

The Renaissance and Shakespeare
Department Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 07
Shakespeare's Othello (Contd.)

When I was a young lecturer in Hindu College on parade I joined the NCC, The National Cadet Corps. And I remember as part of my training, I was told to stand straight. Instead of responding with sir, as I should have I said, but I am standing straight. In other words you are not supposed to answer back, whatever order is given to you have to say sir and do it. Furious, the drill inspector instantly ordered me to run around the field 6 times it is my rifle raised above my head. I was lucky my being a lecturer not a recruit spared me the ignominy of a slap or a kick.

So, in Cyprus then to come back to Othello oh in these military surroundings, Desdemona enters the world in which normal human values have been turned upside down. She is in a context in which soldiers have been slapped kicked, their toes trodden on for the slightest infraction the rules and orders. The man commands like a full soldier Montana says about Othello and all of you or those of you who have heard commands being given to the soldiers on the parade ground will know how the drill instructor has to shout with what volume and how (Refer Time: 01:43) the command has to be.

Do not forget that this is the background that I am stressing and as you all will recall Othello slaps Desdemona. When she tries to intervene for the restoration of Casio after he has been demoted, on stage of course, this is a very shocking scene Othello slapping his wife, but for Othello this is something customary. In the army this sort of thing goes on and in Shakespeare sauce I did not mention Shakespeare source, but the sauce to the play the plot of the play the story of the play Shakespeare found in Cynthia an Italian writer in Cynthia's account of the Othello story Cynthia does not stress the army at all he just said that as I will say here as I am saying yes students of Othello know the extent to which Cynthia goes in creating a military setting, is merely that are referring to Iagos and Ensign and to Cassio's the captain.

Thus treating the issue as completely by the field in Shakespeare, as I am trying to show it is not better fiddle, but is central. So, let us now then move on to this competition I am

deliberately using the word competition, between Iago and Cassio. Cassio gets drunk while on duty as all of you will recall. Nothing can be more heinous a crime than for an officer to get drunk while on duty, and if you read the passage in which the scene is enacted, you will see how thoroughly furious and disgusted a fellow is that his officer should misbehave while on duty. Drunk Cassio shed the veneer of civility and talks about being saved before the ancient is saved and then as you all will recall there is a skirmish between Cassio and Rodrigo, the bell rings because a kind of an alarm in the midst of danger, the Turks are approaching and Othello is absolutely outraged by this kind of a pro under his command after all he is the officer in charge of the island.

Why is Cassio regarded as a rival for Iago? As we saw the beginning of the play Iago has been Othello's right hand man, Cassio is from Florence. Now here again is an interesting point Florence was the city which was known for art, painting, music not for military prowess. When Jorge Fernandez some years ago was the defense minister, then the soldiers up in the mountains bordering Tibet asked for a larger ration of rum in order to combat the cold as you all know the cold is extremely severe in those paths. Some baboos sitting in New Delhi in the ministry of defense refused to grant the increase in the ration for rum. Jorge Fernandez was furious and said those baboos; who refused to increase the ration will be sent up into the mountains to spend the winter there, and then they will realize how indispensable rum is to keep the soldiers warm. I mentioned this in order to show how to be behind the line the Cassio's is not really a part of the army experience.

Now, what does Cassio do then he earns a displeasure of his general Othello? Instead of apologizing and approaching the general, he listens to Iago's advice to go to the wife of the general to Desdemona to intercede on his behalf which of course, is professionally a suicidal thing to do. So, Cassio emerges as a character who is not really in consonance with the discipline that an army and forces it seems to me that Shakespeare is by these subtle touches showing us the inadequacy of Cassio as an army man. In other words the ambience of the army the military as we saw the beginning of this talk, continues to infuse the play even as the play progresses in subtle way.

Why did this condition develop of the army man wanting more money as we saw earlier, the wages of the ensign were half of that the lieutenant which of course, would explain why Iago is so, offended and feel. So, deprived because he is not given the promotion

that he thinks he deserves. After 1588 when the Spanish armada was defeated by the English navy as all of you know, England became the mistress of the field rule Britannia. Britannia rules the waves the queen, Queen Elizabeth the first she increasingly began to favor the navy and not the army. This was in a way detrimental to England's (Refer Time: 09:42) but do not forget that the navy was responsible for privacy on the sea particularly the Spanish and the Portuguese ships, that were bringing back gold silver spices from south America and from India. And as they nerd Europe the English ships would intercept and plunder the goods that they were bringing.

So, it was extremely profitable for England to prey upon this galleon the Spanish galleons, which were no match after the defeat of the armada, which were no match for the supremacy of the English navy. In fact, let me quote from a military historian fortescue, who says England was behind all Europe in military efficiency and all Europe was keenly, arrive alive to this fact. Surprisingly when the queen went to the hospital to see the wounded soldiers that is soldiers from the army, she was disgusted at the site calling them miserable creatures, the queen could not see what they could want and declared that she will not be pestered with the sight of them shocking statement.

But I think it shed light on the way in which the army was being neglected, and some if not all of you may remember how Falstaff in Henry the forth has a great speech in which he talks about honor not being able to set to a leg, a soldier loses his leg or his arm in the battle, and is told that he did this to protect the honor of his country. He says can honor said to a leg or an arm fall (Refer Time: 11:52) asked sarcastically virtual a fig Iago says. In other words army men they are increasingly becoming disillusioned by the way in which the army was being neglected. A work of art reflects or refracts in many ways the social, political and economic conditions of the times from which it emerges. Othello the play is no exception and if we want to make a significant foray into the background of Othello or the background of any of Shakespeare's plays, then we must look at what goes perhaps unnoticed when the play scene on the stage, but which comes to light when we studied the text carefully which is what we are trying to do.

Iagos discussed in the place opening scene at letter and affection taking preference over the old gradation, offer the perspective on his resentment at being superseded by cassio, this it seems to me is an important dimension of the play. Now it begins again I am going back to the beginning of the play and you all will recall that iagos bitterness that Othello

having evaded the three senators, who had recommended his promotion. But Othello with a bombast circumstance horribly stuffed with epithets of war, dismisses reputation why does the Othello dismiss this petition so abruptly? Three senators approached him surely Iago an impecunious ancient or enzyme would not have had the finances to bribe them, they must have approached Othello because they recognized as we saw the beginning of this talk that the ancients role was a crucial the critical role, Did a fellow flavor cassio? Because Casio was the one who went between Desdemona and Othello when he was wimmer in fact, that is precisely what Desdemona says as you all will recall the students of Othello.

She says that Casio was the go between them both. In other words in some sense the romance between Othello and Desdemona, it is playing a deleterious goal in the military background that is so important to an understanding of this play. Othello says trying to explain Desdemona's being attracted to him, she loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. Is this a firm foundation for a man woman relationship to last and repeat the line; she loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. All with a schoolgirl crush and a romantic adventurer you remember she is fascinated by the stories Othello tells her of his exploits and is so, impressed that she falls in love with him.

Now, this should lead us to look more closely into the age difference between Othello and Desdemona. Some of us might ask why is this an important question? It is an important question because the play was intended to be staged, and if you had the director of the play and we are producing this play on the stage or in the film, then you would have to decide as to how pronounced the age difference would be between Desdemona and Othello.

Now there are clues within the play that give us an indication of the ages of these two characters. Othello being a general would not be less than 50 years of age somewhere between 50 and 60 how old is Desdemona? We do not have any definite indication in terms of years, but she does talk of herself as being a child to chiding; let us not forget to look at other places of Shakespeare's how old is Juliet in Romeo and Juliet there we know specifically. She is only 14 perdita in the winter scale is 16, they are again we know that specifically. Miranda in the tempest we know is 15 in September 1673, James duke of York married Maria Beatrice (Refer Time: 17:49) Somadina when she was 15.

So, in Elizabethan times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, aristocratic girls married very early. In other words Othello the difference in age between Othello and Desdemona would be around 30 years which is of course, a very large time span. So, let us keep this in mind while we study Othello or fellow recognizes that his age is in some sense going against him, in his relationship with Desdemona. He says I therefore, beg it not to please the palate of my appetite, not to comply with heat the young effects in my defunct. In other words he is not sexually as passionate as a younger man would be and Iago recognizes this when he says his soul is so unfettered to her love, that she may make unmake do what she list even as her appetite shall play the god with his weak function.

In other words we are now approaching a deep psychological Kasem or an (Refer Time: 19:30) between Desdemona and Othello, and the play of course, is a profound psychological investigation into human relationships and a student's of display we must recognize that this is an important dimension which we have to reckon with. This is adequacy is Othello's private hell about which the shrewd Iago has some inkling based on the vast age difference between the two, and in a recent book on Othello by black actors located in America the Afro American edited by Michael e call, my former colleague in the department of English of the university of Delhi.

One of the authors of the essays that constitute this volume says interestingly enough that the name Othello has held in it. If you write out the name Othello you will find that there is hell and the name Desdemona has the word demon in it. An interesting kind of a linguistic side light that while we may consider too fanciful to be preoccupied with, nevertheless just suggest the subtlety of display. To conclude then ladies and gentlemen we have looked at certain aspects of Othello, which shed light on the complexities of display and in your reading of the play it is very important to hold all these aspects in your mind.

So, that you do not get carried away by just one aspect, but you recognize that there is the military aspect, there is a romantic aspect, there is the contest between Iago and Cassio, all these have been woven together by Shakespeare in terms of his consummate art and dramatic skill, to create a composite whole in which if your imaginations are strong enough, or if you are looking at a good stage production of the play, or a film production of the play, the director the producer or your imagination will recognize and

will incorporate in your reconstruction of the play, all directors reconstruction, in the producers reconstruction, the ambience that Shakespeare is suggesting.

In which many of these political, social, cultural factors play apart, and there is all of all of you know a Shakespearean play is a vast compendium of these fossils, which be as readers as students must try to disentangle. I deliberately use the word disentangle because then we can put each of them under the microscope of our own inquiring minds, and resolve them into a work of art which in its totality is one of the greatest achievements of Shakespeare.

Please, now read the play keeping in mind these diverse factors.

Thank you.