

Othello's Reformation of Personal Identity in Venetian Society

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Abstract

Among the literary works involving racial issues, Shakespeare's *Othello* holds a special status due to the fact that it is one of the earliest literary works which touched upon the identity problem of blacks in Europe. Referring to Shakespeare's *Othello*, Caryl Phillips examines the issue of identity crisis and trauma in his *The Nature of Blood* with a keen eye on the ambitions and feelings of a black character who moves from South to Venice on a private mission. The main purpose of this study is to reveal the struggle of a black man, Caryl Phillips' Othello, who suffers from a deep identity crisis imposed on him by the society he lives in, and to discuss to what extent the Venetian environment has been influential in shaping Othello's identity and thus examine the trauma Othello experiences. This paper delves deep into the inner conflicts Othello experiences, uncovers his trauma, and focuses on his efforts to reform his identity in conformity with his environment. The newly gained experiences in this foreign environment reformats Othello's original identity and this reformation period turns out to be a process in which Othello leaves his original self and accommodates himself with the newly gained social codes.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Othello's trauma, Venetian society, and racial biases.

1. Introduction

The struggle between human nature and foreign culture has led individuals to be aware of the concept of personal identity. Depending upon this, we have come to realize a need to relate ourselves to the outer world or communal norms. The existence of strongly established communal norms and prejudices forces individuals to define personal and communal identity in order to accommodate cultural codes to personal instincts. The term "identity", can refer to an individual's own subjective sense of self, and also to the common sense of a group or a country, which both include some unique features distinguishing "self" or "us" from the "others". Actually, the group identity is the combination and integration of individual's identity.

This article will mainly focus on the fragmentation of Othello's identity that occurs under the weight of his personal trauma that stems from the deep historical roots of racism in Europe in Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood*. The analysis will follow two steps: first, Othello's true self which has not been corrupted and transformed under the weight of the Venetian social norms will be focused on; in the second aspect, Othello's personal trauma and assimilation into the culture that he feels himself inferior will be scrutinized. As an author who was born in St Kitts in the Caribbean in 1957 and grew up in Britain and currently lives in the US, Caryl Phillips has a multicultural origin and identity. He made journeys to Caribbean and Europe in 1980s which reinforced the awareness of him towards his African and European ancestry. This multicultural background is also reflected in many of his works like *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There is Darkness* (1982), *The Shelter* (1984), *Crossing the River* (1993) and *Othello* (1997).

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In this study, we deal with the issue of an identity formation of a black man in the presence of European racism and stereotypical images of black people unlike many academic studies in which *Othello* was examined with reference to European racism often with a comparison with racial discrimination against Jewish people. For, Holocaust was used by Phillips in his hereby analyzed fiction and by Anita Desai in her *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) to illustrate colonial suffering to a Western audience. (Hesse, 2014) Actually, as Phillips noted in the interview he granted to Maya G. Vinuesa (2007) that "you don't have to be black for society to stereotype you: it stereotypes women, it stereotypes working-class people, and it certainly stereotypes non-white people." He maintains this argument with narrating his self experience:

I was in my doctor's office in New York on Monday and one of the doctors came out, looked at me and said "Are you a dancer?"... I've been going through this for years, but younger people still have to deal with it, not just because they're non-white, but because they are women, or because they are Muslim. It's just how society likes to categorise people –if you are non-white the chances are that you're going to be categorised with more vigour in Europe still, even though things *have* changed. (Vinuesa, 2007)

Furthermore, Phillips claims that these stereotypes still exist while trying to find a job, buying a ticket to travel and etc. even though Britain and many other European countries recognized the need to accept their multicultural and multi-ethnic social structure. It is also for this stereotypical perception that he left Britain and moved to the US as he conspicuously expressed in the interview he had with Axel Stähler: "I left Britain in 1990 to go and live in America for one year because I was fed up and dispirited about the fact that every time a member of the black community in Britain threw a brick or a bottle at the police the BBC would call me to ask me to comment on it " (Stähler, 2007). As demonstrated, he was associated with everything negative caused by the black population in Britain.

2. Othello's True Self

In *The Nature of Blood*, by revisiting Shakespeare's *Othello*, Phillips focuses on the issues of discrimination, racism, belongingness and identity formation through various interwoven stories. The novel interweaves disparate voices from different times and places, which demonstrates that Phillips put an emphasis on the interconnectedness of histories and stories. As Alan McCluskey (2013) notes "Phillips more controversially juxtaposes the experiences of, among others, an emancipated African slave and a Jewish Holocaust survivor, both of whom struggle to adjust to life in societies in which they are considered outsiders". The "outsiders" emphasis made by McCluskey is substantial to understand the trauma Othello and Eva experience within the novel because of their origin different from that of the mainstream; Othello comes from African origin and Eva comes from Jewish one. Isabelle Hesse (2014) explains the reason for this juxtaposition as "The impulse to include Jewish characters can be explained through the parallels between the Jewish experience of discrimination and suffering and the domination of colonized people by European colonial powers". However, according to Stef Craps (2008), "Phillips's interest in the persecution of the Jews can be traced back to his experience of growing up black in Britain". In this sense, he builds the story upon his childhood experiences.

The fiction which is predicated on the vexing question of belonging basically involves the criticism of European sense of superiority to other nations and people by referring to both black men's and Jewish people's bitter and unpleasant experiences in Europe. In this respect, Andrew Armstrong (2008) characterizes *The Nature of Blood* as a blackness which opposes superiority or in other words, whiteness of the Europeans. As Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso (2012) attracted attention, "Caryl Phillips recreates an Othello-like figure who struggles to come to terms with his identity as an outsider in early modern Venice, and his first-person narrative is interwoven with the stories of other people who participate in a similar sense of exile and liminality in other locations of Europe."

On reaching Venice, as a general of the Venetian army, Othello expects to be welcome and escorted by Venetian state since he believes that he has moved "from the edge of the world into the center." (Phillips, 1997) This belief of Othello proves that he and the people in his original country were persuaded that they were living in the edge of the world, in other words, in an inferior place to Europe, Venice in particular as passes in the story. Accordingly, they seem to have internalized to be placed in a lower status than the mainstream, for this reason, we can't argue that Othello had already a strong self-confident identity before his arrival to Venice. It is for this reason that throughout his narrative, Othello associated Africa with darkness and Venice (Europe) with light as seen in such terms as "my dark bosom" and "fair Venice" (Phillips, 1997). The only reason why he sees himself so respectable and important is the mission given to him by the Venetian army.

Thus, the honour, respect and prestige come not from Othello himself but from the task assigned to him. However, what he finds is the total ignorance of his presence in this society of which social strata has a deep historical roots of racism. Because of his skin color, he is considered as an unimportant element in the Venetian society. The color of black, as considered a negative sign, causes a perception management mechanism through which a sign opens various negative rooms in the brains of Europeans. Michel Foucault (1994) scrutinizes the knowledge that has been manipulated to establish a thought leading binary opposition. He stresses on the hidden impact of sign as follows:

Once the sign is located in the interstices of thought, two dimensions of analysis open up: investigations into the antitheses or inversions of representation in non-actual but simultaneous ...comparisons, such as impressions, reminiscences, imaginings, memories all aspects of the image in time.

In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips (1997) focuses on Othello's juxtaposition of his past and present situation on his arriving in this new land:

I remembered I had led the fighting men of my own people for many years, and had also served in battle as a General for several other nations, both Christian and heathen. But now I was confidently arriving in Venice, summoned by the doge and his senators to lead the Venetian army... But where was the party to meet me?

Before he realizes his worthless existence in the eyes of Venetians, he has considered himself as a noteworthy man of royal blood. In the fiction, Phillips (1997) scrutinizes Othello's realization of his presence and trauma or conflict in this racist society as follows:

Some among these people, both high and low, were teaching me to think of myself as a man less worthy than the person I knew myself to be. My own people although degraded and without the sophistication and manners of these Venetians, at least regarded me with respect and dignity, and among them I had many friends and some few enemies, all of whom were easily identifiable. Among the Venetians, all was confusion as I attempted to distinguish those who beheld my person with scorn and contempt...

Depending on the cultural values that cover his true self, Othello tries to view this new social environment in accordance with the cultural vestiges that remind him of his native land. The sense of belonging to his native land and the expectation, which leads him to be considered as a man of royal class, fall in short in his realization of the prejudice of Venetian society. In his article "Diasporas and Desperations" James Shapiro (1997) describes Othello's position and the Venetian ossified racism: "Venice needs the Moorish general, as it does its money lending Jews, to secure its empire -- but does not expect him to violate its ironclad racial and religious boundaries; it was important to keep the bloodlines pure."

Othello's functional aspect in Venice gives him an opportunity to prove his existence rather than his original or true identity. Othello is aware of this reality but he cannot get rid of this self-delusion in which he finds a fake satisfaction. In her article 'To Remember Too Much is Indeed a Form of Madness': Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and the Modalities of European Racism, Ashley Dawson (2004) touches Othello's trauma with respect to its relation with the European identity as follows:

Phillips turns to an examination of European identity and the place of blacks and Jews in Europe...Through its intertwining, interrupted testimonies, the novel records the fragmentation of memory and identity that occurs under the weight of historical trauma. By following its protagonists through this trauma, *The Nature of Blood* reverses the social production of moral invisibility that accompanies genocide and other gross human rights violations.

Supporting Dawson, Acquarone (2008) asserts that "*The Nature of Blood* deplores the building of barriers and the imposition of borders between ethnic, racial or religious communities..."

Being isolated from the society in a different way from that of the Jewish who were living in a ghetto at that time, Othello begins to question his position and existence. The reason for this questioning stems from the fact that he saw himself different from Jewish while wandering in the Jewish ghetto in Venice. Indeed, ghetto had critical functions for the European societies as it enabled them to keep themselves "pure". Sibley (1995) succinctly put the meaning and importance of ghettos in Europe as:

The ghetto (camp) runs throughout Europe's history in her relations with 'others'. Historically, the ghetto has functioned as a society of outcasts – usually as punishment for those seen as a threat to the homogeneousness and purity of the dominant group. The ghetto is therefore one of those 'residual spaces' strategically used in the purification of space and the treatment of difference in authoritarian societies.

Even if Othello wasn't in a ghetto, the reality was that he was no different from a Jew for dominant society, that's why Phillips brought the story of black man and Jewish together. Although Othello is physically in Europe, he is psychologically feeling himself outside it because he is aware of himself as a stranger and views his place through the eyes of the host society. His physical closeness didn't literally come to mean that he was one of the Europeans and deserved the same respect and prestige with them. In this sense, as a man who realizes his unbelonging to the majority society, he fits well in the category of people with W.E.B. Dubois' concept of double consciousness, the feeling he described for black Americans "as a sense of always looking at one-self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 2007). Othello exposes the ignorance of the majority society towards him by the act of a manservant who "disliked me on account of my complexion and bearing" (Phillips, 1997).

3. Othello's Trauma and Assimilation

The term trauma has a deep historical background in the minds of those who have been raised in a European racist country. Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie (2005) claim: Trauma, as both a concept and a diagnostic category, is a Western artifact, the product of a specific socio-political and clinical genealogy that emerges with late modernity and is assembled out of Euro-American experiences of industrialization and warfare, its gender relations, and its conceptions of normalcy and deviance. Since Caryl Phillips has been raised in Britain and exposed to racism, he has experienced the trauma in his life and reflected the effect of this trauma in his characters. As Muñoz-Valdivieso (2012) points out "Phillips came from St Kitts to Britain at four months and has remained throughout his life painfully conscious of a sense of unbelonging that the younger writers confront in a more self-assured manner. The trauma Othello experiences is in a way the reflection of the trauma of the author himself.

Othello's trauma mainly results from the cold treatment he gets from the Venetian society established on a strict class system and the issuing belongingness and loneliness. He boasts of coming for the help of the Venetian army in the battle against Turks but the real battle happens not between these two enemies but himself and the Venetian society, or in a wider scale all racist and discriminative European communities. No matter how hard he strives to be part of the majority, he can't overpass the border put between him and the dominant community. Accordingly, his situation fits well with the interpretation brought by Charles Taylor (1994); Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression..."

The more he tries to become a respectable person in the Venetian society, the more he loses or has to concede. This fact is clarified by Isabelle Hesse (2014) as "As the African general tries to become a full member of Venetian society, he is sent off to the periphery, to Cyprus, illustrating that even the distinctive black 'other' cannot be tolerated in the midst of European society if he tries to rise above his station". His ideals and imaginations were all lost and he finds himself in a total despondency. If we approach this disappointment in Othello through the perspective of colonialism, the situation of him is similar to that of his ancestors who were forced into slavery and "objectified as merchandise for the benefit of the master race" as Cecilia Acqarone conspicuously asserted (2008). Unlike his ancestors, Othello willingly and advertently runs for the help of the "master race". However, he is used by the dominant power like an object, which conveys that he is no more than an ordinary object to be used in the war against Turks. This is what he finds unacceptable and unbearable and thus leads to a trauma.

Having lost his sense of belonging and identity under the weight of Venetian rigid and racist national consciousness and values, Othello seeks refuge in his entrance to Venetian societal strata by accommodating and reforming his true self regardless of the ignorance of his existence as a black general. Wendy Zierler (2004) focuses on Othello's conflict as "the *Othello* narrative is told in the first person by Othello himself, who describes his acclimation to life in Venice: how he attempts to assimilate into this aristocratic European community, how against all social norms, he falls in love with Desdemona, and so on".

In a mood of considering himself as an outsider and alien both culturally and physically, he attempts to adjust his physical appearance in accordance with Venetian fashion as “I wondered if my new costume might convince some among these Venetians to look upon me with a kinder eye. It was this desire to be accepted that was knotting my stomach and depriving me of sleep” (Phillips, 1997).

Although he is aware of the alienation that covers his identity in relation to his native land, he cannot rescue himself from this newly-born trauma. The first step of assimilation emerges in the way of forcing him to change his costume “I might dress myself according to the Venetian fashion, as opposed to that of my native country” (Phillips, 1997). He goes on his confessions about the loss of his personal identity in an extent that he defines this conflict or trauma as a betrayal “I realized that this city was betraying me and I was betraying myself” (Phillips, 1997).

Day by day he becomes aware of the superiority of Venetian aristocracy and society as “However, the Venetian aristocrat remained confident about the superiority of his traditions over those of any other, and while exterior display of a different culture was tolerated, I was learning that such stubbornness was unlikely to aid one’s passage through society” (Phillips, 1997). On realizing the fact that the only way to rescue him from isolation is to find out a passage into society, he becomes an opportunist who adjusts his personal instincts in the way of gaining a social position as:

This second invitation from the senator afforded me the opportunity to make a larger statement about the manner in which I might henceforth conduct myself in this great republic. In my quieter moments, I had often wondered if a marriage of the finest of my own customs with their Venetian refinement might not, in due course produce a more sophisticated man (Phillips, 1997).

At his attempts to be recognized by the Venetian aristocracy, he realizes his physical association with slaves and tries to escape from the weight of being put in the position of an inferior man by reforming his identity associating himself with Romans and Greek. His betrayal of his identity and wish to be considered as a man of royal blood forces him to wear a white mask on a black skin as “. . . Venetian households did, from time to time use black slaves. I countered with the information that I had once been held as a slave. . . . I chose not to mention my royal blood, or the fact that many Romans and Greek had also been held as slaves” (Phillips, 1997).

With his marriage with the senator’s daughter, Othello aspires this relationship to become a kind of an elevator that will give rise his position in a society which posits him as an inferior subject. However, marriage is not a proper solution to tacit racism and discrimination as long as the reaction and treatment of the dominant society remain the same with the pre-marriage time. At this point, Phillips emphasized in one of his interviews that even if European girls or boys got married with non-Europeans, their families and the community they belong would most probably give an adverse reaction because they are not ready for such a serious relationship. He thinks that this type of intercourse is a taboo in Europe that needs to be broken.

That is the final taboo: “Mum, this is my husband-to-be, he’s called Mohammed” or, “Mum, I’m going to marry this woman, she’s called Fatima.” People are okay if different races work together, but they don’t like it if you bring them home and say that they are going to be part of your family. . . . That is the final taboo and the link between sexuality and prejudice: it’s the fear. . . . It’s a real fear, particularly in Europe, but also in America, of this rather stupid word *purity* being corrupted. A *loss of purity* is what people feel without actually realising that there is no such thing as ‘purity’. (Vinuesa, 2007)

Based on the arguments the author raised above, Othello has little chance to be fully accepted and appreciated by the Desdemona’s family and society no matter how hard he tries and struggles just because he doesn’t carry the pure blood possessed by the Venetians. After all, towards the end of the story, he confesses this fact:

And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man’s war for him /Wide-receiver in the Venetian army / The republic’s grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet / You tuck your black skin away beneath their epauletted uniform, appropriate their words, . . . their manners, worry your nappy woollen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son to the back of your noble mind. . . . Brother, you are weak. A figment of a Venetian imagination. . . . Brother, jump from her bed and fly away home. (Phillips, 1997)

This is also the point where the questioning in Othello reached the top and now he is to decide his future: to stay as a man whose characteristics he described or to leave for home as a noble man.

4. Conclusion

Instead of showing resistance against the Venetian racist and isolating assaults on his identity, Othello chooses to accommodate his physical appearance and cultural values in accordance with Venetian customs and values in order to get accepted by the majority or in other words by the center. While reforming his personal identity on encountering a different society that ignores and puts him in the position of an 'invisible man', he loses the control of concord that shapes his true self.

The trauma that emerges because of the weight of European racism on his identity leads him to refuse his native land and its traditions in spite of the warning calls made to him within the narrative. Remaining too much under the influence of this conflict, Othello finds a passage to enter aristocracy in order to escape from the inferiority complex that tortures him. However, the 'white mask' that he puts on his face will not change the color of his skin beneath the mask.

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