

## The Scale of Jealousy in Shakespeare's Othello: The Moor of Venice

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### Abstract

*Readings of Shakespeare's works have reached a number beyond imagination. As he purely processed primal emotions of human beings in his plays, he is still favoured. Hence, this study highlights one of these emotions, mainly is jealousy. In other words, the current study aims at providing the readers with a scale on which meanings and reasons of jealousy are sprayed. On this scale, readers are invited to decide whether the source of meaning is fixed or dynamic. Based on the Social Constructivist Theory, the current study debates on the possibilities of varied meanings in diverse societies on the Earth.*

**Keywords:** Jealousy, Shakespeare's Othello, Social Constructivism, Culture

*Othello* has been predominantly a subject of racist and colonial studies as the tragic hero in the play is of Moorish origins. Much has been debated about his race in countless research papers. Martin Orkin (1986), for instance, remarks “*the English audiences that sat down to watch the first performances of Othello belonged to a nation that was itself soon to undertake colonization in the New World*” (p.1). In another study, Imtiaz Habib (1998) puts the historical facts of the play under spotlight by asserting “*Shakespeare's Othello should be considered not just in the light of traditional sources for the play (such as Cinthio) but also in the contexts of black military service in Tudor armies and generally, of the unacknowledged blacks of sixteenth century England*” (p.15). Arthur L. Little (1993) also clarifies racism in *Othello* as “*To the extent that blackness in Othello is allegorical, it functions as Shakespeare's pre-text, what the audience knows before it comes to experience the play*” (p.305).

Just as a bulk of research has been made on racism and colonialism, there have been also, though less, critics who are eager to dedicate themselves to *Othello's* secondary, perhaps, for most, the most intriguing theme that is jealousy. For Millecent Bell (1997), *Othello's* “*chief subject is sexual jealousy*” (p.120). Marcus Nordlund (2002) shares his invaluable views about early modern jealousy in Shakespeare's *Othello*. In another study, Melanie H. Ross (2005) compares *Othello's* jealousy to “*mental conceiving*” (p. 1). Its relation to the mental processes has been recognized by the psychiatrists and neurologists as well. Besides, an illness named after Othello himself is known to have symptoms of delusions of infidelity of

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the spouse (McNamara & Durso, 1991, p. 157). This illness also goes by the name ‘Othello syndrome’ caused by supposed infidelity of spouse, whereby the subject concerned consumes himself with fervour and rage, which eventually leads to an inevitable homicide. However, it is not the main concern of this study to relocate and revisit what has already been debated and criticized. Rather, this study aims at providing an intercultural and social constructivist perspective on jealousy. Its primary aim is to reveal the cultural elements which bear jealousy in minds. By doing so, it also intends to display the diversity of these elements and their dynamic meanings.

Othello, the Moor of Venice in the play, represents the embodiment of high qualities such as nobility, equality, love, and courage. However, his most striking quality is his jealousy. It is jealousy that brings about his downfall, but it is still definitely intriguing why Shakespeare chose a man of Moorish origin as the hero of a play which is so infused with jealous acts all over. The vagueness behind this assumption fades when one thinks that Othello is like a black spot on a blinding white sheet which needs to be washed away sooner or later. The language that Shakespeare uses teaches us the western-white supremacy in regular intervals in the play by throwing foul denunciations against the other. Even the name Moor carries hidden messages inside it. It was commonly used as a nation’s name, who lived in the north of Africa in those days. However, Moor is a color-coded, invented name for these people of African or Berber backgrounds. Etymologically, moor comes from a Greek word, mauro(μαυρο), meaning black, blackened or charred. In this context, it becomes more than problematic to decide who is jealous of whom.

Around Othello, characters from both sides, either loving or hating him, can be observed in the play. Every single one of them has their own parts in the play. On the lovers’ side, Desdemona is love in its purest form. Cassio is obviously a loving comrade. However, Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, and Roderigo, a platonic lover of hers, quietly and intrusively hate Othello. They wait for the best time to get Desdemona back from him even if they are jealous to their bones. The final and the most important character in the play is Iago. He is a venomous snake with a silver tongue whispering into the ears of his victims. He is an instrument, which can easily be found in every society around the globe, and is used to manipulate and put people in a harmful way. He does what he does because he is what he is. His existential meaning is to corrupt and watch his mastery in deceitful arts with joyous feelings.

Poor Desdemona naively wishes, after an argument with Othello, that the cause of his anger is a state matter as in the following quotation:

**EMILIA** Pray heaven it be state matters, as you think,  
And no conception nor no jealous toy  
Concerning you.

**DESDEMONA** Alas the day, I never gave him cause.

**EMILIA** But jealous souls will not be answered so.  
They are not ever jealous for the cause,  
But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster  
Begot upon itself, born on itself.

**DESDEMONA** Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind.

(3.4.149-157, *Othello*)

The quotation implies that jealousy is a product of the mind. Desdemona thinks that jealousy comes from the physical acts, whereas Emilia, on the other hand, warns her that it is a

fatherless and figureless monster, on its own, consuming minds of its victims. The question, either in the physical world or in a whirlpool of abstract terms in mind, implies whether this monstrous emotion has a will of its own or is open to construction. In order to provide possible answers to these questions, definitions from different perspectives can be evaluated. For instance, Jealousy can be defined as an experience which is multidimensional and in these dimensions, mind deals with cognitive, emotional and coping behaviours (Fleischmann, Spitzberg, Andersen, & Roesch, 2005; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). So, it is an intricate meaning-making process and its subject is the host of the mind. Also, as it has layers of meanings from within and without, whereby the attempts to isolate jealousy as a self-begotten emotion cannot succeed. In this case, characters like Iago steps in:

**IAGO** O beware, my lord, of jealousy:

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss  
Who certain of his fate loves not his wronger;  
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er  
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet fondly loves?

(3.3.168-173, *Othello*)

He pours his poison through Othello's ears and watches how it seizes him slowly. Is this easy? Someone says something, and suddenly, you become jealous. To find a possible answer, Dinesh Bhugra (1993), a psychiatrist, delivers an article on a thorough definition of jealousy. As an attempt to comprehend the motives of Othello's jealousy, the following figure could probably present a useful illustration.

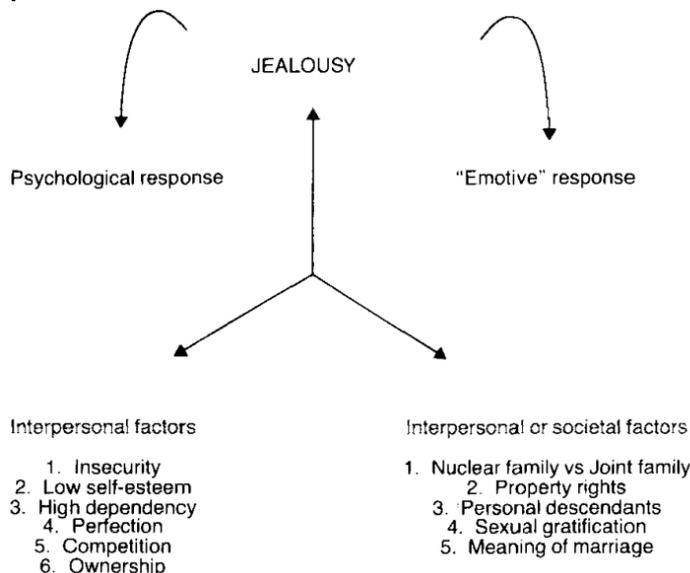


Figure 1. Jealousy (adopted from Bhugra, 1993)

As Figure 1. illustrates, a number of associations can be made with Othello's character in the play. It would be an undeniable presupposition or in those times is an absolute fact, that Othello's origin is the perfect habitat which is open to suggestion. As a Moor integrated to a new culture, Othello might feel insecure because of his colour. His self-esteem can be also low because of his insecurity. He is dependent on Desdemona as she acts as a door opener to this brave new world. He would not have been accepted in the family if Desdemona had not insisted on her love of his inner beauty. In order to achieve this, Othello needed to perform every act in a perfect manner which also caused obvious and hidden rivalries among his

competitors. Consequently, Othello's ownership towards Desdemona grew to such degree that he fell a victim to the suggestions of Iago quite easily.

When exactly does jealousy occur? Is it in the nature or nurture? According to DeSteno and Salovey (1996), jealousy emerges as a result of a risk of losing, which is caused by a real or imaginary rival that is a valuable relationship (p. 920). Actually, jealousy is in the nature of all beings waiting to be summoned at a point, whereby the partners face dire circumstances testing their love and fate. Hence, jealousy is a rather 'neutral' impulse which is labelled and given directions by our feelings, beliefs, values, and expectations (the latter being modified by our association with other people, institutions, and culture) (Walster & Walster 1977, as quoted in Bhugra 1993). As can be understood from the quotation, the intensity of jealousy is not as most imagined it to be. It is more likely to be amplified by the power structures around us; the most powerful of which is culture. Culture weaves its web of meanings. There is no escape. As a part of culture, human subjects have to abide by the rules of that system. Here also, Othello acts according to the rules of Venetian culture in those times. As a social being, meanings are derived from the counterparts of each member of the society.

Can acts of jealousy be seen in the same way all over the world? The answer to this question is obviously big 'No!'. In today's world, it is not a secret that the reasons behind jealousy are not fixed and can vary from one culture to another. Each culture has its own elements of social integrity. Politics, family structures, lineage, economic and legal apparatuses direct the behaviours of its members. This is mandatory in the sense that it forms an identity which secures the integrity of the social structure. It also creates a code by means, whereby a healthy communication among the members of the society can be established. These codes directly affect the behaviours and shape the members. According to the system, it creates a healthy environment, though the opposite can be claimed for the society to live in a harmony.

Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) discusses the Social Constructivism in his seminal book *Mind in Society* claiming that the concepts are formed within a society through the social learning. The following quotation sheds light on Othello's case:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (p.57).

Othello's two-staged cultural development occurs in the play. Iago, a powerful tool in the social construct, whispers and teaches him at times straightforwardly, and at other times indirectly, deluding Othello at his own gain. This becomes even clearer when Othello defines himself as "*Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought*", (5.2.341, *Othello*). Being wrought here means that Othello himself was ill-informed and reshaped by someone else rather than by his own will. Besides, Desdemona, too, does not believe that he is jealous. "*EMILIA Is he not jealous? / DESDEMONA Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him*" (3.4.25-27, *Othello*). Desdemona, here, gives clues about Othello's original culture by saying "*the sun where he was born*", which simply takes us to the Moorish culture of Othello. Seeds of jealousy were thrown by Iago, but they were grown by Othello himself. Iago carries the message of the culture.

Cultures provide contexts in which symbols carry messages. In the play, the most prominent symbol is the handkerchief of Othello's mother. Othello gives this invaluable gift, which can be also counted as a symbol of Othello's cultural heritage to Desdemona. The handkerchief is a token of mutual love and a seal between Desdemona and Othello. When Othello sees the handkerchief in the hands of unexpected people, he erupts like a volcano out of his imagined jealousy. These heirlooms have a vital and defining meaning in the Turkish culture, too. According to the Turkish traditions, if you hand your handkerchief to someone of the opposite sex, it serves as a seal of love between both of you. Of course, when the vastness of the world thought, it seems quite improbable to reach all the cultural elements throughout the world. Dozens of different kinds of behaviours can be defined as jealousy provoking depending on the location and the culture of the interaction. While dancing with someone else's spouse could be deemed normal for some cultures, in the Turkish culture, the case is quite the opposite or kissing even on the cheek or hands could not be accepted. Even handshaking, in some parts of Turkey, seems quite not right. As an extreme example, Bhugra gives Toda community in South India:

When a man wanted a married woman as a lover, he had to ask the permission of all her husbands and if permission was granted, he would pay them a mutually negotiable annual fee, after which she would live with him as if she were his real wife (p. 277).

This, in most of the cultures around the world, is against traditions, laws, ethics, and, so on. However, for the members of a small community, they still have their own rules shaping their identity. What is dangerous is messing with this identity. Both in nature and nurture, human subjects are prone to being jealous of their partners. Yet, each and every example of these acts, mostly unconscious, resides in a hypnotic structure called culture. The potency, variety, or the intensity of a neutral emotion like jealousy is controlled by the power structures that govern our civilizations. So, culture is in charge of creating and shaping this scale and this scale is liquid and is always vulnerable to globalization's powerful winds of change. Briefly, one reasonably feels the obligation, as advised, to compare and comprehend the differences among cultures without the intrusion as it would be counted as a subjugation attempt which causes nothing but malady and chaos.

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