Act V

Tragedies in classical drama end in death and comedies end with the happy marriage of the protagonists. This order is maintained in Shakespeare’s Othello in order to achieve some specific moral and political purposes.

In scene two, Othello addresses his sleepy wife Desdemona in a monologue where he sounds like the death angel in charge of morally judging the dead to be person. In his words, Othello qualifies this mission as a cause that should be carried out in order to restore the moral order that Desdemona disrupted.

Oth. It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:

It is the cause, yet I’ll not shed her blood,

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

And smooth, as monumental alabaster;

Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men,

Put out the light, and then put out the light

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister

I can again thy former light restore, V.ii.1-10.

At this stage, Othello believes that he knows all the truth that gives him the legitimate right to punish Desdemona for her infidelity and to restore the original chastity she had before the lustful “sin”. Othello positions himself as god’s instrument to punish the guilty and guide her towards redemption. This scene is a pseudo moral trial because it actually lacks the legitimacy of a real trial. It considerably contrasts with the first trial in Act I where the senators were fair and impartial. The two opposite trials demonstrate the power of reason over emotion; Othello in this juncture lacks the rational credit to be a fair judge. May be Shakespeare tries to state that rationality and wisdom should be the main values and rules guiding our behaviour and the affairs of society at large.

Othello wrongly believes that if he takes Desdemona’s soul from her body, she will be purified and redeemed from her sin. “I would not kill thy unprepared spirit, no, heaven forfend, I would not kill thy soul”. He believes in the dichotomy between the sinful body and the pure soul, but such a belief is based on false evidence that Iago gave him for malicious purposes. Worse Othello based his judgement on proofs he did not see nor check. He keeps repeating “I saw the handkerchief” though he did not see it. By so doing, Othello proved a gullible and naive person but at the same time his fanatic nature. He believes that the truth he knows is beyond doubt. The tragedy resides in the wrong knowledge Othello has acquired from unreliable source. It is a knowledge that poisoned his mind and disrupted the harmony in his marital life.

The second scene dramatises the sharp contrast between the docile Desdemona and the rebellious Emilia. Desdemona passively accepts the verdict uttered by her husband though it led to her death. On the opposite side, the character of Emilia personifies the rebellious woman who challenges patriarchy and injustice.

Emil. I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak: V.ii.185.

Desdemona dies obediently because she incarnates the old and traditional woman that patriarchy denies her of all rights. While Emilia stands for the new woman who has a voice and a strong character. She resembles Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew, the woman who rejects passive and marginal roles in society. We may deduce from these female characters that Shakespeare was paving the ground for the change in gender roles that modern societies will witness in later times.

Othello commits suicide when he realises the grave error he made; in Plato’s term it is called the tragic error that inevitably leads to the tragic fall. But before dying, the moor recalls his origin and long repressed identity as a Muslim coming from a Muslim society.

Oth. Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum; set you down this,

And say besides, that in Aleppo once

Where a malignant and turban’d Turk

Beat a Venetiann and traduc’d the state,

I took by the throat the circumcised dog

And smote him thus. (Stubs himself. V.ii.351-357.

He recalls Aleppo, the turbans that Muslims wear, circumcision and the Spanish (Andalusian) sword. All these memories take him back to his lost identity and reminds him of the impossible mission of integration in a host society where culture and values differ from his own. We may conclude that the death of the couple demonstrates how challenging and difficult it is to coexist in a society that does not recognise diversity. It is the same fate that the Jewish character faces in the Merchant of Venice.

The play might have multiple impacts on the audience. The classical audience was expected to feel fear and pity in order to achieve catharsis or purification. This is the main function and objective of the tragedy in classical drama. Audience and readers should stick to the moral and political order established by society otherwise they might face the same tragic end of the tragic character. Seen from this perspective, the structure of a tragedy is extremely conservative because it keeps the order as it is without any attempt to challenge or change it. The moor and Desdemona tried to overcome the obstacles imposed on them by patriarchal and conservative society but they failed. Their failure could serve as a warning against any individual who dares challenge the established order.

The play could also be seen as a lesson of female resilience. Modern female readers might see in Emilia a model to follow in their pursuit of freedom and equality. Docile and passive Desdemona cannot satisfy the expectations and needs of modern women who claim their rights as citizens.

Last but not least, Othello could also serve as an eye opener as far as tolerance and diversity are concerned. The multicultural couple (Desdemona and Othello) could have lived and prospered if the host Venetian society were tolerant and open enough.

Like all Shakespearean plays, Othello could illuminate our life again and again because its power resides in its openness and adaptability. We may identify with it regardless of time and space and see ourselves in the words and deeds of characters. Hence the universal dimension of Shakespeare.