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A Comparative Discussion between Two Tragic Heroes: Othello and Willy Loman

Introduction

Shakespeare's Othello is a unique figure among Shakespeare's heroes. Like all other heroes of Shakespeare, Othello, towards the end of the play, faces a tragic downfall. Yet, the question arises how far Othello is responsible for his own downfall, or whether he is responsible for his downfall at all. Much ink has been used and misused in proving and disproving that Othello is black in color. His blackness is much responsible to bring about the tragedy in the life of both Othello and Desdemona. If the nature of the tragedy in *Othello* is considered, the causes and background of Othello's fall, Othello himself and how far the surroundings are responsible for his tragedy. The point of racial alienation, i.e. Othello's blackness, comes before the audience with all their plausibility and dramatic significance. On the other hand, *Death of a Salesman* is a new kind of play in which Miller showed originality in different issues. However, he was mostly criticized for his depiction of a tragic hero in Aristotelian terms, a great man of flawed goodness. Prior to the nineteenth century, "greatness" in the shorthand of that stage, was shown as a social and political standing. However, in the last 150 years, the emphasis has shifted to moral and human qualities without much regard to the position. Willy Loman, a salesman, sacrifices himself upon the alteration of the American dream. Like Twain's boy, Willy has met with the enormous public success. He is capable of moving the middle brow audience as well as intellectual sophisticate. We have come to know the definition of the tragedy from the "Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the Poetics":

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its

quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody. (McManus 1999)

It is difficult to understand why a black man should be a hero of the great tragedy. Even Coleridge is unwilling to admit that the big tragedy might be based on the life of a black man. Coleridge simply forgot the truth that love is blind. Now it is significant that Desdemona, who chooses Othello in preference of her own people, declares that she saw Othello's visage in her mind. She loved the greatness, goodness and nobility of Othello's soul and mind and not his body. He was really white in soul, though black in body and complexion. This is further proved in the fact that when the audience gets familiar with the character of Iago, an opposite picture of a man, who is white without and black within. However, Shakespeare wants his audience to use both sight and insight to Othello as a black Moor and to appreciate his inner life as a splendid soldier and servant of the Venetian state.

Similarities and Dissimilarities between Othello and Willy Loman

In Shakespeare's play, the protagonist Othello is a man of honor rather molded with psychological imperfections like obsession and jealousy than being a man violent in nature. His passion for Desdemona and his subsequent obsession with Iago's manipulation essentially evolves from his racial status in the society. Othello's honorable status in his society, even being the man of inferior race, makes him vulnerable to Iago's manipulation. The black slave, Othello, is rather hailed and appreciated by the society. It is supposed to enslave him because of his military prowess. Whereas Willy Loman is not of the noble birth, he is not a leader of men. He has little self-knowledge and achieves no insight; and his moral values are deplorable. His sole "heroic" quality is his integrity. His principles may be unconscious and built on fallacies. However, he believes in them, practices them and finally dies for them. Miller has claimed a need for re-definition of a "hero"; his stature as the hero is not so utterly dependent upon his rank.

In a racially segregated society, Othello rises at the level of the celebrated influence and takes a socially established member's daughter as his wife. Keeping aside his past, he looks forwards and endeavors to be received by the society on his military prowess and credits. Yet in the clandestine corner of his mind, he feels anxious and remains isolated and unfamiliar in the society, which he does not belong to racially. This loneliness of Othello in the society is vividly

depicted in his own words in the last scene of the play. While killing himself, once he repeats how he killed a Turk with martial prowess:

Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him thus. (Shakespeare 209-211)

At the same time, by comparing his self-killing with the murder of a Turk, he powerfully articulates the fact that he will forever remain an outsider and an alien to the society. In contrast to Othello, Willy made his last attempt to establish himself and get a social recognition which he had failed to attain. Nevertheless, Othello is successful to attain the social recognition, power, and leadership. The problem was within Othello. That was his inferiority complex which, on the one hand, blindfolds him from Desdemona's virtue and spotlessness. On the other hand, this keeps him obsessed with the fear of being deserted by his love, Desdemona, a symbolic platform of passion and a status in the society. In fact, he suffered from a family crisis which was based on the false suspicion. However, the problem of Willy is quite different from Othello's problem. Willy himself is outdated and redundant; his heroes and his independent brother, Ben, who boasts, "When I went into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty one. And by God, I was rich" (Miller 33).

Othello's suspicion for the society and his fear of being deserted by his love pushes to the verge of insanity. His bluster and smugness rather fuel his obsession and fear. Such the man's love for his wife is necessarily entailed with his continual fear of being rejected and deceived by his society as well as his wife. Iago manipulates this very weakness and psychological imperfections of Othello. Indeed, in the play, Iago Machiavellian's presence is not the root but the crucial cause of Othello's insanity. He is more of the trigger of an event than the sole reason of Othello's insane-like condition. He plays on the protagonist's insecurities and "trigger off an engulfing suspicion and jealousy of his wife's supposed infidelity, which culminates in him murdering her" (Hamlin 34). Whereas the psychological imperfections lie in Othello's circumstances' driven psychic mould, it has successfully been played on by Iago. On the

contrary, Loman, however, is not an innocent person destroyed by a corrupt society. He is a man who gradually destroys himself through ignorance and blindness, placing his trust in false values that must inevitably crumble. The evil is not in external forces, not in Howard, who is merely a catalytic agent when he fires Willy. It is not in Charley, who practices a stolid morality without preaching it, not even in the impersonal growth of an industrialized culture. It is in Willy himself and in every other character as a part of the human condition.

Throughout the whole play, Othello remains calm, polite and respectful. He is neither rude nor offensive to Desdemona's father, Brabantio. Even being a brave General, his self-control is praiseworthy. Iago shows the highest reverence to Brabantio. He assures him that he is respectful because of his age. Othello is never a violent man by nature. If he were, he would behave otherwise, i.e. violently. Othello's dignity and self-control are evident in Lodovico's speech:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
 Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
 Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
 The shot of accident nor dart of chance
 Could neither graze nor pierce? (Shakespeare 153)

But Othello's calm and respectable manners tend to camouflage his physiological imperfections and flaws. Unlike Othello, at the social level, Willy is a victim of the American dream personified in all its confusion by three different figures. Firstly, there is Ben, Willy's brother. He is a self-made man who went to the capitalist jungle and became rich; and the totally self-assured man who knew what he wanted and would brook no ethical interference with his designs for material success. Othello does not run after fame or the social recognition while Willy Loman runs after money and the social status. This proves that there are lots of differences between the two heroes.

A close analysis of Othello's honorable, restraint and self-controlled manner will rather reveal that the protagonist belongs to the world where excesses of idealism and self-restraint grossly affect his ability to differ the rumor from reality. In such sense, Othello is locked within himself and within the world of thinking where he is infected with the inability to act. This

inability to act and face the truth is evident in his willingness to keep faith in Desdemona's chastity and not to enquire into the supposed infidelity.

In one sense Othello and Willy can be compared from the same point of view. These two heroes are fighters. Othello fights against the enemies in the battle field; whereas Willy fights against his fate. Othello, the Moor General, is as proud and honorable as a typical general of the society. Yet he is the people's creation; and he endeavors to be what his people expect him to be. Therefore, Othello, a former slave, still remains a slave in his own head. He is imprisoned by an ideal caricature of himself. This imprisonment grows him insolent more and more to the insecure possibilities and future induced by the supposed infidelity of his wife. Rather than being fortified by his freewill love for Desdemona, he becomes more vulnerable to the fears and insecurities built in his nature. Indeed, Othello is a suspiciously minded man. Conversely, Willy does not possess that kind of negative qualities at all. Willy, the tragic hero of *Death of a Salesman*, follows his father. The latter one ventured into the pioneer's wilderness with no security. Willy as a victim of this inexorable social system which drives the men to frantic, all overwhelming dreams of achievement are destined not only by their ostentation but also by their inherent contradictoriness. As a social sufferer, he has specified his elegy in the last scene by his associate Charley who sarcastically, by a kind of difference and the lack of dreams, has succeeded within the American system.

Othello's ideal imprisonment continually prompts him to avoid facing what he fears, i.e. Desdemona's supposed infidelity. Meanwhile he could have unearthed Iago's wickedness by frankly discussing it with his wife. It is brightly evident in the speech in which he acknowledges his flaws in the following manner:

Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
 Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme (Shakespeare 209).

His inability to face fears and insecurities keep away from doing so. Indeed, such inability evolves from Othello's virtual imprisonment in his self-conjuration according to the society's expectation from this former slave. Of course, Othello himself is greatly responsible for his own destiny. On the other hand, Miller finds the appropriate concrete symbols for the social

realities of his time and place. He achieves through a series of emotional confrontations among the members of the family an emotionally valid psychological statement about the particular conflict of the American family as well as the universal psychological family struggle.

In Willy's case, the American success dream is no longer adequate. The road and Willy's car, for their social and psychological significance, have a metaphysical meaning. Willy's soul can no longer travel along the road: it has broken down. This happens because the road has the last meaning. Much of Willy's suffering is due to the nature of the American society. He was deprived of his regular salaries and relegated to working on a commission basis because of his old age. He pleads that he is unable to continue his travelling job and demands to Howard to provide him the job so that he can remain in New York. Howard does not pay heed to his appeal and refuses such a transfer. Willy protests his shocking saying, "You cannot eat an orange and through the peel- man is not a piece of fruit" (Miller 58). Willy is a man of the material society where success determines the one's social status. Willy had chased success throughout his life but failed to attain his goal. Meanwhile Othello had got everything in his life but failed to carry on with all his attainments. Willy spent all his life in selling products, but after losing his job he had nothing to sell except his own life. Linda, Willy's wife, regards him as a ship that fails to find a harbor; whereas Othello kills his beloved wife on the basis of false suspicion. Othello kills his wife, whereas Willy kills himself.

Conclusion

Both of the plays, *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman*, are tragedies. From this point of view, they are very similar to each other. In *Othello*, the hero belongs to a different race and is black in complexion. The character, Othello, suffers from the inferiority complex. Although he succeeds to marry a white beauty, Desdemona, yet he distrusts her due to her excessive simplicity. Both the husband and the wife fail to understand the plan of Iago and fall into the trap. Hence, the villain Iago succeeds in his conspiracy. Being not same though the end of *Death of a Salesman* is quite similar. In this play, the hero commits suicide. In *Othello*, the hero Othello kills his beloved wife. However, in *Death of a Salesman*, the hero kills himself. In one sense, both heroes are guilty of the same crime. The hero of *Death of a Salesman* suffers from the identity crisis. He had spent his entire life to achieve success but failed. Finally, he kills himself. On the other hand, Othello is a victim of jealousy. How can a black Moor be a life partner of a

white woman? And how can a black Moor be a leader of the entire force? Iago considers himself as the right person who could have got the position of leadership. Hence, the conspiracy begins and finally a happy conjugal life comes to an end.

Works Cited

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