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Shakespeare's *Othello*: a Tragic Tale of Conjugal Abuse

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Abstract: Women across historical, social and religious boundaries have been pitted against the asphyxiating patriarchal norms and rigid cultural constructs which bestow power, dominance and freedom on man, and push her into the margins of both, society and domestic space. The current paper attempts to explore the mechanics of domestic violence, and its treatment in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. The aim is to ascertain how the playwright addresses the issue of crime against women within the familial and social world of his times. Based on the theme of power politics within domestic hierarchy, the play not only lays bare a grim picture of domestic abuse and violence against women in matrimony, but also offers an insight into the psyche of abusers. The dialectics of power struggle in the play written in the 16th century is a reflection of the playwright's sensitivity towards the existential reality of women of his times and his negation of male hegemony and criminal violence in conjugal relations.

Key Words: Conjugal abuse, verbal violence, honour killing, male hegemony, patriarchal norms, power struggle, gender inequity, self image

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Literature is said to be a reflection of life, for no writer is immune to the social, political and cultural realities that mould and define his creative spirit. William Shakespeare is one such

literary artist whose plays have enshrined the timeless realities of human situation. Being a social critic, he captured the harsh actualities of life entangled in the intricacies of human psyche raising pertinent and disturbing questions on the issues which perturbed his sense of morality, justice and propriety. Shakespeare was keenly aware of the fact that in the long odyssey of human evolution marked by varied socio-cultural, political and economic developments, the status of women has largely been secondary to man's. They have been condemned by the inflexible patriarchal social strictures into tacit servility, forced obedience and unwarranted violence, both within the domestic environs and without. This phenomenon has existed ubiquitously across temporal, geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Shakespeare's own consciousness of the seamier side of man-woman relationship reflected in brutal acts of violence, rape, physical and verbal abuse, mutilation and killing in the name of honour, finds a vivid expression in his plays such as *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Taming of the Shrew* and even *Hamlet*.

The present paper delves into Shakespeare's treatment of criminal offences against women during Elizabethan times in *Othello*. An attempt has been made to probe into the mechanics of marital power struggle manifested in the form wife-beating in this tragic play. Based on the theme of power politics within domestic hierarchy, this play lays bare a grim picture of nuptial discord, subalternity of women and violence within matrimony inflicted by suffocating patriarchal norms of the 16th century England. However, before examining the text, it is pertinent to understand how scholars, psychologists and sociologists define and analyze the crime of domestic abuse.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, the term domestic abuse/violence refers specifically to "male violence (physical or psychological) against women" (Scott and Marshall 190). Feminists who have been fighting for the cause of women against various inequities since the middle of the 20th century argue that this social phenomenon is symptomatic of gender inequality in power distribution, and oppression of women. Lynn Shipway in her book *Domestic Violence for Health Professionals* defines the term 'Domestic Violence' as "a continuum of behaviour ranging from verbal abuse, physical and sexual assault to rape and homicide. The vast majority of such violence, and the most severe and chronic incidents are perpetrated by men against women and their children" (Shipway 1). In fact, brutality of any kind

between married partners, or those living together or those who have previously cohabited may be termed as domestic abuse or violence. It involves the use of force, power or violence to gain or maintain power over an intimate partner by instilling fear and subjugation.

Donald G. Dutton, an eminent psychologist, holds it as synonymous with “wife assault” and defines it “as a systematic form of domination and social control of women by men” (Dutton 168). Though the term itself is gender neutral, yet in majority of cases, it is the man who abuses his wife physically, emotionally, sexually, economically or psychologically within the domestic space. History testifies that till recent times, violence against women within home had never been considered a “crime” or a culpable offence either by law or society. In fact, many cultures even accorded social sanction to it as a husband’s right to use violence to control his delinquent wife. Deborah Lockton and Richard Ward in their book titled *Domestic Violence* point out that even in English law at a point of time, “a husband had the right to ‘chastise’ his wife” (Lockton and Ward 3). Sociologists also agree that this social vice has been in existence for centuries beyond geographical, racial and political boundaries, the incidences of which are spread across literatures of different cultures and nations.

Shakespeare’s sensitivity towards the issues of crimes against women, gender inequity and marital violence finds an eloquent expression in his most well known domestic tragedy *Othello* - a horrifying tale of a husband’s unfounded jealousy culminating in the brutal murder of his innocent wife. The play dramatizes the tragic end of a unique inter-racial love story between a beautiful, pious and accomplished noblewoman, and a valiant, noble and much venerated Black warrior. Fascinated by the glorious achievements of this Moor who had a vagabond, adventurous and perilous past; Desdemona defies all socio-cultural and familial restrictions to woo him, and finally elopes with him to wed him. As a devoted wife she is eager to compensate him for all the warmth, love and care he has missed in his early life. Though both exhibit a natural understanding and mutual regard, their compatibility is put to test by Othello’s blind faith in Iago, his diabolical subordinate. Using Desdemona as a pawn to avenge his ignominious rejection for the post of Othello’s deputy, the villain poisons his master’s mind against her character by painting it in sordid colours. Victoria Time in her book *Shakespeare’s Criminals: Criminology, Fiction and Drama* asserts: “In a society of male dominance, Iago can only

properly redress the slight by Othello of not according him the position of Lieutenant through ridiculing Othello's wife's morality" (Time 84). Blinded by interminable jealousy, Othello's injured male ego exercises its masculine hegemony by abusing her, hitting her and finally killing her in the name of honour without giving her any chance to defend herself. Denied any chance of explanation, she has no option but to submit helplessly to the atrocities of her tyrant husband armed with the twin ferocities of darkness – falsehood and evil. The play however, ends with the revelation of the of her innocence truth resulting in Iago's capture and Othello's suicide.

Presenting a sharp critique on the patriarchal power politics and gender polarization in marriage which shove the wife into silent subalternity in *Othello*, Shakespeare addresses the polemics of gender inequality and crime within the institution of marriage in two different milieus but similar mechanics. Reared in a social environment that lavishes power and significance on man, and denies any liberty or economic asset to the woman, Othello and Iago emerge as stereotypical males, forever doubtful and intolerant of the character, competence and virtues of their wives. Sociologists have instated that a major cause of discord between the partners which breeds violence in the long run is the unbridgeable cultural and intellectual divide between the two. The text of *Othello* clearly reflects the huge social and racial gulf separating the hero and heroine. Othello, the glorified black warrior, is acutely conscious of his own nomadic past, lack of social grooming and dark complexion as contrasted with Desdemona's unmatched beauty, fairness and upbringing in the refined and noble Venetian environs. For him, she is a rare gift, his most prized possession, and his route to social acceptance in a country that has streaks of colour and racial prejudice. This makes him an extremely possessive and insecure husband. Iago, a self-centred, ambitious and diabolical subordinate, is quick to fathom his General's weakness, and hence panders his jealousy to its maximum by suggesting an unholy alliance between Desdemona, and the handsome and eligible Cassio. Instigated by the villainy of Iago, Othello is scared of "being recognized as a fool who has given his heart unwisely" (Bloom 35). Disregarding the virtues of his beloved wife, the Moor punishes her for the sins she has not committed. Blinded by misplaced suspicion, he accuses her of having immoral liaisons and resolves to save his honour by eliminating her.

OTHELLO. All my fond love thus I blow to heaven:

'Tis gone.

Arise black vengeance, from the hollow cell!
Yield up, O love! Thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate... (*Othello*, III. iii. 445-49)

Evidently, Othello's low self-esteem, sense of insecurity and inferiority complex prompt him to use violence against both, his wife and her 'supposed lover' for whose restoration she pleads. Ernest Havemann has drawn a strong causal affinity between incidences of wife-beating and man's poor self-esteem:

It appears that violence is often the reaction of a man who feels he has not in any way earned the right to control his wife and children and who therefore, finds his masculinity threatened. A man who appears perfectly competent to other people may feel in his heart that he has failed to live up to his own possibilities. His self-image may be so fragile that he is threatened by any sign of independence on the part of his wife. This is probably one reason violence occurs at all levels of society. (Havemann 230)

Thus the bond of marriage which should thrive on mutual love, warmth and trust is instead embroiled in power politics. The upholding of orthodox patriarchal mores which restrict the freedom, voice and liberty of the wife perpetuates domestic violence. The pressure of maintaining supremacy at the societal plane is the prime propagator of wife-abuse at the individual level. In this struggle, the man, by virtue of the power bestowed on him by law, custom and society, turns into a tyrant. In the words of Dobash and Dobash:

Wife assault is mainly 'normal violence' committed not by mad men who are unlike other men, but by men who believe that patriarchy is their right, that marriage gives them unrestricted control over their wife and that violence is an accepted means of establishing this control. (qtd. in Dutton 168)

Quite ironically, experts in the court of law categorize any aggression in the form of verbal abuse, punching, kicking, biting, dragging, slapping, bashing, pulling by hair, hitting with an object, or threatening with a weapon as acts of "severe" violence fit to be tried as criminal offences, for such acts may lead to psychological trauma or physical bruises/cuts, bleeding, broken bones, miscarriage and even death. In the context of this play, both Othello and Iago are

guilty of several such offences. The seeds of suspicion sown in the insecure mind of Othello by Iago, nurtured on malice and untruth, begin to sprout quickly, transforming him into a brute. Crazed by inveterate jealousy, just like Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, Othello himself designs the ruin of his nuptial felicity. We witness the shocking decline of his military glory and manly grace when he explodes, shouts and strikes his wife in the presence of a deputation come from Venice. Caustic in his response to her "crocodile tears," he dismisses her unceremoniously out of his sight. Hereafter, we view an absolute negation of a truthful and gentle wife. Just like Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Desdemona too becomes a hapless victim of false accusations and verbal abuse by her loved one. Whatever she says or does is horribly transformed into testimonies of her falseness in Othello's mind. Patricia Evan's observation in her book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize it and How to Respond* that "Verbal abuse precedes domestic violence in relationships" (Evans 12) is endorsed when ignoring her desperate pleas for his former love and kindness, he damns her further with invectives such as "a whore," "public commoner" and "an impudent strumpet." Thus, words - sharp, piercing and virulent - are transformed into instruments of torture as Desdemona's victimization continues unabated. Commenting on the mentality of the man in such a fractured conjugal alliance, Simone de Beauvoir observes:

Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is most truly universal, the most irresistible one.... He enacts violence, power, unyielding resolution; he issues commands in tones of severity; he shouts and pounds the table: this face is a daily reality for his wife. (Beauvoir 483-484)

In the climactic scene however, the jealousy-crazed Othello strangles Desdemona mercilessly, satiated in the belief that in executing this dastardly deed, he is driven by honour. In fact, the thought of his wife committing adultery threatens his self-assumed level of social decency and calls for a violent reprimand. He justifies the barbarous act of her cold-blooded murder as a "sacrifice," for as he states: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V. ii. 6). Thus, acting as a self-glorified guardian of morality, he holds a brutal act of domestic violence as synonymous with "honour killing" and absolutely imperative to save his name.

Shakespeare instates the universal existence of crimes against women through the predicament of Emilia who typifies the lower social order is not very different from that of her

mistress. She is treated no better than an obedient servant by Iago. His derogatory remarks about women in general made in the presence of Desdemona and Emilia reveal his scant regard for her as a partner in life. His baseless suspicions about her illicit relationships with Othello and Cassio are symptomatic of his own moral depravity and insecure male ego:

IAGO. I hate the Moor.

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office. I know not if't be true
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do it as for surety. (I.iii.380-83)

Suspicious by nature, Iago prefers to believe Emilia to be dishonest and accuses her of the same, yet he does not hesitate from using her as a tool to execute his diabolical plan against Cassio and Desdemona. He makes the innocent woman a partner in his crime by urging her to steal Desdemona's handkerchief gifted by the Moor. Unfortunately, driven by her sincere love for him, Emilia complies with his wishes despite knowing the significance of the kerchief for Desdemona, and inadvertently facilitates the provision of "ocular proof" against her mistress. She proves her loyalty to the delinquent Iago yet again when she professes that she could even compromise her honour for the advancement of her husband:

EMILIA. ...Marry I would not do such a thing for a joint

ring, nor for measures of a lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats
nor caps, nor any petty exhibition. But for all the whole
world! Ud's pity, who would not make her husband a
cuckold, to make him a monarch? I should venture
purgatory for't. (IV.iii.70-76)

Thus, Emilia displays a greater devotion than her villainous husband, yet she emerges as much a victim of domestic violence – both physical and psychological - as her mistress. Though the reality of Iago's perfidious involvement in the murder of Desdemona hits her like a bolt from the blue, she stands for truth fearlessly. Emilia's refusal to keep mum on an issue which has shaken her faith in men, challenges Iago's fragile male ego. Her open defiance invites his

unbridled verbal fury - “What, are you mad? I charge you, get you home” (V.ii.191), “Villainous whore!” (227) and “Filth, thou liest!” (229) - before he injures her mortally. Verbal abuse of this kind, according to Patricia Evans “is an issue of control – a means of holding power over others” (Evans 19). In this regard, Iago’s vituperative tirade against his wife points to his frustration at the loss of power to manipulate her, and his inability to accept his own vulnerability in the face of truth of the moment. Ironically, he accuses the innocent Emilia of all that he himself has been guilty of - lies, villainy and madness.

From the tragic fate of these two pious women, it appears that the typical chauvinistic psyche of men, rooted in their respective patriarchal cultures, is easily hurt and so they must hurt their partners too. Perhaps that is why Othello convolutes everything that Desdemona says or does so as to rebuke her. No amount of pleading, begging or cajoling can control his unbridled fury. At the core of his brazen impudence lies this inherent assurance that one, it is his right and second, that it would never be challenged. No wonder he assaults her self-respect by hitting her in full public view with impunity. In a similar fashion, even Iago does not hesitate from calling Emilia names or hitting her with a sword openly. It is evident that the conformist cultural norms which nurture the manliness of both Othello and Iago as representatives of two different social stratas are not very different. Their inordinate pride, uncontrolled temper and deep-seated jealousy are reflections of the orthodox mentality which takes a sadistic pleasure in shoving women into the margins and suffocating their voices. Ascertaining this view Dobash and Dobash observe:

Men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural proscriptions that are cherished in western society – aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination – and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance” (Dobash and Dobash 24).

If conjugal relationships marred by domestic abuse expose the sexism of male psyche, they also reveal the plight of the women ensnared in such abusive alliances. In the context of *Othello*, the meek and silent submission of Desdemona to the obnoxious behaviour and violent temperament of her jealous husband seems to validate her status as a subaltern. Quite ironically, both she and Emilia, irrespective of socio-economic factors separating their identities, are compelled to tolerate the misdemeanor of their husbands. As a devoted wife Desdemona tries her best to

ignore or bear her husband's inexplicable behaviour, unwarranted wrath and humiliation to buy peace. She is always pleasant to him, eager to pamper his ego and pander his sense of superiority, but to no avail for she suffers verbal abuse, physical brutalization and finally strangulation despite her innocence. In the process, she encounters both – loss of love and loss of self. Her calmness, perseverance and gentleness fail to invoke any mercy in Othello's heart, and he murders her ruthlessly. Eulogizing Shakespeare's objective assessment of male and female psyche embodied in his varied protagonists, famous Victorian philosopher, John Ruskin pointed out quite candidly:

Whereas there is hardly a play that has not a perfect woman in it, steadfast in grave hope, and errorless purpose: Cordelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Hermione, Imogen, Queen Catherine, Perdita, Sylvia, Viola, Rosalind, Helena, and last, and perhaps loveliest, Virgilia, are all faultless; conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity.... The catastrophe of every play is caused always by the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and, failing that, there is none. (Qtd. in Jameson, 439)

It is pertinent to remember that in the beginning of the play, Shakespeare presents Desdemona as a bold and feisty young girl who defies her father and family tradition to wed her lover. Ironically, it is this boldness and defiance which is perceived as a warning of her infidelity by Iago. Even Emilia is deceived, for not only does her husband regard her immoral but himself has designs on Desdemona. Yet, paradoxically, she has to suffer a cruel death for her devotion to her husband and mistress. From the predicament of these women, it is evident that social constraints, personal sincerity and economic dependence on the husbands restrict their escape from such iniquitous relationships. Though both, Desdemona and Emilia, surrender to their hopeless fate under the despotic control of their callous husbands, yet they prove far more superior as human beings. Shakespeare, very cleverly brings out the irony of their gender's fate by juxtaposing the fidelity of Emilia to her mistress on the one side and Iago's treachery against his master on the other. Concomitantly, the dichotomy between the sincere devotion of the two women to their respective husbands, and the invidiously jealous natures of the men is also not lost upon the readers.

An insight into Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre establishes him as a social realist who exhibits a keen awareness of the ills plaguing the familial and social structures of his times. Castigating the socio-cultural norms which govern the matrimonial relations in *Othello*, he exposes how "man was the absolute patriarch who owned and controlled all properties and people within the family" while a woman was "obligated to obey her husband while he enjoyed the legal right and moral obligation to control and punish her for any 'misbehaviour'" (Dobash and Dobash, *Wives* 432). Historical discourses testify that the issue of wife beating has been taken up seriously at various platforms – social, political and legal - only in the recent times. John Stuart Mill, who played a momentous role in introducing the women's suffrage amendment in the Reform Bill of 1867, had asserted: "The records of the police courts clearly showed not only that women could not rely on men for protection, but that often the men closest to them [especially, their partners] posed the greatest threat to their welfare" (Mill 159). Equating domestic violence with "domestic terrorism," Gloria Steinem, in an interview that appeared in *The Tribune* (9 February 2014), asserts that gender violence is normalized through cultural sanction and that "men did not invent violence against women, they inherited it as a cultural legacy" (Shukla 1). In the context of the play, if both Othello and Iago emerge as the stereotypical patriarchs (who continue to exist even today), both Desdemona and Emilia embody the agony of all such women as are trapped in exploitative and unequal marriages. The predicament of these wives - one a General's and the other, an ensign's, embodies the quintessential womanhood of the times – silenced, servile and marginalized.

Thus through *Othello*, Shakespeare also examines the existential struggle of Renaissance women. He underscores the fact that whenever a woman has dared to break the socially stipulated barriers, and ventured beyond the conventional boundaries to seek her desire, voice and entity, she has been confronted and penalized. Desdemona's decision to challenge her father's authority to marry a Moor proves fateful. Similarly, Emilia has to pay with her life for challenging her husband. Inexperienced and unmindful of the devious proscriptions of the patriarchal system, both women become helpless victims of domestic violence, while their delinquent husbands, the greatly magnified "noble Moor" and the "honest" Iago, who pose as self-professed guardians of morality and fidelity, are reduced to mere criminals. It would be pertinent to assert here that as a social analyst, William Shakespeare not only critiques the maladies afflicting the patriarchal society of his times but also continues invoking the audience

to challenge fallacious gender constructs. In fact, the commonality of the fates of two women representing different societal levels establishes the ubiquitous existence of crimes against women. The playwright however, instates the fact emphatically that love, mutuality, trust, faith and honesty are integral to the success of a conjugal relationship; and that want of these virtues perpetuates chaos. Though the perpetrators as well as the victims of domestic violence in this tragic play eventually die, it is not difficult to guess on whose side the author stands. Adopting a pragmatic, moralistic and humane approach, Shakespeare pricks the conscience of his audience as if urging them to negate crime against women.

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