

# Shakespeare's Othello from the Perspective of Islam

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## **Introduction**

When Muslim students take up the study of English literature, it is typically for the purpose of improving their English, much in demand in today's world. While this is no doubt a worthy motivation, a systematic study of literature can bring additional benefits.

For example, a focused study of literature can help develop what are known as "higher order or critical thinking skills." The higher order thinking skills include the recollection and application of knowledge. They also include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These skills are developed within the discipline known as *literary criticism*.

Moreover, literature can assist in the spiritual growth of readers. It can help readers become better human beings by presenting them with good role models. In literature, this takes place by means of story telling.

Stories narrate events that are either fictional or based on real events. They may also comprise a mixture of the two. By tracing the lives of the protagonists in their interaction with their antagonists in real-life settings, literature can teach valuable lessons in ethics. By showing the triumph of good over evil, literature can motivate readers to become good or better persons. Every good story has a moral or teaches an ethical lesson.

Literature can illustrate, in an imaginative way, the consequences of various choices made by different characters. Each choice is made on the basis of a particular understanding of ethics or morality.

In this way, literature can complement the teaching of religion. Religion highlights the benefits of being a good person and the cost of evil deeds. Indeed good literature should – as in the case of great literature does – take its inspiration from religion.

## **Tragedy**

Tragedy is the occurrence of misfortune in one form or another. A tragic experience brings harm and sometimes death or disability to its victims. Tragedies generally occur in the form of disasters, natural or man-made. The occurrence of tragedy entails *loss of control* over one's life. In many cases, tragedies can be prevented. Not a few tragedies are caused by human error or a failing of one kind or another.

Tragedy seldom takes place without injustice. Sometimes the injustice is caused by the victim and sometimes by other parties. In some cases, the victim may share the responsibility for causing a tragedy with another party or parties.

Tragedies may be caused by personal traits such as impulsiveness, pride, an addiction or some other vice. They can also be caused by indiscretions. For example, according to a saying popular during wartime, “loose lips can sink ships.”

Tragedies take place on a personal, national and even global level. A loss of a loved one, an automobile accident, or a terminal illness, all constitute examples of *personal* tragedies. Famine, wars or civil wars constitute examples of *national* tragedies. An epidemic, a flood of refugees from a war zone or a world war are examples of *global* tragedies.

Significant events that caused a great deal of harm also qualify as tragedies. Examples include the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 and the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The 9/11 attacks and their geopolitical consequences also represent recent and ongoing tragedies.

Similarly, the suffering and harm caused by various conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere can hardly be described in terms other than tragic. Oppression of people, regardless of where this takes place, is always tragic. Customs resulting from ignorance, such as the burying female infants alive, also constitute tragedies.

The experience of tragedy may have a profound impact on how a person perceives life. A tragedy can make a person more *compassionate* by making him or her realise the vulnerability of all to misfortune. Matters that may have previously seemed important may appear less so after an experience of tragedy, while concerns that previously appeared inconsequential, may take on a new importance.

Experience of tragedy enables a witness or victim to gain insight into the vicissitudes of existence from a unique – *tragic* – perspective. As a result, complacency may give way to a realisation that nothing in life may be taken for granted, and that man is not the only disposer of his affairs.

Perspectives can change even on a social level, and have political consequences. For example, the suffering imposed on millions of people worldwide during the Great Depression resulted in the implementation of new policies designed to help the poor to overcome unemployment.

In such cases – essentially *crises* – the policies and even responsibilities of government can change, obliging governments to take a far greater responsibility for protecting and ensuring the welfare of the people than was the case until then.

Because of the suffering and harm they bring, it is imperative to avoid tragedies. It is better to prevent a tragedy than to have to grapple with its consequences. Thus, in order to minimise the occurrence of tragedies, it is necessary to be pro-active.

There are many theories of tragedy. Ordinary tragedies can be caused by mistakes or simply a failure to follow rules. Tragedies can also take place as a consequence of ignorance. According to another view, tragedies are also caused by transgressions of divine prohibitions, or a failure to comply with divine commands. In other words, they arise when man ignores the signs of God or even adopts the attitude of an adversary (cf. Qur’an, 16:04, 36:77).

## **Tragedy and religion**

The religious conception posits tragedy as arising from man's alienation from his Creator. This separation, if not overcome, brings loss. Conversely, man's rapprochement with his Creator brings rewards. Success in life requires attaining God-consciousness. In other words, success requires living in accordance with the will of the Creator. Man charts his future by the choices he makes.

One example of tragedy in the Qur'an is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The latter murdered his brother out of jealousy, as Abel's offering of sacrifice was accepted while that of Cain was rejected. Cain's tragic flaw appears to have been his jealousy, coupled with a proclivity to commit violence.

Divine retribution brings punishment to wrongdoers. By committing injustice, perpetrators bring retribution on themselves. As the Qur'an puts it, *God did not do any injustice to them, but they wronged themselves* (30:9).

Historical experience confirms that transgressors are vanquished in the longer term. Napoleon and Hitler were both defeated in Russia. Japan's aggression against China at the beginning of WWII, and later against other nations, was also thoroughly defeated.

However, even in the aftermath of misfortune, there is hope for redemption. This requires repentance and reform. In such cases, man may hope for a return to divine favour. Thus, tragedy followed by regret can act as a catalyst – a wake-up call as it were – and alert the victim to the need for change.

In the history of Islam, various tragedies include various civil wars, as well as the collapse of the Umayyad, Abbasid and the Ottoman dynasties. In order to prevent a repeat of tragedy, it is necessary to identify the failing or failings that caused the tragedy in the first place.

This requires the analysis of historical events, a kind of "post mortem." Subsequently, the failing or failings that caused a tragedy in the first place need to be addressed in order to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy.

Indeed, the ethical and legal part of the teaching of Islam, in the form of the commands and prohibitions, appear to be intended to *prevent* various tragedies. Thus, the prohibition of adultery is designed to protect the family, while the prohibition of slander is to protect people's reputation. Similarly, the prohibition of murder is intended to protect life while the prohibition of stealing is intended to safeguard private and public property.

The command to protect orphans is to protect vulnerable groups of society, while the command to practice charity is intended to help the poor. The command to act with justice seeks to prevent conflicts and maintain peace. The command to fear God is to ensure that all other commands and prohibitions will be respected.

## **Modernity and tradition**

The difference between modernity and tradition corresponds roughly to the difference between the future and the past, between what is new and what is familiar. While tradition preserves custom and heritage, modernity demands adjustment and change.

Thus, a certain degree of tension can be expected to exist between tradition and modernity.

The rise of Industrialisation and the attendant invention and utilisation of new technologies is widely identified with the emergence of *modernity*. For example, the invention of the printing press enabled more people to become knowledgeable, and in that way facilitated a greater acceptance of the idea of equality.

By contrast, tradition portrays a hierarchical vision of society, with emphasis on continuity, stability, and harmony. An important characteristic of a “traditional” way of life is stability. Ritual is also an important part of tradition, because it provides a visible expression of the identity of a given community. Another important characteristic of “tradition” is *loyalty*, not least to the tradition itself.

Every tradition reflects a particular *worldview*. This worldview is typically communicated in a narrative of one kind or another, such as a scripture or a Constitution. Disagreements between modernisers and traditionally minded persons may arise if attempts at “modernisation” come to be viewed as little more than attempts to *undermine*, if not outright to *destroy* “tradition.”

There is no reason to doubt that a successful integration of tradition and modernity is possible. The reason is that what is best in tradition can be preserved even in the modern age, because the core of what is best in a tradition invariably comprises *values*.

By definition, values are intangible and cannot therefore be affected by mere passage of time or a changing historical environment. Thus, “traditional” values need not be affected by characteristically “modern” developments, such as the invention of the printing press or the Internet.

In itself, technology is *morally neutral*. It is *how* we use technology that can be morally acceptable or reprehensible. From the perspective of Islam, there is nothing wrong with the use of modern technologies, as long as it is done in ways that are in agreement with the teaching of religion. If they are used in ways that violate the norms of Islam, then their use cannot be condoned.

The tension between tradition and modernity is sometimes expressed in the difference between “conservatives” and “progressives.” In Elizabethan England, the contest between tradition and modernity is cast as a contest between what was perceived as the arbitrary rule of the monarchy and those calling for the rule of law, greater personal autonomy, and a more representative, democratic form of government.

### **Ideological and social context**

Shakespeare’s *Othello* was written and performed on stage during the English Renaissance. This was a time of the emergence of *European* modernity. A major social transformation was taking place at this time. Under the new dispensation, man would take greater control over his own destiny than was the case under the old regime. The emancipation of the spirit from the constraints of dogma brought a sense of relief. There was a willingness to sail into uncharted waters, metaphorically as well as literally.

The spirit of the Renaissance, inherited from the world of Islam, brimmed with optimism and confidence. It engaged its supporters in new, daring pursuits. Exploration of new lands was accompanied by a flowering of the arts: literature, music and drama.

Art and science, as means for the acquisition of knowledge or expression of spiritual awareness, began to acquire a higher status. Rightly or wrongly, reason came to be seen as a source of “enlightenment” or knowledge in its own right. Industrialisation would soon become a leading catalyst of change.

There were calls for a greater concern for the individual. It would not be long before slavery was abolished in a number of countries. There was a new focus on “how people lived rather than how they ought to live.” Idealism was giving way to realism. The new “realism” also found expression in Shakespeare’s work.

The Elizabethan era, named after Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry the VIII, is known as the golden age of English history. It spanned the period from the beginning of the English Reformation (1534) to the start of the English Civil Wars in 1642, a power struggle between Charles I and the supporters of Parliament. The transition from tradition to modernity was characterised by a great deal of political instability.

Protestantism was introduced into England by Henry VIII in 1534, only 17 years after Martin Luther’s publication of the 95 Theses that sparked the Reformation in continental Europe. Mary I attempted to restore Catholicism 1553. An attempt by Spain to restore Catholicism in England in 1588 with the help of the Armada failed. Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558 until her death in 1603, re-established a moderate form of Protestantism in 1559.

The Civil Wars between the King and Parliament ended in 1649 with the trial and execution of Charles I, and the establishment of republican government during the Interregnum (1649 – 1660). The republican government was dominated by Puritans, who enforced a strict moral code, which included the closure of theatres.

The republican government gave way to rule by Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army (1653 – 1658). The inability of Richard Cromwell, the successor of Oliver Cromwell to rule after his father’s death, helped to usher in the Restoration of the Catholic monarchy under Charles II in 1660. Protestantism was once again re-established during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

Economically, feudalism was in decline. England, Venice and other nations began to benefit from rising trade. Some powers, such as Venice, were coming into confrontation with the Ottoman Empire.

Venice – a cosmopolitan city-state – came into the possession of Cyprus in 1473. This was a mere twenty years after the fall of Constantinople in the East, and nineteen years before the fall of Granada in 1492. The latter incidentally took place in the same year that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Selim II conquered Cyprus in 1571, two months before the Battle of Lepanto, in which a Turkish fleet was defeated by the Venetians. These events form the historical background of the action of play, which would therefore have taken place sometime between 1473 and 1571.

## Othello

Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. In England, Shakespeare occupies a place comparable to that of Rumi in the Islamic civilisation. It appears that Shakespeare was prompted to cast Othello as a Moor by Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, who was the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I in 1600.

The first performance took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1604, at the Banqueting House at the Whitehall Palace in London. It was first published in 1622, six years after Shakespeare died. Since then the play has been staged in many nations in the form of theatre performances, films and television dramas.

The action of the play takes place in Venice, an independent republic, sometime between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, against the background of the competition between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Venice over control of the Mediterranean, in particular over lucrative trade routes and colonies.

Venice was a rich, cosmopolitan city-state. It was able to afford hiring a mercenary army to defend its colonies from its enemies. In the Mediterranean the Ottoman Empire was still expanding, despite having suffered a setback in Europe at the Battle of Vienna in 1529.

The play explores the relationships between Desdemona and Othello, Cassio and Iago, and between Iago and his wife Emilia. Othello and his warriors are mercenaries. Othello was esteemed in Venice for his military prowess. He was a man of courage.

Venetians hired Othello and his mercenaries to defend Cyprus – at that time a Venetian colony – from the Turks who were threatening to conquer the strategically located Mediterranean island.

The fact that the Venetians would hire a Muslim to command a force of mercenaries against a threat to their colonial interests posed by other Muslims – the Ottoman Turks – reflects a more cosmopolitan society.

While waiting in Venice for his military assignment in Cyprus, Othello falls in love with Desdemona, the daughter of a prominent Venetian. She reciprocates his love. However, Desdemona marries Othello surreptitiously, without the knowledge of her father.

By secretly eloping with Othello, and marrying a foreigner, Desdemona breaks with tradition. Desdemona's father becomes upset when he hears the news of his daughter's marriage from Roderigo, egged on to do so by Iago.

The marriage of Othello and Desdemona departs from tradition not only because Desdemona marries Othello secretly, but also because theirs is an interracial, and even inter-religious marriage, as there is reason to believe that Othello was Muslim.

Additional complications arise from the fact that Othello's assistant Iago is *also* in love with Desdemona. As Iago's plans were frustrated, he plans to take revenge. Iago, to whom Othello refers as "honest Iago," is the archetypal villain. His reasons for hating Othello also include being passed up for promotion in favour of Iago's rival, Cassio, Othello's captain.

While Iago has occasionally been characterised as a “realist,” it is more accurate to view him as “evil.” He is a master of deception. He insinuates to Othello that Desdemona is guilty of adultery with Cassio.

Othello becomes jealous. He becomes convinced of Desdemona’s guilt when she is unable to produce a handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona as a gift. The handkerchief was stolen and planted in Cassio’s house by Iago’s wife Emilia, who was asked to do so by her husband.

In a fit of rage Othello murders Desdemona. The murder is a form of “honour killing.” When he finds out from Emilia, Iago’s wife, that Desdemona was innocent Othello realises his mistake and kills himself.

Desdemona’s murder is a miscarriage of justice. The play shows the failings of various characters and their demise: jealousy and gullibility in Othello’s case, disobedience in the case of Desdemona, and slander in the case of Iago.

From an ethical perspective, the play conveys a warning against unfounded suspicion and jealousy. It also cautions against condemning people on the basis of minimal evidence.

## **Conclusion**

A significant challenge to the medieval worldview emerged some years prior to the time of Shakespeare. As a result of this challenge – generally known as the Reformation – traditional beliefs and practices started to be questioned and eventually began to give way to a new outlook.

The challenge to tradition was facilitated by the emergence of a new method of acquiring knowledge, known as the *scientific or empirical method*. This new – characteristically *modern* – method advocated a mechanistic view of the universe. For better or worse, it was also applied in the study of morality and ethics. Soon it became clear, however, that the results the new method of inquiry brought in the area of ethics, differed significantly from “traditional” notions about ethics and morality.

The new method of inquiry generated a new – modern – *worldview*. This worldview sought to emancipate man from the shackles imposed by traditional dogma and open new possibilities. In many ways, the arrival of modernity represented a *transformation* of tradition. However, in some ways, modernity also represented a *departure* from tradition.

Modernity brought greater autonomy in matters of faith. In politics, it manifested itself in the demise of autocratic government, and the emergence of the rule of law. In the new, cosmopolitan society, there was room for the arts and sciences, including the theatre. The rule of law was to supplant the rule of men.

In the new world, man was no longer seen as striving to gain the pleasure of God. Rather, he came to be seen as struggling for power after power, over nature as well as other people. Man was increasingly becoming a “measure of all things.”

While Othello and Desdemona departed from “tradition” in the way they married, at the social level, society departed from “tradition” in the way it came to be governed. Practices that were previously forbidden, such as usury, were legalised.

There is no doubt that a change of this magnitude in what is seen as acceptable from an ethical point of view is likely to have a major long term impact. Only time can tell whether this impact may, at the level of society, turn out to be comparable in any way to the impact a departure from “tradition” had on the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.

Revelation teaches man the difference between good and evil, and why it is important to do good and refrain from evil. This knowledge is required for living well. History confirms that success or the lack of it depends on how well man is able to *understand*, *retain*, and *follow* revealed guidance. Thus, as the analysis of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in its historical context shows, the excesses of secular modernity call for restraint and accentuate, in turn, the need to pay heed to the guidance offered to man by his Creator by means of revelation.