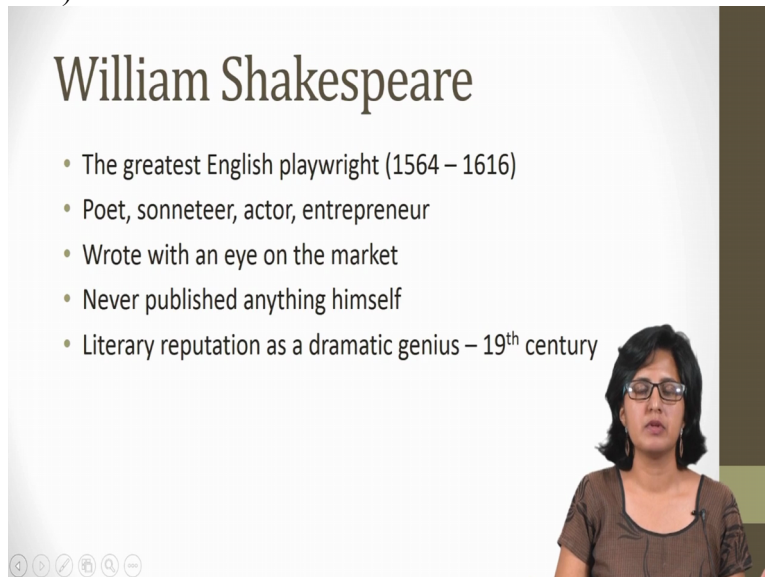


Introduction to World Literature
Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Othello -1
Othello by William Shakespeare

Hello and welcome to yet another NPTEL session of this course, Introduction to world literature and today we are discussing the text Othello by William Shakespeare.

(Refer Slide Time 0:22)



The slide features the title "William Shakespeare" in a large, serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list of facts about him. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj speaking. At the bottom left of the slide, there are several small navigation icons.

- The greatest English playwright (1564 – 1616)
- Poet, sonneteer, actor, entrepreneur
- Wrote with an eye on the market
- Never published anything himself
- Literary reputation as a dramatic genius – 19th century

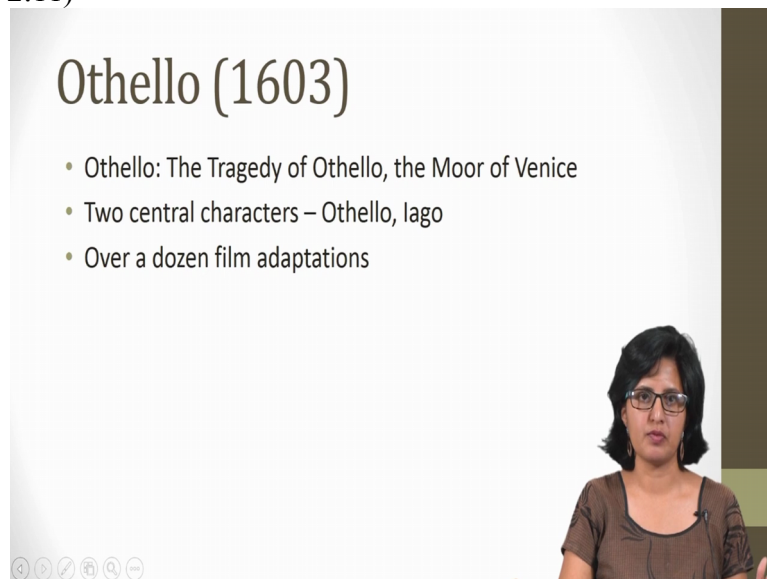
William Shakespeare is of course a man who needs no introduction. He is considered as the greatest playwright who lived during the Elizabethan times and he is also seen as the best known name and the best-known artist from England. He lived from 1564 till 1616. Those of you who are familiar with Shakespeare's biography would also know that these dates are based on certain conjectures which are part of the documents available. There is no actual birth record or a death record and Shakespeare earned his fame and reputation as a poet, a sonneteer, actor and an entrepreneur.

He wrote with an eye on the market. He was not one of those conventional writers who lived in staged plays. During those times, he staged his plays directly even before he had the time to publish anything by himself and also except that he arrived in London from Stratford-upon-Avon totally friendless and he started his career in a very low profile and then he went on to become

the best known face in London, he went back to Stratford-upon-Avon to buy the second-largest property. He also became a shareholder in some of the important playhouses of those times.

So that was the kind of steady growth that he had as a dramatist and as an entrepreneur and as an artist who had an eye on the market. So Shakespeare's literary reputation, his dramatic genius was cemented only in the 19th century. He was of course seen as a successful artist, a successful dramatist but in the 19th century also find him getting elevated to the status of a literary genius. We also find a plethora of artists, of critical works emerging since the 19th-century on Shakespeare.

(Refer Slide Time 2:11)



So today we are looking at one of his greatest tragedies, Othello. This is presumably written in 1603. This is one of, this belongs to this later phase when he was writing during the time of King James I. And this, the full title goes like this Othello: The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice. There are 2 central characters in this play, Othello and Iago and there are a few other important characters as well including Desdemona, Amelia, Cassio, Brabantia, they all play a significant role but nevertheless it is possible to say that display belongs to Othello and Iago and some even go to the extent of saying that it belongs to Iago who is the villain of this piece.

And this play, Othello it continues to be a huge success whenever it was staged and there is over a dozen film adaptations. And this has also become an inspiration for a number of other kinds of works which emerged in the earlier and in the present times. It is often said that

Shakespeare's supreme dramatic genius is in his tragedies and Othello is one such work which manifests his supreme Genius, his supreme craft and his dramatic artistry in more or less perfect ways.

(Refer Slide Time 3:29)



Othello

- Shares with King Lear, Macbeth and Hamlet a fascination with evil.
- Studies the devastating effects of jealousy and vengeful the.
- Only a passing interest in the political strife to which Shakespeare's Roman tragedies are devoted.
- The action of Othello concentrated overwhelmingly on the emotion of jealousy

A woman with glasses and a brown top is speaking in the foreground of the slide.

So the play, Othello, it shares with the other important tragedies such as King Lear, Macbeth and Hamlet a fascination with evil. All these 4 tragedies are considered as the most important ones and the most intense works of Shakespeare and if you read about the critical tradition available on Shakespeare and the scholarship on Shakespeare, you will also notice a number of works on these 4 tragedies and in Othello, we find that a number of people have studied the devastating effects of jealousy and the vengeful emotions and Shakespeare only had a passing interest in the political strife and we find that Shakespeare's Roman tragedies are mostly devoted to that.

Otherwise in the action of Othello, defined the competition is overwhelmingly on the emotion of jealousy and we find Shakespeare taking this emotion to different levels playing with it and even using that as a character itself to shape, redefine, even change different characters.

(Refer Slide Time 4:33)



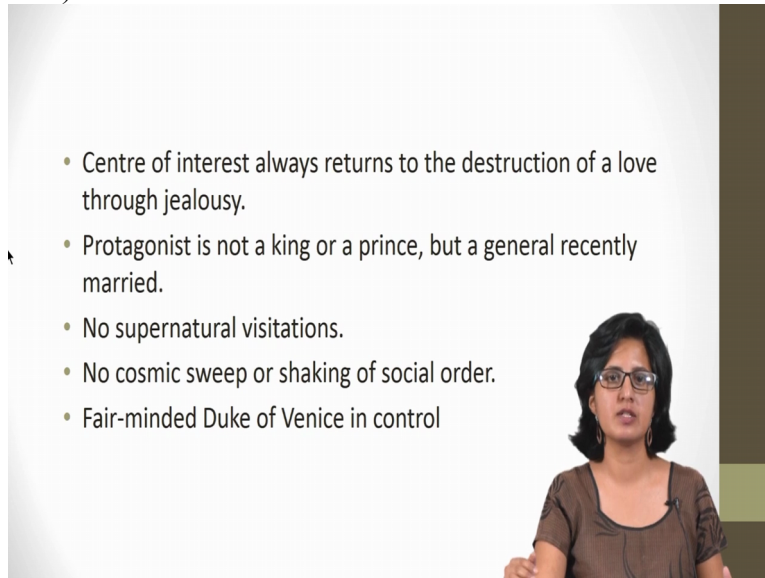
Othello, the Moor

- No consensus on Othello's ethnic origin
- "Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent and contradictory"
- Dark-skinned people in general – interchangeably with terms such as African, Somali, Ethiopian, Negro, Arab, Berber and even Indian

On the protagonists, Othello, the Moor, there is no consensus on Othello's ethnic origin. The term, Moor has obviously been used to describe Othello and it is said that the Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent and even contradictory. So it is perhaps safe to say that Moor is a term used to refer to dark skinned people in general and it is obviously a racist derogatory term and this has also been used interchangeably with terms such as African, Somali, Ethiopian, Negro, Arab, Berber or even Indian to suggest that these are people from faraway lands who are predominately non-European in some way or the other.

And these references to the nonwhite in various ways have drawn your attention from where this critical circles and as mentioned, it is also being seen as very racist and derogatory but the focus of this play is mostly on how jealousy as an emotion can be seen as a universal emotion and that there is hardly any difference in the basis of race or gender that we find while the emotion of jealousy is at work.

(Refer Slide Time 5:48)

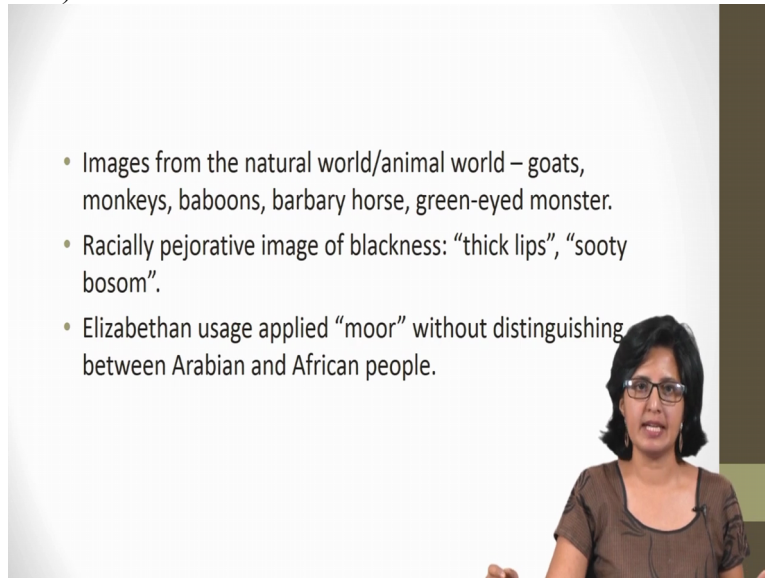
A woman with dark hair and glasses is speaking in front of a presentation slide. The slide has a white background with a dark vertical bar on the right side. The slide contains five bullet points.

- Centre of interest always returns to the destruction of a love through jealousy.
- Protagonist is not a king or a prince, but a general recently married.
- No supernatural visitations.
- No cosmic sweep or shaking of social order.
- Fair-minded Duke of Venice in control

So it is interesting to notice how the play looks at jealousy and how the centre of interest always returns to the destruction of love through jealousy. The protagonist here is not a king or a Prince but he is a general, an Army general and he is also recently married and in this play, unlike some of the other plays by Shakespeare, there are no supernatural visitations. There is no comic sweep or shaking of social order. We only have as a protagonist, a fair-minded Duke of Venice in control.

So when the play begins, things are completely under control and we even get this impression that this is mainly a political story, the story of a political strife with a love story in the background but as the play progresses, we get to know that it is totally otherwise. The political actions, it automatically goes to the background and we realise that it is mostly about this man, Othello and how he is swayed, how his emotions are being swayed by these cunning interventions by Iago who once was his trusted confidante but from beginning of the play, we also get to know that Iago is not what he is.

(Refer Slide Time 7:00)



- Images from the natural world/animal world – goats, monkeys, baboons, barbary horse, green-eyed monster.
- Racially pejorative image of blackness: “thick lips”, “sooty bosom”.
- Elizabethan usage applied “moor” without distinguishing between Arabian and African people.

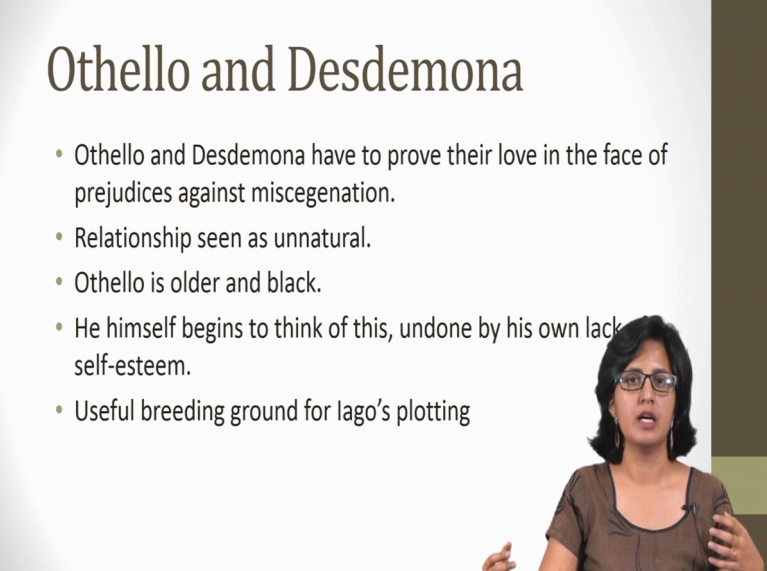
In this play, perhaps to invoke the kind of racist, derogatory attitude that the white characters had towards the moor, we find a lot of images being invoked from the natural world or from the animal world like goats, monkeys, baboons, barberry horse, green eyed monster and sometimes terms such as green eyed monster it is also used to talk about abstract emotions such as jealousy and there is very predominant use of the racially pejorative image of blackness, especially when discussions are about the Moor: thick lips, sooty bosom.

So these are the ways in which Shakespeare is also trying to tell us about the dominant attitudes of the playgoers of those times, of the audience of those times towards the nonwhite. We also need to keep in mind that this was the time when England was going really successful in their overseas expedition, the race for the colonies had already begun and England we realise that within a few decades, they also become the number one, they become the superpowers in terms of the racial power equation.

So coming back to the play, during the Elizabethan times, the term “moor” did not really distinguish between Arabian and African people. It was used as a general term to refer to any dark skinned person. So here we do not find Shakespeare also taking any particular care or any pain to show us whether the Moor, Othello was Arabian or African or something else. So he leaves it at that and perhaps leaves it very open for the audiences’ imagination. And it is also important to notice that during the Elizabethan period, specially the Elizabethan audience, it

really did not matter from their from where the Moor came as long as his blackness, his non-whiteness was emphasised to create a contrast.

(Refer Slide Time 8:59)



Othello and Desdemona

- Othello and Desdemona have to prove their love in the face of prejudices against miscegenation.
- Relationship seen as unnatural.
- Othello is older and black.
- He himself begins to think of this, undone by his own lack of self-esteem.
- Useful breeding ground for Iago's plotting

A woman with glasses and a brown top is speaking in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Othello and Desdemona are the pair, are the couple who are in love and at the outset of the play, we get to know that they decide to elope and get married and this is also happening at a very significant juncture in Othello's own career and Desdemona has done this pretty much against the will of her father who also had favoured Othello as a general, who had favoured Othello as an adventurer but not as a suitor for his daughter. So Othello and Desdemona are forced to prove their love in the face of these prejudices against miscegenation.

And this also becomes one of the subplots in this play, one of the subtext in this play which becomes very very significant in reading the play against the colonial rhetorical which was getting predominant from the Elizabethan times onwards. The relationship between a white woman and a nonwhite or a black person was seen as something unnatural. And to make things worse, Othello is being portrayed as being black as well as older than Desdemona.

And in fact as the play progresses, we realise that Othello himself of course at the instigation of Iago, he himself begins to think of this and he is undone by his own lack of self-esteem and this lack of self-esteem, this lack of confidence in his own looks, in his own personality, in his own compatibility as far as his union with Desdemona is concerned we find that that becomes a useful breeding ground for Iago's plotting.

(Refer Slide Time 10:38)

The tragic flaw (hamartia)

- Othello's gravest failing (tragic flaw) is an insufficient regard for himself.
- Begins to see himself through the eyes of Venice, Brabantio.
- Othello's intense love for Desdemona prepares the way for his tragedy.



So the tragic flaw in Othello, the protagonist, the hamartia in Othello is the insufficient regard for himself. He begins to see himself through the eyes of Venice, through the eyes of Brabantio and finally through the emergent eyes of Desdemona herself and we find that Iago finds it very very easy to manipulate Othello. He does not even have to try too hard. And Othello's intense love for Desdemona in fact propels the way for his tragedy and towards the end, ironically Othello himself realises that that he is someone who loved wisely but not too well.

(Refer Slide Time 11:22)

Iago

- Iago belongs to a group of villains in Shakespeare who while motivated in human terms also take delight in evil for its own sake.
- Personified evil derived from the vice of the morality play.
- These villains take the audience into their confidence and boast in soliloquy about their cleverness, exult in the triumph.
- Superb actors deceiving every other character until the final action.

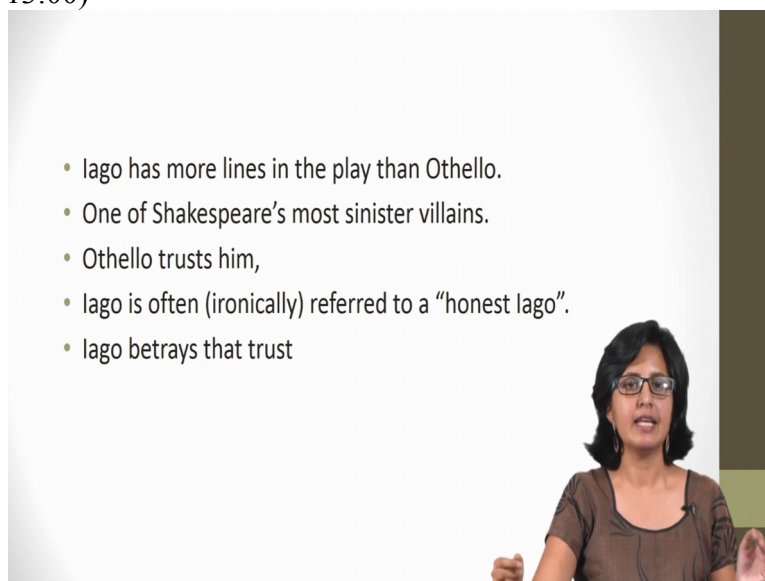


And Iago is one of the most fascinating characters of Shakespeare, he is considered as one of the finest villains sketched in literary canvas and Iago belongs to a group of villains in Shakespeare who while motivated in human terms, they also take delight in evil for its own sake. So he is this personified evil derived from the vice of morality play. Morality play being one of the earlier kinds of play before the Elizabethan stage took over.

And these villains like Iago, they take the audience into their confidence, they boast soliloquy about their cleverness and they exult in the triumph of evil. We find Iago doing precisely that throughout the play. While one is a (())(12:08) at this capacity of evil that the Iago has, one is also awestruck by his ability, by his smooth manoeuvring through these different other humans and the in the morality play also, we find that this character personifying vice or evil, they are also superb actors receiving every other character until later reactions.

So there is this action happening at 2 levels. On the one hand, they are good actors onstage, on the other hand, they also deceiving the other characters and what makes it all the more thrilling and experience for the audience is that this is not covered before the audience. The audience can see through the villainy of these characters but the other characters cannot. This increases the tension level while the audience are watching the play.

(Refer Slide Time 13:00)



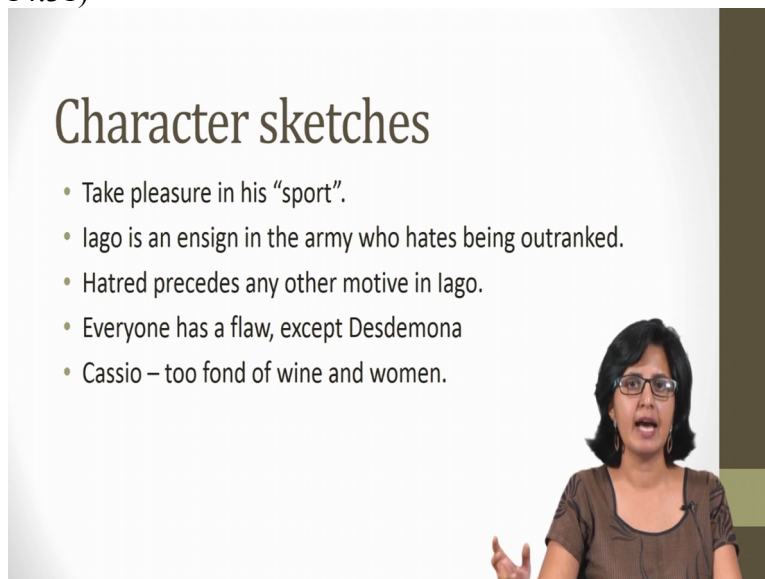
- Iago has more lines in the play than Othello.
- One of Shakespeare's most sinister villains.
- Othello trusts him,
- Iago is often (ironically) referred to a "honest Iago".
- Iago betrays that trust

And in Othello, we notice that Iago has more lines than Othello and he is considered as one of Shakespeare's most sinister villains and ironically, throughout the play Othello trusts him,

blindly trusts him. Othello trusts Iago more than his friend Cassio, more than his beloved Desdemona, more than anyone else and we find Othello becoming a very weak man, someone without a rationale, someone without common sense when he is with Iago. And Iago is often referred to as “honesty Iago” and we begin to see the irony in this, the audience begins to see the irony in this but thanks to the supreme craft in this play, we find that the other characters are not able to see through this irony.

And this also reminds us of the way in which Shakespeare again uses such techniques in his play, in his Roman tragedy. Julius Caesar where while Mark Anthony is making this famous speech, he continuously refers to Brutus as the honourable man, Brutus is an honourable man. He is drawing our attention to the act of deception that he committed but he is also referring to Brutus as an honourable man. So the irony makes his villainy seem all the more unacceptable. Iago betrays that trust that Othello has on him and that is also part of the way in which the plot unfolds.

(Refer Slide Time 14:31)



The slide features a title 'Character sketches' in a large, dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of five points. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a brown top, who appears to be presenting the slide.

Character sketches

- Take pleasure in his “sport”.
- Iago is an ensign in the army who hates being outranked.
- Hatred precedes any other motive in Iago.
- Everyone has a flaw, except Desdemona
- Cassio – too fond of wine and women.

Shakespeare’s characters were not always well formed and well-rounded but in this play, we find that he has given perhaps more care in the way in which Iago’s character has been shaped and Iago is someone who takes pleasure in his sport and the way he goes about his acts of villainy, his acts of deception, he goes about manipulating various other people, he seems to totally enjoy it and this, that is his pastime, that is his sport and he is really good at it we also notice. And Iago

is someone who is in the Army and he hates being outranked, we get to know that in the beginning of the play.

He has been outranked and Cassio has taken his place and this was perhaps the position that he had been waiting for and from that moment, he has identified some significant motive. But we also get to know throughout the play as it progresses that it was not really that motive alone, it was not just because he felt this spite because he was outranked by Cassio and what emerges is very ironical and significant is that hatred precedes any other motive in Iago.

In this soliloquy where he is trying to reason out his hatred we also find him looking for various reasons, he even goes to the extent of assuming that perhaps his own wife had cheated him with the moor. So there is a way in which he goes looking for reasons even when there is none because hatred seems to be the only motive. And in this play, we notice that the way Shakespeare has presented these characters, Shakespeare has drawn out these characters, every character seems to have a flaw except Desdemona.

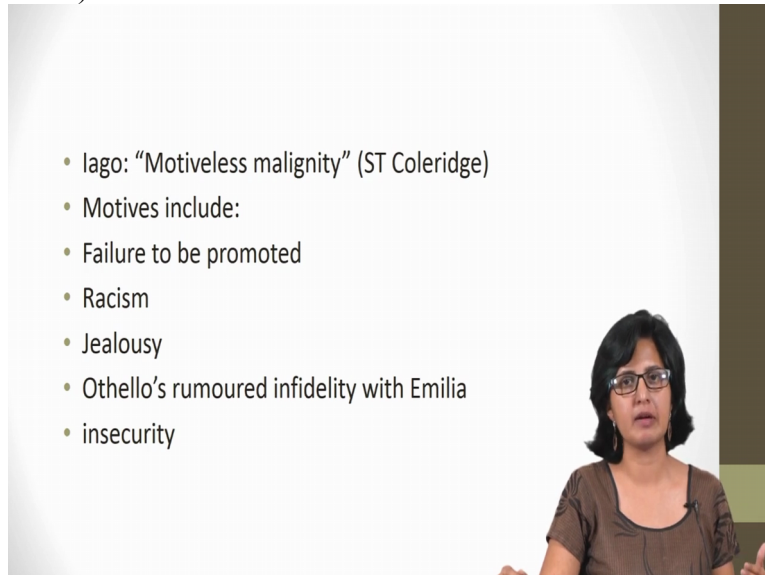
Desdemona is presented as someone who is flawless, who is perfect and who certainly did not receive the kind of ending that she does in this play but of course there are some critics who also feel that Desdemona's character is not really well rounded and Shakespeare has not given much care in shaping her character and she also speaks very less. Throughout the play we get to know very little about the real Desdemona. Cassio who comes across as the other fine soul in this play, he is also shown as being too fond of wine and women.

So there is a way in which Shakespeare rightfully gives a flaw to each of these characters so that the tragedy makes complete sense. And here we also need to remember that Shakespeare is someone who moved away from the classical tenets, he did not really subscribe to the classical notions of play and he experimented widely in the Elizabethan stage but nevertheless, there are certain concepts that he also borrows and uses freely in his idea of this tragedy, especially in the case of the tragic flaw, the hamartia and the conception of the tragic hero.

So those are some of the things that we find him being in alignment with the classical Masters. And he is also who is someone who radically changed the stage and he also tried to introduce a

lot of innovations which then became more or less standardised in the Elizabethan and English stage.

(Refer Slide Time 17:58)



- Iago: "Motiveless malignity" (ST Coleridge)
- Motives include:
 - Failure to be promoted
 - Racism
 - Jealousy
 - Othello's rumoured infidelity with Emilia
 - insecurity

Talking about Iago, Coleridge once remarked that he has "motiveless malignity". This is a face which has been continually used to refer to the motiveless vicious acts performed by Iago throughout the play and some of the motives when we go through this play, we realise that it could be the failure to get promoted because Cassio had already taken his position. It could be racism because he keeps making derogatory remarks about the moor.

It could be jealousy and it could be Othello's rumoured infidelity with Emilia and this is very interesting because Iago does not really seem to mind the infidelity because he is not someone who is really attached to his wife either. If this can serve as a reason to continue with his maligning ways, then why not? And this seems to be the spirit with which Iago continues to work and he also has immense feeling of security but he is also frighteningly, formidably confident and he is the only character who remains consistent throughout.

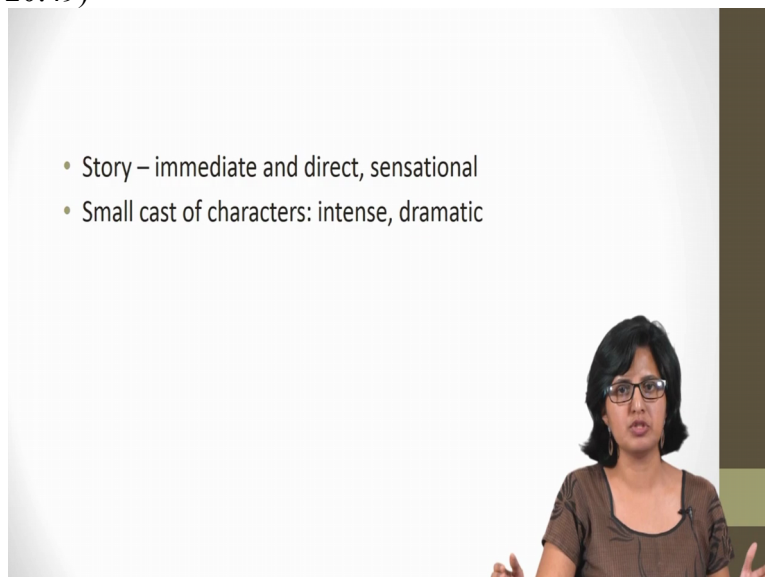
We do not find him undergoing any change even after being discovered. Even after his villainy being discovered towards the end, we find him retaining his composure and remaining the same vicious, villainous Iago that he was from the beginning. There is no reason for us to suspect that there perhaps was a past and there was a moment after which he became like this because he

seems to totally enjoy his sport. As many critics have put it, he seems to be totally in control of the manipulations that he is doing and he does not feel even for a moment guilty about it.

Make no mistake, he does not try to amend his ways in anyway and even after Rodrigo dies quite accidentally, we find that this man is left with no remorse and he can stoop to any level, he can take any kind of criticism and he knows how to change his behaviour in front of each one and he has also very very smart because he knows the weaknesses of each person. He knows how insecure the moor feels in front of his wife and how fortunate he thinks that Desdemona chose him over the others.

Iago knows too well what Cassio's weaknesses are and Iago knows very well how to make a fool out of Rodrigo. And he knows what language to use in each occasion and he also shifts between these registers. He can use extremely filthy language, he can use a language with a lot of sexual connotations, he can also use the profound intense language that he often uses with Othello.

(Refer Slide Time 20:49)



The storyline can be seen as immediate and direct, it is very very sensational too. And there is a small cast of characters but they are very intense. Each act is very very dramatic as well. There are 5 acts in this play and in the following session we shall take a look at some of the significant scenes in these different acts. Here, in this session we do not propose to present you with the range of, in fact the amazing range of critical traditions within which this play has been located,

the different readings and the different analytical works available on Othello but we rather would prefer to present before you a close reading of some of the important scenes in these 5 acts.

So I hope before that you will be able to take a look at the play itself and also become a little familiar with the kind of writing and the kind of style that Shakespeare uses in Othello. So in the following session where we take a closer look at some of the scenes across these 5 acts, the reading would begin to make more sense for you. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session where we do a close reading of the important scenes across 5 acts. Thank you.