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OTHELLO'NUN BİR DOĞULU OLARAK
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PORTRAIT OF OTHELLO AS AN EASTERN
MAN

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Öz

William Shakespeare tarafından yazılan Othello, tüm zamanların en önemli eserlerinden biridir. Othello'nun 1603'te yazıldığına inanılıyor. Oyunun kahramanı Othello, aynı zamanda Venedik kuvvetlerinin generali olan siyah, bir adamdır. Eşi Desdemona, teğmeni Casio ve sancaktarı Iago'dur. Oyun, ana dört karakterinin özel hayatlarına, sorunlarına ve tutkularına odaklanır. Othello, Iago'nun, Desdemona'nın Casio ile ilişkisi hakkındaki yalanlarına inandığından Desdemona'yı öldürür ve oyunun sonunda kendisini öldürür. Bu çalışma, 16. Yüzyılda, siyahı bir adam kötü olarak görüldüğünden, Othello'nun batılların görüşlerine göre kötü bir adam olarak tasvir edilmesini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca dünyanın doğusundan gelen Doğulu karakter mantıksız ve ahlaksız olarak görülmüyordu. Dolayısıyla hem siyahı bir adam hem de Doğulu bir adam olarak Othello, Shakespeare'in gözünde de kötü ve mantıksız bir adam olarak görülmüş olabilir. Bu nedenle Shakespeare, Othello'nun başarılı ve güçlü bir adam olabileceğini düşünmüş olabilmesine rağmen doğulu bir adam olarak Othello, Iago'nun da yardımıyla zamanla ortaya çıkan kötü bir tarafa sahiptir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Othello, kötülük, doğululuk, siyahilik.

Abstract

Othello, written by William Shakespeare, is one of the greatest works of all time. It is believed that Othello was written in 1603. The protagonist of the play, Othello, is a black man who is also the general of the Venetian forces. His wife is Desdemona, his lieutenant is Casio and his ensign is Iago. Othello centers on the private lives, problems and passions of its main four characters. Othello believes in Iago's lies about Desdemona's relationship with Casio so he kills Desdemona and kills himself at the end of the play. This paper aims to illustrate the portrayal of Othello as an evil man according to western people's views in the 16th century since the black man was seen as evil at that time. Besides, the Oriental character that was from the eastern part of the world was seen as illogical and immoral. Thus, Othello, both as a black and oriental man, might be seen as evil and illogical man in the eye of Shakespeare, too. That's why Shakespeare might have thought that Othello may be a successful and strong man, but, as an oriental man, he has an evil side which is revealed in time with the help of Iago.

Keywords: Othello, evil, orientalism, blackness.

INTRODUCTION

The 16th century witnessed myriad of famous writers such as Christopher Marlowe, Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare among others. However, the most well-known writer over the world is Shakespeare. He wrote many plays included *Othello* when England had an African population taken from Africa as slaves. As Greenblatt (2012) states, “they (blacks) became increasingly fashionable as servants in aristocratic and gentle households in the last decades of the 16th century” (p. 546). Some Elizabethans believed that “Africans’ blackness resulted from the climate of the regions where they lived.” (Greenblatt, 2012, p. 545). Furthermore, Toker (2014) illustrates that “nonetheless, some of them think that black people are evil. As according to them, God created human in his own image – i.e. white – therefore people with black skins must be either lower in breeding or an abnormality of some sort. They did not have any high opinion of foreigners” (p. 31). It is clear that English people were prejudiced against the blacks and this was obviously reflected in the play *Othello*.

Othello is also from the eastern part of the world. He probably comes from Africa or Asia. His nationality can be understood with the word *Moor* as “the words “Moor,” “blackman”, “blackmoor”, “Negroe”, “Aethiopian” (or even “Turk,” and “Arab”) were used interchangeably in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in spite of the fact that the English became aware of the distinctions between different types of blacks (Elaskary, 2008, p. 7). 'Moor' was a term that was often used to refer to all Muslims regardless of, -whether they were from Africa or Asia. Therefore, it may be concluded that, for English people, the origin of the eastern one does not matter. That is, one is western if s/he comes from some parts of west. This creates a distinction between west and east, which results in a hierarchy of west and the rest. In this regard, the distinction between east and west is explained in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. According to Said (2003), “there are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominates while; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (p. 36). One may notice that, a sort of hierarchy is created by western people. According to this hierarchy one side is superior to the other side. In other words, one side is the opposite of the other side, which results in binary oppositions. Interestingly enough, for centuries European's perspective has been the same about these binary oppositions. Particularly during the 16th century when the colonialism started and increased, people's way of thinking was the same in terms of *Orientalism* and Said (2003) stated in this context that “European people think that the European is a close reasoner; he is natural logician; he is by nature skeptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is the most slipshod description” (p. 38).

Shakespeare as the 16th century European writer may have had the same idea with the contemporaries. He may have wanted to show the difference between the east and the west. As the main character, *Othello* was an eastern man and he could be easily controlled by others. In the end, not only did he make his own end but also he was seen as evil. The 16th century concept will be discussed in terms of Racism and Orientalism in the rest of the paper.

1. PORTRAIT OF OTHELLO AS A BLACK MAN AND EVIL

One of Cinthio's tales in *Hecatommithi* is *Othello*'s major source which describes Iago's passion for Desdemona. However, Shakespeare deleted any romantic element from his play. In addition, unlike Cinthio, who has obvious causes for vengeance, Shakespeare's Iago is unsure of why he acts the way he does. For instance, on the one hand, he envies Cassio as he is a lieutenant and he also accuses *Othello* and Emilia of adultery. On the other hand, he claims that he hates being a servant and shows racist hatred of the black man. As it is seen, he does not have a clear motivation for plotting against *Othello*. To put it differently, Iago has problems with all of the characters. For instance, he plots against *Othello* as Iago believes that *Othello* is a moor and does not deserve to be a commander for the army and the love of Desdemona. Iago hates Cassio as Iago thinks that Cassio is an inexperienced soldier. He also takes

advantage of Roderigo's feelings for Desdemona and makes use of him. He also stabs his wife Emilia for revealing too much information. In this sense, Samuel Taylor Coleridge defines Iago's actions as "motive hunting of motiveless malignity" (1987, p. 315). For instance, as Işık (2014) writes, "When Othello asks Iago if there is something bothering him Iago answers as 'nothing', which is ironically true. That he plots against Othello by creating a net to ensnare him seems intelligently artistic. That is, one can admire him for how he carefully and elaborately plots against Othello" (p. 12). Although Iago does not have an apparent reason for plotting against Othello and this makes him as a sort of incarnation of evil in the play Othello is considered as the embodiment of evil. In other words, as Beier (2014) states that Iago sees every situation as an opportunity and, through his ruthless deeds, draws fortune. Iago was created to represent evil, and he never possesses or exercises any virtues (p. 83). Interestingly enough, not Iago but Othello is considered as being evil by the characters in the play. His race may be considered as an important factor affecting other characters' ideas in the sense that Othello may act in an evil way.

Othello reveals the ideas of Shakespeare's contemporaries about eastern world and elaborates on Shakespeare's understanding of eastern people, especially black people. According to westerners, "God created humanity from his own reflection, white." (Toker, 2014, p. 31). *Othello* was written when African people were taken from Africa as slaves. The play presents the slavery event. For example, in the play when all people learned that Othello married to Desdemona, Othello said that Brabantio invited him to his house and Othello told his whole life story until he met with Desdemona's family. He explains it as follows:

Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field,
 Of hair-breadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,
 Of being taken by the insolent foe
 And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
 And portance in my traveler's history. (Shakespeare 1.3.134-139)

This quotation shows that blacks including Othello, are taken as slaves. If they fail to escape from their owners, they have to stay with them. This may be the reason why poets and writers like Shakespeare used black figures in their works.

There are many superstitions about being black. For instance, some Elizabethans believed that Africans were black because of the climate (Greenblatt, 2012, p. 545). Furthermore, according to another belief, some of them thought that black people were evil (Toker, 2014, p. 31). Lastly, Elaskary (2008) explains, "all Moors, white, brown, black or Negroes, were usually associated with loads of negative characteristics; being cruel, greedy, inferior, impulsive, aggressive, pagan, devilish or voluptuous, and a few positive ones; being daring, strong, hard-working or, sometimes, passionate" (p. 8). These negative characteristics are attributed to Othello as well. For example, in the play when Emilia learns Othello killed Desdemona, she says "o, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!" (Shakespeare, 5.2.131-132). If someone white killed somebody, she wouldn't say 'blacker'. Probably she would say 'How devil you are!'. However, when Othello kills Desdemona, Emilia emphasizes Othello's blackness. Moreover, Iago calls Brabantio at night "Arise, arise! / Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, / or else the devil will make a grandsire of you" (Shakespeare, 1.189-91). Iago basically says that if Brabantio failed to save his daughter, Desdemona would give birth from a devil and Brabantio would be the grandsire of these children. Moreover, Brabantio says:

A maiden never bold,
 Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
 Blushed at herself, and she -in spite of nature,

Of years, of country, credit, everything-

To fall in love with what she feared to look on?' (Shakespeare 1.3.95-99).

In this quotation Brabantio wants to lay stress on Othello's physical appearance. He says that 'how a nice girl like Desdemona loves someone whom she fears to look at?' Because she was seen as *white ewe* who is pure because she is white and Othello was seen as *black ram* which means the incarnation of the devil. That's why Brabantio thinks like that. Additionally, Iago says to Roderigo "and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?" (Shakespeare, 2.1.220-221). Iago wants to convince Roderigo that Desdemona will be bored of Othello whose shape is like devil.

Although Othello is popular among people who love him, he loses their love and respect in time, however, this does not happen because of a flaw in his character but because of his race. Othello's racial difference gives Iago a significant advantage. That is, Iago makes use of the racial difference to irritate Brabantio about his daughter's marriage to Othello since he realizes that he can humiliate Othello with his past. For instance, he accuses Othello in front of ancients and dukes of practicing witchcraft on Desdemona, which both harm Othello's authority and causes Othello to confront this otherness in public. In addition, Brabantio makes use of Othello's skin color against him and claims

BRABANTIO: And she, in spite of nature,

Of years, of country, credit, everything,

To fall in love with what she feared to look on?

It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect

That will confess perfection so could err.

Against all rules of nature, and must be driven. (Shakespeare 1.3.99-104)

Although Brabantio has a good relationship with Othello who has stayed at Brabantio's house on different occasions Iago expects Brabantio to oppose the marriage of his daughter to Othello because of racial difference. When Desdemona reveals her love for Othello, her father explains, "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has misled her father, and may thee" (Shakespeare 1.3.288-289) with his most racist face of Othello. Iago focuses on the otherness of Othello in terms of his race because he realizes that it is Othello's weak side. Realizing Othello's insecurities in himself, Iago mentions, "The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are" (Shakespeare 1.3.399-402). As it may be seen, in the play there are a great number of examples showing how Othello is evil in the eyes of characters. All of the characters are the reflections of the real people in the 16th century. Shakespeare may have reflected black people as evil because his contemporaries thought in this way. Shakespeare lived in the 16th century, which is a potential source of his ideas about black people.

2. PORTRAIT OF OTHELLO AS AN ORIENT AND EVIL

In the play, although Iago is the incarnation of devil, Othello seems to be an evil character. When looked in detail, it is realized that Othello's evilness is realized by the characters in the play and of course by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. For centuries, the eastern world has been seen as *illogical* (Said, 2003, p. 38) and *barbarians* (Said, p. 38) by the westerners. Edward Said explains the relationship between east and west in *Orientalism*. While the eastern world is introduced as *Orients*, the western world is called as *Occidents*. Their borders are strict and quite clear in the play. For example, Iago, who is a European man, wants to be the lieutenant of Othello, but Othello chooses Cassio as his lieutenant. Hence, Iago makes plans that harm all people, especially Othello. He says that he will pretend to love and follow Othello but in reality, he is not the person who appears to be (Shakespeare 1.1.62-65). Iago chooses to act in an evil way as a person. He even thinks that Othello slept with his wife Emilia and although he says that it may not be true, it arouses suspicion for him (Shakespeare 1.3.375-379). He mischievously performs his plans,

and while nothing happens to Iago in the end, Othello as an eastern man not only falls metaphorically and loses everything he has but also ends up in death. On the one hand, Othello is called as “thick-lips” (Shakespeare 1.1.66), “black ram” (Shakespeare 1.1.88), “Barbary horse” (Shakespeare 1.1.111) and “Moor” (Shakespeare I.I.116) by his enemies, evoking his African race. Characters don't say these words right to his face because of his power. On the other hand, he is called as “Valiant Othello” (Shakespeare 1.3.49), “worthy governor” (Shakespeare 2.1.31), “our noble general, Othello” (Shakespeare 2.2.11) etc. by people who love him. It can be understood that Othello who is called as Barbary, black horse, etc., has enemies but he is also a popular person. In the end, his reputation turns into evil and he loses his job. Therefore, as an eastern and black man Othello is seen as evil character both by the people around him and by statesmen. Because his race is black, he is considered as evil. However, evil is a choice taken by individuals. That is, one person may choose to act in a good or evil way. It is not one's race that decides. It is known that “freedom is considered as a possibility of good and evil. There may be coercive reasons but human beings, by means of ‘freedom’ and ‘will’, are the ultimate authority to choose something” (Işık, 2017, p. 251).

Shakespeare as a European man may have wanted to show Othello as an illogical man. In the play, Othello kills Desdemona without questioning her. He believes in Iago's lies about Desdemona and Cassio. He sees Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's hand and thinks that she deceives him. That's why; Othello is portrayed as a stereotypical *Orient* man. For, when he envies his wife, he cannot use his logic, instead of it, he uses his emotions. On the other hand, Iago is portrayed as a European man as he uses his logic rather than his emotions. Hence, he reaches his aims. Also, mentioning Othello Iago says that “The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are.” (Shakespeare 1.3.388-391). He means that Othello seems to be a decent man, thus, why he can be controlled easily. As he cannot use his logic and, he cannot see the realities. As a result, because of Iago's outstanding abilities, Othello has lost his honor, reputation and marriage.

Moreover, in the play eastern people are seen as immoral and barbarian. For example, Othello tells about his dangerous adventures which he saw. While he is talking about these unfortunate disasters he says, “and of the Cannibals that each other eats, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Grew beneath their shoulders...” (Shakespeare I.III.143-145). As an eastern man, he sees Cannibals as barbarians. This not only shows Othello's alienation from his society and but also Shakespeare's idea about Orientals. In this regard, Said writes about European's way of thinking as follows:

It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians." (2003, p. 54).

Moreover, Othello uses the statement “Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.” (Shakespeare I.III.82-83), when he defends himself in front of the Duke. He wants to tell that he cannot speak properly and he is not a smooth talker because he spends most of his time in fighting in wars. All of these negative characteristics become integrated with Othello, and since he is easterner and black, he is considered as evil. Moreover, he is seen as barbarian and illogical man. For he behaves like barbarians as he does not listen to anybody and judges people and makes illogical decisions. As a person having lived in England in the 16th century, Shakespeare created such a character to show Orientals' behaviors and how evil they might be.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's famous play *Othello* is portrayed as evil because the title character is black and comes from the eastern world. According to the people of the 16th century, God created human his own image as white. Blacks are inferior to his whiteness, hence, they are sinful and evil. The reason why

the characters in the play think the same way with the people of the 16th century is because they are the inner voice of Shakespeare. In the play, the characters call Othello as “thick-lips” (Shakespeare 1.1.66), “black ram” (Shakespeare 1.1.88), “Barbary horse” (Shakespeare 1.1.111). All of these words are representations of how evil he is in the eyes of people. For example, Othello kills Desdemona and Emilia reacts against him as “blacker devil” (Shakespeare 5.2.131-132). Moreover, Iago calls Brabantio that if he didn't save his daughter, he would be the grandfather of devil's children (Shakespeare 1.1.89-91). Furthermore, Elizabethan Londoners see blacks as ‘aliens’, because they think that they have differences (Toker, 2014, p. 32). Othello describes Cannibals as eating each other (Shakespeare 1.3.143). This shows his alienation from his society- since he starts to think like Europeans. On the other hand, it also shows that how Elizabethans think about others. These distinctions between the east and the west are explained by Edward Said (2003) who describes the east as *Orients* and the west as *Occidents* by stating that, “the westerners set up boundaries between their land and others which they call ‘the land of barbarians’ (p. 54). They believe that easterners are barbarians and do not know anything and they eat human flesh, which is something exemplified in the play (Shakespeare 1.3.143-145). For instance, Othello says he is rude in his speech (Shakespeare 1.3. 82-83), which shows his barbarian side. Although he knows how to fight well, he does not know how to speak before public, which makes him indecent for English people. Moreover, as Said (2003) mentioned, to westerners, *Occidents* are reasonable while *Orients* are illogical people (p. 38). Their minds are different. That's why, Othello is seen as an *illogical* person. As he acts with emotions rather than with his logic and kills his wife without listening to her. In the end, he loses everything he has and kills himself. Therefore, as a tragic hero, Othello is considered as an evil person not only for the characters of the play but also for Shakespeare and his contemporaries as well because the 16th century English people were prejudiced against eastern people. They saw *orients* as illogical and immoral. This is the reason why, Shakespeare may have thought like his contemporaries and Othello is created in this way.

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