

## *Othello: A Legal Alien in Multicultural Renaissance Venice*

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### **Abstract**

Venice was like no other city in the world during the Renaissance. It was the beating heart of the Eastern Mediterranean. With its extensive political, cultural, and economic prowess, Venice served as a site of encounter between the East and the West. A seemingly quite integrated and racially diverse society, Venice was an opulent city and a multicultural metropolis where Muslims, Christians, and Jews would find a niche in its wide-opened doors. As a cosmopolitan city in constant movement, Venice attracted immigrants from all walks of life. It embraced the pluralities of ethnicities, creeds, and commercial trades. Thanks to its multicultural and ethnic character, the city served as a site of encounter in the Mediterranean basin of the 16th century fostering a blurring of boundaries of all types. Yet, running parallel to this opulence and openness, there was a dim side about this multi-cultural city. The glamorous cross-cultural Venetian society was tainted with “ethnocentrism” where “the other,” as embodied in Shakespeare’s Othello, was misperceived, discarded, and racially unwelcomed. This paper aims to communicate the dual nature of a dazzling Venetian city caught between the binaries of integration and seclusion, openness and aversion to aliens. This paper will focus, more accurately, on the character of Othello and his suffering in a multicultural society which denied all his services on the basis of his colour and race.

Keywords: Diversity, Multiculturalism, Plurality, Discrimination, Renaissance, Othello, Venice

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## Introduction

Venice during the early modern was like no other city in the world over. It was perceived as an ecumenical city where different nationalities poured into a culturally flowing society further contributing to its enrichment and florescence. With an unparalleled political framework, a commercial dominance over the whole region, and a unique tolerance over the three faiths and creeds, Venice was the direction of many adventurers and art lovers who saw in this city a haven, an implacable sanctuary to exist and coexist peacefully with assorted races in “the Queen of the Adriatic.”<sup>1</sup> Such an artistic spot enchanted its visitors with its singular natural charm, art, architecture, local tales, and fashion already crossing its path to future centuries of amazement and wonder. During the Renaissance and even some time before there were streams of immigrants coming from the adjacent countries and the far-fetched ends of the earth. Jews along with Greeks, Albanians, Ottomans, Venetian dominions and many others were outflowing to this global city. Venice welcomed all races with hands wide open as long as they would contribute to its well-being and prosperity through individual merit. Each community enriched the Venetian soil with its multi-faceted background giving a share in a cross-cultural dialogue and breaking barriers and frontiers. Admittedly, Venice was “an ideal [place] in which civic virtue produces a powerful, free society that in turn protects and nurtures the honor and freedom of its members” (Hadfield, 1997, P. 8).

## Glamorous Cross-Cultural Venice

It is significant to note that Venice captured the attention not only through the world of mercantilism and commercial deeds, but it was also seen as a gateway to a multitude of ethnicities sharing features of their cultures, tongues, and identities. In Renaissance Venice, colors, races, and faiths would mix and meet on a daily basis. In that microcosm of the world, you could “heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnicks” (Horodowitch, 2008, P. 79). In Venice of the Renaissance, it was clear that either for travelers or *cittadini*, Venice was a multilingual metropolis radiating with a multitude of tongues granting the city a culturally diversified feature. Joining a dinner on Venetian summer evening, French traveler Jean- Baptiste Tavernier noted the significant use of no less than thirteen languages including, “Latin, French, German, English, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Indian, Syrian and Malaysian.” He added that in this social gathering, a conversation was “begun in one language (. . .) continued in another and completed in a third.” This polyglot communion unfolded the multilinguistic skills mark of various nations such as the Turks and Armenians “who do not know three or four languages” (Tavernier, 1981, P. 272). Nowhere were diversified languages as much widespread as in the Venetian society. Being a mosaic of East and West, Orient and Occident, old and new, Venice was without any equal during its time and the centuries that would follow. The open republican city state could match the unmatched and make distinct points unite. Through its wedding culturally, politically, and commercially with the East, Venice managed to make ends meet at the different layers of life. Preserving its long-standing traditions and traces while welcoming ‘foreign’ ones, sometimes totally new to the native culture, Venice manifested a willingness to bridge the gap between unlike attitudes and cultural milieus leading to a sort of cultural dynamism and educing a passage to modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a name attributed to Venice among others as, “City of Bridges,” “City of Masks,” “City of Water,” “La Serenissima,” “The Floating City,” and “La Dominante.”

## A City of Paradoxes

However cumulative and thriving, it is distressing to feel among the layers of such an affluent society trace of ethnocentrism and prejudice against some races and minorities. The feeling of 'otherness' as felt by some outsiders leaves no room to think that the vibrant image of the city with lagoons hides secrets about cultural disintegration and the marginalization of some ethnicities, color, and religion. Venice of the Renaissance era is defined by its belonging and defense of the Christian faith which it harbors and protects from the threats of the Ottoman Empire which was conquering the world, back then, in the name of Islam. Sensitive an issue as it might be, the issue of faith happened to play against the grandeur of a city supposedly transparent to different creeds and spiritual orientations. Venice maintained its position as a Christian Catholic axis in Europe and held a pivotal role among its neighbors and foreigners as a white European force in the region to be revered and highly esteemed. Venice was a carrier of the message of Christianity and civilization to the world and any juxtaposed image to this was received with a sort of skepticism. Particularly when it came to Muslims which Venice came to explore more about with its intermingling with Turkish traders, Venice would show less leniency in this particular regard. As a matter of fact, the prevailing presence of the Ottomans in Europe and their conquest of many parts of this continent and the African one was conceived with a lot of awe and fear. Europe apprehended the Ottoman empire which extended its invasions East and West and earned many lands which it kept under its dominion.

Therefore Venice saw in the Ottomans, with all their background culture, not only a potential threat but also a sense of insecurity which destabilizes its very hegemony in the area with all the magnificence that Venice entertained at the time. Venetians abhorred the Turks, and all the details related to their culture as pictured in Shakespeare's *Othello* through its General Othello. They demonized their race and tainted their image with the worst possible portraits. During Shakespeare's time, Judaism and Islam were perceived as precursory religions at a conjuncture where Protestantism, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, was precarious with the country switching from Protestantism to Catholicism at different intervals under the rule of different crowns. Thus, the non-European identity along with the non-Christian belief jeopardized the peace of Europe. Vitkus remarks that Venice was "a sphere of tolerance and rationality located between the twin tyrannies of papal superstition on the one hand and Islamic "paganism" on the other" (Vitkus, 1997, P. 163). Religion and identity mattered during the Renaissance with the radical changes the continent was witnessing. The constant threat and fear of Islamic expansionism at the heart of Europe was quite manifest and could not pass unnoticed. The overriding ascendancy of Muslims and their infiltration within the different walks of life and layers of the European states granted a legal justification to fear it. In his book, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, Matar notes that, "the English were unable to situate the Muslims conveniently in their world of colonial enterprise. Unable to defeat them, as they had defeated the American Indian natives, the Englishmen borrowed discourses of difference from their encounter with the American Indians" (Matar, 2000, P. 15). Given its wide-spread hegemony over different parts of Europe as the Ottomans conquered the Dalmatian hinterland culminating in the invasion of Cyprus, a dominion of Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Turks were misperceived by Venetians. The term "Turk," itself, was conceived to be synonymous of any individual embracing the Muslim creed.

After the chute of the Roman capital, Constantinople, in mid-fifteenth century the Muslim presence was carefully looked at namely in light of its great artistic and literary achievements. Such an existence destabilized the secure feeling that Venice had as a supreme

cultural center of Europe. Harbored feelings of prejudice and ignited racial animosity as created through the stereotypical images of Muslims and Africans in the Muslim diaspora has at as an origin, 'the difference from the other.' Shakespeare captured these meanings of alienation and highlighted the white European supremacy through the character of his protagonist Othello. *Othello*, the play, was written at a peculiar time of Euro-Arab contests over who would have the upper hand over the East Mediterranean. This period marked a great interconnectedness in terms of diplomatic relationships as well as trade deals. Paradoxically the Renaissance was not without deep chasm between Christian Europe and the Muslim world as reflected through the hegemonic presence of the Turks over big parts on Europe. When Shakespeare wrote his play, *Othello*, both Venice and the Ottoman Empire were giant powers in the East Mediterranean.

### **Alienated Othello**

In this regard, it was obvious to sense a sort of fractures in relationships between both superpowers, which Othello epitomized more saliently in his tragedy within a white European Christian society. Being dark skinned within a community that favored fair skin of Western origin threw the African Moore in unparalleled adversity and big tribulations he could hardly survive at the end of the play. Race becomes Othello's capital challenge as it is not perceived in shallow terms as "dark" as much as it is comprehended as a token of 'apparatus' in a cultural frame. Othello's tragic flaw stems primarily from his feeling as an outsider in a place not meant for him given his race and color. Such a feeling of being a 'misfit' brings about the birth of his *alienation*. In this light Othello is both an outsider and an alienated. Othello's alienation is linked to his 'black' ethnicity and what is believed by his western counterparts as an 'inferior culture.' Serving as a model to the entire world during the Renaissance, Europe could not conceive of any potential presence other than white and European. Based on this logic, any other alternative rival or power had to be misperceived, underrated, and even subjugated to the main European force. "For whiteness to exist, not only must Black people be subjugated by white people but they also must not function as 'people' under their conceptualization in the first place" (Hari, 2017, P. 144). Under this spectrum, "black" was not a rival, not even a parallel but an entity unworthy of meritocracy to be condoned and 'excluded'. Kiernan 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" (Kiernan, 1989). The prevailing image that in Venice, racial and religious boundaries were dissolved should be taken with a pinch of salt. Venice in many respects abominated the cultural 'other' who was seen at once enriching and disgracing. This image ripples upon the surface when we consider Othello's status. Being a successful navy General, Othello descends from black African roots. Appreciated for his outstanding military skills, Othello was swept into the elite of the Venetian society because of his loyalty, distinguished services, and after he converted to Christianity. Caught between the binaries of his differences, Othello feels a 'legal alien'. He desperately attempts to readjust into unlikable worlds by marrying Desdemona, a white charming Lady of the upper Venetian class whom he presumably 'bewitched' to win her heart. Othello's identity was called into question since the outset of the play. Boyarin argues that the "open secret in [Othello's] heart was the secret of Islam in Europe (...) the Moors had ruled many European" Christians "for centuries" (Boyarin, 2011, P. 254). Despite Othello's remarkable achievements and prowess including leading a military campaign to Cyprus to fight the Turks, which gained him the respect of his high white superiors, Othello could not elope the denigrating gaze of those surrounding him by virtue of his color which they associate not only with 'otherness', but also with a derogatory connotation. Racial stereotypes

continue to strangle him however hard he tries to win the admiration of all. Othello's color and ethnicity turn out to be his primary obstacle, an intruder into a homogenous society reputed for being heterogenous. This makes him an outsider, an intruder into a circle he initially did not belong to.

In a multicultural diversity, Othello becomes a target by virtue of his race. Being dark-skinned builds barriers within a Venetian European society. It breeds antagonism and dissonance among the two different parts. Othello's sole guilt, therefore, becomes his race which portrays him as "cruel and treacherous, and his evil is directly associated with his blackness." (Cowhig 1985, P. 2). The stereotyping image surrounding the character of Othello, that the devil is always depicted in "black garb", (Mei, 2006, P. 31) has been announced since the beginning of the play. As the play opens, Iago and Roderigo both corroborate the idea of 'difference' by referring to Othello's race. Iago, the play's unparalleled manipulator fueled by his own jealousy against Othello who had Cassio promoted to the position of lieutenant than him sarcastically addresses Othello telling him: "Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul, Even now, now, very now, an old black ram" (I.1.85-90). Loomba believes that the renaissance perception was somehow different about the skin color tone. According to her, the moors descending from an Arab origin whose skin color was relatively fair enjoyed some prerogatives while Sub-Saharan Africans were "associated *with* a lack of religion and culture, and painted as low-born" (Loomba, 2002, P. 81). This issue is further illustrated in the vehement racial sentiments that the trio: Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio have for Othello. Iago explicitly verbalizes his hostility towards Othello saying: "I hate the Moor" (III.1.385). Roderigo, also, cannot but join Iago in his ethnic campaign against Othello calling him "wheeling stranger." As the play is drawing to an end, seeing Desdemona dying after making sure that Othello took his life, Emilia blasts in Othello's face reminding him that the devil is black "O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!" (V.2.161). The racial discrimination is crowned with Othello's father-in-law, Brabantio, who could not hide his ignited racial animosity towards the Moor considering his marriage to an upper-class Venetian Lady as an act of transgression, "a treason of the blood" (Okin 1987, P. 166). Through the physical intermingling between Othello and Desdemona, there is a shattering of the boundaries that set the East and the West apart. Othello's wedding to Desdemona is seen as an act of defiance to the limits of the progressive European white world epitomized by Desdemona and the primitive African black one as represented by Othello. Such an act bought Othello a big deal of contempt and abasement. Desdemona was the only one to venerate and dignify the Moor beyond the racist ethnocentric gaze. Seeing him deeper than his skin, she could see his worth in his mind and deeds when she declares that, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.3.252).

Yet the play, through the reconciliation of the apparently irreconcilable, is a foreboding of what is going to happen at the end. In the same way as Africa and Europe stand out as two worlds apart, Shakespeare is warning against the shattering relationship between Othello and Desdemona. The play closes on the most unexpected tragic scene with Othello strangling the woman he loved the most to death after he was manipulated by Iago to think that she is adulterous. Strangely enough, Othello, the distinguished military commander who has been deployed to protect Cyprus, a Venetian dominion from the Ottoman attacks, has become himself a threat to awe to his wife and the Venetian society as a whole. Sadly enough, despite his interminable devotion in his services to the Venetian state and his wife, "But that I love the gentle Desdemona," he delicately says (I.2.25), Othello's coexistence has always been inadmissible. Despite all the odds he went through to finally unite with the woman he loved the most, Brabantio rejects his quest for marriage. Above all despite his conversion to

Christianity while born Muslim, Othello remains the same alienated outsider, a misfit in a place he always cherished the hope to fit into. "Blackness cannot exist as humanness within the realm that whiteness conceives," Writes Hari. "Black lives cannot matter under the standards of whiteness, by necessity and design" (Ziyad, 2017, P. 147). As a matter of fact, "blacks -were- monsters, strange creatures from outside the boundaries of the world," (Aubrey, 1999, P. 96). according to the European thought.

In the Western imagination, the color 'black' has always been associated with the 'devil,' 'magic', the 'treacherous' while 'white' has been linked to the 'angelic,' the 'pure' and the 'good,' social constructions which have often been thwarted by empirical evidence. Such binaries are reflected in the intense relationship governing the life of the Moor military and his soft-skinned spouse. It is no coincidence that Iago speaks of the "devils [who] will the blackest sins put on" (II.3.329) while Emilia calls Othello "the blacker devil" (V.2.132). Shakespeare underlies the idea that the ethnocentric fracture between the Orient and the Occident shattering the two spheres of the globe has also contaminated private relationships. Therefore, the split relationship at home between two opposite worlds extend to reflect a microcosm of the opposite relationships on an international scale. Once again, Shakespeare reverts back to the idea that Venice, however enchanting it might look superficially and though multiculturalism seems to be its norm, it is also the city of endless contradictions despite its apparent tolerance to foreigners. The 'social injustice' making differences between people on the basis of color, race, and religion turned into an 'ideology' to legitimize discrimination against Jews and the Moors seeing them inherently evil and morally depraved. Othello the Moor, by virtue of his color, sets the stage for a frenzy of racial diatribe against him. The man with the "thick lips" (I.1.66) and "old black ram" (I.1.98) falls prey to the racial malevolence of Iago who inculcated in his mind the image of infidelity; the thought that a White European Lady cannot mingle with a black African. Othello's marriage to Desdemona only heightened this prejudice. Entrapped in his endless doubts and insecurities, Othello's sense of identity shattered down. When he believes Desdemona is cheating on him, he exclaims: "Othello's occupation is gone" (III.3.409); "Haply, for I am black...She's gone" (III.3.263-9).

The communication breakdown of between Othello and his disintegration in his new culture is strikingly stereotypical. The Venetian multicultural milieu could, regrettably, not erase the long-standing prejudice, ethnocentrism, and bigotry against the black 'other.' Instead of celebrating individual differences as a significant contribution to the Venetian culture, it rather exacerbates the already existing fissure and corroborates identification to the supreme European model, which they take it to be. Via the tragedy of his main protagonist, Othello, Shakespeare stresses the idea that the identity crisis and the cultural divide between the Arab and the European worlds have not been bridged, that dissimilation rather than assimilation remains the norm. It becomes obvious that barriers of all sorts could not withstand the test of time since Shakespeare's days till today. The situation has been aggravated in the present times to embrace new terms such as 'Islamophobia,' most of which is merely socially constructed images by the opposite part reaching an obnoxious portrait of Muslims as demonstrated by Shaheen (Shaheen, 2009). In the beginning of the play, Othello was not feeling distinct from others except in his genuine services to the state accepting his "negative oversimplified stereotype of himself" (Neill, 2005, P. 195-96). It is Iago who succeeds in colonizing Othello linguistically and psychologically raising within him a racial awareness through the use of offensive animalistic language that reminds him of his barbaric origins. Iago makes a full sense of the idea of "race" when Iago poisons his mind with ideas of inferiority, the fact that an upper-class Lady cannot intermingle with a black African man as

it is perceived against nature. Desdemona's father also believes that his daughter's marriage to Othello is "against all rules of nature." Brabantio suspects Othello having resorted to malevolent acts of magic and sorcery to reach Desdemona's soul. He brutally says: "Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her" (I.2.64).

Iago also uses segregationist terms to describe Othello's otherness as, "black Othello" (II.3.28), "the lusty Moor" (II.2.284), "the devil," "a Barbary horse" (I.1.112) and "an erring Barbarian" (I.3.350). All these qualifiers are the best testimony that however devoted Othello might be to the state and the people, he is also seen from the lens of Venetians as an alien. The racist discourse amplified in the significant amount of racial discrimination above has served across the previous centuries to legitimize the colonial enterprise. Representing the black in an image of bestiality and sexual lust dehumanizing him, has justified the means through which the West sought to aggrandize its empire of conquest through trade slavery. Blackness was an accomplice of barbarity and truculence and such was Othello's image in the eyes of Brabantio and his mates. A man who "springs startlingly close to the sources of animal energy, the *feritas* in man." (Sukanta, 1981, P. 164). The process of 'othering' marginalizing the outsider as an intruder into a homogenous society on the basis of the bias of difference is meant to corroborate the superiority of one power over the inferiority of the other. The logocentrism ideology based on classification and the dichotomy of 'us' vs 'them', 'black' vs 'white,' East' vs 'West,' further perpetuated the presence of aliens. It is in light of these binaries that the play, Othello, should be read; a play about Black pride subverted by white supremacy. Such subversion is built on a false set of cultural beliefs of one pole vis-à-vis the other. It is worth noting, in this regard, that it is the potent party that tries to standardize its values and set of beliefs at the expense of a marginalized dominated party which turns over time into the defamed 'other', subject to the cruel categorization of the predominant power.

It is worth noting that an international mega city like Venice which prides itself upon being a transparent door to multiethnicities from the world over, appears to be more lenient and tolerant towards settlers and immigrants belonging to the same European ancestry. Othello is not the only foreigner to be sharing the Venetian life. Roderigo and Iago are also outsiders, yet not discriminated against by virtue of their common faith and race. Andrew Hadfield points out that both "Iago and Roderigo are Spanish names which also makes them to be strangers and outsiders like Othello, though their foreignness is clearly disguised because they are whites." (Hadfield, P. 5). In the final scene of the play. When Othello finds out that the handkerchief he gave to Desdemona as a token of love was in Cassio's hands, he falls into frenzy using the same 'black' jargon that he has been victim to. In Othello's subconscious, he remains a dark-skinned African Moor regardless of his concessions of converting to Christianity in his desperate attempt to further assimilate to the Venetian society. Parekh believes that in the process of being fully assimilated into a new culture cannot be made concrete but with an undeniable conversion from one creed to another.

Othello is by no means of a high rank to his equals. He is in an "in-between" position; neither fully integrated in a society that accepted him only on the basis of his courageous services to defend the Venetian state against any possible external enemies, nor fully allied with his mother culture. Othello, finally, realizes that he is no more than a hired mercenary to be rid of when times call. Following this, "the Venetian aristocrats will certainly not admit him [Othello] to their inmost society, and they certainly do not want their daughters to marry Moors" (Wain, 1982, P. 14). His act of murdering Desdemona is an act of retaliation not only against his wife but against the whole Venetian society and by extension to the whole

Western hemisphere that inculcated within the black the idea of inferiority and vileness. According to Cartelli and Rowe, race is the cause of Othello's crime (Cartelli & Rowe, 2007). Othello bursts in a verbal outrage in front of treacherous Iago saying, "Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!" (III.3.448) preparing to kill Desdemona whose "name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black as mine own face" (III.3.387-389). His bloody revenge is the ultimate testimony that he, himself, has descended into the fires of desperation of his own hatred. More than ever, Othello testifies to himself, first, that he is not worthwhile, that grand achievements from the vintage point of the west are not measured by the potency of the deed nor by its bravery but rather by the color of the skin and the sharing of the same white race. Thus, "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" (Kiernan, 1989, P. 57).

## **Conclusion**

Having Shakespeare's, *Othello*, end tragically, is far from intentionally meaning to reach a cathartic purpose. The main incentive behind Shakespeare's portrait of the psychological ills of his protagonist is to demonstrate the devastating effects of racism and ethnic exclusion of what we call "the other" and the costs of this seclusion upon the psyche of the "dominated." The play finally culminates in a bath of blood carrying in its maze the tears of a broken African military commander who neither his good ethics, nor his achievements in the military service he renders to the state brought him solace against his ethnic roots. Othello who has been admitted into the Venetian society by dint of his military worth and rhetorical skills is, ultimately, felt inferior to the aristocratic senator like, Brabantio, and even to his peers. This point leads us to another serious issue of the Venetian society which is its limited openness. However, dazzling in thousand colors the city might be, and however richly multilingual, and multiethnic, diversity was apparently not the norm essential to communication in a non-sleeping city over the sea. The prevailing idea about the unique multicultural character of Venice seems to have declared its bankruptcy in *Othello*. In Shakespeare's work, Venice is revealed as a segregationist and discriminatory against the foreigner foregrounding intense feelings of European racism and challenging centuries-long held beliefs that Venice is an opened gate to the world where all mixed races could live in peace and harmony. Such was the image communicated by Shakespeare voicing "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).



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