



The Power of Words: Analyzing Language as a Tool of racial discrimination in Shakespeare's Othello

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Abstract

This study, investigate the enduring theme of race as it permeates world of literature, with a particular focus on the Elizabethan Era, a period marked by pronounced racial prejudice. As one of the most significant literary periods in which race has been explored, this era offers a rich tapestry for our analysis. Our primary case of study is William Shakespeare's timeless masterpiece, Othello, which stands as powerful evidence to the devastating effects of racism. Through the lens of this classic work, we examine the inescapable consequences of racial bias on individuals and society at large, highlighting the countless ways in which a culture steeped in racism can restrict and suffocate love, while simultaneously empowering those who perpetuate discrimination to shatter the lives of others. This study analyzes linguistic racism in Othello and unveils the underlying mechanisms by which such prejudice is constructed, perpetuated, and ingrained within social dynamics, ultimately shedding light on the urgent need to dismantle systemic racism and foster inclusive, empathetic societies.

Key words: verbal racism, Othello, Shakespeare.

قوة الكلمات: تحليل اللغة كأداة للعنصرية في مسرحية "عطيل" لشكسبير

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الخلاصة

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الموضوع الدائم للعنصرية كما يتغلغل في عالم الأدب، مع تركيز خاص على العصر الإليزابيثي، وهي فترة تميزت بتحيزها العرقي الواضح. باعتبارها واحدة من أهم الفترات الأدبية التي تم فيها استكشاف مسألة العرق، تقدم هذه الحقبة نسيجاً غنياً للدراسة الحالية. حيث ان دراستنا الرئيسية هي تحفة ويليام شكسبير الخالدة، "عطيل"، التي تعد دليلاً قوياً على الآثار المدمرة للعنصرية. من خلال عدسة هذا العمل الكلاسيكي، تقوم هذه الدراسة بفحص العواقب التي لا مفر منها للتحيز العرقي على الأفراد والمجتمع ككل، مسلطين الضوء على الطرق العديدة التي يمكن أن تقيد بها ثقافة مشبعة بعنصرية الحب وتخنقه، في حين تمكن في الوقت ذاته أولئك الذين يستمرون في التمييز من تحطيم حياة الآخرين. تحلل هذه الدراسة العنصرية اللغوية في مسرحية "عطيل" وتكشف الآليات الكامنة التي يتم من خلالها بناء هذا التحيز واستمراره وتثبيتته في الديناميكيات الاجتماعية، مما يسلط الضوء في النهاية على الحاجة الملحة لتفكيك العنصرية النظامية وتعزيز مجتمعات شاملة ومتسامحة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنصرية اللفظية، عطيل، شكسبير.



Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Problem

This study explores linguistic aspects of racial discrimination in William Shakespeare's Othello, focusing on societal biases during the Elizabethan Era. We analyze the impact of linguistic racism on the play's characters, particularly Othello and Desdemona's relationship. Additionally, we examine Othello's role in Venetian society and the systemic oppression he faces due to his race. Our goal is to enhance understanding of how racism operated in the Elizabethan Era and its relevance to modern discourse on social inequality.

1.2 Research Questions

- What is Racial Discrimination?
- What is the relationship between linguistics and Racial Discrimination?
- What is the effect of racism on Othello?

1.3 The Aim

The research aims to denounce racial discrimination and to show how William Shakespeare demonstrated racial discrimination in the play, Othello, to reduce racial discrimination of all kinds.

1.4 Limits

The limits of the research include the play Othello by William Shakespeare and all related sources, as well as the subject of racial discrimination throughout the language of the play.

1.5 Significance

The Significance of the research denounces and reduces racial discrimination and equality among all human beings, regardless of race, color, or religion. All human beings are equal.

Chapter Two

Literary framework

2.1. Biography of William Shakespeare

Shakespeare was born in Stratford – upon – Avon on April 23, 1564, and is believed to have died in 1616. (Baker, 2009).

William Shakespeare's family, John Shakespeare married Mary Arden and had eight children, she lost two daughters while they were young, William became the eldest son of John Shakespeare's family who worked as a glove maker, but he rose socially in the ranks of Stratford society where he assumed



civic responsibilities, and as a result of the prestigious social status that John enjoyed, he sent his children, including William, to the local high school. (Baker, 2009).

During his lifetime, Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems, (38) plays, (154) sonnets, and many diverse collections of writings, but there are no known original manuscripts of William Shakespeare's plays in the twenty – first century, and that nearly half of the plays prepared by William Shakespeare constitute a collection of compliments that he gave to the actors working in Shakespeare's company, and these plays were collected after William Shakespeare's death for publication, and these writings were collected in the First Folio (the term "folio" refers to the size of the paper used). There were 36 of his plays in the collection, but none of his poems were published. (Baker, 2009).

The rich and diverse cultural legacy of works left behind by William Shakespeare has made him one of the most prominent literary figures in the English language. His cultural works have been reflected in civilizations and societies, as they are embodied in the creation of opinions and ideas that Shakespeare presented. His plays have a long and glorious history on stage and screen, and his works have been collected in several editions of the complete works of William Shakespeare, which include all of his plays, sonnets, and other pieces. (Baker, 2009).

2.2. Summary of Othello by William Shakespeare

In Othello, Roderigo, in love with Desdemona, is devastated to learn she has secretly married Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army. Iago, resentful of Othello for promoting Cassio instead of him, manipulates Roderigo and others to exact his revenge. He convinces Roderigo to pursue Desdemona and informs her father, Brabantio, about the secret marriage, which leads to a confrontation. Despite this, Othello defends his love for Desdemona before the Senate, and she chooses to join him on his military campaign in Cyprus. Meanwhile, Iago plots to ruin Othello by planting doubts about Desdemona's fidelity, particularly with Cassio (Shakespeare, Othello, 2020).

Iago's manipulations intensify as he steals Desdemona's handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her, and uses it to make Othello believe she is unfaithful. Othello, consumed by jealousy, orders Iago to kill Cassio and eventually murders Desdemona himself. Emilia, Iago's wife, exposes Iago's lies, leading to her own murder by Iago. Realizing his tragic mistake, Othello kills himself, and Cassio is left to take command in Cyprus. The play ends with Iago's



arrest and the devastation of Othello's and Desdemona's love, caused by deceit and jealousy (Shakespeare, Othello, 2020)..

2.3. Racism Through Verbal Language

Linguistic racism is the reference to race of a particular social class or individual against another social class or individual through the use of language. The victims of this racism are often people who speak languages such as Spanish or Arabic, or varieties of a particular language such as American colloquial English or African American. These languages and varieties are despised and viewed as inferior to mainstream languages such as Standard English, which uses grammar to pronounce words and is mostly used by wealthy whites. (Bowser, 2017).

It is considered unethical to use terms like "Nigger" and "Spic." More importantly, stating statements that sound or may be interpreted as racist is prohibited. Furthermore, because the prevailing racial ideology foreshadows There is little room for socially sanctioned conversation about race when you are color blind. issues relating to race Does this imply that white people do not converse in public? What about the non – whites? They do, as several studies have proven, but they do so in different ways. so, but in a very cautious, indirect, reluctant, and, on rare occasions, even apprehensive way utilizing the coding language Surprisingly, there aren't many (Summaries, 2018).

Accent discrimination, non – native English speakers outweigh native English speakers three to one, notwithstanding the difficulty of defining the phrase "native English speaker". The word typically refers to somebody who has spoken English as their primary language since childhood. However, many children acquire numerous languages at the same time, for example, if their parents are from different countries or if a country has multiple official languages (Daileader, 2005).

English that sounds as if it originates from rich, predominantly white, and monolingual countries is given a special status. Multilingual nations like Nigeria and Singapore, according to this narrow perspective, have less 'legitimate' and acceptable versions of English, even though English is an official language in both (Daileader, 2005).

English is spoken in multiple accents depending on the nature of the local community or linguistic community, whether this language is acquired or native. For example, in the United States, people of African origins do not understand American English according to the rules and grammatical rules, and they are still subject to discrimination. Some English speakers face judgments based on perceptions about their nationality or race, not their personal skills in communication and linguistic integration. When some



members of the European community speak English with a French, German or Italian accent, they are seen as nice, sophisticated and elegant. However, the English spoken by Asians, Africans or Middle Easterners may be seen as difficult and unpleasant. (Bowser, 2017).

Chapter Three

Application

3.1 Benjamin's Explanation of Racial Discrimination

Conservative talk radio identified "color – blindness" as a solution to the racial problem in the late 1980s (Hilliard & Keith, 1999; Spence, 2006). Colorblindness is a direct application of indirection: you can't discriminate against someone if you don't know their race. Colorblindness was seen by conservatives as a method to eliminate affirmative action, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and any other policies they claim to discriminate against White people. Conservatives have even recommended removing race – related items from the US Census and any government – financed poll. Some White Americans even said that they didn't notice a person's ethnicity or color any longer. As a result, they couldn't be racist or act in a racially biased manner (Bowser, 2017, p. 47).

Color – blindness criticisms, both as a national policy and as a personal practice, were sharp. Advocates were hard at work while professing colorblindness. attempting to weaken organizations that retain a semblance of fairness The conservative American Civil Rights Movement was founded on the principle of colorblindness. The Institute support California Proposition 209, which prohibits the use of race in advertising, In public life, sex, or ethnicity. Proposal 2 in Michigan, which had the same goals as Proposition 209, was based on colorblindness. Both propositions are now enacted into law. Making legislation is the most direct way of bringing a concept into institutional life. The ultimate line is that persons who claim colorblindness can still discriminate racially, and their colorblind public policies can still prejudice racially. Racism has not vanished as a result of color blindness. Only "color – blind racism" emerges as a result. There is no theory here, either (Bowser, 2017, p. 51).

3.2 Racial Discrimination in Othello by William Shakespeare

"Racism is usually defined as prejudice or discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on such a belief. It is someone who is prejudiced and discriminates against someone because of their race, or ethnicity" (Summaries, 2018). William Shakespeare's Othello was written between 1600 and 1605. The film tells the story of a black man in Venice who rises to the rank of general, where he is greatly loved and trusted by his white



superiors, at a time when ethnic minorities were so low – status in European society that they were almost ignored. (Shakespeare, Othello, 2020).

Othello was also called Moor as a contemptuous term, A Moor is not a mixture of Arab and white, but a much wider range of applications referring to the dark – skinned peoples of various Muslim countries, but not exclusively (Shakespeare, Othello, 2020). By the time of Shakespeare, the term was applied to “blackamoors” or various of many dark – skinned peoples. It is obvious by the script of the play itself, that Othello is a black – skinned man, who may well be a Christian convert, but is obviously of other than a Christian background. Today the role of Othello is usually represented by a black actor, but historically more white actors have played him, beginning with Richard Burbage (Shakespeare, Othello, 2020).

When Othello marries the attractive young white girl Desdemona, daughter of Senator Brabantio, things have been changed completely. Prejudices are brought to the fore when Cassio is appointed Othello's personal assistant. Iago's envy and jealousy grows, and he seeks to use Othello's marriage as a means of revenge for what he has done. "My lord, you are robbed; It is a shame to wear your dress; Your heart has burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, There is an old black ram licking your white ewe. Rise, rise; Wake the citizens who snore with the bell, Or the devil will make a grandfather of you: Rise, I say." We might assume that Iago is not a sensitive character. His statements might suggest that other races in Venice are treated differently. They are even associated with animals and the devil disguised as a woman. However, through Brabantio's response, we can determine that racism is present. (Summaries, 2018).

The racist environment created around the marriage is shown when Brabantio insists on telling Othello where his daughter is. “ Dammed 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 wealthy curled darlings of our nation, Would ever have, to incur a general mock, Run from her guard age to the sooty bosom. Of such a thing as thou.” (Summaries, 2018).

Brabantio was suspended after discovering that Desdemona was not coerced and gladly wedded to Othello. To put it another way, Brabantio thought Othello had used witchcraft on her. This is prejudiced because Brabantio is implying that his daughter could not fall in love with a moor unless he utilized witchcraft, and that a black man – even a great soldier like Othello – had nothing to offer a white lady (Summaries, 2018).

Brabantio would prefer that his daughter remain single rather than marry a black guy. When he approaches the duke to rule on the legitimacy of the



marriage, he feels the duke will agree with him. "Mine's not an idle cause: the duke himself, Or any of my brothers of the state, Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own; For if such actions may have passage free, Bond – slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be." This is another example of prejudice; Brabantio feels that because they are both white and Othello is black, the Duke will side with him (Summaries, 2018).

His speech implies that other races will be allowed as long as they are helpful and remember where they belong and adhere to it. He was rising beyond his assumed station by marrying Desdemona, a lovely white girl that every guy would want (Summaries, 2018). The Duke of Venice clearly accepted Brabantio's story, but Othello was spared when the Turks attacked Cyprus and he was required. Desdemona also persuades the council that she married Othello because she loved him and that he did not use witchcraft against her (Summaries, 2018).

During the Elizabethan period, it was thought that the flaws in one's character were mirrored in one's looks. The duke, on the other hand, assures Brabantio that his daughter would be secure if Othello marries her. The Duke says "noble signior, If virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son – in – law is far more fair than black" When the Duke says this, disposed Racism because the Duke is saying that Othello is noble, unlike the other moors (Summaries, 2018). Racism is demonstrated in Othello throughout the play, but especially in Act 1. Iago's choice to kill Othello is not based on race, but rather on the grounds that he feels the military advancement is more important (Summaries, 2018).

While racism indeed is demonstrated in Othello, it has nothing to do with the tragic outcomes in the play. On the contrary, Shakespeare has displayed Othello as a good black man who was driven to do horrible things by a white man. Shakespeare's point is that appearance is no indicator of the person beneath the skin. Like they say, "don't judge a person by their color" (Summaries, 2018).

3.3 Linguistics Racial Discrimination in Othello by William Shakespeare

Dramatists throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods employed language to create a dramatic atmosphere, as well as to describe time, location, and character. However, in Othello, language is more than just a means of conveying the drama; it is also action. Tragic events occur when the hero is deceived by words, as Othello falls because he trusts all the words said by a lying man, and wield power either by speaking, being silent, or silencing others, in this drama (Busse, 2006, p. 383).

"Othello is a blank poetry and prose play. Unrhymed iambic pentameters with five stressed syllables and five unstressed syllables make up blank poetry.



Shakespeare, on the other hand, is a master of the classical form, altering the tempo of his writing to accomplish certain effects. He also gives each of his characters their own set of idioms. We can observe how the playwright constructs not only character but also the core topic of antagonism, by looking at the language of Othello and Iago". Othello's distinctive style is dignified, measured blank verse, as seen by his opening statements in Act I Scenes 2 and 3. Given his role in the play, this is acceptable. His use of blank verse also contributes to the overall feel of the poem (Busse, 2006).

Othello is a clear and focused speaker. These phrases demonstrate his power, and his allusions to "shining swords" and "dew" convey a sense of danger and beauty. These phrases fit the speaker's passionate nature, for the protagonist's personal qualities can be seen as a powerful speaker as well as an impressive man. Desdemona realizes her husband's rhetorical power when she enters the next scene, when Othello uses words not only to defend his escape from Desdemona, but to allow him to keep her. We already know that she was seduced by his stories; now we know that she speaks in the same solemn, deliberate tone as he does. (Daileader, 2005).

Shakespeare embodies the nature of friendship and harmony between Desdemona and Othello through the types of their mutual speech; the lovers are, as Iago describes it, well – tuned at this time. At this moment, each of Othello's extended utterances may be compared to a sonnet, embodying the grandeur and romanticism that we associate with the tragic protagonist. Many commentators see Othello as Shakespeare's most 'poetic' hero, an appropriate assessment considering that the play centers on the protagonist's love experiences. But Othello did not speak poetically about the state of love he experienced. He sang poetically about his wonderful professional position as a soldier, and he embodied himself as a great military hero. "The orderliness of his verse conveys not just his confidence, but also that we, the senators, would be prudent to place our faith in his calm and reason. Othello's allusion to and pride in his estimate, which is linked to this, also assist to give a feeling of the hero's value, while also implying that how you are viewed by others – your reputation – will be a major topic in this play" (Daileader, 2005).

This study of the hero's and villain's opposing idioms may be extended; each of Othello's characters has his or her unique style. Cassio's speech, for example, is noble and courtly, whereas Emilia's is salty and down – to – earth. Othello's several 'voices' and styles are a key aspect of the play's ability to captivate and impact the audience. Shakespeare's use of figurative language, or imagery, is another key aspect of the play's linguistic force, as described in Critical Approaches Imagery and Critical Approaches (Daileader, 2005).



Chapter Four

Conclusion

this research has demonstrated the pervasive influence of linguistic racism in William Shakespeare's Othello, particularly within the social and cultural framework of the Elizabethan era. By exploring how racial prejudice is embedded in language, the study has shown that characters like Othello are subjected to a system of verbal discrimination that not only alienates them but also reinforces societal inequalities. Through an analysis of the play's language, this research underscores the power of words in shaping perceptions, relationships, and fates, revealing how deeply racism is woven into social dynamics.

Moreover, this investigation highlights the urgent need to confront and dismantle linguistic racism as a crucial component of broader systemic oppression. The study advocates for the importance of inclusive discourse and understanding, both in literature and in contemporary society, to foster greater equality and empathy. Shakespeare's work continues to serve as a powerful tool for reflecting on racial issues, emphasizing the enduring relevance of these themes in the ongoing fight against discrimination.

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