Act IV

The first scene of act iv dramatizes the moral and physical downfall of Othello and the macabre triumph of Iago’s villainy. We are actually moving towards witnessing the tragic error that all tragic characters commit before their death. In this play the tragic error is when Othello wrongly misjudges his wife Desdemona and kills her.

To achieve his villainous plan, Iago convinces Othello that his wife has betrayed him when donating the “handkerchief” to Cassio and when kissing and having an affair with him.

Iago. Will you think so?

Oth. Think so, Iago?

Iago. What,

Oth. An unothariz’d kiss.

Iago. Or to be naked with her friend abed,

An hour, or more, not meaning any harm?

Oth. Naked abed, Iago and not meaning any harm? IV. i.1-5.

Iago tries to insinuate that liberal sexual affairs are a banal routine and practice in Venice and that “honour” is not that sacred because “her honour is an essence that is not seen” IV. i.16-17. This could be a mere strategy adopted by Iago to fuel Othello’s rage and jealousy against Desdemona. It could also point to the sharp contrast in the cultural perception of the body and values between the moor and the Venetian society. Othello strongly believes in the sacred nature of the body in marital relations while Iago/Venetians consider the body a mere site of pleasure and desire. Desdemona, like all the other Venetian characters, seem to have a double life; the legal one and the amorous one. Othello, on the opposite side, believes that the body and marriage are so sacred that any violation of this sacred union should lead to capital physical punishment. The simple thought of Desdemona’s infidelity causes his epilepsy.

Oth. Lie with her, lie on her?- We say lie on her, when they belie her, - lie with her, zounds, that’s fulsome! Handkerchief\_confessions-handkerchief! To confess, and be hanged for his hour. First, to be hanged, and then to confess; I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shake me thus. Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is’t possible? Confess?- Handkerchief? O devil! (He falls down. IV.i.35-44.

Othello falls down because all his values and certainties are now nullified by the shocking truth he discovers. It is the end of a man who used to believe in moral and legal rules like loyalty, fidelity, honour, love, etc. All of a sudden he discovers the obscure and hidden reality of the human nature. Cassio is no longer a friend but a traitor. Desdemona is no longer a loyal wife but a lustful woman. Such new knowledge that Othello discovers is what we may call a fatal knowledge because it leads to the absurdity of life rather than to an empowering knowledge. The irony lies in the fact that all this is the working of Iago ; none of the legacies told and concocted by Iago are true. Still Othello takes them for granted and thus confirms his naive and gullible personality. Iago qualifies his reaction as “savage madness” IV.i.55. Indeed, Othello has already judged his wife guilty and imagined her punishment in a very cruel manner.

Oth. I will chop her into messes...Cuckold me!

Get me some poison, I ago, this night; I’ll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again, this night, Iago.

In addition to his menacing thoughts, Othello strikes his wife Desdemona in the face when she innocently welcomes him

Des. ..sweet Othello

Oth. Devil! (Striking her.

Des. I have not deserv’d this.

Lod. My lord, this would not be beli’d in Venice. IV. i.234-237.

Postcolonial critics consider this scene and the way Shakespeare has portrayed the moor a concrete evidence of Shakespeare’s racist attitude towards blacks. The violent treatment of his wife and impulsive reaction might easily lead readers to consider the moor a savage person lacking the civilized qualities of a Venetian. The words uttered by Lodovico when witnessing how Othello strikes his wife ((this would not be beli’d in Venice) confirm how the blacks/moors are seen in Shakespeare’s time; they are violent and impulsive while the Venetians/Europeans are rational and civilized. Personally, I cannot find any concrete evidence in the play confirming this critique of Shakespeare by postcolonial readers. Actually, Shakespeare might use this incidence to challenge racist stereotypes and build a new perception of the other as a human being with qualities and defects like all human beings.

Act IV also raises gender questions related to woman’s position in the Venetian society, power relations and sexuality. Because Othello is the husband and the powerful man, he automatically condemns his wife Desdemona and accuses her of infidelity. He uses several degrading words to justify her immoral behaviour. The words “whore”, ”impudent strumpet” that Othello uses to describe Desdemona contrast with the gentle and loving terms he used in Act I when he was fond of her. His view of Desdemona shifts from one extreme to another. She used to be the faithful angel and now she is the “impudent strumpet”. Women in the Venetian society cannot be seen as individuals but rather as a stock of images and stereotypes. They lack the free will to voice their pains and emotions because the real power resides in the hands of patriarchal figures (fathers and husbands). The irrational way Othello adopts to condemn Desdemona confirms that women are a mere instrument utilized by males to assert their supremacy. Othello allows himself the right to judge and condemn Desdemona as if his suspicion is factual evidence.

Oth. Why, what art thou?

Des. Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife.

Oth. Come, swear it, damn thyself,

Lest being like one of heaven, the devils themselves

Should fear to seize thee, therefore be double-damn’d,

Swear thou art honest. IV. Ii.34-38.

Scene two provides an opposite portrayal of women in the Venetian society. On the one side Desdemona represents the obedient woman who passively accepts all the patriarchal rules like submission, obedience and physical and moral abuse. On the other side Emilia is rather a rebellious woman who defends her case regardless of gender roles. She openly voices her disagreement with Othello’s vulgar treatment of Desdemona and defends her chastity and fidelity.

Emil. Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?

What place, what time, what form, what likelihood? IV. Ii.139-140.

On the contrary, Desdemona accepts her fate without any resistance and asks her maid to prepare her burial sheets.

Des. If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me

In one of those same sheets. IV. Iii. 23-24.

The nuptial sheets become burial ones and this shows the impossibility of such a marriage between a moor and a Venetian woman. There are so many cultural barriers that separate the two. Hence their death in a tragic way.

Emilia has also a deep knowledge of her society and the moral inconsistency of Venetians. She acknowledges that both men and women can cuckold their partners for material or sexual gains.

Emil. But I do think it is their husbands’ faults

And pour our treasures into foreign laps;

Or else break out in perish jealousy,

Throwing restraint upon us: or say they strike us

Or scant our former having in despite ,

Why , we have galls: and though we have some grace,

Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know,

Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,

And have their palates both for sweet, and sour,

As husbands have. IV. Iii. 85-96.

Modern female readers are more likely to identify with Emilia and reject Desdemona’s docile character. Seen from this perspective, the play sounds a very modern one because it raises issues that are still pertinent today. Shakespeare, once again, confirms that he is our contemporary.