



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

A FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS ON THE CHARACTER, OTHELLO

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ABSTRACT

Psychoanalytical approach has undergone a gradual importance over time in the world of literature. Psychoanalysis has always been an important tool in understanding literary texts. Psychoanalytical knowledge provides readers better sort of understanding of literary pieces and assists to achieve the target of communicative literary competence. The research tends to focus on one of the most acknowledged characters of William Shakespeare, Othello. Psychoanalytic approach has been used in this study to bring out the unconscious activity of Othello's mind aroused by jealousy, inferiority complex, and Iago's heinous plan. This study demonstrates how humans are helpless in the hand of some unconscious factors of mind. The purpose of this study is to depict how Shakespeare's character Othello is motivated by unconscious drives like Id, Ego and Superego. In order to balance the unconscious conflicts in mind, Othello's ego controls his Id and Superego while ego applying a series of defense mechanisms like rationalization, somatization, denial, intellectualization, regression, projection etc. By applying Freud's psychoanalytic approach on the character Othello, the paper will also attempt to interpret how the unconscious factors affect Othello's behavior, personality, mental health and personal relationships.

Key words: Freudian components of Personality, Jealousy, Inferiority complex, Defense mechanisms of *Othello*.

"Othello" or "The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice" (1603) is one of the most remarkable and well performed plays across the globe written by William Shakespeare. Ben Jonson said (1650), "Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time!" Shakespeare is best known for his sincere presentations of human emotions. His literary works have the power to transcend over time. Perhaps, that is the striking reason for being his plays universal. Many critics appreciate Othello as one of the greatest heroes of Shakespeare. The critics of psychoanalysis often focus on the inner workings of character. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is one of the finest and effective ways to explain human

behavior and psychology. The article attempts to bring out Othello's unconscious mind and drives. "These unconscious factors have the potential to produce unhappiness in the form of disturbing personality traits or disturbances in self-esteem" (American psychoanalytic Association, 1998). Othello's psychological problem is rooted in his unconscious mind. By applying this theory on Othello's character, it allows the readers to have a great insight into the inner workings of Othello's mind. It also provides a deeper understanding of Othello.

Recently there has been a growing interest in the fields of psychology. "As a direct result of

psychoanalysis, approaches to psychological problem has been developed worldwide" (Farrell, 1981). In the past decade much research has been focused on the basic psychoanalysis of Othello. In this section of the paper, I would like to discuss some views of scholars on psychoanalysis of Othello. Most of the writers consider Othello's act of killing his beautiful wife and his tragic doom from the grand position because of racial prejudice, jealousy, inferiority complex, Iago's heinous plot and so on. Many researchers have extensively studied only a few defense mechanisms applied by Othello's ego which are not only interesting but also important.

Coleridge (Coleridge, 247) states that "Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago" (qtd. In Xun Wu, 27). But David Enoch, a psychiatrist, (David, 1991: 38) holds the view that that "Iago merely fanned the flame of jealousy, which was already embedded in Othello's personality". (qtd. Chin-jung, 50). Robeson states: "Othello is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honor, rather than jealousy" (qtd. In Andreas, 39, In Mutlu, 135).

Crystal Cookies (2016) mentions Othello's superego (conscience) that makes him think twice about making this decision as he asks for "ocular proof" (III.iii.366). LokiS54cero (2017) states that "murdering others is an outward projection of an unconscious desire to die". Othello himself wanted to die for the feeling of betrayal. But in projecting his self-hatred to Desdemona, he projected his killing instinct. But Othello exercises his will for regression when killing himself. LokiS54cero (2017) also states "Othello's jealousy might be a denial of his own desires. Othello probably lusts after someone else. But he fails to express. In order to defend his ego, he projected these desires onto his wife. Then, he becomes very suspicious of her interactions with others. Othello then convinces himself of his wife's infidelity by displacing a hatred of himself onto Desdemona".

Athlete Mario Balotelli (1990) states that 'Racism springs from ignorance'. The fact cannot be denied that Othello's ignorance is his lack of prudence. He always considers Iago as "honest

ensign" which is ironic in the play (V.ii.150). From the experience of literature, it is understood that a great warrior, or a great king must exercise prudence in such important matters of state. If Othello had the capability to exercise such prudence, he would not be the victim of Iago's conspiracy.

The views above sound reasonable in interpreting the psychology of Othello because every reagent like conspiracy, jealousy directly or indirectly shapes Othello's behavior and personality. However, they pay much attention to the external causes and a few defense mechanisms. But in this paper the author will attempt to trace Freud's almost all defense mechanisms which is applied by Othello's ego internally. Moreover, the paper will end with a relationship among the causes which are responsible for shaping Othello's personality and actions.

Sigmund Freud is known as the proponent of Psychoanalysis. Human beings are motivated by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts. According to Freud, there are three components of personality like Id, Superego, Ego. The complex theory of Freud is overshadowed in Othello. From the psychoanalytic approach, it is understood that Othello's behavior is the result of the interaction among Id, Ego and Superego. This interaction happens in his unconscious mind.

In *An outline of psychoanalysis* (1949), Freud explains the components of Personality. Id resides completely at the unconscious level. It acts under the "pleasure principle" (Freud, 1856). Id wants an immediate gratification. Id is "the primitive and instinctual part of the mind" that contains sexual and aggressive drives (Freud, 1856). It is unwilling to compromise. Id will do anything to achieve its goal no matter how dangerous its action may seem. Superego is the idealistic part of the personality. It resides in preconscious mind. It is the decision making component of personality. "The super ego's function is to control the Id's impulses" (Freud 1856). It especially controls those which society forbids such as aggression. The superego can punish the ego through causing feelings of guilt. Ego resides in all levels of awareness. It operates under reality principle. Ego attempts to negotiate between

Id and Superego to satisfy both realistically. The ego acts as a referee for the Id and superego. Id is chaotic and unreasonable. But ego works by reason.

In "Othello", conflicts among id, ego, and superego arise in Othello's unconscious mind. Conflicts come in various ways like slip of the tongue, dreams, jokes, jealousy, anger, anxiety, and defense mechanisms. To deal with conflicts in life, the ego employs a range of defense mechanism. As Othello becomes more jealous, angry and tensed, his ego applies some defense mechanisms like projection, intellectualization, displacement, denial regression, rationalism etc. Some examples of which are stated later in this paper. "These unconscious drives and defense mechanisms also help an individual to overcome the challenges they face in life" (National Psychological Association for psychoanalysis, 1998). But sometimes these can be fatal as in Othello.

Some critics consider Othello's gullibility as a tragic flaw while many critics regard jealousy as Othello's "tragic flaw". But Othello did not create jealousy himself. Rather, it originates from Othello's psychology of inferiority. Jealousy is a strong emotion that strikes humans with its lethal venom. Iago poisons Othello's mind and Othello reacts to this jealousy. Jealousy heavily shapes his personality and behavior. This painful emotional feeling is good enough to destroy any happiness. Othello possesses "free and open nature" (I.iii.397). Though Othello is a soldier, leader and powerful figure of Venetian society, he is not devoid of jealousy. He is so gullible that sinister Iago easily manipulates him. "Iago reflects the archetypal villain" (Sen, 2006). Othello relies easily on Iago to believe without being thought deeply. Iago tries to prove Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio which increases Othello's torments of jealousy.

"Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,
As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;
And his unbookish jealousy must
construe". (IV.i. L 93-95)

Iago in a soliloquy explains that he intends to question Cassio about his relations with Bianca, a prostitute who earns her livelihood by selling her bodily charms. Consequently, overhearing their

conversation, Othello believes that they are talking about Desdemona. Then, he is quite convinced that "all his worst fears are justified" (Sen, 2006). Iago also soliloquizes to keep the handkerchief of Desdemona in Cassio's lodging and intends that Othello will discover the handkerchief in the former lieutenant's possession. Thus, his jealous suspicion will be confirmed. Thus jealousy arises and Othello reacts to it. Consequently, this jealousy kindles some unconscious drives in his mind.

Like jealousy, Othello's inferiority complex changes his personality and behavior. This Inferiority complex causes unnecessary doubt and jealousy, sense of revenge and hatred in Othello which results in disasters. Inferiority complex is an intense feeling of unworthiness. Othello corresponds to the Freud's theory of Inferiority complex. He is often referred to as the "Moor" (I.i.116), "the Barbary Horse" (I.i.111), "old black ram" (I.i.8), "Thick-lips" (I.i.66). Othello is a black moor who is living in a white society. He concerns over his race, poor language and age. That's why, he considers himself as racial outsider in Venetian society. Shakespeare seems to base her protagonist on racial prejudice. It is important to note that another striking reason of Iago's success of destroying Othello's marriage is "Inferiority complex". Because of Othello's inferiority complex, sinister Iago easily puts monstrous thoughts in him. Othello says,

"Rude am I in my speech, more than
pertains to feats of broil and battle"- (I.i.81-82)

His speech suggests that he always feels himself inferior to others. He gradually rejects the positivity of blackness. Desdemona can cope with the racial prejudice but Othello cannot cope with that. If Desdemona had racial prejudice, she had not accepted Othello as husband. Her relationship with him is based on love. But Othello gradually accepts the idea that blackness is ugliness and inferiority. He also thinks that he does not deserve Desdemona as he is black. He says,

"I am black, and have not those soft parts
of conversation". (I. ii. 268)

His speech seems to suggest how he is heavily influenced by inferiority complex. He has no idea

how unconsciously racial prejudice has penetrated into his mind. However, this inferiority complex, jealousy culminates gradually in the rise of his unconscious drives.

Before implanting monstrous thoughts in Othello's mind, Iago tactfully arouses Othello's curiosity. When Othello urges Iago to speak the truth, Iago pretends and cautions Othello to be aware of jealousy. Iago refers to Jealousy as the "green eyed monster" (III.iii.170). At that moment "Othello denies any thoughts of Jealousy in relation to Desdemona" (Sen, 2006). Here Othello refuses to accept a negative behavior which is denial. He intentionally denies that he would not feel jealousy regarding Desdemona. But he feels jealousy. Othello seems to apply here denial mechanism.

When Othello is convinced of Desdemona's adulterous behavior, he is enraged and determined to tear Desdemona into pieces. Anger is a strong feeling of annoyance. Sometimes, superego cannot control the impulses of Id. That time, psychological problems are manifested physically. Desdemona urges Othello several times to so that he can give Cassio his formal position. But the Moor is surprised by her resistance. This increases his curiosity. At one point of the play, he cannot tolerate her "high concern for Cassio" and compels to strike her before the relatives (Sen, 2006). Othello's action here is the manifestation of his inward anger and jealousy. Here is the somatization defense mechanism because her psychological problems become physical.

After having convinced by Iago about Desdemona's infidelity, he decides to kill his wife. Othello kills her based on his jealousy. Since murdering someone is an aggressive desire, it is the Id of Othello. Desdemona asked Othello to postpone the murder for tomorrow but Othello did not pay any heed to her words. But before killing her, "his conscience makes him think twice about making this decision" (Crystal Cookies, 2016). His conscience is his superego.

"I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have
pluck'd thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,/it needs
must wither". (V.iii.L12-14)

Nevertheless, it can be said that Othello does not directly rely on Iago. It is Othello's Id that drives him to jealousy but it is his superego that drives him to ask Iago to give "ocular proof" (III.iii.366). He says,

"Villain, be sure thou prove my love a
whore,

Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof" (III .
iii. L 365-366)

Here he attempts to figure out if she is unfaithful or not based on evidence. By asking an evidence, he tends to depend on his conscience (Superego) here rather than instinct rage and jealousy.

Iago's heinous accusation against Desdemona works very quickly. Othello soliloquizes that whether he should believe that Desdemona is unfaithful or not. He also soliloquizes over the fact that if he should disbelieve Iago or not. Instead of going to dinner, he complains of a headache to her wife. Her wife gives him handkerchief, but he refuses to take that. He says that it is too small. So, here Othello is both lying and denying his inner anxiety. He denies to her wife that something is wrong. Again, denial mechanism is manifested. After killing Desdemona, "Othello comes to know the horrible truth of Iago's treachery" (Sen, 2006.) Before dying, Emilia asserts that,

"Moor she was chaste, she lov'd thee, cruel
Moor" - (V. ii. L 250)

Then Othello becomes crazy with grief. He feels remorse for her. So, it is his superego that means conscience which makes him feel guilty for having done heinous murder. He says out of grief.

"O Desdemona! Dead Desdemona
!Dead! Oh! Oh!" - (V.ii. L 282)

Emilia confesses everything to Othello. Then he stabs Iago for his treachery and lying. Othello stabs out of anger which is the expression of Othello's Id. Othello admits that murdering his faithful and beautiful wife is his blunder. He thinks that it is useless to stay in the world. Then he murders himself. Through death, he tries to seek justice.

It is true that Desdemona has been murdered falsely. But Emilia demands an explanation to Othello for this terrible deed. Having questioned by Emilia, Othello's ego again applies

rationalization mechanism. Once again, he attempts to give a credible justification. He tries to justify his mistakes. Othello explains that he smoothers her for his "unchaste behavior with Cassio" (Sen, 2006). He also points out that he kills her so that she cannot "betray more men" (V.ii.6). Then, he moves forward to explain the evidence of the handkerchief. When Emilia tells the real story of the handkerchief, Othello's superego compels him to concern the terrible treachery of sinister Iago.

Othello asks Emilia about Desdemona's infidelity whether it is true or not. Though Emilia asserts that she is faithful, Othello does not concern over that fact. Rather, he soliloquizes that Emilia is a "subtle whore" (IV.ii.21) that is why she might not reveal her wife's infidelity. He also calls Desdemona "cunning whore of Venice" out of anger (IV. ii.91). So, it is understood how jealousy and anger have affected Othello's mind unconsciously. He begins treating other woman as whore. Jealousy has distorted his psychology, relationship, and views. Thus, jealousy creates sadness, anger, depression, and feelings of unworthiness in Othello.

In spite of being a powerful figure, he falls easily prey to a Machiavellian character Iago which is pathetic. If he had been careful about Iago, he would not have such a downfall in his life. However, he does not act wisely. Nor does he discuss with his wife. If he had discussed his suspicion with his wife and Cassio, he would not be the victim of Iago's plan. Iago's plotworks quick inflamed by jealousy, tragic flaw, racial prejudice, and inferiority complex. As Othello feels inferior, Iago quickly puts heinous thoughts in gullible Othello. He thinks that Cassio is more handsome than him. Because of inferiority complex and, Othello easily believes Desdemona's fake infidelity. These things are interrelated with each other.

In the light of above discussion, it can be surely understood that these unconscious drives in Othello's mind are inevitable. No human can avoid these drives. It is true that Othello becomes aware of these things. But it is too late then. Racial prejudice and inferiority complex are complex negative attitudes which are instinctual in Othello. These complex feelings heavily shape his behavior and actions. Consequently, Othello's defense

mechanisms are the outcome of these complex feelings. It is a difficult task to uproot these things from the world. But spiritual bonding among people would remove such negative feeling of unworthiness. So it can be said that Freud's psychoanalysis on the character of Othello enables the readers to have a great understanding of Othello. In fact, this theory provides a new level of understanding about Shakespearean art and efficiency. Here lies the greatness of Sigmund Freud as the proponent of psychoanalysis.

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