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The Moor as a Muslim in William Shakespeare's Othello

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Abstract

The portrait of Muslim and Islam had an effective impact on the Elizabethan stage. It was dramatized paradoxically at the stage. Mostly, Muslims (Turk, Moors, Arabs and Persian) were represented as outsiders, infidels, lustful, violent people and barbarian. At the same time, they were regarded as a great threat to Europe, particularly after the expanses of Ottoman empire. The alliance of Queen Elizabeth with the Ottoman Empire represented by its Sultan Murad 11 had opened a new era of communication, policies and cultural exchange. The Elizabethan playwrights' writings and imagination were influenced by the tales and stories that narrated about Muslims and their actions. The stories were narrated by captives, travelers politician and traders. In addition, the Elizabethan people kept the Medieval distorted image towards Muslims' characterization. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) portrayed a controversial image of a Muslim who converted to Christianity in his famous play *Othello*. The study aims at analyzing the Moor's character as a Muslim and his paradoxical action throughout William Shakespeare's *Othello*. The paper is divided into three sections; the first one is a brief introduction. It is concentrated on the western perspective of Islam, Prophet Muhammad and the eastern people, the second section deals with the Muslim's visage on Elizabethan stage, the third section discusses the contradicting and paradoxical Islam-Christian image of Othello. The Conclusion sums up to the findings of the paper.

Keywords : the Moor, Muslims, William Shakespeare and Othello

1.1. Introduction

Literature is the mirror of societies and their cultural progress. Drama, for instance deals with many issues, subjects, ideological and cultural perspectives. Muslim people and Islam as any race and religion have a great impact on Elizabethan drama and its playwrights. The image of Islam and Muslims was not clearly depicted, and overloaded by different interpretations. The Elizabethan era inherited its perspective attitudes towards Islam and its Prophet from the Middle Ages. Elie Salem stated that Elizabethan writings on Islam reflected more the spirit of Middle Ages than that of Renaissance". (1965: 43) These attitudes or ideas were merely depended either on the ignorance of Islam and its reality or the distorted facts. The age of prophet Muhammad considered as "one of slavery, theft, robbery, conceit" (Ibid:45) and Muslim worshiped him as an "idol". The hostility against Islam appeared in the writing of men of letters and theologians as Byron Smith pointed out that:

The story of Muhammad as it is presented in English literature has its beginning in the Middle Ages. It is the record of slow emergence of historical figure from the thick mist of grotesque and fantastic legend, which continued, unchanged or only slightly modified, into the period of the Renaissance and beyond. The long persistence of the legendary belief about Muhammad was due to hostile prejudices of Christians towards an alien religion, reinforced by the memory of the crusades and by the ever-present fears of growing power of the Turkish empire during the sixteenth century. (1939:1)

The term of "Mohammedans" was familiar among English people at the Renaissance period. They could not recognize that Muhammad was only a prophet. Blanks noted in 1999:

The Oxford English Dictionary still defines 'Allah' as the name of the Deity among 'Mohammedans', an error that will be the most politically incorrect in the history of modern lexicography.(14)

In the Middle Ages, "Saracen" was common term among Christians in Europe for an Arab or a Muslim. It meant *sharqi* in Arabic, Oriental, Eastern. The Arabic Qur'an entered Europe through Spain with Muslim conquerors in the eighth century. In Elizabethan literature, Quran and Prophet Muhammad were criticized, and regarded as false and infidel. The Moors and Turks were characterized by criminal and evil traits. The Quran was misinterpreted as the sources of these evil traits. Some of Elizabethan playwrights were interested to dramatize the Muslims and Arab Characters in their dramatic writings (Al-Olaqi, 2012: 1767).

The Quran was portrayed as "the work of the devil" (Salem, 1965:50), and as "a stupid, verbose, extravagant book". This image was created and affirmed at that time. Moreover, Muhammad was created by the assistance of a heretical Christian or Jew. A historian Phillip K. Hitti tried to explain the Western attitude towards Islam. He declared that:

Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and other less highly developed Religions were never subjected to such a barrage of abuse and condemnation as Muhammadanism was. They posed no threat to Medieval West and offered no competition. It was, therefore, primarily fear, hostility, and prejudice that colored the western views of Islam and conditioned its attitude. Islamic beliefs were enemy's beliefs, and as such, suspect if not false. (Hitti, 1962:49)

Despite the confused picture of Islam and Muslims in the mind of English people, they did not be ashamed from Muslim, and communicated with them in different realms. Queen Elizabeth I made tangible relation with the remarkable Muslims rulers. She asked Sultan Murad III to join an Anglo-Ottoman alliance. Elizabeth wanted to secure trading rights and to face the threat of Spain. The relationship between England and the Islamic world had various aspects as for "diplomats, merchants, theologians, artists, poets, women and children, people from every class, pilgrimage, slaves, criminals, camp followers, -all had East-West connections" (Blanks & Frassetto, 1999:2). The pilgrimage, traveling and trade encouraged the West-East communication, besides the movement of sciences and translation.

1.2. Muslims' Visages on Elizabethan Stage

The spirit of the Renaissance inherited from the world of Islam, sparked with hope and confidence. Trading with new countries was accompanied by a flowering of the arts: literature, music and drama (Abdullah, 2002:4). The Arabs as Syed M. Ahsan mentioned that they kept the higher intellectual life and the study of science alive, in a time when the Christian west was fighting hopelessly with barbarism. The Arabs founded a link between the ancient culture and modern civilization (Ahsan, 1969:60). Muslims were identified by the two terms "Turk" and "Moor" in the Elizabethan texts. The Moor for an example described those with black skin and connected with any other skin color. It labeled as Black Moor, Tawny Moors, and White Moors (Sanders, 2003:11). There was a connection between the geographical origins and beliefs. The Moor could be African, Ethiopian, or Indian, who was either black or Muslim." The word 'Moor' was commonly used to refer to Muslims in general whether they came from Africa or Asia". (Barthelemy, 1977:3).

Moors in all their types as white, brown, black or Negroes, were visualized with negative qualities as being cruel, greedy, inferior, impulsive, aggressive, pagan and devilish. At the same time, they had a few positive ones as being daring, strong, hard-working or passionate (Elaskary, 2008: 9). At the Elizabethan period, the dramatists' writings based on four sources that dealt with the Orient: history books, the returning fighters who fought the Muslim at the Medieval age, the merchants and travelers who traveled to the Orient, the narrative accounts of captives people who were captured by Moorish and Turkish pirates in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Moors had been depicted in the same way as the Turks in the Elizabethan drama, "the only visible differences was that they were slightly more despicable than the Turks" (Ahsan, 1969:4). In Renaissance English plays, the Turks' characters were represented more than any other country of the East. It was obvious, because the Turks were the only nation which had threatened the peace of Europe at that time.. So as, the drama represented them as treacherous, barbarous, lustful, and devils (Ibid: 32). The Elizabethan hated the Turks and the religion of the Turks. The English people saw Islam as a threat to their religion, and they were frightened by Islamic converting. The Muslims were called by ethnic names with religious connotation. Otherwise, Muslims' scientific inquires and cultural contributions did not mention in Medieval and Renaissance writings.

2.1. Muslims in William Shakespeare's Drama

Shakespeare's works explored different themes and issues. He wrote about Man and the universe. His written plays were classified into three stages: Romances, Histories and Tragedies. William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) lived in the age when Queen Elizabeth eagerly involved in strategic relation with Muslims. Shakespeare's plays were affected by various sources and stories, in addition to his flaming imagination. These stories traced back to Islam, Muslims and their styles, traditions and beliefs. As Taylor pointed out that:

Islam was an important part of Shakespeare's world, and English superstitions about Islam shaped some of his work. Shakespeare apparently read Richard Knolles's General History of the Turks (1603), which means that he knew more about Islamic history and culture than most of us. He refer[ed] to Islam – to the prophet "Mahomet" to Morocco, and Barbary and Constantinople, to Moors, Turks, Ottomites, sultans, Saracens, paynims, moriscos-at least 141 Times in different plays (Taylor, 2004:1)

Some of Shakespeare's plays had few allusion to Islam as Koran, mosque and prayers. In the Elizabethan period more than sixty plays portrayed Muslims in the guise of Turks, Moors or Persians featured on London's stages. Another critic Haider stated that Shakespeare's knowledge about Islamic religion was sparse. He made one clearly reference to the prophet Muhammad 'Mahomet' in *Henry VI* "Was Mahomet inspired with a dove\Thou with an eagle art inspired then\ How may I reverently worship thee enough" (1.ii.140-141). This was a common view about the Prophet of Islam in the Medieval time (Haider, 2016:2). As Taylor wrote that Shakespeare "knew the Islamic history more than us", a contradictory other view was exposed by Chew another critic. Chew affirmed that the legends and lies which transformed to Shakespeare's England about Mahomet and Mohammedanism were inherited from Medieval ideas. They Pictured the Islam and its Founder in a confused and contradictory mass of grotesque notions (Chew. 1965:387). Shakespeare did not refer to Muslims as Mohammedan in contrary, he classified them with non-Christian as heathens, pagans and Saracens. The term "Moors" had been used in three of Shakespeare's plays as an equivalent to Muslims people; *Titus Andronicus*, *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*.

2.2. Othello (1604)

The play performed on the 1st of November 1604 at the Banqueting House at the Whitehall Palace in London. The events of the play had happened in Venice, an independent republic, and the broke out of war between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Venice. That war represented the belonging of Ottoman Empire for controlling over the Mediterranean routes. In fact, when "the reign of Elizabeth I began, Soliman the Magnificent represented a great threat to Europe. The danger of Turkish invasion was widely demonstrated in the Elizabethan drama, particularly in Shakespeare's *Othello* (Bayouli, 1977:113). Shakespeare's *Othello* was written and performed on stage during the English Renaissance. Whereby, major social, political and social changes had happened. Particularly, Man's attitudes toward fate and the universe. Othello, the hero was figured as an outsider or a stranger. Generally, he characterized the image of Oriental characters and particularly the Arabs in the Elizabethan audience mind. The heavily choice of images of darkness and lights emphasizing the racial origin of Othello "The Moor". Othello was a brown Moor who came originally from Barbary but lived as a semi-naturalized citizen in the tiny Republic of Venice and married a white beautiful Venetian lady (Elaskary 137).

The play explores Othello –Desdemona relationship and how this marital relationship is depicted in the play. *Othello* is the tragedy of a man who loves so passionately, but not "wisely". Othello loves Desdemona and cares to be qualified to her position and statue in Venetian community. She loves him "for the dangers [he] had pass'd, And [he] loved her that she did pity them (Othello, 1.iii: 16)". She is enchanted by his braveness and honorable soul. Paradoxically, he is easily manipulated by Iago's speech about Desdemona's infidelity. Iago uses Desdemona's stolen handkerchief as a proof of her unfaithfulness. The lost handkerchief and Desdemona's unrelenting petitions for Cassio arouse Othello's suspicion. Then, he becomes the judge, the witness and the executor of his beloved Desdemona.

Shakespeare sets up a Moorish character 'Othello' who becomes a subject to controversial perspectives. Abdulhameed asserts that some sources discuss Othello's character as a Moroccan and, a little of them refer to him as an Arabic person with Arabic name. While other sources mention that he is a Muslim who converts to Christianity (Abdulhameed, 2011:82). There are four evidences emphasis the Arabic nationality of Othello; the first one is his name which becomes subject of doubt, secondly his country is Morocco or Mauritania, thirdly, the original source of *Othello* has taken from *Thousands*

Nights and a Night, and the fourth is Othello's references to Arab in the play (Ibid, 84). For instance, he mentions Egypt, and how the handkerchief has given to his father there and the palm trees.

Shakespeare finds the story of Othello in the collection of novellas entitled *Hecatommithi*. This collection is like the eastern story "The Three Apples" in the *Thousands Nights and a Night*. Othello is a General in Venetian army who praised by his peers as "a noble", "gallant man", and "valiant". But Iago the villain of the play refers to him as a "Moor", "barbarian horse". Othello also describes as "black", "sooty" and as a negroid throughout Rodrigo's allusion to him "thick lips". Othello is Muslim Moor who has converted to Christianity. Some scholars declare that Othello's converting to Christianity based on the historical figure known as Leo Africanus (1494-1554) (Bartels, 1990: 434). He was born in Granada as a Muslim, he travelled across Africa and was educated in Rome, where he was baptised by the Pope and re-named John Leo (Ibid: 436). In *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600). Africanus gives accounts of various tribes in the continent and it is clear that Shakespeare was inspired by his description of the Moors. Africanus writes:

No nation in the world is so subject unto jealousy; for they will rather lose their lives, than put up any disgrace in the behalf of their women... They travel over the whole world to exercise traffic... and it is accounted heinous among them for any man to utter in company, any bawdy or unseemly word (Africanus, 1600: 154).

Leo Africanus is like Othello in some points. Both Leo and Othello are Moors who captured by Europeans, both convert to Christianity. Both of them are very affective figures have worked with fellow Europeans in the war against the Ottoman terror (Whitney, 1992:509). Whitney states that both of them are Moors who escaped dangerous life in the desert and mountains of Africa and both are "noble" Moors (Ibid:510). This wanderer traveler is might be Othello who suffers from doubt, suspicion, envy who commits murder and suicide. The mutual indication to Othello as 'Moor' reflects the Renaissance context which shows the "inconsistent" and "vague" contradictory vision of the Muslims and Arabs (Kitishat, 2013:2). In other words, Othello is presented as brave and noble warrior, but he cannot be qualified as Venetian citizen. Apparently, he is unable to satisfy the Venetian society and being a member of it. This fact reveals in Brabantio's objection against Othello-Desdemona marriage:

So opposite to marriage shunned

The wealthy, curled darling of our nations.

Would ever to have incur a general mock

Run from her guard age to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou-to fear, not to delight. (I. ii.9)

He also doesn't recognize Othello's goodness, otherwise he connects him with magic and black art. Othello epitomizes unacknowledgeable type of Oriental figure. Brabantio accuses Othello of winning Desdemona's heart by magical spells:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd 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, (I.ii.9)

Brabantio repeats his charge against Othello as a witchcraft man:

She is abused and stolen from me.

By spells and medicinies brought of mountbanks;

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,

Sans witchcraft could not. (I.iii.13)

Othello manifestoes his Christianity when he identifies himself with the other Christian: "Are we turned Turk, and to ourselves do that? Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl" (II.iii.40). Draper sets out that Othello's speeches colored by Christian images and concepts. (Draper, 1966:172). Othello considers

himself as a civilized Christian, when he addresses the Senate in decorated respected speech. He is proud of what he has done, and unaware of Brabantio's feeling of injury:

That I have ta' en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true; true, I have married her,
The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more.
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field. (I.iii.13)

By this action, Othello confirms his ignorance of the Venetian norms and traditions. Othello is a "pagan" synonymous to Muslim person who converts to Christianity. As Iago (his rival) says that Othello has changed his religion for Desdemona's love. She can affect him "to renounce his baptism, All seals and symbols of redeemed sin" (2.3.45). Shakespeare is cleverly depicted Othello's paradoxical world, when he gives Othello a time to practice Christianity and be a citizen in Venice. Othello strives to maintain a physical and spiritual title of being one of Venice community but, he is seen as "primary.. a noble barbarian who [has] become Christian ... but who [has] retains the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood..." (Bradly, 1904:186-7). Othello's race, religion, Christianity and nobility are not integrated and be questionable in the whole play. A critic Cyndia Susan Clegg argues that the word "Islam" doesn't mention in the play. But she believes that *Othello* should be read from "an informed Islamic perspective" (2009:230). Clegg thinks that Othello has turned Turk due to his obedience of Quran injunctions (Ibid: 234). The typical punishment of adultery is death and Othello takes it upon his wife to justify his action: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.105). To argue Clegg, the Quran exposes the issue of infidelity and adultery in Al-Nur (Light) Sura, and there is not any hint to death or murder. It refers to two sorts of punishment which are interpreted into different ways. The interpretations trace back to the Islamic school of thoughts "Fiqh". The adulterer and adulteress are mentioned in the holy Quran and they are lashed a hundred lashes: "The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with a hundred stripes Let a party of the believers witness their punishment" (Quran, 24:2, Yusuf Ali). Both of them are punished publicly. The married woman should be punished if her infidelity is assured by four witnesses. No one be able to accuse her without a clear evidence and the availability of four witnesses. On contrary, the accusers will be punished instead of her. "And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses to support their allegations, - flog them with eighty stripes" (Ibid, 24:4). In the Islamic world, the traditional and social norms are always adapted more than the objectively and fairly Islamic norms. Clegg states that Othello's suicide based on Islamic law, because he kills his chaste wife without improved guilt. His suicidal action is rooted on the Quran verse "Those who slander chaste women... are cursed in this life and the hereafter" (Quran, 24:23,). From Islamic theologian prospective, this doesn't mean that the Quran encourages suicide as the critic mentioned earlier. It prohibits sin against other people and especially chaste women, and the curse is a warning to such kind of vice-doers. Othello's actions as a Muslim reveal the stereotype interpretation about Islam and Quran.

The protagonist has an extremist passion in fighting, love and judgment. This kind of lingered emotion becomes a touch stone of his downfall. When he kills Desdemona, he declares, "Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell" (III.iii.65). Shakespeare manipulates the evil as if it is inherited in the Moor's race. This evilness is repressed and can be awoken at any time. In Othello's cause, the Christianity personifies rationality, self-control and insight, while Islam represents murder, madness, and sharp temper. "Both Moors and Muslims are regarded as given to an natural sexual and domestic practice" (Ahsan, 1969:63). The state of Othello's regret and remorse is highlighted by his last speech, "Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum / Set you down this / And say besides, that in Aleppo once / Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state / I took by the throat the circumcised dog / And smote him, thus." (V.ii.119) He is a Venetian citizen and its defender, and he has turned to the Turk in his suicide doing. As Alexander argues:

Othello does not move from a glamorous black to a hated Turk; rather, we need to notice how both blacks and Turks can be glamorized as well as hated in contemporary representations, and how the two were

interconnected, both in *Othello* and in the culture at large, via the Spanish discourse on Moorishness, via medieval stereotypes of black Turks, or Egyptians, and also by more recent developments in global relations (Alexander, 2000:9).

Shakespeare strips Othello's character from vices that are connected with the Moors: treachery, lasciviousness, and curly. Critics have referred to one of Moor's trait which is jealousy, and Othello becomes its slave. In his final speech, Othello satirizes himself as "a base Indian" who doesn't value his pearl "Desdemona", " *the base Indian, [who] threw a pearl away...*" (V.ii.120). Othello's self-peace have been annihilated by his military position and social status. Then he becomes an "honorable murderer". His violence action retreats him into his old identity when Venice community have described him as a "heartless," barbarian "Moor." Before he kills Desdemona, Othello explains, "Thou dost stone my heart, / And mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice" (V.ii.107). Ahsan proclaims that "Shakespeare or the audience may have seen in this 'Black Muslim' two layers of evil, through both skin colour and faith; violence upon violence and sin upon sin". (Ahsan:201). Shakespeare dramatizes the world of humanity in the play. He depicts various characters, each one has positive and negative characteristics. As a hero Othello becomes the target of Iago who is the source of Othello's transformation. Othello's deterioration is caused by Iago's interference. But Othello's easily changing reflects a natural sort of anger and jealousy. At the end, Othello vindicates his life by his death and address the Venetian members to speak about him, "Speak as I am".

2.3. Conclusion

Othello is a controversial play. It can be interpreted in different levels and scopes. Othello represents the Arabic/Oriental character which is centered in the Elizabethan writings. Othello's positive qualities are conditioned by his past slave life. To be a Muslim and converted to Christianity is worthless. Inner faith cannot be reconciled with exterior conversion and be suspected. Othello's self-conflict of Islamic-Christian identity is obvious when he kills himself. Othello's first religion which is Islam has shown as stigma, and Othello describes as a devilish anti-Christian figure. Shakespeare clarifies that blackness is not in color but it is in action. So as, Iago who has white skin is the villain and tricks-maker. He is more criminal than Othello and the evil walking along the whole action of the play. From the beginning of the play till its ending, he proves himself as an evil doer. Iago is the enemy of all the characters including his wife, whom he kills at the end of the play. He never speaks positively about any characters in the play.

Many critics deal with the play from racial point of view. Othello has been seen as a black Moor, an outsider, and a stranger. While, Shakespeare's sources of the play reflect his influences by stories and historical writings. Hence, he exposes the world of Elizabethan age as he has found it with a little bit of imagination. As he shows the positive and negative merits of Othello. Shakespeare also is neutral in his dealing with Iago, Brabantio, Desdemona and other characters.

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