

## Desdemona as a Subversive Daughter and Submissive Wife: Reading Shakespeare's *Othello*

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### Abstract

*William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English poet, playwright, and actor and widely regarded as the most excellent writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". (Narayanrao, 3). Everyone is familiar with the well-known fictional male characters he has developed. It was evident that all of Shakespeare's play titles used the names of male protagonists. What about the female protagonists? Did Elizabethan society have a gender-biased society? What was the position of the Elizabethan women? How did Shakespeare represent them in his works? In the play Othello, Shakespeare portrayed Desdemona as a submissive wife and a subversive daughter. What were the reasons for being so submissive and subversive? Why did Desdemona break the social conventions of the Elizabethan period? Desdemona had abandoned her family in order to win Othello's love, but in the end, she received nothing. Despite this, she was his submissive, faithful, and noble wife. In return, she got the punishment from her husband. Why did Othello kill her? Even though, she was a noble, a loyal and an obedient wife to him. Is it because of Othello's suspicion and jealousy? Is jealousy so more robust and more powerful than love? How could Othello's love change so quickly and turn into hate? How can a person suddenly believe in lies? Why do good people always suffer and die for their mistakes? Why did Othello not have faith in his loyal wife? Why did he trust Iago's words? Iago is seen by Othello as a clever, honest, and devoted man. So, he trusted him unquestioningly. Whatever lies Iago told him, Othello believed in it. He was ensnared in Iago's mind game rather than comprehending it. Othello is a brave man and a loving husband to Desdemona, but he had a trust issue with her. The problems of faith, honesty, obedience, jealousy, and loyalty are the main themes of the drama. These problems have been thoroughly examined in light of the current era.*

**Keywords:** *submissive, subversive, jealous, loyal, trust, social norms*

Women in the Elizabethan era were denied equal rights and freedoms due to gender bias. The social hierarchy of the society had specific rules for women. How should women behave in private and public spheres? Their roles differed according to the time and situation. The women did not pursue any careers outside of providing household services as maids and cooks. They had given the impression of being very emotional, submissive, docile, and inferior to the men. It was their responsibility to protect their families' honor and reputation as they were members of a patriarchal society. They should respect their dads and wives and refrain from speaking to anyone. The Elizabethan culture regarded the wife's innocence as a highly noteworthy phenomena.

Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, composed in five acts between 1603 and 1622, was eventually published in 1622. Numerous themes, including love, loyalty, trust,

relationships, jealousy, handkerchiefs, goodness, justice, power, appearance, and reality are the main topics of the play.

The lead character in *Othello* is a black man who is married to affluent white Desdemona. Othello is a man of extraordinary dignity and great honor. Their marriage broke the social convention of the Elizabethan period. Most prominently, Desdemona had subverted the natural order by eloping and choosing her life partner. In Elizabethan society, which was patriarchal and forbade women from selecting their own life partners, eloping was frowned upon. Women were only permitted to get married with their fathers' approval. Let's say that a woman's father is regarded as her master if she is single; if she is married, her husband is unquestionably her master. These two aspects can be seen in Shakespeare's other play, *The Taming of the Shrew*. In one of the scenes in the play,

Petruchio mentions to his wife Kate as her master. In the words of Petruchio:

"They shall go forward, Kate, at thy command.  
Obey the bride, you that attend on her;  
Go to the feast, revel and domineer,  
Carouse full measure to her maidenhead,  
Be mad and merry, or hang yourselves:  
But for my bonny Kate, she must be with me.  
Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret;  
I will be master of what is mine.  
She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,  
My household stuff, my field, my barn,  
My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything;  
And here she stands, touch her whoever dare;  
I'll bring mine action on the proudest he  
That stops my way in Padua. Grumio,  
Draw forth thy weapon; we are beset with thieves;  
Rescue thy mistress, if thou be a man.  
Fear not, sweet wench; they shall not touch thee,  
Kate; I'll buckler thee against a million." (The Taming  
of the Shrew, Act III, Scene 2, 79-80)

Petruchio refers to Katherine as his wife and calls himself her master. "I will master what is mine own," he declares. Declaring Kate his property, he makes comparisons between her and things, household items, fields, barns, horses, oxen, and ass. For Petruchio, Katherine is like his property and commodity. It demonstrates the dominance of men and the way in which women were viewed as subordinate in society. Men were expected by society to be the breadwinners, and women were expected to take care of the home and raise children. In addition, women are supposed to behave in a highly submissive manner toward their husbands, fathers, and brothers. They had been viewed as inferior to males, both emotionally and physically.

Desdemona, an aristocratic woman in the play Othello, is portrayed as a subservient lover and obedient daughter. Shakespeare's Desdemona is among his best-ever characters. She is Othello's (the Moor of Venice) noble wife. She married against the wishes of her parents and subverted the social order of the society. According to the rules of the society, a black Moor cannot marry a white woman. Desdemona, daughter of a Senator, despite having social and political hierarchies, she married to Othello.

Their marriage broke the social taboo of the society. Brabantio referred to Othello as a "thief," accusing him of having cast a sorceress spell on her daughter. He remarks, "How could she love and marry a black man like Othello when she's turned down so many young men from Venice?"

The truth was not digestible to him. Brabantio says, "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?"

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,  
So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,  
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
Run from her garage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight."  
(The Tragedy of Othello, Act 1, Scene 2, 18)

Desdemona had the option of marrying anyone in the area, but she decides to wed Othello despite their different racial backgrounds. That can be viewed as a good aspect of her character. Desdemona defies expectations by marrying a Moor, and she is chastised for her customary disobedience. Furthermore, she doesn't care if this is criticized. When she is in front of her father, she is not even shy. She expresses her love and loyalty for Othello clearly. In the words of Desdemona,

"That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued  
Even to the very quality of my lord:  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honors and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate?  
So that, dear lords, if I am left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he goes to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,  
And I, a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him." (The  
Tragedy of Othello, Act I, Scene 3, 31)

What might Shakespeare be trying to convey in his play Othello? What does he want to show the readers? Is it sympathy or pity for Desdemona? While some readers might sympathize with Desdemona's character, others

would not. First of all, she weds Othello without her father's approval. Her subversive attitude towards her father can be attributed to her disobedience. Secondly, if any woman transgresses gender boundaries, she will get the punishment. Desdemona's love affairs and marriage to Othello followed a similar path.

Desdemona expresses her emotions and how she has been a virtuous and submissive wife to Othello in her conversation with Emilia. Desdemona says, "Emilia, come. Be as your fancies teach you; Whatever you be, I am obedient." (Othello, Act 3. Scene 3, 78). Desdemona believes that she is an obedient and loyal wife to Othello. It shows her submissive nature towards her husband. Society has specific expectations from women; they have to fulfill the needs and demands of their husbands. They require their women to be clever, obedient, and refined.

Desdemona's father, Brabantio, was curious by her feelings of affection and deference for him. Does she love her husband more than she does him? The readers will fall in love with Desdemona after reading her response. Desdemona says:

"My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty:  
To you, I am bound for life and education;  
My life and education both taught me  
How to respect you; you are the lord's duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter, but here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to Moor, my lord." (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 1. Scene 3, 28-29)

Desdemona and Brabantio's conversations indicate that she is aware of her responsibilities as a wife and daughter. She says, it was not easy for her to choose. Her father has given her life and education, so she obeys and respects him. But now she is married to Othello - now she has to obey him, the same way as her mother offers to her father. Shakespeare maintained that a woman would be punished, if she attempted to violate any of the patriarchal norms. In his plays, he has allowed female protagonists a considerable amount of choice, but within bounds.

Emilia is another female character in the play Othello. She is the wife of Iago and Desdemona's attendant who is bold and robust. She questions the unfair rules that apply only to women. She voices and asks for equality between

the sexes. What is wrong with their husbands? Women are human too, with feelings just like men's. Emilia is aware of the societal injustice against women. Emilia questions:

"Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,  
Yet we have some revenge. Let husbands know  
Their wives have senses like them: they see and smell  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,  
As husbands have. What is it that they do  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?  
I think it doth: isn't frailty that thus errs?  
It is so too: and have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
Then let them use us well: else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." (Othello, Act 4, Scene 3, 136-137)

If a daughter, a wife, any woman tries to transgress gender boundaries, she will face some consequences in the end. The suspicion is like a poison in the relationship between wife and husband. Relationships could end as a result; Othello's story illustrates this. Because Desdemona gave Cassio a handkerchief as a sign of affection, he believes that she had betrayed him. Thus, the misunderstanding made him to kill his wife. Othello asks Desdemona:

OTHELLO: "Think on thy sins.  
DESDEMONA: They are loves I bear to you.  
OTHELLO: Aye, and for that, thou diest.  
DESDEMONA: That death's unnatural and kills for loving.  
Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?  
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame:  
These are portents, but yet I hope, I hope,  
They do not point on me.  
OTHELLO: Peace, and be still!  
DESDEMONA: I WILL SO. What's the matter?  
OTHELLO: That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee  
Thou gavest to Cassio. (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 147)

Desdemona's talk with Othello demonstrates her unwavering affection for him. Othello believes, however,

that she has betrayed him and is no longer a faithful wife. In an attempt to comfort him, Desdemona gives Cassio a handkerchief and says she has never loved him. But her attempts to convenience Othello have failed. Desdemona said:

DESDEMONA: "And have your mercy too! I never did Offend you in my life; I never loved Cassio But with such a general warranty of heaven As I might love. I never gave him a token.

OTHELLO: By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand.

O perjured woman! thou dost stone my heart, And it makes me call what I intend to it A murder, which I thought was a sacrifice:

I saw the handkerchief.

DESDEMONA: I never gave it him: send for him hither:

Let him confess the truth.

OTHELLO: He hath confessed."(The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 147-148)

The foundation of human existence is understanding amongst people. Everything ruins after it's gone. The issue may arise from Othello's inability to recognize his wife's innocence and truthfulness due to misunderstanding. In an effort to show Othello how devoted she is, she suggests that he phone Cassio so that he can be honest. He was not to hear, though. But he sensed that there was a sexual link between Cassio and Desdemona. Othello's primary issue is that he thinks his wife has cheated on him because he saw the handkerchief in Cassio's hand. Desdemona is even called a "whore" by him. She informs Emilia before passing away that she is passing away innocently. Desdemona said:

DESDEMONA: A guiltless death I die.

EMILIA: O, who hath done this deed?

DESDEMONA: Nobody; I. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell! [Die.] (Othello, Act 5, Scene, 2.151)

Desdemona is an example of a good person who suffers and is punished without fault. In any relationship, trust is very essential. If there is no trust, then no relationship. Instead of having faith in Desdemona, Othello blindly accepted Iago, concluding that Desdemona was not a disobedient wife. But Othello had a trust problem. So, he

killed Desdemona. Emilia becomes enraged after Desdemona dies and starts questioning Othello. She said:

EMILIA: She said so: I must need report the truth. %

OTHELLO: She's like a liar, gone to burning hell:

'Twas I that killed her.

EMILIA: O, the more angel she, And you, the blacker devil!

OTHELLO: She turned to folly, and she was a whore.

EMILIA: Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil.

OTHELLO: She was false as water.

EMILIA: Thou art rash as fire, to say

That she was false: O, she was heavenly true!

OTHELLO: Cassio did top her; ask thy husband else.

Oh, I was dammed beneath all depth in hell,

But that I did proceed upon just grounds

To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all.

EMILIA: O, mistress, villain hath made mocks with love!

My husband say that she was false!

OTHELLO: I say, thy husband: dost understand the world?

My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago." (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 151-152)

Emilia knows very well about her husband's nature. She calls Iago a villain, who mocked on their relationship. She is a provocative and robust woman; who questioned Othello for killing Desdemona. She indeed referred to him as stupid fool, idiot, as dumb as dirt. She cautions him that she will tell the truth to everyone. Emilia said,

"Thou hast not half that power to do me harm

As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!

As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed—

I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known

Though I lost twenty lives. Help! Help, ho! Help!

The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder!

(The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 152)

Emilia is a very faithful servant to Desdemona and an audacious female character. For Emilia, it was painful and emotional to see Desdemona dying. She accuses Othello of a murderer who killed her sweetest and innocent Desdemona. She asserts that, "The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder!" (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5,

Scene 2, 175) Othello reveals the reason for killing Desdemona. He said,

"This pitiful, but yet Iago knows  
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame  
A thousand times committed, Cassio confessed it:  
And she did gratify his amorous works  
With that recognizance and pledge of love  
When I first gave her, I saw it in his hand:  
It was a handkerchief, an antique token  
My father gave my mother." (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 154-155)

Othello feels that Desdemona has betrayed him because he fell for Iago's falsehoods. Although he had a great deal of affection for Desdemona, he didn't trust her. The vintage handkerchief that Desdemona receives as a gesture of affection is the play's central plot point. Desdemona lost the handkerchief. Rather, Iago took advantage of the opportunity that Emilia inadvertently provided him by stating, "lost." Put a handkerchief in Cassio's bedroom and plot to cause miscommunication between Othello and Desdemona. He concluded that Desdemona was having an affair with him and thought Cassio was the owner of the scarf.

Emilia loses her temper and tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief when Desdemona dies. Iago attempts to dissuade her from learning the truth, but she brashly declares that she will speak the truth. Iago addresses her as a 'villainous whore'. The term 'whore' is referred to all the women characters in the play. Emilia revealed the actual color of Iago, she says,

"O thou dull Moor! That handkerchief thou speak of  
I found by fortune and did give my husband;  
For often with a solemn earnestness--  
More than, indeed, belonged to such a trifle--  
He begged of me to steal it."

IAGO: Villainous whore!

Emilia: She give it Cassio? No, alas, I found it,  
And I did give 't my husband." (The Tragedy of Othello, Act 5, Scene 2, 155)

Othello's suspicious behavior made him kill Desdemona to save his family's pride and honor. But in reality, she was a loyal wife. She truly wanted only love and a happy life from her marriage. But in return, she got punishment in terms of death. Thus, in a relationship, trust

must be clear; if doubts arise, it is best to address the issue.

Othello is one of the finest tragedies of Shakespeare. The play makes sense when viewed from various angles. Initially, the play was composed in 1603-04, when Shakespeare was writing for a different audience. They may not be able to sympathize with Desdemona because she has married Othello, a black Moor without her father's consent. By going against her father's wishes and marrying Othello without his approval, she demonstrates that she is a submissive wife. However, the audience of today believes that Desdemona did nothing wrong when she married Othello. She is completely devoted to him.

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