

Studying Gendered Performances and Intersectional Oppression in William Shakespeare's
Othello: A Study under Feminist-Intersectional Reappraisal

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ABSTRACT

The current study is based hermeneutical approach, integrating the concepts of gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity and rank-based intersectionality, to explore gender discrimination in William Shakespeare's Othello (c. 1603). This study highlights how the female characters of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are forced into enacting socially prescribed femininities that ultimately serve patriarchal interests, while male characters (Othello, Iago, Brabantio, Cassio) use possessive and stereotyping discourses to keep themselves on top. The study is based on the framework of Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity, Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity theory and Dusi's (1975) historical feminist theory. The analysis shows that some limitations on the agency of the female are repeated as a result of the interaction between gender and class/rank, and in Desdemona's case, there is interplay between gender and racialized marital status. The differential impacts of these intersecting axes are further amplified by Emilia's verbal resistance and Bianca's marginalization. The study also found that Shakespeare's tragedy speaks to both the early-modern patriarchy and is an abiding criticism of gendered powers that continue to resonate in current discussions of 'toxic masculinity' and 'intersectional justice.' The findings help in understanding of advance the reorientation of Othello to the field of Shakespeare studies and the studies in intersections.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Intersectionality, Feminist Criticism

INTRODUCTION

More than 400 years after the composition, William Shakespeare's Othello remains at the heart of discussions of race, gender and power. The tragedy was written c. 1603 and first performed in the early Jacobean period. It depicts a society in Venice in which the fates of the female characters are determined by patriarchal authority, by racialised others and by class. The studies on the play has tended to explore its misogynistic subtexts and women's restricted powers, but more dynamic interpretations have focused on the performative aspects of gender, the fragility of hegemonic masculinity, and the interaction of rank and race (Innes, 2024; Meng, 2023; Khalid, 2025). These newer approaches reject the binary of male and female as fixed and consider how the repeated performance of speech, silence, obedience and resistance reinforce and sometimes reveal how patriarchal power is at work.

Gender discrimination in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, reveal the patriarchal limitations that shape the lives of its female characters in a Venetian society rife with misogyny. Written in ca. 1603, the play mirrors the pristine gender hierarchies of Elizabethan society that limited women's agency through male hegemony and societal norms (Shakespeare, 1603/2005). Desdemona's progress from defiance against her father to subservience to Othello illustrates the shallowness of female agency, a trend that feminist scholars such as Jardine (1983) connect with the commodification of women of the era. Yet her tragic end reinforces the limits of such defiance, as Dusi (1975) comments on Emilia's critique of male hypocrisy signalling resistance. Bianca, rendered invisible as a courtesan, also continues the spirit of intersectionality by showing how gender and class intersect to compound discrimination, which McEachern (2002) connects with Renaissance anxieties about uncontrolled female sexuality. In this study the analysis is conducted how Shakespeare critiques gender inequalities through the treatment of Caliban and Miranda, drawing on a theoretical discussion of gender discrimination.

The story of Desdemona, the assertive daughter who stands up to her husband, defending her marriage before the Venetian Senate, and the self-effacing wife who takes responsibility for her own murder, is an example of the role of female agency within a male-dominated script that has limited space. It has been her iconic statement "divided duty" that she has scripted in such a way as to shift fidelity from father to husband and yet still stay within the calculus of man. In Act 4, Scene 3, Emilia's protest against the double standards in marriage, and in Bianca's 'dismissed' comments as a courtesan, the effects of gender discrimination are further nuanced by class. These dynamics have been recently shown to be not only historical curiosities, but also to reflect current debates on toxic masculinity, ocular proof, and intersectional oppression (Gilmore, 2019).

Present study, therefore, revisits the treatment of the female characters in *Othello*. It aims to argue that Shakespeare's dramatizing of gender is based on the continual repetition of feminine and masculine performances that in turn maintain and sometimes reveal the precarious nature of patriarchy.

Statement of the Problem

Even though feminist critics have been criticizing *Othello* for decades, many readers of the play continue to view gender discrimination as a relatively stable background rather than one that is continually enacted and layered by a complex hierarchy of relations. Mostly, the first-level analysis of the text focuses on gender, while the second centers on rank or treats race primarily through the lens of *Othello* as the Moor, missing the opportunity to account in a qualitative way for the differing experiences of oppression that arise from Desdemona's elite socio-economic status as a senator's daughter, Emilia's status as a wife of a military subordinate, and Bianca's status as a courtesan. At the same time, the notion of hegemonic masculinity has been fruitfully used with the male characters of the play, but its connection to female performativity, and to rank-based intersectionality, has been somewhat under-theorized in the most recent, high impact study.

Furthermore, the discourses about toxic masculinity have breathed new life into *Othello* but systematic and textual analysis that incorporates the new theories of the day and invokes sustained close reading of the three female figures as a comparative set remains a need. Current studies generally focus on one aspect or one character and neglect a more holistic picture. The problem this study aims to address is thus twofold: first, that existing studies on the subject of gender in *Othello* have not yet engaged with the issues of performativity, hegemonic/toxic masculinity, and rank intersectionality; and second, that they have thus far underestimated the potential of the play to shed light on structures of gendered power in the early modern period and today.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the ways in which Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca enact gendered roles that are shaped by patriarchal norms
- To look at how hegemonic and toxic masculinity function in terms of discourse and action in the characters of Othello, Iago, Brabantio, and Cassio, particularly in terms of the control of femininity's sexuality, femininity's speech, and femininity's mobility.
- To discuss the ways in which gender intersects with rank/class to create distinct ways of discriminating against the three female characters.

Research Questions

1. How are the performances of the female characters in Othello prescribed?
2. What are the personal and structural implications of the females' performances?
3. How do men enact hegemonic and toxic masculinity in regulating women's sexuality, their speech and their social and physical movement?
4. How does the gendered experience of social rank further exacerbate or situate differently the sufferings of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca respectively?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant scholarly, pedagogical, and cultural fields. First, it further develops the study of Shakespeare by combining the latest research in theory with an integrated framework notion of rank intersectionality, toxic masculinity, and gender performativity. Secondly, it makes a feminist contribution to literary criticism through its depiction of the differential functioning of gender performativity in one early-modern dramatic work, leaving any single account of "woman" in Shakespeare complexified. Third, the study addresses a specific call from global Shakespeare scholarship that seeks to go beyond character psychology to social positioning, interpellation and multiple axes of power that play a structured role in Shakespeare. In terms of pedagogy, the article provides a model for advanced students and teachers to read the canon and, without losing their particularity or historical consciousness, apply current theoretical perspectives. A close reading framework, as presented in the article, is needed to inform the critical approach required for stage/screen productions of Othello that are increasingly questioning the issues of race, gender, sexuality, and power, including recent staging where gender is swapped and explicitly intersectional.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Othello's recent critics have advanced to intersectional, performative and masculinity-based approaches. Paul Innes (2024) asserted that rank needs to be considered as a critical axis of intersectionality in the study of Shakespeare along with race and gender. Innes shows how a subject position is constructed for Desdemona by the structured interplay between gender, rank, and race in Venetian social hierarchies, using Toni Morrison's insights regarding constructed whiteness and on Althusserian ideas of interpellation. In his view, the play is not anachronistically psychological, but pre-modern, which is a methodological correction adopted by the present study. Innes's focus on the concept of rank is particularly helpful when

distinguishing between the experiences of Desdemona (elite), Emilia (dependent on a military subordinate), and Bianca (courtesan).

Frank Meng (2023) investigated the motif of ‘ocular proof’ in *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, to explore the concepts of toxic masculinity and the dominance of patriarchy. Meng (2023) connected the anxiety of men over the chastity of women with the existence of hegemonic masculinity, and traces how “*Othello*’s” insistence that he be shown proof of Desdemona’s fidelity is a performance of masculine control that ultimately fractures. This piece of work is especially rich in its ability to trace the early modern jealous plots to the current debate on toxic masculinity and to expose the obsessiveness of evidence that fuels male violence against female subjects.

Aamna Khalid (2025) used Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to consider Desdemona and Lady Macbeth as a performative representation of femininity in Shakespearean tragedy as a social construct and an iterable performance. Khalid demonstrated Desdemona’s compliance, fidelity and rectitude, both respects and challenges the expectations of patriarchy, and hence exposes the fragility of gender binaries. The reading is part of a growing number of recent uses of performativity theory to the early-modern play, and offers a linguistic framework for the analysis of compliance and resistance.

Held (2022) wrote about pity as a connection between race and gender in the Folio text of *Othello*, focusing on the Willow Song. As the play solicits the audience’s sympathy for Desdemona, it held points out that pity is not shared equally across racial and gender lines, thereby reinforcing the hierarchies in the play. Emilia’s role as a proto-feminist critic of the double standards of patriarchy has been highlighted in recent studies, which emphasize her agency despite her social status, and the violence of the play’s final movement.

Many of the other researches on the play’s cultural relevance, further emphasize the play’s ongoing cultural urgency, such as broader discussions of the play’s various implications of toxic masculinity (Gilmore, 2019), and of adaptation, re-visioning, and contemporary performance (including gender-flipped and intersectional productions). In sum, this group of scholarship indicates that gender in *Othello* is not to be examined without taking into account rank, race, and the duties of manhood. These contributions are directly continued in the present study, which has analytical interest in the differential experience of the three main female characters, as well as in the systematic integration of the three theoretical lenses mentioned above.

Research Gap

While recent studies have effectively brought together intersectionality, toxic masculinity and gender performativity to the text of *Othello* but a few studies have directly combined all three frameworks and pursued a sustained comparison among the three differently positioned women: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. A gap therefore exists for an analysis that (a) works with the three women as subjects in a different position within a single field of patriarchy, (b) makes connections between their limited performances and the functioning of both hegemonic and toxic forms of masculinity, and (c) is based exclusively on the scholarship published in recent times. This study is intended to fill this gap and serve as the conceptual and methodological basis for a full-length study.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a feminist and sociological theoretical framework to analyze gender discrimination in *Othello*, making the systemic oppression of women visible. At the core of this framework is Butler’s (1990) idea of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not something we inherently have but rather an

outcome of repeated social performances that often serve to reinforce patriarchal power structures. In Othello, adherence to and deviation from femininity as performance with respect to prescribed roles among Desdemona and Emilia respectively and the socio-calculation of how predetermined gender roles control their fates is another example of the performance of gender. In this regard, Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity theory is useful to elucidate how male power, represented in the characters of Othello and Iago, thrives through the persecution of women to be strengthened and preserve social order, thus legitimising their authority as inherent and unquestionable. This lens is further augmented by considering intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), which shows how gender, alongside class and status (such as Bianca's position as a courtesan) compound discrimination. Furthermore, from an existential feminist perspective (Beauvoir, 1949/2011), which positions women as "the Other" constructed in reference to male subjectivity, the dehumanization of Othello's female characters is also telling; their worth is inextricably linked to how they are seen by men. Lastly, Dusi's (1975) historical feminist critique of Shakespearean drama situates these dynamics within the Elizabethan context, in which female subordination mirrored broader cultural anxieties about power and sexuality. Othello subsequently becomes a space where these theories converge to create a powerful critic of gendered power imbalances, historical specificities, and universal resonance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is qualitative, and is based on the textual analysis, with the use of feminist, masculinity and intersectional theory. Key speeches and scenes in which Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca, and the principal male characters appear, are taken for analysis. Primary data for the study are key speeches and scenes in which Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca and the principal male characters appear, mostly from Acts 1–5 of a standard modern critical edition of Othello. Analytical procedures are carried out in three interrelated stages. First, gendered speech acts and performances are identified and described, both verbally and in the context of the performance. Secondly, these performances are aligned to the hegemonic and toxic masculinity and to the hierarchy of ranks. Third, a comparative evaluation of the results for each of the three female characters is conducted, with an examination of the intersectional positioning of each character (in sense of gender, rank, and racialized status). Theoretical concepts, gender performativity, hegemonic/toxic masculinity, and rank intersectionality are used as lenses for working with theory but not as fixed templates; the former allows for the text to complicate and the latter allows for confirmation of the theoretical expectations. The method is then both theory-based and text-based, as in modern, successful, Shakespearean feminist criticism.

DATA ANALYSIS

Desdemona

"My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty: / To you I am bound for life and education; / My life and education both do learn me / How to respect you... But here's my husband, / And so much duty as my mother showed / To you, preferring you before her father, / So much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord." (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 179-188)

Analysis

Desdemona's speech is a gendered performance, performing the socially obligatory shift from daughter to wife. Her "divided duty" is not a real choice, but a rehearsed part in the male script, performed upon patriarchal stage, an enactment of her submission that validates her subordination by its reiteration of feminine obedience. Here lies hegemonic masculinity, when she shifts her allegiance from one male figure of authority (Brabantio) to another (Othello), showcasing how men construct her identity and value in

society, thus keeping control over the narrative of her life. Intersectionality is a little less apparent in this case, but the gender interacts with her status as an elite woman to restrict her agency to handshakes between elite figures, as opposed to independent action like lower-class women like Bianca. Desdemona is “the Other,” a variable in the equation only as she exists in terms of male figures, father and husband, her subjectivity written off as her duty is spoken only in terms of their perspectives, never her own desires. The deference she embodies in an Elizabethan context expresses the expectation of her time, when a woman’s independence is marked by the boundaries the authority of a man takes until no longer in accommodating domestic to be found.

Brabantio

“O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter? / Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her, / For I’ll refer me to all things of sense, / If she in chains of magic were not bound...” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 1, Scene 2, lines 62-65)

Analysis

Framed by Brabantio as “stowed” Desdemona performs a gender norm of women as passive objects unable to act unless coerced, confirming the patriarchal script which denies her agency. His fury is hegemonic masculinity in action, with Desdemona viewed as his possession; Othello’s “theft” threatens his masculine domination, and he responds with a protective proclamation of ownership. At the intersection of her race and elite status, her value to Brabantio only extends to his multigenerational lineage within a patriarchal system. As “the Other,” Desdemona becomes the possession, her agency denied by Brabantio’s insistence on enchantment, rendering rational choice moot in favor of male-defined narratives. The elision of a daughter’s choice (“choice” really is too tame a word) of a husband (marrying Othello) is impossible without supernatural interference, in keeping with Elizabethan fears of female autonomy, and underlining patriarchal paranoia.

Iago

“Come on, come on; you are pictures out of doors, / Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens, / Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, / Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 2, Scene 1, lines 109-112)

Analysis

Iago’s litany “works the gender system” (Butler 1990) by reducing women to a series of contradictory roles, enforcing a binary that prohibits men from expressing vulnerability and then describes the effects in viciously reductive terms, with the end goal of performing male superiority through repetitive stereotyping, collapsing the ever rich complexity of women to his controlling fantasy. Such rhetoric reinforces hegemonic masculinity by validating hegemonic masculinity. Intersectionality reveals how these generalizations are pointed at women in the aggregate, but their effects differ, elite women like Desdemona are subject to different types of scrutiny than lower-class Bianca, though both are diminished. Here, Beauvoir (1949/2011) insists, women are “the Other,” existing only as “small creatures,” “idle hands,” “cartoons,” the reduction of Iago’s objectifying gaze, their very humanity erased, rendered into such male-crafted caricature as to allow for patriarchal control. This misogyny resonates with Renaissance fears about women’s power, the comedy being a mask for cultural anxieties about women’s power to upend male order.

Othello

“O, my fair warrior! / ... / Come, let us to the castle. / ... / Come, Desdemona, 'tis the soldiers' life / To have their balmy slumbers waked with strife.” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 2, Scene 3, lines 248-252)

Analysis

Othello's tits and ass are marked by a man, as Desdemona's "warrior" is ornamental; Desdemona's passivity reinforces the ideal script of the feminine as spectatorial subject, a performance of erotic compliance amid his virile masculinity. , Othello's military identity dictates Desdemona's position as subservient to him, rendering her position as secondary to his needs and simultaneously demands of her that she be complicit in his needs. Women should take note: on the margins, it is the [married] woman [with less scrutiny] who forms the humid air of female sales [women] within which to sell herself as a trophy; an object, if you will, of objects to be reached and so be at the mercy of the basket of gaiety the gender and elite status place her in, and thus, unlike other women on the margins no level of scrutiny will ensue that would otherwise curtail agency , in so far as all of this leads to a better ratio for women , to follow versus lead. Beauvoir (1949/2011), as "the Other": Desdemona's meaning is derivative of Othello's desire, an absence of voice as he defines for her the role of his will, effectively eliminating her independent agency. This is corresponding to Elizabethan concepts of wifely submission, as women are here to beautify decidedly male spaces (the castle) rather than chip away at men's authority, which is engrained in patriarchal tradition.

Emilia

“But I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties, / And pour our treasures into foreign laps, / Or else break out in peevish jealousies... / And have not we affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 4, Scene 3, lines 86-98)

Analysis

Emilia as a critic of gender performativity interrogates the double standard surrounding women, but as Iago's wife her resistance exists only in words, not in action. , She criticizes the hypocrisy of hegemonic masculinity, which justifies infidelity for men while condemning it for women; but she is ultimately tripped by her own submissiveness, which keeps its power entrenched. While the gender and lower status (altogether at the interest of Desdemona) give her mail a license to speak, her impotent, subordinate identity cardinalize the compounded disabilities of subaltern women. “The Other,” embodied in Emilia (1949/2011), asserts unique affections, as men have, indicating humanity shared with men to combat her objectification, but her existence remains to be defined by male actions and men's judgments. The proto-feminine stance is inclusive of Elizabethan tensions as she too passionately speaks out against patriarchal doings whilst within the confines of the age which kept women's power silenced (Dusinberre 1975).

Iago

“Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You'd have enough. / ... / You shall not write my praise.” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 2, Scene 1, lines 100-104)

Analysis

Iago monitors Emilia's speech as infraction from feminine performance, doing silence as proper role, repetition of gender norms through control. Here can be seen hegemonic masculinity, in which Iago's

control requires Emilia's subordination, her voice a challenge to his power that must be silenced. The gender and lower status intersect, making her speech 'marked as excessive precisely because she is a servant's wife' and thus marking her as rendered silent compared to elite women. Emilia is "the Other," her words degrading and her titles meaningless except to the purposes of Iago, which convert her into an instrument of his will and a nonhuman speaker. The Elizabethan ideals of female speech characterized women's words as riotous, and Iago's scolding mirrors the societal need to silence and subserve females.

Othello: "O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapor of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses." (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 3, Scene 3, lines 272-277).

Analysis

Butler (1990): Othello does masculinity through claiming Desdemona, her "appetites" betraying the script of control Othello rails against, revealing how possession is a matter of gender. His jealousy is motivated by hegemonic masculinity, seeing Desdemona as an aspect of his honor, and her independence as a threat to his dominance which he cannot bear. The gender and elite status intersect to make her a prized possession and her presumed adultery increases Othello's rage, Othello's symbolic value.

Desdemona is "the Other," a "thing" that Othello loves but also fears, her humanity obliterated as he defines her only by his ownership of her, and his loss of her. This is an expression of Renaissance anxieties about female sexuality, wherein women's desires disrupt patriarchal order and incite the destructive paranoia of Othello.

Bianca

"What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights? / Eightscore eight hours? And lovers' absent hours / More tedious than the dial eightscore times? / O weary reckoning!" (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 3, Scene 4, lines 173-176)

Analysis

Bianca plays the gendered role of the devoted lover but her pleas go unheard, reinforcing the script whereby marginal women have no legitimacy aside from their potential use by men. Her sentiments must be dismissed, as the authority of Cassio, the powerful white man, outweighs her voice and his authoritative position belittles her. What's critical is the intersection, her sex and her status of a courtesan only compound her oppression, rendering her cries futile against the inertia of elitist male indifference. Being "the Other," Bianca's value is determined by Cassio's desires; she has no inner life except as a sex object. The Elizabethan scorn for "loose" women provides context for her marginalization, her lower status intensifies the gendered marginalization.

Cassio

"I marry her? What, a customer? I prithee bear / Some charity to my wit; do not think it / So unwholesome. Ha, ha, ha!" (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 4, Scene 1, lines 119-121).

Analysis

Cassio's derision reaffirms the performative nature of gender, transforming Bianca into a "customer" unworthy of wifely status, upholding stereotypes that restrict her identity. Hegemonic masculinity is at the

heart of his contempt for her, as his status is improved by lowering her own, as male privilege is maintained through exclusion. Intersectionality shows how the gender and profession overlap, identifying her as not worthy of respect or marriage, a double bind of discrimination. Bianca is “the Other,” her humanity derided while Cassio identifies her only by her sexual role,³⁶² taking away her equal status. This reveals Elizabethan moral hierarchies: “fallen” women are mocked; their gendered status legitimizes Cassio’s derision.

Desdemona

“Nobody; I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!” (Shakespeare, 1603/2005, Act 5, Scene 2, lines 124-125)

Desdemona’s self-blame achieves a final feminine sacrifice and internalizes patriarchal guilt in service of the gendered role, reinforcing her submission. She forgives Othello, hegemonic masculinity wins, and she is subheading even in her death, exemplifying how men have power over women’s fates. The intersection of the gender and elite status axes into a public demand for this particular martyrdom, the privilege that enables her to use her voice paradoxically heightens the demand for her self-effacement. Through “the Other,” Desdemona’s last words annul her agency; she defines herself in Othello’s “kind” lordship instead, her being entirely relational. This is consistent with Elizabethan ideals of female passivity as women should receive blame to save men’s honour, which is a tragic conclusion of gendered norms.

CONCLUSION

A complex feminist reading of the text reveals the underlying patriarchal systems at play that define and restrict the women of a narrowly defined Venetian society. The play reveals how women are ensnared by gendered expectations, their agency always curtailed by male authority as shown in Othello such as Emilia’s stifled resistance and Bianca’s marginalised pleas. Butler’s (1990) framework of gender performativity highlights how such characters enact socially-conditioned roles, undergirding patriarchal ideals even in rebellion, while Connell’s (2005) hegemonic masculinity reveals pervasive male heteronormativity, evidenced in Othello’s objectifying jealousy and Iago’s silencing of Emilia, that renders them subordinate. Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality illustrates Bianca’s compounded oppression, with the gender and class converging to exacerbate her subjugation, and Beauvoir’s (1949/2011) idea of “the Other” provides a lens for Desdemona’s tragic self-incrimination as the final manifestation of internalized uterine dehumanization. Dusi (1975) pins these dynamics on Elizabethan anxieties, which can be seen in Brabantio’s property-based outrage and Iago’s misogynistic stereotypes within a culture fearful about female autonomy. Relying on these theories collectively uncovers Othello as the product of its time, a timeless criticism of gender inequity and a issues that women’s voices, though sometimes present, will always be brought low by the force of patriarchal power. Shakespeare’s tragedy, then, prompts a consideration of the persistent structures of discrimination that endure beyond its Renaissance landscape, calling for a reassessment of gender justice in both literature and life.

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