
Struggle for Meaning and Order in *Hamlet and Othello*

Hamlet ve Othello'da Anlam ve Düzen Mücadelesi

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Abstract: *Tragedy is about torn-apart forces that influence human emotions and desires. The tragic heroes are in defeat of making sense of their world in Shakespeare's tragedies Hamlet and Othello. This paper will try to examine the three phases Hamlet and Othello experience--alienation from the world by facing its meaninglessness, struggling for making sense through acting against their natures, and reconciliation (a redemption towards meaning) with their worlds in the end--focusing on the fact that though these men suffer through emotional and moral dissolution that lead them to question their beings, and consequently, carry the imperative to act--to take revenge--as tragic heroes. In the end, they have the power to create something new out of nothing. In other words, they gain awareness of life which has once been insignificant.*

Key words: *Hamlet, Othello, tragedy, meaninglessness, alienation.*

Öz: *Trajedi insane duygularını ve arzularını etkileyen parçalanmış kuvvetleri konu alır. Shakespeare'in Hamlet ve Othello oyunlarındaki trajik kahramanlar kendi dünyalarını anlamlandırmakta yenik duruma düşerler. Bu makalede Hamlet ve Othello'nun geçirdikleri üç dönem incelenmeye çalışıldı—dünyanın anlamsızlığıyla yüzleşerek ondan yabancılaşma, kendi tabiatlarına karşı gelerek anlam arama çabası ve sonunda kendi dünyalarıyla uzlaşma (anlam bulma bakımından). Ayrıca bu makale, bu kahramanların duygusal ve ahlaki çöküntüyle acı çektiğini ve bunun sonucunda kendi varoluşlarını sorgulayıp trajik kahramanlar olarak öc alma dürtüsünü taşıdıklarını vurgulamaktadır. Sonunda da, hiçbir şeyden bir şey yaratma gücüne sahip olurlar. Bir başka deyişle, bir zamanlar anlamsız olan hayatlarına karşı bilinçli gözlerle bakarlar.*

Anahtar sözcükler: *Hamlet, Othello, trajedi, anlamsızlık, yabancılaşma*

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Hamlet. Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertas? Never Hamlet. (Hamlet, V.ii.233)

Othello. That's he that was Othello--here I am. (Othello,V.ii.284)

“In Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies the hero is invaded by an alien personality, and, challenged in his inmost being, appears to be taken over, sometimes briefly (Hamlet), sometimes for longer spells (Othello)” (Honigmann,1976: 43). What lies in and beyond the tragedy of Shakespeare’s two heroes--Hamlet, a man of reason and thought, and Othello, a man of fighting and command? In the first place, their downfall is implicit in the psychological motivations which drive them to do what they do. Then, the threat of destruction is always present, and real: the worlds of Hamlet and Othello contains the possibility of a collapse into a chaos full of “sound and fury/ Signifying nothing.” In tragedy, the normal settled routine of everyday life is torn apart by forces, emotions and desires which defeat the hero’s ways of making sense of his world. In the light of these assertions, this paper will try to discuss the three phases Hamlet and Othello experience--alienation from the world by facing its meaninglessness, struggling for making sense through acting against their natures, and reconciliation (a redemption towards meaning) with their worlds in the end--focusing on the fact that though these men suffer through emotional and moral dissolution that lead them to question their beings, and consequently, carry the imperative to act--to take revenge--as tragic heroes.

The imperative of hatred is what drives Hamlet and Othello to act madly: their essential nature is not obligation but will, because their hatred consists in wishing evil to the object of hatred. When this object is human, therefore, hatred (negative imperative to act) becomes an expression of malice which oppresses those who hate and poisons their souls as well.

Hamlet is oppressed not only by grief that his father is murdered by his own uncle, but by the frustration of the desire to act in order to make sense in a world of chaos. With a father murdered by an uncle, a mother who is the murderer’s wife, a ghost[his father’s] calling for revenge, Hamlet’s ideas, thoughts, and beliefs are under pressure. His starting point is a rejection of ‘flesh’ after hearing his father’s ghost: “O that this too sallied flesh would melt/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!” (I.i.129-30). The image of melting suggests that his body and mind are subject to change into a kind of dissolution. Hamlet is alienated from the world that has collapsed for him so that he questions if there is any significance in it. His second thought is deed of suicide. Hamlet asks an existential question:

To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
Or to take arms against sea of troubles.
(III.1.55-7)

Even though death will be a release from the chaos, Hamlet cannot attain harmony and order while experiencing alienation and lack of significance in this world.

Othello's alienation, unlike Hamlet's, is related to his ethnicity and culture. Because of the color of his skin, Othello, as a Moor, feels alienated by the white Venetian society he lives in. His physical appearance is mentioned as "the thick lips" and "old black ram." In this society, the acts of will by which Othello destroys himself is an example of human weakness: His biggest mistake is not trusting his wife, Desdemona, as he believes that he is not good enough for her. Othello's blindness on love is due to his lack of self-knowledge as well as self-confidence for he is a Moor. In other words, the notion of his society that a fair Venetian woman's attraction to a Moor is unnatural strengthens his belief in his wife's infidelity: "Haply, for I am black...She's gone" (III.iii.263-9).

Othello's sketch of life is revealed in his account as much by "most disastrous chances", by the memory of "some distressful stroke/ That my youth suffer'd" as by "moving accidents." Being an outsider of his society, he tells that what he loves in Desdemona is that her response to the story of these strokes answer a need of him: "And I lov'd her that she did pity them"(I.iii.168). Thus, Othello is bound to Desdemona by gratitude. However, his jealousy is out of his lack of love and trust in his partner. This is what makes him experience a chaos:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.
(III.iii.90-2)

Hearing the false assertion that his wife is an adultress, Othello's mind turns to thoughts of revenge: "Damn her, lewd minx! O damn her! (III.iii.475).

Othello judges Desdemona, who both loves and is vulnerable to his love, as being dishonest. This is the second phase where Othello suffers from having to cope with his emotional chaos. He acts against his nature to be able to find meaning in this moral dissolution--the unbearable thought that Desdemona has committed adultery with Cassio, one of his friends. "He [Othello] fails a test of sympathetic insight, falling into a headlong suspicion that belies his professions of love" (Skulsky, 1976: 78). Thus, Othello, whose justice for his wife is built upon a deception, fails to act justly towards Desdemona which causes his moral disillusionment.

Hamlet's struggle for making sense to eliminate his disappointment, based on the chaos he experiences, is apparent in his excessive emotions and failures of sensibility towards the people in his circle. When he listens to his father's ghost, he is face to face with a terrible experience. Almost every item of the revelation is horrifying: details of his uncle's treacherous crime, his mother's adultery, an uncertainty whether she had a hand in the murder. Thus, Hamlet plans to keep the king and queen ignorant of the ghost and his message by pretending to be mad. Hamlet also delays the revenge he decides to take

because he, in one sense, cannot help it, which is a mask to conceal his inner breakdown. As a sullen and silent outsider of this world, Hamlet tries to act himself into the role of man of action but he is too self-conscious that he becomes a remorseless villain. Engaged in a continual battle of wits with his uncle, Hamlet puts on his mad act--a matter of self-preservation and of survival--so that he can have room for manoeuvre.

To be able to survive and make sense in such a world of chaos, Hamlet is sometimes humane and sensitive, and other times violent, cold-blooded and bloodthirsty. His attitude to Ophelia(the woman he loves) and Gertrude(his mother) is nasty, obsessive and excessive: He oppresses defenceless Ophelia, rejecting his love for her: "those that are married already, all but one, shall live/ To a nunn'ry, go" (III.i.147) and goes too far by pursuing Gertrude into her bed. Some of Hamlet's mistakes are excusable because his sensibility is engaged in the thought of murder. He becomes an insane man who does not *know* what he is saying or doing in the eyes of others. However, he makes mistakes in saying and doing unwisely things: Hamlet's remorseless attitude to the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern(two courtiers hired by the king to spy on Hamlet), when he explains the trick he has played upon them without regret, in a sense, brings him to the level of his enemy, the murderer king: "Human weakness tested beyond its endurance by a suffering that is not purgative but morally disfiguring" (Skulsky,1976: 98). He also seems brutal and thoughtless in his manners to Polonius whom he kills as a result of his emotional breakdown.

Before experiencing emotional frustration that will cause his downfall in the end, Othello demands proof at first from the *honest* Iago who causes him to have a conflict between what he thinks and what he knows on the fidelity of his wife.

By the world,
I think my wife be honest and think she is not.
I think that thou [Iago] art honest and think thou art not.
(III.iii.383-5)

"Jealousy has benumbed his reason, and whatever proof Iago has to offer, Othello is now ready to accept as truth" (Ribner, 1960: 65). Othello's extreme reactions to Desdemona, accusing her of losing the handkerchief he has given to her, are out of his will to find the truth about her so-called adultery; in other words he tries to make meaning in this world of hasty judgments, misdeeds, and lies.

This is a world where man cannot reach his grasp of meaning since everything is meaningless:

Swounds, show me what thou'lt do:
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up esill? Eat a crocodile?
I'll do't.
(*Hamlet*, V.1.273-7)

Nay, had she [Desdemona] been true,
If heaven would make me such another world,
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I'd not have sold her for it.
(*Othello*, V.2.144-7)

In one sense, Shakespeare questions the existence of humanity from the mouth of Iago--an intelligent man as opposed to Othello who lacks reason at a moral crisis--in *Othello*: "Are you a man?" (III.iii.374). Hamlet, on the other hand, questions his existence when he deeply feels the emptiness of it in his melancholy:

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. (IV.iv.33-5)

Knowing that his family's honor is at stake, Hamlet chooses violence--"to take arms against the sea of troubles."

Both Hamlet and Othello, representatives of human nature in its weakness and greatness, give up their moral judgments to gain capacity for murder. Hamlet knows that the promise of salvation--a reconciliation with the world--affirms order, justice and mercy even though the evil act of revenge takes a process of inner struggle for him, and Othello, deceived by a wrong insight or suspicion, is also aware of the fact that he has to protect the justice in spite of the painful price he will pay for. Thus, Hamlet and Othello lose their identities among the depth of depravity and misery in a world of chaos, and gain a sense of awareness of the world through the height of nobility. This is the third phase they go through in their tragedy.

Hamlet recognizes that he is being punished by his thoughtless murder of the wrong man, Polonius:

I repent but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister,
(III.iv.173-5)

He accepts his world being an altered man. Making some errors, he realizes that the condition of living in such a world of chaos is through dealing with its dirtiness. In the graveyard scene of the play, throwing skulls, he starts to see life as trivial, and insignificant, not simply accepting death, but understanding the mystery of life--the inevitable evil. A cunning politician, a hollow courtier, a tricky lawyer, come together in a graveyard:

Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?
Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his
cases, his tenures, and his tricks?...his
recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers,
his recoveries... (V.i.98-102)

This is a self-discovery that teaches him the boundaries of human action and judgment. Faced with a task to murder, Hamlet feels that he will set it right. He knows he will not repeat his tragic error--misjudging others and himself, and seeing himself somebody to decide the salvation of his mother and uncle:

...we defy augury; there is a special providence
in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to
come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it
be now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.
(V.ii.220-2)

Now he is ready for what may happen without seeking to avoid it. He thinks he is in God's hands and waits for the divine opportunity to be given to him. In the end, while his uncle dies by his own poison, Hamlet dies as a man who has served God "acting" properly.

Othello's reconciliation, like Hamlet's, is through his belief in divine Providence. In executing Desdemona, Othello conceives himself to be fulfilling the demands of moral justice and honor as well. Othello leaves to Heaven divine mercy:

Desd. Talk you of killing
Oth. Ay I do.
Desd. Then Heaven have mercy on me!
(IV.ii.33-5)

In other words, seeing himself as a man establishing just and benevolent moral order in the world, Othello not only takes the law of justice into his own hands but also interprets it reading it after his own sense. Judging his innocent wife from the villainous Iago's perspective, Othello learns that he has made a wrong moral decision. When Iago speaks truth in the end:

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true.
(V.ii.176)

Othello begins to become aware of the meaning of "thinking." Thus, he executes true justice upon himself by an act of will: "Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.359). "Shakespeare says in the destruction of Othello, as in that of Hamlet, that the virtue and wisdom may come to man only through suffering, struggle, and self-mastery. It is the tragedy of human life and that this must be so" (Ribner, 1960: 55).

In conclusion, both heroes suffer and are reduced into nothingness during the three phases they go through. Their lives enter into a mystery while facing evil but they have one capacity: the power to create something new out of nothing. Thus, they both gain awareness of life which has once been insignificant and meaningless: "Man, trusting to his own judgment, may determine to dispense himself from one obligation in order to fulfill what he regards as a higher good" (Charlton, 1948:75). After a quest for justification through questioning their existences and taking revenge, Hamlet and Othello become more and more aware of a larger good. Hamlet's mind has a sense that it is possible to make goodness itself. And, Othello discovers that for Desdemona and him there is a higher good in after-life.

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