespeare shows two exactly opposite sides of life one, the love between Othello and Desdemona and her willingness to be disowned by her father in order to be with Othello, and on the other Iago's lies. The play heightens the tension between the truth and deception. We witness how Brabantio approaches Duke and asks for justice but Duke becomes sceptical when he learns that Othello is the man accused.

The Duke gives Othello the chance to speak for himself. Othello admits that he has married Desdemona, but he denies having used magic to woo her and claims that Desdemona will support his story. He explains that Brabantio frequently invited him to his house and questioned him about his remarkable life story. The adventurous account that Othello narrated were full of grievous battles and exciting travels, and of reversals of fortune. Desdemona overheard the stories and urged him to retell the stories of his adventures to her. She was so impressed by his bravery that she decided to marry him.

When she was asked to choose between her father and her husband, she readily chooses her husband. She implores in the court of the Venetian Duke that like her own mother, she must shift her primary loyalty from father to husband. Duke, who is highly impressed by the bravery and chivalry of Othello asks him to go to Cyprus to defend the island from the Turks. Desdemona accompanies him in this journey.

The most important and interesting thing that is to be noticed is that Iago plays the role of a puppeteer and everyone in the play seems to be the puppets to Iago's scheming, the audiences/the readers become his silent co-conspirator as he unveils his plans in a series of dialogues delivered as 'asides'. The technique of 'asides' is well adapted by the dramatist in most of his plays which acts as an apt unfolding of the chief characteristics of a character. In this drama the 'asides' of Iago make the audience/reader aware of his vicious motives.

In the scene that follows the audience/readers find themselves on the shore of Cyprus with Montano, the governor of Cyprus. A gentleman arrives to give the news of a wrecked Turkish ship. Cassio together with Iago, Roderigo, Desdemona, and Emilia, Iago's wife reaches Cyprus. Othello arrives in a separate ship. While all are waiting for Othello, Cassio greets Desdemona by clasping her hand. Iago sees this and starts planning. He informs the audience that he will use "as little a web as this" hand-holding to entangle Cassio (II.i.169). Iago starts the plotting and audience is made a part, of it. The way in which Shakespeare presents the actions of the play, it creates an atmosphere of suspense and arouse the curiosity of the audience/readers.

Othello arrives and announces that there will be celebrations that evening to celebrate the victory and the safety of Cyprus from hands of the Turks. Roderigo is worried about his future with Desdemona, he consults Iago if there is any hope left. Iago assures Roderigo that as soon as Desdemona's "blood is made dull with the act of sport," she will lose interest in Othello (II.i.222). But he instigates him by informing that Desdemona seems to be interested in Cassio. Iago plans with Roderigo that he should initiate a fight with Cassio at the evening party. In a soliloquy, Iago explains that his plan is to kill Cassio in order to ruin Othello. We see that Iago easily succeeds in his plot to get Cassio drunk, incite him to fight Roderigo, in Act ii Scene I. The chaos leads to the stabbing of the Governor Montano by Cassio who was attempting to hold Cassio down. Iago sends Roderigo to raise alarm in the town and convinces Othello to strip Cassio of his rank of the lieutenant, but all the while Iago acts as though he loves Cassio. Iago's scheming, cynical nature is starkly contrasted with the rest of the characters in the play, who are all undone by their own trusting, honest natures and their inability to see through Iago's deceptions.



Upset and heartbroken Cassio approaches none but the conspirator himself. Iago with his malicious motives misguides him and asks him to approach Desdemona and plead her to become his intermediary. He convinces Cassio that only Desdemona can change Othello's discretion. In a soliloquy, Iago reveals his plan to the audience. He plans to frame Cassio and Desdemona as lovers and report Othello which will make him jealous.

Cassio sincere effort to reconcile fails. He sends some musicians to play beneath Othello's window but he sends his clown to tell the musicians to go away. Cassio now pleads the clown, a peasant who serves Othello, to send Emilia to him so that he can get a chance to meet Desdemona. Iago always has an eye upon his enemies and we see that Iago passes by and tells Cassio that he will get Othello out of the way so that Cassio can speak privately with Desdemona. Iago fulfils his promise and takes Othello to examine some of the town's fortifications. (paramelt.blogspot.com)

Cassio meets Desdemona requests her to plead her case. She promises that she will try her best to make Othello forgive his former lieutenant. Fate plays an important role in life and so in the tragedies of William Shakespeare. The maliciousness of Iago gets promotion as we see the fate playing the role of a friend to Iago. Shakespeare weaves his plot in such a dramatic manner that audience is left with no choice but to wait for the inevitable to happen.

Othello returns with Iago just at the very moment when Cassio is about to leave Desdemona's room. Cassio feels so uneasy that he leaves without talking to Othello. Othello inquires whether it was Cassio who just parted from his wife, and the traitor gets the opportunity to kindle Othello's fire of jealousy, he replies, "No, sure, I cannot think it, / That he would steal away so guilty-like, / Seeing your coming" (III.iii.37-39).

The conflicting forces of good, as represented by Othello, and evil, as represented by Iago, come into direct contact at the end of Act III, scene iii. In this scene we find that Othello is

completely kneeled down by Iago. He is in the evil grip of the antagonist and the master conspirator Iago. At Othello's arrival Desdemona tries to plead for Cassio she requests to reinstate him as the lieutenant but this made Othello more jealous.

This convinces him of his wife's infidelity. That night when Desdemona comes to call Othello to supper, she finds him feeling unwell. She offers him her handkerchief to wrap around his head, but he finds it to be "[t]oo little" and lets it drop to the floor (III.iii.291).

Emilia picks up the handkerchief, when Desdemona and Othello depart for dinner. She mentions to the audience that Iago has always wanted her to steal it for him.

Iago is too happy to get the handkerchief. He plants it in Cassio's room as "evidence" of his affair with Desdemona. The handkerchief works as an "ocular proof" (III.iii.365) Iago says that he has seen Cassio "wipe his beard" (III.iii.444) with Desdemona's handkerchief.

The handkerchief is the symbol of their love and it becomes unbearable for Othello to know that his wife has gifted it to Cassio. This is the first gift Othello ever gave her.

Othello vows to take revenge on his wife and on Cassio, Iago promises to help him. Othello goes to Desdemona and asks for the handkerchief, but informs that she does not have it with her. She tries to change the subject and continues to pursue on Cassio's behalf. Othello is furious and he leaves the room in rage.

On the other hand, Cassio wonders who has kept the handkerchief in his chamber. He asks Bianca, the prostitute, to take the handkerchief and copy its embroidery for him.

Iago's conspiracies disheartens Othello so much so that he falls into a trance and has a fit of epilepsy. It is so pathetic to see a man of Othello's stature and talent is writhing on the ground.

Cassio approaches to talk but Iago diverts him and asks him to come later on.

Othello recovers only to indulge himself into another devastating and traumatic situation. Iago plans a meeting with Cassio and asks Othello to hide nearby. He convinces the protagonist that

he shall make Cassio speak of his affair with Desdemona. Othello is once again trapped and the audience feels pity for the simplicity of his character.

Iago and Cassio talk about Bianca, but Iago makes the conversation so confusing and weird that Othello's suspicions deepen. The situation worsens as Bianca herself enters with Desdemona's handkerchief. She chides and rebukes him. She complains that why he has asked her to copy the embroidery from the handkerchief gifted to him by another woman.

Othello cannot keep his mental balance as he finds it unbearable when Lodovico informs him to leave Cyprus and return back home by handing over the charge to Cassio. Desdemona finds it refreshing and feels happy that they shall be returning home and so she accompanies Lodovico to deliver the happy message to her husband. Quite on the contrary she finds herself in an awkward position when Othello strikes her in public. Lodovico is horrified by Othello's loss of self-control, he cannot believe what he has witnessed. He remembers how self-controlled man Othello had been before. He wonders whether Othello is mad, but Iago refuses to answer.

At night Othello accuses Desdemona, he calls her a whore. He ignores her protestations and pleadings. Emilia too tries to prove her mistress's innocence but all fell to deaf ears of Othello. Iago doesn't stop his manipulations. He convinces Desdemona that Othello is upset due to some state affairs.

Othello is now determined to kill Desdemona. He asks her to wait for him in bed and also orders to send Emilia away. Iago informs Roderigo that everything is going as planned. He instigates Roderigo to murder Cassio for then only Desdemona and Othello will stay back at Cyprus. Although Roderigo attacks Cassio but he fails to kill him and instead he gets injured in the hand of Cassio. Iago avails this opportunity; he wounds Cassio and runs away.

Othello feels satisfied to hear Cassio shout in pain. He assumes that Iago has killed him. Lodovico and Graziano approaches to look after the matter. They are bewildered to see that Cassio is badly wounded. Iago pretends to be in rage and blames Roderigo for all the disgusting affairs. Cassio is taken away for medication.

Othello approaches their bedchamber to kill Desdemona. She wakes up, she tries to convince her husband that she is innocent but Othello smothers her. Emilia enters to inform that Roderigo is dead. Othello finds it unbelievable that Cassio is still living. Desdemona shouts and to inform that she is murdered. But the ideal wife in her prevents her to disclose the truth. The audience/reader is petrified to see the tragic end of a pious lady.

Shakespeare, is a master in creating a perfect dramatic scene, and the climax of this play is a perfect example of a drama infused scene that leaves the audience/reader bewildered and mesmerized at the same moment. Desdemona's concealing of Othello's crime in her death bed leaves a pertinent effect on the audience/readers' psyche; It is quite unbelievable to Othello that to save his honour and respect his dying wife proclaims that she has committed suicide.

The tragic effect is at its supreme when remorseful Othello admits his crime to Emilia. To her surprise Othello says that his wife Desdemona is and infidel lady. He also tells her that Iago is the one who had informed him about the illicit relationship of Desdemona. Emilia realizes that her husband has ruined her master's life. The repentant Emilia reveals that the handkerchief which has created such a havoc and has ruined the life of Desdemona and Othello was handed over to Iago by her. She had no idea of Iago's malicious intentions.

The heart broken protagonist tries to kill Iago but Montano and Graziano disarms him. Iago kills his wife and tries to flee only to be caught by Lodovico and Montano. Othello kills himself in regret. The drama ends with Graziano receiving all the properties of Othello.

Students this drama has a single plot but it deals with human passions and the audiences/readers find an immediate agreement with the raging emotions if found in similar situation, and this is the secret of the age long popularity of this play.

It is so captivating and engaging to see that Iago manipulates the protagonist to such an extent that Othello's life becomes a hell. Now, his only unswerving desire is to take revenge on those who have cuckolded him. Unlike many Shakespearean tragedies where the protagonist confronts the antagonist at the play's climax, Othello expresses his absolute trust in Iago by appointing him his new lieutenant. Othello's misplacement of trust, and blindness to Iago's true motivations, increases the tension further, as the audiences/readers wonders when, if ever, Othello will see the truth about his supposed friend. Iago's grip seems to be so strong on Othello that he becomes increasingly deranged with jealousy, and now refuses to listen to Desdemona's avowals of innocence.

Iago's treacherous plot leads to the extremity of brutality. We are perplexed to see the paradigm shift in the character of Othello. The faith and love that had once been the pivotal point of their love disappeared and now Othello seems to be so much blind in suspiciousness that all persuasions of Desdemona that she could never betray him fall to deaf ears, he starts demanding proof of her infidelity so that he can feel justified in killing her. Revenge became the only motive of his life.

Act III of the drama is very important. It unfolds all the important incidents that culminates into the final act of tragedy. It arouses the feeling of catharsis in the minds of the readers / audiences which is the ultimate aim of a tragedy.

The incident when Iago frames story that Cassio called out Desdemona's name in his sleep, wrung Iago's hand, kissed him hard on the lips, and threw his leg over Iago's thigh enrages Othello, the cunning manipulator consoles him and by saying that it is just a dream.

Iago plays with the mind and emotions of Othello and claims to have witnessed Cassio wiping his beard with the handkerchief Othello had gifted Desdemona. Furious, Othello cries out for blood because it was his first gift to Desdemona. He kneels and vows to heaven that he will take his revenge on Desdemona and Cassio, and Iago too kneels with him, vowing to help execute his master's vengeance. Iago's selfish motive is achieved as Othello promotes Iago to lieutenant.

The timing of events is very important in Act III. Iago anticipates and manipulates all the characters so skilfully that they seem to be acting simultaneously of their own free will. The mastermind Iago plays with the emotions of not only Othello but also with all the characters of the play, be it Cassio, Roderigo or his wife Emilia.

According to some critics, the crafty Iago plans to take the advantage of Othello's superstitions. He being a moor, an outsider feels indebted to his wife because of her love and courtship. It is perhaps this feeling of outsider and obligation that makes Othello an easy trap. The self-confident general who has witnessed so many ups and downs in his life as a warrior seems to fail as a self-assured husband to innocent Desdemona. He as a lover fails drastically partly because of his effortlessness and partly because he is inexperienced. He is a successful soldier but an ineffective family man.

It takes very little evidence to convince him of her unfaithfulness. All Iago has to do to Othello is to make him doubt Desdemona, and jealousy spreads like a virus until he rejects her absolutely. Notably, Iago, too, has no evidence that Othello has slept with Emilia, but the

suspicion or doubt seems to have been sufficient to make him spurn Emilia and persecute Othello. As Othello says, “[T]o be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved” (III.iii.183–184).

(paramelt.blogspot.com)

It is incomprehensible for him that the basis of most of relationships is faith and trust, a quality that Othello is unwilling to extend to his own wife.

All Iago really has to do to provoke Othello is to remind him that he doesn't know for certain what his wife is doing or feeling. Iago's advice that Othello “[I]ook to [his] wife. Observe her well. . .” appears harmless at first, until one considers how out of the ordinary it is for a husband to “observe” his wife as if she were a specimen under a microscope (III.iii.201).

For a man to treat his wife as a problem to be solved or a thing to be known, rather than as a person with a claim upon him, is simply incompatible with the day-to-day business of being married. Othello's rejection of his wife's offering of physical solace (via the handkerchief), and his termination of the exchange in which Desdemona argues for Cassio, thereby asserting a marital right, clearly demonstrate this incompatibility. as a husband, he misinterprets Desdemona firstly because of his ignorance and secondly because of his hidden awkward feeling of an outsider.

Handkerchief in this play is the symbol of faith and trust; the loss of which utterly shatters the marital relationship of the couple. It may also be concluded that Othello's knowledge of love and human relationship was as fragile as a handkerchief, it was as small and timid as a small piece of cloth that can tear or be lost at any given time. It acts as a powerful motif in this play, to show the fragility of the love relationship of Othello and Desdemona.

The episode that follows put forth the fact that both husband and wife are unable to understand the feelings of each other. Othello continuously demands to see the handkerchief and Desdemona goes on advocating Cassio. Othello finds it irritating but Desdemona seems to be untouched and unconcerned.

Although Othello wanted to resolve his doubt but he soon learns, however, that to be once in doubt is to be never resolved. Only after he kills Desdemona does Othello discover he believed the wrong person. When he at last realizes his error, he kills himself, rather than to live in a world where honour and honesty have no value.  
(www.sparknotes.com.)

#### Weblinks

Paramelt.blogspot.com

The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist by **George Pierce Baker** <https://www.questia.com/library/7117705/the-development-of-shakespeare-as-a-dramatist>

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