Structural Analysis of Cultural Hegemony in Shakespeare's *Othello*

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ABSTRACT: *Parallel to language, cultures are made up of structures which departmentalize individuals into different categories. This study applies Saussure's theory of structuralism on social structures of racism and gender exhibited in Shakespeare's tragedy Othello. These cultural structures dictate the role of the characters, particularly, of the protagonists: Othello and Desdemona. The characters like signs are regulated and determined by the social structures prescribed by community. These social systems are arbitrary as there is no any logic of signifying Othello by his 'blackness' which further signifies 'barbarism' and 'wildness'. Likewise, Desdemona is signified by 'feminity' approved by the collective inertia of Venetian society. This process of arbitrary signification makes the whole social structures arbitrary which protects them from any modification in community. The inflexible sign system in social structures leads to their rigidity and conservativeness. Any attempt of these characters to assert their autonomy makes them distrustful in the community which, eventually, causes their tragedy.*

Parallel to language, cultures are made up of structures of gender, profession, race, social status, etc. which departmentalize individuals into different categories. The intelligibility of phenomena of human life cannot be done except only through observing these structural interrelations among the individual entities. Behind local variations in the surface phenomena, there are constant laws of abstract culture (Blackburn 353) which are self-justified, self-contained and self-verifying (Hawkes 24).These self-justified abstract laws of the cultural systems direct the individuals as the constituents. The formation of this system is arbitrary as there is no logic and reasoning behind fixing the individuals in the signifying structures of race, gender, social rank, wealth, age etc. The very arbitrariness involved in the formation of the system "follows no law other than that of tradition" (Saussure 74). The centuries old conventions lead to preserving this social and cultural system as a heritage of historical forces. All the sets of intellectual productions, social behaviors, and perceptions are the outcome of these "cultural idioms" (Skocpol 258) in which the individuals are weighed "not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position"(Saussure 122)in the system. The individuals have to conform to these systems to be acceptable in social 'synchrony' (Saussure 101). Whenever these individuals assert themselves as autonomous entities, they are considered anomalous and, eventually, their existence becomes intolerable for the 'guardians' of the system. Taking this view, the author has applied Saussure's theory of structuralism on Shakespeare's well-known tragedy *Othello* where the racial and gender structures of Venetian culture constrain the lives of the protagonists (Othello and Desdemona). The endeavor of these characters to assert their individuality as signs is overwhelmed by defeat.

Theory of Structuralism was first defined in terms of language by a Swiss philosopher, Saussure in 1959. He espoused that language is basically a structure which is constituted by linguistic signs. According to him, sign is a combination of signified and signifier. Signified is the concept in the human mind while the signifier is the sound image. The relationship between the concept and sound-image is arbitrary as there is no logic behind this relationship. Once the relationship is established, it is fixed as the signifier chosen by language could not be replaced by other (Saussure71) signifier in the community. Though to appearances, the signifier is freely chosen with respect to idea that it represents, but it is fixed, not free, with respect to linguistic community that uses it (71). Hence linguistic sign becomes arbitrary on the whole(67). This

arbitrariness and fixity of sign protects language from any attempt to modify it (73) and makes language heritage of the historical forces. The system of language is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflection as the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it(73).According to Saussure, sign is "inert by nature" as it "follows no law other than that of tradition" (74). As the sign itself is counterpart of the other signs of language (114), the whole system of relations is arbitrary. In the linguistic system of interdependent terms, the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others (114).The community as a social fact is necessary for it as it creates linguistic signs, owes the existence of linguistic systems by giving them general acceptance and usage. The individual by himself is incapable of fixing even a single value in the "fixed system" (120) of language which is "based on relations" (122).

In 1972, Strauss took the structures of language as an appropriate model for the analysis of culture at large. Strauss' application of structuralism is "extension, to another field, of structural linguistics" (*Structural Anthropology*233).He claimed that different aspects of social life can only be studied by the methods of and with the help of concepts similar to those employed in linguistics as, according to Strauss, the inmost nature of cultural constituents is the same as that of language (*Structural Anthropology* 62). He identified constitutive elements out of the mass of cultural phenomenon such as ceremonies, rites, kinship relations, marriage laws, methods of cooking, totemic system, cultural behaviours etc. The phonological differences of phonemes in structural theory became the basis of his non-linguistic cultural principles. He analyzed that the constituents of cultures in terms of binary oppositions make the cultural structures analogous to the phonemic structure of language as like "phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems" (*Structures of Kinship* 34). Cousins' relationships, in a society, may be analyzed into constituent elements of system which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation. Strauss' analysis concluded that systems should be seen as a type of language which establishes association between individuals and groups. The knowledge of any of the structures of society gives insight to a person into the working of the overall system of that society. Myth, nature of savage mind, kinship and language are regarded as the production of "identical unconscious structures" (*Structural Anthropology* 62) which constitute a coordinated whole. This whole functions to insure

permanency of social group by means of interwining consanguineous and affinal ties (*Structural Anthropology* 309).

Besides the cultural elements of kinship, myth, etc. analyzed by Strauss, there are numerous entities in cultures which are socially structured. Individuals are departmentalized in cultures on the basis of their gender, creed, profession, and social class etc. This categorization of individuals is exhibited in almost all the literary pieces as literature is the mirror to society. The structural constraints of Venetian cultures are portrayed in full bloom in Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* where the structures of racism and gender lash the characters of Othello and Desdemona to age-old conservative system of social signification putting their personal identities and lives into stake. Though, a lot of research is available on themes of racism and gender in *Othello*, yet there is lack of research studies on the play *Othello* in light of the theory of structuralism. The current study is aimed at analyzing how cultures are traditionally structured and preserved like languages by applying the theory of structuralism on the cultural constraints of Venetian society in Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*.

The text of *Othello* is woven by the threads of constraints of Venetian culture. The constituent elements of these structures, characters, are entrapped in the snares of 'masculinistic-racist hegemony'. All the characters in the play, except the protagonists Othello and Desdemona, act to conform to these structures to be acceptable. Therefore, the social structures are more decisive for these *deconstructed* characters than others. The decisive decree of the society is initiated in the play by assigning signifiers to these characters. Othello is signified by 'black Moor' in the play. The blackness of Othello is frequently referred to as 'devil'. The signifier of blackness is associated with signifier of 'barbarism' which is devoid of "loveliness in favor …and beauties" (I.i.232). This relationship of signifiers determines the race of Othello in Venetian culture. The blackness of Othello is taken as a criterion of evaluating his identity as color is "the site of a constant formation and deformation of identities and meanings" (Benston71) in the social systems of human signification. Othello's gradation of color stands for gradation of "barbarity", "animality", and "primitive emotions" (Neil 384). Blackness becomes "a staple ingredient in images of wildness, of evil, of class differences" (Loomba207). This yardstick of complexion for signifying human beings is arbitrary and devoid of any reason. But once the signifier 'black Moor' is used to signify Othello (signifier), it

becomes fixed as "no other signifier could replace it" (Saussure 71). Once this relationship between Othello and his barbarism (blackness) is established, it is not modifiable as modification always requires some logic which is not an ingredient of the signifying process (Saussure 67) in structure of race. Likewise, Desdemona is signified by the signifier of 'lady'. The signifier of 'lady' attached with the signified of Desdemona has arbitrary association as there is no "natural" aspect of gender other than sexual organ (Butler *Gender Trouble*140) which divides humans into man and woman. The phallic supremacy of man over woman is arbitrarily constructed. The internal arbitrariness of assigning signifiers to characters is also a part of the whole social system made up of these arbitrary signs. This process of signification makes a larger system of structures. In these social structures, the signs of Othello and Desdemona have their value in relation to other signs in the social system. Their value is determined by the presence of others as their position is always "relative" in the system of relations (Saussure 122) in syntagmatic and paradigmatic arrangement. These characters, though they are marginalized in the process of social and cultural signification, spare from degradation when they act within their domains of 'black Moor' and 'obedient Desdemona' prescribed by the social forces. Their tragedy starts when they step out of their limited spheres by their interracial marriage.

When the play starts, the news of the "unnatural" marriage of Desdemona and Othello is broadcasted by Iago and Roderigo. Iago had been having a grudge against Othello for a long time. But he finds the time of the elopement of the 'fair' Desdemona with 'black Othello' congenial to "poison his delight" (I.i.70) by losing its color. All the detestation against the black Othello and Desdemona accumulates in the animal imagery and devilish lexis used for these deviant characters. Iago arouses the fury of the father of Desdemona by saying, "even now, now, very now an old black ram/ is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.89-91). He is provoked to cure it "or else the devil will make a grandsire of you" (I.i.93).The use of such imagery is to emphasize on the barbaric instincts of the characters displayed in their "making the beast with two backs" (I.i.120). The imagined pictures of Desdemona and black Moor is mirrored to Brabantio by stating that Desdemona is "covered with a Barbary horse; you'll/have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have courses/for cousins and jennets for germans" (I.i.114-116).The white and 'honest' gentlemen assume that fair Desdemona is "transported" to "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.129) as only sexual lust is the

drive of their marriage. In the whole Act I, the characters of Othello and Desdemona are treated as 'other' and 'peripheral. Their transgression of asserting their individual value is unacceptable by the "collective inertia" (Saussure 74) of Venetian community. The masculinist-racial structures of this society demanded a role of commodity from Desdemona being a daughter of Brabantio. Her marriage with Othello is double transgression as she subverted her normative role of obedient Desdemona and chose the black moor with "thick lips" who was "a thing…to fear not to delight" (I.i.72). The structuralists of the society excluded these deviant characters from the group of humans giving them animals names. Their struggle to constitute a self in relation to one another's subordinate position (Andrzejewski, 44) is rebutted by declaring them animals / beasts.

For Brabantio, the match of the Othello and Desdemona incurs "a general mock/run from her guardage to the sooty bossom" (I.ii.70-71). He accuses Othello of practicing charms on Desdemona to abuse "her delicate youth with drugs or minerals" (I.ii.75). This "probable and palpable to thinking" (I.ii.77) act is regarded as an effect of some magic paralyzing the sense of thinking of Desdemona. Brabantio speaks before the senate alleging Othello:

> *She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted*
> *By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;*
> *For nature so preposterously to err,*
> *Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,*
> *Sans witchcraft could not* (I.iii.62-66)

In this entire scenario, Othello's racial 'otherness' is reiterated, but Desdemona is treated as a passive object as a commodity which can be 'tupped', 'transported' but is assumed to be incapable of any reasoning. Nobody admits that Desdemona is willingly involved in elopement until she pronounces 'I may confess / due to the moor my lord' (I.iii.190-191).This confession of Desdemona subverts her position from passive 'object' to active 'subject' asserting 'I' for herself. In feminist theory proposed by Butler, the use of pronoun 'I' has the following peculiarities:

> *The invocation of 'I' presumes the capacity to*
> *speak for and as the universal human. This*
> *privilege to speak 'I' establishes a sovereign self,*
> *center of absolute plentitude and power;*

> *speaking establishes 'the supreme act of subjectivity'. This coming into the subjectivity is the effective overthrow of sex and hence, the feminine; 'no woman can say I without being for herself a total subject-that is ungendered, universal, whole'.* (*Gender Trouble*117)

She claims identity for herself through 'I' by rejecting her role as mere 'reflection'. This assertion of her position as 'subject' turns the tables on her. Her father who took her elopement as an effect of magic warns Othello "look to her, Moor, if though hast eyes to see / she has deceived her father and may thee" (I.iii.295-296). But Othello proudly declares "my life upon her faith" (I.iii.297-298). He is the first person who gives the autonomous identity of an independent self to Desdemona first by asking her opinion and secondly calling her by her name; otherwise she was previously referred to as 'my daughter', 'your daughter'. This acceptance and celebration of self-identity of Desdemona by Othello is only because her autonomy gave him visage against the stigmatization of racial structures of her society.

Desdemona's proclamation for Othello is considered an "error of her choice" (I.iii.354). This 'error of her choice' is so much insisted in the surrounding of the newly married couple Othello himself begins to suspect her choice as unsoundness of her character. He realizes his deficiency in "sympathy in years, manners, and beauties" (II.i.230-232) which are possessed by "civil and humane"Cassio (II.i.239-242).He thinks that her transgression of the intrinsic laws of cultural constraints would lead her to pollute the laws of matrimonial structures. Desdemona's second assertion of her self for assuring Cassio of his post by asserting "I give thee warrant of thy place" (III. iii. 20) is not hailed by Othello as he considers her reiterated insistence on the restoration of the post of Cassio as a threat to his own visage which was reinforced by Desdemona's choice for him. His faith begins to be quivered and he comments on the deviation of Desdemona, "I do not think but Desdemona honest. […] and yet how nature erring from itself" (III. iii. 259-263). This opening of Othello makes Iago braver in exploiting Desdemona's nature by poisoning Othello's ears by raising 'a point' that Desdemona once defied the script written by Venetian society and did

> *Not to affect many proposed matches*
> *Of her clime, complexion, and degree,*

Whereto we see in all things nature tends-
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural
(III. iii. 245-249)

This 'disproportion' of her character for rejecting the script of the social structures written for women leads to her destruction. Iago arguments that she violated the structure of the culture once, she would do so again. Iago as the force of the structures of society makes Othello demand "some proof" (III.iii. 402) for the adultery of Desdemona. Her non-conformative act of breaking the structures of society is verified as falsehood of her character by the same person whom she chose by rejecting the 'curled' darlings of her own race. This deviant nature of Desdemona makes him think "Haply, for I am black/ and have not those soft parts of conversation / that chambers have" (III. iii. 279-281). But the reason of burning of the mines of sulphur in Othello is the knowledge of the supposed adultery of Desdemona with Cassio and not the purity of her character as he states "I had been happy if the general camp/ pioneers and all had tasted her sweet body" (III. iii. 361-362). Against her transgression of the normative role of an obedient daughter suggested by Iago "she did deceive her father, marry you" (III. iii. 218), Othello puts affirmation to this accusation and says "so she did" (III. iii. 219). He thinks that the adultery of Desdemona would make his name which is "as fresh as Diana's visage" as "begrimed and black" as his own face (III. iii. 385-388). The structuring principle of masculinity overrides the 'natural' and 'real' nature of Desdemona and begins to impose its own system for reshaping her role as an 'obedient wife'. The self-justified and self-verifying racial bigotry takes the form of male chauvinism where the black and shelved Othello asserts his masculinity over Desdemona. The appeal of Desdemona to 'reality' beyond the structural system of gender is thwarted as impurity of her character. The value given to her by the relations to other individuals in the system becomes suspicious as her relationship with other elements in the structure is not approved by the traditions of social structures. Desdemona's attempt to mean something 'real' and 'natural' other than that fixed by the society is not welcomed even by her 'lord'. At this point, Othello resumes "culturally institutionalized authority of phallic" (Edelman 48) by acting upon the advice of "look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio" (III. iii. 218). Now on, Othello becomes a guardian of the masculine structure of his society.

Othello's position in racial and gender structures of Venetian culture is contradictory. Iago aggravates this contradiction by frequently alluding to unnatural choice of Desdemona and her supposed adultery with Cassio. However, Othello performs his role of a *man* with masculine hegemony of violence. According to Butler (2004), violence is the expression of the worst order. Through violence, the vulnerability of one human to another is exposed terrifyingly. The vulnerability of Othello is asserted through violence. When Othello gets the proof of Desdemona's adultery by Cassio's dream, calls out "black vengeance, from the hallow hell" (III. iii. 462) to inflict penalty on Desdemona. The words of "O, blood, blood, blood!" (III. iii. 467) become an illustration of his blood thirsty revenge. The punishment becomes even severe when he cries out "damn her, lewed minx! O, damn her, damn her!"(III. iii. 491). Damnation is changed into the suggestion of "hang her!"(IV.i. 187) for "nine years a killing" (IV. i. 178).The intensity increases with "O, a thousand, a thousand times!" (IV. i. 192).This punishment is changed into a dictum "I will chop her into messes" (IV. i. 199). The granted status of an independent self and subject is taken back by Othello in his speech where Desdemona is mere a passive receiver of penalty. Othello's desire to kill Desdemona for not conforming to her role prescribed by the social system suggests that "life itself requires a set of sheltering norms, and that to be outside it, to live outside it, is to court death" (Butler*Gender Trouble* 34). Desdemona assures Othello of the purity of her character against the allegation of being a "whore" that "if to preserve this vessel for my lord/from any other foul unlawful touch/ be not to be strumpet, I am none" (IV. ii. 107). But the proofs given by Emilia and Desdemona are not accepted where the foul pretensions of 'honest' Iago work. The love of Desdemona for Othello becomes her greatest sin. She realizes after Othello's slapping "how foolish are our minds!"(IV. iii. 25) who transgress the norms for the guardians of norms for their sake and become 'whore'. Before strangling Desdemona, Othello asks her to think upon her sins. At this, she replies, "they are loves I bear to you" (IV. iii. 41-43). When Emilia asks the dying Desdemona who did harm her, she blames herself as "nobody, I myself" (V. ii. 128). She admits that the cause of her death is not anything else but her own 'sin' of defying the norms of her culture. Othello murders Desdemona and names this hideous crime "all honorable murder, if you will/ for naught I did in hate, but all in honor" (V. ii. 302-303). This physical violence of Othello is an expression of dehumanization which was already at work in the structural dominance (Butler*Gender Trouble* 25). This honor killing is the fruit of Desdemona's transgression for

selecting a person who was not of her match and race. But the killing of Desdemona brings chaos in Othello for leaving him all alone in his racial confines of black Moor. Realizing his own blunder of throwing away 'a pearl', Othello commits suicide. This "unwise" (V. ii. 354) love of Moor and Desdemona began the tragedy by stirred up the established harmony of systems. Their death eventually restores the defied structures of society.

Cultures are structured like language. The individuals as signs are regulated by the hegemony of the cultural and social structures as is exhibited in *Othello.* In this play, themasculinist and racial structures are intertwined. The whole process of signification is arbitrary where Othello, hero, is arbitrarily signified by 'black moor' and a *man* with 'honor' which precipitates the intensity of tragedy. He is a victim and a vamp at the same time. On the other hand, Desdemona is arbitrarily associated with signifier of 'lady' and 'fair Desdemona'. But the signifier of 'fair' is dominated by the signifier of 'faminity'. She becomes a victim of male chauvinism and is penalized by the very person for whom she breaks all the laws of the structures of society. The signifier of 'blackness' of Othello awakens his signifier of 'masculinity' and he, eventually, asserts his phallic power over Desdemona through violence. Othello's earlier violation against the social structure was due to the status of 'lord' given to him by Desdemona as her beloved to erase his signifier of 'blackness'. But when he adopts the role of Desdemona's husband, he himself becomes a structuralist punishing Desdemona for her sins of *infidelity*. The punishment for violating the social structures is determined as no less than 'putting off the light' of Desdemona's life. The murder of Desdemona makes Othello realize his internal chaos which was filled up by the love of Desdemona. His existence as a black moor is once again threatened after the death of Desdemona. This overwhelming realization becomes a cause of his suicide. So, the tragedy of these characters ends up with their deaths. Their deaths restore the dominance of the violated racial and chauvinist structures of society. The victory of the structural hegemony thwarts the individual's appeal to their 'real' and 'natural' life. The lesson which arises out of this tragedy is the conformity to the social structures highlighting that those who violate the racial structures must have to commit suicide and those women who break feminine structures and elope with their lovers, must have to die. The victory of the social structures over the individuals is celebrated by destroying the deviant characters by their own hands. This play proves Shakespeare, the author of the play under analysis, a structuralist who is

committed to make the structural chauvinism explicit through his tragedy *Othello.*

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