

# An Analysis of Power Desire of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* From Psychological Perspectives

HIND ABDUALLAH ALKOLI, Shi Ji  
Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

This study aims to investigate how powerful desires controlling and influence the play's characters. In particularly Iago's Power is probably the most important motive. Iago employed to manipulate Othello. It is clearly seen that Iago thrived in power because he loves manipulating people so that they do what he says. Othello indicates the power of desires, love and jealousy. The purpose of this study is to obtain a deeper understanding and analyze the character's power and how Shakespeare used Iago's power desires? To cause the tragic downfall Othello by using the psychological approaches. Shakespeare's tragedies' characters motivated by the power desires. Shakespeare shows that the human need, feelings, emotions and passions or desires may lead their owners to be mad if they surrender to them to go beyond the limits. This paper looks how Shakespeare shows the humanism by describing Iago's desires in his play, *Othello* the most notable tragedies.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare's *Othello*, desires of power, psychology approaches

## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a play loaded with controversy, deceit, and manipulation, and most of the action that we generated by the play's main manipulator, Iago. Critically, Iago's character interpreted, among many things, as a representation of the devil, motiveless and a cunning manipulator. Othello is the first serious black protagonist in Western literature and he's still one of the most famous. *Othello* is a part of Shakespeare's most highly concentrated tragedies. Iago is a character who has a role to play, but at the same time he is also a director who directs the actions of the other characters and decides on the development of the plot of the play. He is a confidante, but at the same time he is also an enemy. He serves his master. Yet he also controls his master. He plans his action and ensures the outcome. Yet he does not have any visible motives. The duality that he constantly shows throughout the play, confirms the complexities of Iago's personalities that he is not only a man seeking vengeance.

This study appears and focuses on the impact of powerful desire and human ambition in terms of what moral lessons can be learned from it. Before elaborating on the moral significance of the great tragedy, *Othello*, in particular, and Shakespearean drama, in general, it is important to reconsider some of the discordant views stated by some critics about the moral outlook of Shakespeare's drama. Shakespeare's *Othello* tragic play is a deep

---

HIND ABDUALLAH ALKOLI, Master Degree, English Language & Literature Department, Southwest Jiaotong University.

Shi Ji, Professor of English literature and Chinese, master supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University.

interpretation of realistic view of psychology and human's motivation in the characters' life. His presence of evil in it showed human nature, instinct and weakness in visible power desires and uncontrolled desires that lead to loss of control over his morality, nature and surroundings. This study explores the destruction of the evil and reconstruction of humanity in the tragedy, which embodies universal morality and value in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*.

### Literature Review

There is no question that Iago's actions in *Othello* are villainous. Yet one question seems to be remain resonant throughout centuries of Shakespearean criticism, Why? In the play's text, Iago offers his audience justification for his malicious actions against Othello. First, as he explains to Roderigo, Michael Cassio, good looking, but much less experienced officer is awarded the promotion to lieutenant that Iago says should have been his. Iago is full of anxiety over this, and blames Othello, the man who ultimately chooses Cassio for the position. Additionally, Othello has won the love of Desdemona, a Senator's highly sought after daughter, yet Iago is still suspicious that Othello had an affair with his wife, Emilia. Samuel Taylor Coleridge argue that these are not motives, but rather they serve as validations for Iago to exercise his underlying love of exerting power (Coleridge, 1960, p. 310), an argument with which I agree; however, I believe that Iago has a deeper-rooted motivation, he is deeply conflicted about love, unsure if he has the ability to love, and he is envious of those who love and are loved.

In addition to the above, Iago is undoubtedly disconnected from love, and he allows us to see this disconnect through many of his interactions during the play, often confusing or interchanging love and lust. Take, for example, one of his earliest interactions with Rodrigo after the confirmation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage. Rodrigo is threatening to drown himself since he will be living in "torment" without Desdemona:

Iago: If thou dost, I shall never love thee after

Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen,

I would change my humanity with a baboon

But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings or unfitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion (*Othello*, 1.3.301-28)

In addition, Spencer uses the example of Iago attacking Othello by "forcing an artificial set of emotions, based on a sexual jealousy about which he knows nothing" (Spencer, 1949, p. 133), however Spencer example serves to satisfy my argument about Iago's conflicted and murky understanding of actual love. In a soliloquy that bears enormous importance on understanding Iago's character, the "villain" speaks about his own love for Desdemona:

"Now I do love her too; / Not out of absolute lust

But partly led to diet my revenge, / For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards (*Othello*, 2.1.291-7)

Well, the thing is Gajowski suggests the reason Iago uses Othello's ability to love and jealousy against him is because of a chain of male competition (Gajowski, 1992, p. 63). She argues, through a feminist lens, that men view women as possessions (p. 63): "Look at your house, your daughter, and your bags!" (*Othello*, 1.1.80). If this

is true then Iago's desire to exercise control over Othello and Desdemona is not only because of a desire to achieve love; he is also, as Coleridge may suggest, lusting after the power of control. Iago is manipulating in order to enter, compete, and win in the struggle for masculine dominance. When Othello speaks the line, "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (*Othello*, 5.2.6), he is demonstrating Iago's control and power over him, the seed of doubt had been planted in Othello as early as the first act. Brabantio speaks to Othello about Desdemona: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (*Othello*, 1.3.287-8). During this conversation, Iago is present, and since he is modeling his definitions of love and lust after those he witnesses who are in love. With this in mind, we can really start to understand the relationship between love, power, and control, Iago undoubtedly has the desire for power, and he sees the control that people who are in love have over each other.

As far as I argue that one of Iago's real and subliminal motivation is that he does not know love; this alienates him, and he moved with the desire to attain love and also by the desire to become complete. Spencer briefly introduces the concept of the evil man as the incomplete man (Spencer, 1949, p. 135), so if we assume that Iago is evil, perhaps he motivated by his own in-completion of his own inability to love

### **Iago' Desire for Power**

From the above, we can see that Iago's struggle for power is a fight for position. He wants to become second in command because he feels he deserve it. He feels he have the quality for Cassio's position and also consider Cassio's position to be an insult given that Cassio has so little experience. Iago thinks Othello has put his own pride before what he feels he deserve. This enable us to understand jealousy as something that wants what others have and it can be based on personal self-esteem in a sense that you deserve something even though it is someone else's decision. We see Iago is a proud and confident person and very conscious of social status. The study investigates the power desires of universal human behaviors accompanied by their nature and characteristics in Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello*. He poses the story of the struggle of the evil human desires. He uses Iago to show that dark thought and unconscious temptations cause a human who lacks strength of character to do terrible actions. Through various, Shakespeare transforms them into a reflective analysis of human characteristics and defines the complexity of the human condition. These plays are a deep interpretation of the realistic view of psychological, social, and divines human personality in the process of life affair

### **Iago as Representation of Evil: A Psychoanalytic Approach**

Psychoanalysis is an effective technique of exploring repressed or unconscious impulses and anxieties, as well as internal conflict. We can gain a much greater understanding of the characters, the ways their minds work, and the effect they thought patterns have on the themes portrayed in the drama

Psychologically, Iago is a slighted man, powerfully possessed by hatred against a master who kept him down, and by envy for a man he despises who promoted over him.

There are various psychological factors that associated with the causation of mental problems. For example, psychological trauma, frequently as a result of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, is a critical etiological factor in the development of various mental disorders in childhood and adulthood (Ross, 2003). Neglect, particularly regarding symptoms of psychosis and schizophrenia, is another psychological factor that is strongly associated

with mental health problems within the framework of a causal relationship (Read, 2005). Psychological Perspective explains why people are experiencing difficulties. With the psychology presented in this part of this chapter, we will be able to get a deeper understanding of human behaviors and thought. Freud (1929) the human behaviors has roots in their mind so the mind is the source of human characteristics. He believed that human mind designs happiness or brutality. So the problem of mind is the key issue of human life. Psychology is the science of behavior and mind to explore the human's behavior and thought. In this paper, my attempt is to define Iago's desires of power, indicate the course of their psychological crisis.

The tragedy of *Othello* is tragic by William Shakespeare, wrote in 1603. The story revolves around four central characters, Othello, his beloved wife, Desdemona, Cassio, and, Iago. Its varied and enduring themes of ambitious, love, jealousy, betrayal, revenge and repentance. Although its title suggests that the tragedy belongs primarily to Othello, Iago plays a major role in the plot. He reflects the archetypal villain, and has the biggest share of the dialogue. In *Othello*, it is Iago who manipulates all other personalities at will, controlling their movements and trapping them in an intricate net of lies. He achieves this by getting close to all personalities and playing on their weaknesses while they refer to him as honest Iago, thus furthering his control over the characters.

Iago's use of reverse psychology captivates others' attention and serves as a tool to ensure that himself appear honest and unwilling to implicate others. On the surface, he seems to have a loyal and worthy friend, but his wording and tone always imply the opposite of what he says. When Othello asks whether it was Cassio that talked with his wife (3.3.41-43) (*Othello*, 1912). Iago appears to be an honest friend who wants to see the best in others (3.3.255-257). However, in saying this, Iago leads Othello to do the exact reverse while expressing his apparent hope that the rumor is untrue. Similarly, after he describes Cassio's supposed behavior during his sleep (3.3.484-485), which leads Othello to argue for the other side as he responds, "But this denoted a forgone conclusion" (3.3.486). On numerous other occasions, Iago urges Othello to be patient and calm, and asserts that he may be mistaken, but these comments only feed Othello's rage and his belief that the rumors are true, which is precisely what Iago desires.

From the above, we can get that Iago's true motive appears to be his desire for power and his willingness to exercise what power he has whenever possible. He seems to draw at least some pleasure from exercising his considerable power of manipulation upon others. He often boasts of his exploitation of others and at the ease with which he engages in it. One such example is when Iago gloats "Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me/ for making him egregiously an ass" (*Othello*, II, I, 320-321). The desire for power is also clear in Iago's choice of victims. Two people whose lives Iago makes the most effort to ruin are Othello and Cassio. Cassio is the man who got a position that Iago wanted for himself and Othello is the man who put him there. It is therefore required no leap of faith to assume that the act of going after both of these individuals is a power play. Othello was certainly the puppet of Iago's plot, but his actions because of Iago's manipulation, though understandable, were not completely justified and he is not completely free from blame, he is a victim to his naivety.

According to Freud's psychological approach, it is impossible depict the sexual inferences that suppressed by the superego. one of Freud's theories;

Human behavior is motivated ultimately by what we would call sexuality. Freud Designates the primary psychic force as libido, or sexual energy. His third major Premise is that because of the powerful social taboos attached to certain sexual impulses, many of our desires and memories are repressed. (Guerin, 1992, p. 119)

## Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can see that Iago is a person who was able to takeover Othello with his psychological manipulation. All he mainly wanted to do was to have back at Othello for taking the promotion that he wanted. He worked his way into Othello's head and made him become a green-eyed monster. Jealous. He is the symbolic representation of what the devil stands for destructiveness and of nothingness (Rosenberg, 1961, p. 170). He is another artist. The way he creates evil the destruction of the people around him is an artist who makes his masterpiece. In conclusion, Iago creates destruction and his materials are the people around him, like an artist who makes his work from the materials around him.

To put it another way, Spivack (1985) and Bradley offer another explanation of Iago's behavior. "He is just an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation" (Bradley, 1960, p. 230). As an artist, he is satisfied with what he has considered as an artistic achievement. He is a skillful writer who has the authority to decide on the lives of his characters and to devise any plot that might intricate his story. He masters all the skill and his characters are all willing personalities that put their fate in his hands to be molded on his will. That is why Iago refuses to offer any explanation for his action. In his understanding, there is no anything to explain. Above all, Iago concluding words are. "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (*Othello*, 5.2.311-2). He just cannot explain why he does what he does. He does not even defend himself with the motives. He has offered before. As an artist, Iago's concern is only in creating his masterpiece of evil, therefore, his lack of emotion and motives suit his profession. He rejoices in his work and he is not obliged to have a motive to create his art. The real artist does his work of art for art's sake and Iago does his wicked scheme for evil's sake.

## References

- Bradley, A. C. (1960). *Shakespearean tragedy: lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*. London: Macmillan Co Ltd.; New York: St Martin's Press.
- Coleridge, S. T. (1998). "Comments on *Othello*". 1960. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pp. 149-151). A. Kernan (Ed.). New York: Signet Classics.
- Freud, S. (1929). *Civilization and its discontents*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.
- Gajowski, E. (1992). *The art of loving: Female subjectivity and male discursive traditions in Shakespeare's tragedies*. New York: University of Delaware Press.
- Guerin, W. L. (Ed.). (1992). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Read, J., Van os, J., Morrison, A. P., & Ross, C. A. (2005). Childhood trauma, psychosis and schizophrenia: A literature review with theoretical and clinical implications. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 112(5), 330- 350
- Rosenberg, M. (1961). *The masks of Othello: The search for the identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by three centuries of actors and critics*. New York: University of Delaware Press.
- Ross, J. R. A. C. A. (2003). Psychological trauma and psychosis: Another reason why people diagnosed schizophrenic must be offered psychological therapies. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 31(1), 247-268.
- Shakespeare, W. (1998). *The tragedy of Othello, the moor of Venice*. A. Kernan (Ed.). New York: Signet Classics.
- Spencer, T. (1949). *Shakespeare and the nature of man Lowell lectures* (2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan Co..
- Spivack, B. (1958). *Shakespeare and the allegory of evil. The history of a metaphor in relation to his major villains [On the Connection Between Shakespearean Villains and Mediaeval Morality Plays.]*. New York; Oxford University Press: London.