

Representation of Elizabethan women in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Aliya Hussain¹, Summaya Khan¹, Hassan Bin Zubair^{2*}

^{1,2}Department of English, Superior College, Mian Channu, Pakistan; aliahussain719@gmail.com (A.H.); kmazna07@gmail.com (S.K.); hbz77@yahoo.com (H.B.Z.).

Abstract: This research explores Shakespeare's *Othello* as a complex play that explores the essence of womanhood through its characters. This research focuses on Desdemona, the central female figure, aiming to uncover the roles that Shakespeare crafted for women in *Othello* and the influences on these roles. Cultural feminism theory has been applied as a critical lens in this descriptive qualitative study. The study has yielded two main discoveries. Firstly, women in Shakespeare's *Othello* play the roles of wives, caretakers, and peacemakers. Secondly, the researcher finds that the roles of women in the play are shaped by relational and personal factors. This research is qualitative in nature. Theories presented by J. Bingham and I. Maylani supports this research to analyze its text. Here, the researcher examines the roles that women play in *Othello* by Shakespeare as a point of reflection for those who are interested in the study of women. In addition, the researcher educated the public through this study on the various feminist critiques, including cultural feminism. This study aims to investigate the roles played by women in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the elements that influence those roles.

Keywords: *Desdemona, Elizabethan, Othello, Shakespeare, Women.*

1. Introduction

Literature is a mirror of human reality as well as a form of entertainment for readers. It describes historical cultures and conveys the social state of humanity, among other things. There are three genres in it: drama, prose, and poetry. In addition to releasing people's imaginations from real-world problems, drama is meant to convey a variety of ideas for illustrating societal conditions, human experience, and specific life truths. It demonstrates that literary creations are not the result of madness but rather are reflections of events that have occurred or will occur in the future. Because of this, studying literature is always connected to other fields of study, including history, sociology, psychology, structuralism, and other branches of philosophy.

One of the subjects that is utilized in literary criticism and theories is feminism. The premise that gender disparities exist led to the development of feminism and the unfairness that affects women. "Feminism is the fight for women to have the same rights as men. Women's roles are always to be the second sex and to be subservient, while men's roles become those of authority". Furthermore, this reinforces the stereotype that females are connected to the body, matter, emotion, absence of reason, unreasonable, and the like, whereas males are usually linked with reasonable, objective reasoning, and so forth. Females are viewed as a lesser species as a result of this assertion. A group of individuals identifying as radical cultural feminists, on the other hand, asserted that women were not made to be the second species, but rather to walk alongside men as they face the world. "Positive characteristics of what is perceived as a feminine character or personality are the emphasis of cultural feminism" (Bingham, Jackson, Gamblin, & Jones, 2009). "Cultural feminism on the 'natural' compassion, nurturing inclinations, pacifism, relationship-focused mindset, and concern for others that distinguish women from men" (Alief & Farijanti, 2018).

2. Literature Review

William Shakespeare is one of the playwrights who addresses this topic in his work with his drama Othello. Shakespeare presents a society that differs greatly from his own in this play. “It was composed during the height of Shakespeare’s notoriety” (Abuzahra & Salahat, 2018). Reading this play for the first time can be challenging because it revolves around several real-life human experiences, such as the battle for a prominent position in the government, falling in love, and other such experiences. All of the drama’s issues, nevertheless, are undoubtedly related to women’s roles and existence.

Accordingly, some commentators think that this play is about Renaissance conceptions of women. “Othello by Shakespeare can be classified as a feminist piece of literature due to the play’s examination of men and women”. The piece made clear the oppression that women must endure daily. She said that although Desdemona and Emilia’s characters in Othello are proven to be, adequate, patriarchal control ends their favor and strengths. In a similar vein, “thought that Shakespeare’s exploration of female characters was unfavorable” (Masule, 2014). Shakespeare makes women into sex goddesses who would force males to murder their partners out of pure love. On the other hand, “in terms of racial relations, women in Othello may have a significant advantage over men. Indeed, men and women aren’t always superior to one another in some situations” (Amri & Maylani, 2020). The roles that each man and woman play in society are found to be significantly influenced by their ethnicity and status.

“The affinity of human activities to establish predictable, recognizable patterns is known as a role in sociology”. The role is impacted by how people occupy social positions and the organization of social life. In summary, women’s roles are defined by society as a system of interconnected rights, obligations, and behaviors. Cultural feminism holds a distinct perspective on women’s roles in comparison to other feminist thinkers. The attributes that this school tends to appreciate in both men and women are products of nature and society (Lewis, 2019). It makes the case that dominance, aggression, and other stereotypically masculine traits are harmful to society. Rather, the nature of women, which prioritizes equality, collaboration, and compassion, is beneficial in social and professional decision-making processes (Lewis, 2019). Thus, to create a better world, these activities are equally necessary. “A subset of feminism known as ‘cultural feminism’ highlights the fundamental biological and inherent distinctions between males and females” (Bingham et al., 2009).

In the drama Othello, the female figure whose life forms the subject of these studies. Desdemona is the socially adept offspring of Brabantio, a lawmaker from Venice. She is also characterized as a lovely lady with a noble demeanor. Women’s compassion and beauty form the basis for their discrimination and perceived weakness in sixteenth-century Venice. But Desdemona fights the culture that shapes her role as a wife and daughter by using those things as a weapon. Desdemona plays a crucial role in a war situation, acting as a key factor in Othello’s victory or defeat. Therefore, Desdemona’s function as a wife goes beyond simply preserving their relationship; she also has a personal role as the one with the true authority to decide everything, which is included in Othello’s life, because of her inherent potential as a female.

Here, the researcher examines the roles that women play in Othello by Shakespeare as a point of reflection for those who are interested in the study of women. In addition, the researcher educated the public through this study on the various feminist critiques, including cultural feminism. This study aims to investigate the roles played by women in Shakespeare’s Othello and the elements that influence those roles.

3. Research Objectives

- To highlight the role of feminism in the play Othello by William Shakespeare.
- To elaborate the character sketch of women characters in Othello.

4. Research Questions

1. How does Desdemona's character challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles in Othello?
2. What is the significance of Emilia's actions and decisions about the portrayal of women in the play?
3. How does Shakespeare depict the power dynamics between men and women in Othello?
4. In what ways does the character of Bianca contribute to the overall theme of gender and sexuality in the play?

5. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. Theories presented by J. Bingham and I. Maylani supports this research to analyze its text. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is a type of study that is conducted on natural objects with an emphasis on meaning and data quality to support conclusions. Descriptive analysis is the method employed, and it reveals the roles played by women and the variables that influence them. However, literary criticism is also used in this study. The goal of literary criticism is to analyze and evaluate literary works through critical analysis. Literary criticism, according to Sheet (2020), is the term for writing that analyzes, assesses, explores, and interprets literary works. Locating data on a particular theory is necessary while conducting research for literary criticism. The study examined feminist concepts in Othello by Shakespeare (1999) employing Womanhood literary criticism. According to Endraswara (2008), womanhood literary criticism is a literary theory that is predicated on an awareness of the roles and positions that women play in literary works.

Reading and comprehending Shakespeare's Othello was the first stage in gathering the data, as it provided general information about the lives of the female characters through dialogue. The researcher next selected the data that exclusively addressed the study's issues, women's roles, and the variables influencing them. The final step involved data identification and selection of the most pertinent data to address the study's topic. After that, the data were evaluated by grouping them into various that are presumed to be the outcome of women's roles and the cultural feminism criteria. The researcher also searched for a relationship between the facts implementing the concept of cultural feminism related to the women in the play was the subsequent phase. Forming a conclusion derived from the complete examination was the ultimate move.

5.1. Woman's Roles

This research delves into the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's Othello, seen through the prism of cultural feminism. The play suggests that the softness and physicality of Venetian women are often interpreted as signs of weakness and grounds for discrimination. Yet, Desdemona, a prominent female character in Othello, turns these perceived weaknesses into her strengths to combat the societal norms that shape her roles as a daughter and wife. Cultural feminism celebrates the power of femininity, and in this drama, the roles of women are portrayed as a wife, lovers, and friends.

5.2. Woman as Wife

Desdemona is depicted as a woman profoundly devoted to her husband, viewing it as her responsibility as the spouse of a Venetian general in Othello. She remains obedient and loyal to him, from the blissful beginning of their relationship through any challenges they face. The play highlights how Desdemona demonstrates her loyalty to her husband, even when the Venetians disapprove of her love for Othello. As the daughter of a Venetian senator, Desdemona is well-educated and highly sought after for marriage. Yet, she chooses Othello, a Moor and the general of the Venetian military, as her husband. She courageously fights against any opposition to her choice, including her father (Act 1 scene 3: 180-192). This moment highlights Desdemona's dedication to showing her affection and faithfulness to her husband. She believes that her faithfulness to her partner is a testament to her position as a spouse and her contribution to their household's happiness.

Another situation arises when Othello is called to battle the Turks in Cyprus. He is concerned about leaving Desdemona for a month. However, Desdemona chooses to go with him, dedicating her life and luck to Othello's happiness and safety. This is reflected in her conversation with the Duke of Venice.

“DESDEMONA: That I did love the Moor to live with him,
 My downright violence and storm of fortunes
 May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued Even to the very quality of
 my lord: I saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honour and his
 valiant parts Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
 So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
 A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
 The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him.” (Act 1 scene 3: 244-275)”

Desdemona expresses her deep love and dedication to her husband, Othello. The text from line six reveals her fear and anxiety when she learns Othello has to confront the Turks for a month. She's worried about the prospect of losing him and the hardship of life without him. She asserts that her life is dedicated to Othello, out of respect for his bravery and nobility. She then implores the Duke to let her accompany and reside with Othello. This shows her commitment as a wife to surrender her life and remain faithful to her beloved husband, regardless of the situation.

Desdemona's part as a spouse contributes significantly to the war victory. Many Venetians regard her presence as vital in the life of Othello. This is evident when Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, refers to her as “She that I spake of, our great captain's captain,” (Act 3 scene 3: 76). Implying that she is a key source of motivation for Othello, fueling his spirit and energy to secure a victory for Cyprus. This highlights Desdemona's unique and crucial role in the fight of Othello against the Turks. It's undeniable that she is the source of Othello's strength, as he acknowledges her as his “O my fair warrior!” (Act 2 scene 1: 175). In Britannica dictionary, In the Britannica dictionary, a “warrior” is defined as a person known for their bravery and talent in battles. A “fair warrior” refers to a wise or beautiful individual who assists their lord in warfare. As mentioned earlier, Desdemona is a wife prepared to stand by her husband under all circumstances. Therefore, in this play, Desdemona is seen as Othello's faithful soldier, capable of soothing his soul with her wisdom and brilliant ideas.

Desdemona holds a significant role in Othello's life, especially during times of conflict. Her influence extends beyond being a companion to Othello, as she possesses the power to sway his victories and defeats. Therefore, Desdemona's role as a wife isn't limited to being a sexual partner, she's also a figure of authority with the potential to shape outcomes with her feminine power.

This concept of feminine influence is common in many literary works, particularly those dealing with politics, family, and authority, indicating that women can also have a significant impact on political situations. In this drama, Desdemona's role as the wife of the military general is used for political maneuvering. She becomes a pawn in Iago's plan to overthrow Othello from his position as the military general of Venice. Being Othello's beloved wife, Iago exploits her position to carry out his scheme by falsely accusing her of having an affair with Cassio, Othello's trusted lieutenant. Iago's plan is reflected in his statement below:

“DESDEMONA: “After some time, to abuse Othello's ear That he is too familiar with his
 wife.
 He hath a person and a smooth dispose
 To be suspected, framed to make women false.
 The Moor is of a free and open nature,
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led
 by the nose as asses are” (Act 1 scene 3: 361-383).

This provocation causes Othello to question Desdemona's faithfulness, leading him to believe that she has broken the trust of their marriage. He labels Desdemona as a brave Venetian woman who dared to

marry and deceive the military senator of Venice. Despite these accusations, Desdemona remains steadfast in her loyalty to her spouse. Her commitment as a faithful wife is highlighted in the drama. Here, she affirms her subservience to Othello, particularly when he doubts her faithfulness. This concept is illustrated in the following exchange where “Othello asks.: Why, what art thou?

“DESDEMONA: Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife.

OTHELLO: Come, swear it, damn thyself Lest, being like one of heaven...

Swear thou art honest.” (Act 4 Scene 3)

This presents that Desdemona remains true to her belief of being Othello's faithful wife. Even in the face of Othello's anger, she responds gently, demonstrating her obedience. She's determined to show that she's genuinely his dutiful wife. Being obedient means, she'll continue to follow Othello's commands, from the blissful beginning of their relationship to his later fits of jealousy. Her steadfastness and loyalty even make Othello question his decision to harm her, leading to his regret. This highlights Desdemona's belief that a woman's loyalty is unshakeable and is her strength in society. Her feminine power comes from her unwavering commitment to her husband. In traditional terms, a submissive woman is seen as respectful, which is necessary to avoid conflict. Being a loyal and obedient wife doesn't make a woman inferior, but rather makes her husband reliant on her, as she becomes someone he can trust and depend on.

5.3. *Woman as a Caretaker*

It's truly remarkable how Desdemona embodies the role of a caregiver in Othello. She's always there for others, prioritizing their needs over her own. This aspect of her character is most evident in her interactions with Emilia. When Iago disrespects Emilia, Desdemona doesn't remain silent but stands up for her, showing her anger towards Iago's treatment of his wife. She also comforts Emilia, “Do not learn/of him, Emilia, though he is thy husband...” (Act 2 scene 1).

This aligns with the cultural concept of care associated with women, always seeking solutions that prevent harm to others. Desdemona is the embodiment of a woman who won't stay quiet when she sees someone she cares about in trouble. Instead, she takes responsibility to ensure their happiness. It's a powerful portrayal of a woman's role as a caregiver and a testament to Desdemona's strength and compassion. Desdemona demonstrates her innate caregiving qualities when looking after her sick husband. As portrayed in the drama, she is constantly by his side, ready to assist him whenever he needs to, particularly when he is unwell. His health and comfort are her top priorities.

Desdemona's caring nature is evident in her interactions with her husband. She quickly notices when Othello speaks softly due to a headache. She blames herself, feeling that she hasn't been taking good enough care of him. Desdemona tends to Othello, using a handkerchief to soothe his forehead and assure him that he will feel better soon. This showcases her protective instincts, her love, and her concern for her family. She won't let her family suffer or be in turmoil. Othello acknowledges that her nurturing and love are the reasons why he fell in love with her in the first place. "... Upon this hint I spake: She loved me for the dangers I had passed, And I loved her that she did pity them.” (Act 1 scene 3: 130-173). The power of womanhood is beautifully exemplified in this context. A woman's nurturing nature has the potential to soften even the toughest of warriors, shifting their hardened principles. This shows that one doesn't need to be masculine to be a leader, as the femininity of a woman can unconsciously make her the ruler of the world. Women, often considered secondary, can wield significant power. They can command respect and authority in all aspects, as men entrust them with both domestic and external matters, recognizing their understanding and capabilities. It's a testament to the power and influence of femininity.

5.4. *Woman as a Peacemaker*

In the play, Desdemona is portrayed as a peacekeeper. She steps in to resolve the issues between Othello and Cassio. As Othello's spouse, she believes it's her responsibility to ensure harmony in her husband's friendships. She's also focused on upholding Othello's reputation as a distinguished military general in Venice. She takes Cassio's plea to heart because she sees him as a true and understanding friend

to her husband. Therefore, she promises to help restore Cassio's reputation and put an end to their disagreement. This is reflected in the following excerpt.

Desdemona is shown as a peacemaker in the play. She tries to mend the rift between Othello and Cassio because she believes it's her duty as a wife to maintain harmony in her husband's relationship. She also wants to protect Othello's reputation as a respected military general of Venice. Desdemona empathizes with Cassio's plea because she sees him as a loyal friend to her husband who understands Othello's character. She vows to restore Cassio's reputation and resolve their conflict. This is evident in the following quote. "But I will have my lord and you again. As friendly as you were" (Act 3, Scene 3:5-7). Despite Othello's resistance to her suggestions, Desdemona persists in her efforts to reconcile her husband and his lieutenant. This is because her desire to create peace stems from her convictions.

6. Findings

The women play in Shakespeare's Othello as a point of reflection for those who are interested in the study of women. In addition, the researcher educated the public through this study on the various feminist critiques, including cultural feminism. This study aims to investigate the roles played by women in Shakespeare's Othello and the elements that influence those roles. Being Othello's powerful wife, Desdemona possesses a trait of loyalty. She sees it as her duty as a wife to be faithful to her husband. The upbringing of a person has an impact on how their morality and loyalty develop. A child does not automatically possess loyalty; rather, it is something that the parents must establish in them. That being said, a lot relies on the child's ingrained habits from their previous existence. Nonetheless, while the child is still malleable, it is still the parent's responsibility to shape them into better behavior patterns.

Emilia believes that thousands of spouses must do this, but only because their husbands' actions have caused them pain. Subsequently, she queries Desdemona about her willingness to comply with her husband's abuse. Desdemona responds clearly and honestly, saying that she will not carry out the task even if it means killing herself. Generally speaking, a faithful wife will defend her husband against any negative criticism. The notion that relationships and personal factors account for Desdemona's allegiance is reinforced by this evidence. Therefore, it can be said that her education both personal and familial is the primary factor influencing her ability to become a powerful wife in her husband's life. Because she claims to be in charge of finding solutions for everyone's problems, women in cultural feminism feel more compassionate toward one another. Giving everyone what they need or desire is something she feels obligated to do. Thus, when Desdemona tries to assist Cassio, it happens to her.

Women see themselves as at the heart of a web of connectivity, a closely linked network of intimates. Women therefore must avoid conflict of any type. Maintaining harmonious relationships in social life is their goal. However, to foster harmony, women need to possess specific qualities like wisdom, fairness, and intelligence as these traits play a significant role in bringing individuals who are at odds together. Desdemona is portrayed in this play as a lady whose noble nature is revered by Venetians. According to the drama's description, one of the male characters discovers that she is intelligent, astute, idea-rich, and savvy in handling conflict. These are the circumstances that drive her to fulfill her responsibility as a mediator. In his testimony, Cassio describes Desdemona as a really beautiful woman, a very new, delicate being who is perfectly modest and faultless. He is implying that she is a flawless, kind, and attractive woman. In addition, Iago claims that she enjoys playing games, has provocative eyes, and speaks about love frequently. As a result, in their opinion, Desdemona is a lovely, sensitive being who is joyous and appropriately modest.

Desdemona's innate qualities include her history as a mediator of peace. A peacemaker must undoubtedly be intelligent and impartial as she depends on them to resolve the issues that the family members are facing. Therefore, her inherent noble quality is the factor that influences her ability to be a peacemaker. Included under the personality element is this one, which is determined by an individual's inner beauty and motivation. The wisdom that emanates from a person's mind or soul is the way of inner beauty. Desdemona's disposition therefore influences her function as a broker of peace.

7. Conclusion

This research has explored the various roles of women in Shakespeare's Othello through a feminist lens, specifically cultural feminism. This study is not only important but also empowering for women, as it sheds light on the fight for equality and the ability to shape our destinies. In the play, Desdemona embodies the roles of a loyal and respectful wife, a caring lover who provides support in times of trouble, and a peacemaker who plays a crucial role in resolving conflicts. Her loyalty and respect for her husband are influenced by their relationship and personal factors. As a caretaker, Desdemona's self-motivation and past experiences shape her role. As a peacemaker, personal factors contribute to her ability to bring harmony to the conflicts within the drama. It's incredible how these different roles intertwine and showcase the complexity of women's experiences.

Funding:

This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Competing Interests:

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions:

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Copyright:

© 2023 by the authors. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

References

- Abuzahra, N., & Salahat, R. (2018). Analyzing Iago's speech in Shakespeare's Othello. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 2(2), 185-203.
- Alief, V. R., & Farijanti, D. (2018). Cultural feminism found in the Asne Seierstad's *s Kabul*. *Academic Journal Perspective: Education, Language, and Literature*, 3(2), 379-387.
- Amri, S. H., & Maylani, I. (2020). Paradoxality of women positions in Othello by Shakespeare: The study of class and race intersections. *Journal of Language Teaching and Literature*, 1(2), 12-20.
- Bingham, J., Jackson, V., Gamblin, M., & Jones, J. (2009). *Cultural feminism in South Africa*. Mississippi: Jackson State University - CLL.
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Endraswara, S. (2008). *Literary research methodology*. Yogyakarta: Media Pressindo. Print.
- Lewis, J. J. (2019). History & culture. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-feminism-definition-3528996>
- Masule, C. M. (2014). *A comparative analysis of the depiction of women in Sifiso Nyathi's God of Women and William Shakespeare's Othello*. Windhoek: The University of Namibia.
- Shakespeare, W. (1999). *Othello*. New Delhi: S. Chand And Company LTD.
- Sheet, L. (2020). Literary criticism. Retrieved from <https://libguides.bgsu.edu/litstudies/litcrit>