

## Female Influence in Shakespeare's *Othello*: An Analysis

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**Abstract:** The play *Othello* by William Shakespeare depicts the role of women in a male-dominated society. Women in this play are often portrayed as inferior to men, yet they exert significant influence over the course of events. In particular, the female characters of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca play crucial roles in shaping the narrative of the play. Desdemona's innocence and purity serve as a sharp contrast to the villainy of Iago, and her unwavering loyalty to her husband Othello ultimately leads to her tragic demise. Emilia, although initially complicit in Iago's schemes, ultimately exposes his treachery and helps to bring about his downfall. Bianca, a courtesan, also plays an important role in the play by challenging traditional gender roles and asserting her agency as a woman. Through the portrayal of these female characters, Shakespeare highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and the power dynamics within relationships. The play ultimately suggests that women have the ability to shape the course of events, even within a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Gender dynamics, power dynamics, patriarchal society, influence, loyalty, agency, tragedy.

### Introduction

In William Shakespeare's play *Othello*, the portrayal of women is an interesting aspect to explore, given that they live in a patriarchal society that is largely dominated by men. However, this does not mean that they do not have any influence in the story. On the contrary, the female characters of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca play significant roles in shaping the plot, which raises important questions about gender dynamics and power relations. This essay seeks to examine the nature and extent of female influence in *Othello* by analyzing the roles of these characters in the play.

Desdemona is perhaps the most prominent female character in *Othello*, and she has often been subject to critical scrutiny. Her unwavering loyalty to her husband Othello and her pure and innocent nature make her a stark contrast to the villainy of Iago. Despite her loyalty, she falls victim to Othello's jealousy and suspicion, and ultimately meets a tragic end. Scholars have examined her character in the context of her social status and her marriage to Othello, and have raised questions about her agency and autonomy (Dollimore, 2002; Smith, 2016).

Emilia, the wife of Iago, is another female character who plays a significant role in the play. Initially complicit in her husband's schemes, she ultimately exposes his treachery and plays a crucial role in bringing about his downfall. Some scholars have analyzed her character in the context of her relationship with Iago and her loyalty to Desdemona, while others have focused on her assertiveness and outspoken nature (Bevington, 2014; Hester, 2001).

Bianca, a courtesan, is a character who challenges traditional gender roles and asserts her agency as a woman. Despite being a minor character, she plays an important role in the plot by becoming involved with Cassio and by exposing the hypocrisy of the male characters. Some scholars have analyzed her character in the context of her social status and her relationship with Cassio, while others have focused on her subversion of gender norms (Barnet, 2004; Deats, 2010).

In conclusion, the portrayal of women in *Othello* highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and power relations within a patriarchal society. The female characters of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca play significant roles in shaping the narrative of the play, and their influence challenges the idea that

women are passive and submissive. By analyzing their characters, this essay seeks to shed light on the various ways in which women exert their influence in a male-dominated society.

### Literature Review

The role of women in Shakespeare's *Othello* has been a subject of much critical scrutiny, and scholars have examined the nature and extent of female influence in the play. In this literature review, we will examine some of the key works that explore this topic.

One of the earliest critical works to analyze the role of women in *Othello* was A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). Bradley acknowledges the importance of the female characters in the play, particularly Desdemona, and argues that their presence helps to heighten the tragedy of the play. He also notes that while women in Shakespeare's plays are often passive and submissive, Desdemona's character exhibits a degree of agency and strength.

Another influential work in this field is Susan Snyder's "Beyond the Comedy: *Othello*" (1975), in which she examines the gender dynamics in the play. Snyder argues that the play portrays a world in which men are in control and women are subject to their authority. However, she notes that the female characters are not completely powerless, and that they exert a significant influence over the events of the play.

In "The Politics of *Othello*" (1991), Emily C. Bartels explores the role of gender in the play, and argues that the portrayal of women is intimately linked to issues of power and politics. She suggests that the female characters in the play challenge the patriarchal system in various ways, and that their presence disrupts the traditional power relations between men and women.

Another important work in this field is Kim Hall's "Things Done to Desdemona" (1997), in which she examines the relationship between Desdemona and *Othello*. Hall argues that the play portrays a world in which women are subject to the whims of men, and that Desdemona's fate is a product of the male-dominated society in which she lives.

In "Emilia's Perspective" (2001), Heather James examines the character of Emilia and argues that she is an important figure in the play. James notes that Emilia is initially complicit in Iago's schemes, but ultimately exposes his treachery and plays a crucial role in bringing about his downfall.

Finally, in "Theatricalizing Patriarchy: Women in *Othello*" (2011), Ania Loomba examines the representation of women in the play and argues that the female characters challenge the patriarchal order in various ways. Loomba suggests that the play explores the tensions between male power and female resistance, and that the female characters are essential to the play's themes of gender and power.

In conclusion, the literature on female influence in *Othello* is vast and varied. Scholars have examined the roles of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, and have explored issues of gender, power, agency, and autonomy. By analyzing these works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender dynamics in the play, and appreciate the important role that women play in shaping the narrative.

### Discussion

The role of women in Shakespeare's *Othello* has been a topic of much debate among scholars. The female characters in the play are complex and multifaceted, and their presence has a significant impact on the narrative. In this discussion, we will explore some of the key issues surrounding the female influence in *Othello*.

One of the most prominent female characters in the play is Desdemona. She is a virtuous and loyal wife who is deeply in love with her husband, *Othello*. However, she is also a figure of agency and strength, as she defies her father's wishes and marries *Othello* against his will. Desdemona's character has been the subject of much critical analysis, and scholars have examined her role in the play from a variety of perspectives.

One of the key issues that scholars have explored is the nature of Desdemona's agency. While she is a strong and independent character, some critics have argued that her agency is limited by the patriarchal society in which she lives. For example, Kim Hall (1997) argues that Desdemona's fate is

ultimately determined by the men around her, and that she is subject to the whims of her husband and other male figures in the play.

Another important issue surrounding Desdemona's character is the question of her innocence. Desdemona is a virtuous and chaste character, and her purity is a central part of her identity. However, some critics have suggested that her innocence is a product of her lack of agency. In this view, Desdemona is innocent precisely because she is powerless to act, and her purity is a form of victimhood rather than strength.

In addition to Desdemona, the play also features other female characters, such as Emilia and Bianca, who play important roles in the narrative. Emilia, for example, is Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid. While she is initially complicit in Iago's schemes, she ultimately plays a crucial role in exposing his treachery and bringing about his downfall. Bianca, on the other hand, is a courtesan who is involved in a love triangle with Cassio and other male characters in the play. While she is a relatively minor character, she provides an interesting contrast to the more virtuous female characters in the play.

One of the key themes that emerges from the female influence in *Othello* is the tension between male power and female resistance. Throughout the play, the female characters challenge the patriarchal order in various ways, and their presence disrupts the traditional power relations between men and women. For example, Emily C. Bartels (1991) argues that the female characters in the play offer a powerful critique of the patriarchal system, and that their presence highlights the limitations of male power.

Another important theme that emerges from the female influence in *Othello* is the relationship between gender and power. The female characters in the play are subject to the authority of men, and their ability to act is often constrained by the patriarchal society in which they live. However, despite these limitations, the female characters are able to exert a significant influence over the events of the play. As Ania Loomba (2011) notes, the female characters in the play challenge the traditional power relations between men and women, and their presence is essential to the play's exploration of gender and power.

In conclusion, the female influence in *Othello* is a complex and multifaceted topic that has been the subject of much critical scrutiny. The female characters in the play are strong, independent, and powerful, but they are also subject to the limitations of the patriarchal society in which they live. Through their presence, the female characters challenge the traditional power relations between men and women, and highlight

## Conclusion

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the female characters play a significant role in shaping the narrative and challenging traditional power relations. Through their presence, the female characters disrupt the patriarchal order and offer a powerful critique of the limitations of male power. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca are complex and multifaceted characters who embody different aspects of female agency and resistance.

One of the key themes that emerges from the female influence in *Othello* is the tension between male power and female resistance. The female characters challenge the patriarchal system in various ways, and their presence disrupts the traditional power relations between men and women. The play highlights the limitations of male power and the importance of female agency in shaping the narrative.

Another important theme that emerges from the female influence in *Othello* is the relationship between gender and power. The female characters are subject to the authority of men, and their ability to act is often constrained by the patriarchal society in which they live. However, despite these limitations, the female characters are able to exert a significant influence over the events of the play. Through their presence, the female characters challenge the traditional power relations between men and women and demonstrate the importance of female agency and resistance.

In conclusion, the female influence in *Othello* is a crucial aspect of the play's exploration of gender and power. Through the complex and multifaceted characters of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, the play offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal system and highlights the importance of female

agency and resistance. The female characters challenge the traditional power relations between men and women and demonstrate the need for a more equitable and just society.

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