Othello : Act I

The contemporary success and pertinence of Shakespeare’s Othello today are attributed, among others, to the resonance of some issues that Shakespeare considered in his time and our modern society. One of the most striking issue is the lack of understanding between people belonging to different cultures and origins.

The opening scenes of act I demonstrate how the gulf between people from European origins and African one is deep and unreconcilable. Iago, the personification of the villain in the play, cannot hide his hate and raciscm against Othello. The first exchanges between Iago and Roderigo might seem motivated by jealousy. Roderigo Loves Desdemona and wants her to be his wife not Othello’s. Iago is furious againt Othello for appointing Cassio as his lieutenant :

Iago. Despite me if I do not : three great ones of the city

In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,

Oft capp’d to him, and by the faith of man,…

Nonsuits my mediators : for « certs », says he,

« I have already chosen my officer, »

And what was he ?

Forsooth, a great arithmetician,

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, (I. i. 7-20)

But behind such superficial pretexts lies the real cause of the dispute : the racial hatred of a black man coming from a non european origin. Iago’s descriptions of Othello testify to racist thoughts and attitudes towards the Moor. He calls him a « Barbary horse » a «  beast with two backs ». However, none of these words and thoughts are openly stated in public. Iago’s villainy and skill in hiding his real personality allow him to attack the Moor by using different strategies without revealing his true nature. The first scene, then, announces two major themes in the whole play and these go hand in hand. The first theme is racism and the second theme is the contrast between reality and appearance.

Consequently the first act is deliberately staged in darkness and at night. The events take place at night because darkness is commonly associated with magic, evil, sorcery and malevolent forces. The Moor is accused by Brabantion to have used magic to win the heart of his daughter Desdemona :

Bra, O thou foul thief, where has thou stow’d my daughet ?

Damn’d as thou art, thou hast enchanted her…

That thou has practis’d on her with foul charms,

Abus »d her delicate youth with drugs or minerals, (I. ii. 62-74)

For Brabatio the love relationship between the white Desdemona and the black Othello cannot be comprehended because culture, traditions and norms have never witnessed an affair of this nature ; only magic can justify their love.

Darkness refers also to the discrepancy between reality and appearance. We often take appearance for granted and consider what we see as the truth while appearance is often deceiving and misleading. Here again, Othello is judged for his black skin and not for his delicate heart and personality. By dramatising this issue, Shakespeare wants to draw our attention to how superficial our judgement might be if we do not use reason and wit. Actually, the whole tragedy in this play stems from sterotype, bias on one side and deceiving appearance on the other side.

The first act also dramatises the clash between irrational emotions be them jealousy, hatred, parental authority and rational behaviour. Cassio, Roderigo and Brabantio represent the irrationality of emotions while Othello and the Council of senators stand for fairness and good sense. When Othello was menaced by Brabantio’s men he reaceted in a very calm manner :

Oth. Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust ‘em ;

Good signior, you shall more command with years

Than with your weapons. (I. ii. 58-61)

With such a calm reaction, Othello proves to be a civilized man who rejects violence and opts for dialogue and rational behaviour. Shakespeare has deliberatelt portrayed his character in this manner to deconstruct the common steroptypes used against black people. Othello is not at all the savage African who is motivated by his bestial instincts such as sex and violence. The other symbol of rationality and civility is represented by the council of senators who, as neutral judges, prefer to listen to both parties (Brabatio and Othello) before pronouncing any sentence.

All. We are very sorry for ‘t.

Duke. (To Othello) What in your own part can you say so to this ? (I. ii. 74-76)

First Sen. But, Othello, speak,

Did you by indirect and forced courses

Subdue and poinson this young maid’s affections ? (I. ii.110-112)

The duke of Venice and the senators are ready to consider the matter from a detached position. Thus they represent rationality and the rule of law. The council is a state in miniature where all citizens are equal as long as they abide by the law. Othello’s response has proven that he himself is a man of noble origin, good intentions and rational confidence. His long speech delivered to the members of the council provide enough information about his ethnic background as well as the intimate human relationship that linked Othello and Desdemona. We learn from him that « She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d, And I love’d her that she did pity them » (I.ii. 167-168). The love relationship between the two rests on pure and genuine human feelings for the other. Seen from this angle, we may argue that this is a very modern couple who believes in difference and diversity regardless of cultural, ethnis and religious barriers. Once again, Shakespeare seems to state that the audacity and intelligence of this couple cannot be tolerated in a medieval context where strict patriarchal and hegemonic laws control even the private lives of people. Hence the tragic death of the two characters at the end of the play.

The first act briefly refers to a more urgent and serious issue that all members of the council should unravel ; it is the Ottoman attack on Cyprus. Military reports have announced that an imminent attack of an Ottoman fleet is threatening the security of Cyprus and Venetian interests. The senators then appointed the brave and experienced Othello to lead a Venetian naval army. And this what he did with success. The play all of a sudden moves to shed light on the military and also religious conflict between Christian Venice and Muslim Ottomans. The two armies and societies represented the eternal conflict between Muslims and Christians. It started long ago with Muslim « Fath » and then the Christian Crusades. In between, lie the intimate love relationship of Othello and Desdemona. They spontaneously tempted to go beyond the religious conflicts and create a new couple but the strict mental and cultural traditions will ruin their project.

We may then say that Shakespeare was already thinking of a multicultural society where different identities could coexist and tolerate each other. By the brief lapse of time that their love lasted, Shakespeare was depicting the possibility of love between a white Christian woman and a black Muslim man. Shakespeare’s dream has been fulfilled in some modern societies but in so many other contexts the obstacles caused by racism, fundamentalism, patriarchy are so rigid that none of this is possible.