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**Rethinking Othello: Old and New Images
on Black and White**

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Introduction

According to Errol Hill (1984: 7) Shakespeare has four specifically black characters: “Aaron the Moor, who appears in Titus Andronicus [c. 1592], The Prince of Morocco in The Merchant of Venice [c. 1597], Othello, in the play written at the height of Shakespeare’s powers in 1604, and his only black female, Cleopatra, in Antony and Cleopatra [1606-1607]”. He does not mention Caliban despite the importance of this character in its representation by postcolonial criticism of the oppression of the trapped slave by the master (Prospero).

Othello versus Caliban is not a slave but a noble man in a context where he is perceived as different. He is respected and despite the quiet racism portrayed by Iago, his blackness does not stop him from marrying the white and virginal Desdemona. Othello is also a noble savage, the protagonist of his own tragedy described as a Moor and in that sense black or blackened. His colour is what has made this character so attractive for reinterpretation by

African and Caribbean writers in addition to the topic of jealousy made complex by the black male – white woman relationship.

This paper seeks to analyse how this relationship between the black man and the white woman has been portrayed under the shadow of the Othello complex with special attention to the way it has been understood and rewritten by Derek Walcott and particularly in the plays of Caryl Phillips: *Strange Fruit* (1981) and *The Shelter* (1984)¹, and Fred D'Aguiar *A Jamaican Airman Foresees His Death* (1995). Phillips and D'Aguiar share their generation's struggle of being brought up in England of Caribbean parents. In their plays Great Britain becomes a new Venice where freedom is not possible due to the existence of prejudice and racism.

It is very likely that the image of the Moor portrayed as a black man would not correspond to the image of the first performances in the Elizabethan period. It was a historical moment when Europe had continuous conflicts over the Mediterranean to get the control of the area and religious wars between Christians and Muslims were common place. As a consequence of that historical situation in some countries like Spain, there is a conscious difference between the adjective black and Moor which is still present. This difference is based upon historical and sociological elements due to the conquest of the peninsula in the VIIIth century by the Arabs and its occupation until 1592; the word "Moor" *moro*, is in keeping with the Shakespearean concept, which differs from the contemporary one in English speaking areas. It is commonly believed, that Shakespeare was inspired by the portrait of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, Moorish ambassador who visited Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 for the portrayal of the character. Full of pejorative meaning and prejudice, the word "Moor" refers to the Muslim population of the North African countries and, in terms of colour, the adjective refers to a range of olive skin complexions, not black.

Curiously enough one of the traditional images of the black man in Spanish culture does not have to do with Othello, but with Epiphany and the story telling of Jesus's birth and the representation of Balthasar, one of the three Wise Men. This figure has had a remarkable importance in the Hispanic Caribbean because of the Spanish colonization whose main pillar was the Catholic religion. Epiphany was not only celebrated all over the Hispanic Caribbean where the enslaved created their own syncretised version of the festivity, but also, Balthasar became an icon of identification for the dark skinned population. Due to that fact, the

representations of Balthasar in the Hispanic Caribbean vary in shades so that the character is portrayed as a very dark man or a mulatto, symbolising the different shades of the Caribbean. The three Wise Men or the three Kings, as they are known in the Hispanic tradition represent the idea of the Holy Trinity as carriers of supersyncretic layers typified by the different skin colours of a Caribbean context.

There is no absolute certainty about the moment when *The Venetian Moor*, Othello, is represented as a black man for the first time or, to be exact, blackened. “We learn that the established tradition until the late eighteenth century was to play Othello in blackface. The character was so presented by English professionals by the time of Thomas Betterton, a leading actor of the Restoration stage” (Hill, 1984: 8). The most traditional images related to the Moor have usually been those spread by the cinema, especially in powerful versions by Sir Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles with their made-up faces. However, the idea of playing with the skin colour as a mask is also present in Trinidad Carnival through the performing of the so called “Minstrels” who reverse the white minstrel stereotype of blackface by whitening.

The controversy over Othello’s colour is part of the play itself and, in that sense, there is a parallel story related to its performance. Ania Loomba & Martin Orkin (1998: 1) point out that “Shakespeare has become during the colonial period the quintessence of Englishness. Shakespeare’s plays were used to establish colonial authority.” Due to the colour issue, nowadays some black actors have refused to perform Othello considering the play to be full of colour prejudice, perpetuating racist stereotypes. However, there was a time when the character could not be performed by a black man as he was enslaved:

Having enslaved the black man, white Europeans sought to justify their actions by propagating an image of the African as a barbarous savage. When domiciled and admitted to civilized society, the African could become only an exotically costumed fetcher-and-carrier for his masters or a buffoon to entertain them. The problem was that white actors made up as blacks ran the risk of being identified with this image of ridicule. Moreover, Othello’s noble qualities and regal bearing did not fit the black stereotype, hence then the need to present him with a tawny skin. (Hill, 1984: 9)

This sense of the black actor as buffoon obliges Ira Aldridge, an African American actor to a forced exile in search of more serious drama available for black actors. He is in fact, the first documented black actor to play major Shakespearian parts in England making his debut as

Othello in 1833 at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. He also performed Aaron, the Moor of Titus Andronicus, King Lear, Shylock, Macbeth or Hamlet. Another African American actor linked to the tradition of Othello is Paul Robeson. In 1930 he starred in the title role in *Othello* in England when no U.S. company would employ him for the part. He repeated the role in New York in 1943, and toured the U.S. with it until 1945. This Broadway run of *Othello* is still the longest of any Shakespeare play. In the introduction to *The Shelter*, Phillips speaks about Ira Aldridge, Billie Holiday and Paul Robeson as models for the black artist who should avoid being influenced by white biased critics:

They did not need the missionaries (for the moment I shall call them critics) to guide them. Quite the reverse, history has shown us that it was the critics who were being led, guided like sullen children along a path they did not, they could not understand (Phillips: 1984: 8).

A racist play?

Euripides chose a foreigner to represent his idea of Medea's myth for an Athenian audience who would have never have accepted the final parricide if committed by anybody from Athens. Shakespeare chooses an outsider to portray the complex world of jealousy. His blackness and different cultural background is what constitutes Othello's "otherness". The play can differ widely in meaning depending on the semiotics suggested by the actors' skin colour. Different experiments have been done in this sense, for example representing Iago and Emilia as black or, portraying Othello as an Indian who serves the colonial troops of the British Empire with Iago symbolising the spirit of colonization and the values imposed by the Empire. *Cámara Negra* (2000) a Spanish company, reduced the play to three characters: Othello, Iago and Desdemona, all of them white because they understood the myth as a universal depiction of jealousy.² The actor Patrick Stewart complained about the fact that "Othello has become a role for Blacks only" (Herndon, 1997) in comments about an unsuccessful version in which he starred which reversed the colour of 22 actors of African origin. Quite remarkable and necessary for this paper is, at least, to mention the performance of the Jamaican origin actor Lenny Henry, better known as a comedian, who appeared in the 2009 Othello's production directed by Barrie Rutter at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds.

However, despite the different stage productions and versions, a reading of the original text will inevitably show a great amount of prejudiced and racist elements. Before the action of

the play, Othello had been enslaved, had escaped, and joined the Venetians in their wars with the Turks, who were sailing to attack Cyprus. It is the story of Othello's difficult and dangerous life that draws Desdemona, daughter of the Venetian Brabantio, to love and pity him. Othello does not appear until the third scene of the first act and by then, the audience have already created their own opinion of the Moor through the biased comments of Iago and Roderigo that will clash with Othello's description of himself and Desdemona's feelings for him and the also common references to him as a noble man.

Othello is introduced by these two former characters as a thief and an animal to Brabantio, who will reject his daughter after the Duke's acquittal. The reference to him as *the Moor* is present throughout the play and his nature usually animalized: "Thick lips", "barbary horse", "lascivious", "lusty", are all adjectives related to his sexual prowess, as is "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" or in the depiction of the couple's intimacy as in: "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs"³. A stereotypical image created by white society is the portrayal of the black man as physically dangerous as in the images related to vodou.⁴

Austin Clarke analyses this stereotype in a very interesting essay where he makes an interwoven relationship between Othello and the well-known case of the African American athlete O. J. Simpson comparing the adjectives used in the trial to refer to the athlete with those just mentioned.⁵ He "examines the correlation of social success to racial integration resulting from that success in a man, also black, who lives in a white society." Clarke points out that the insistence on animalising the black man who has succeeded in a white society is due to a "psychosexual obsession with black men who lie in bed with white women".

Derek Walcott uses these animal images in a poem significantly titled *Goats and Monkeys*.⁶ In the poem Walcott associates sexuality and violence as it is interwoven with racial tension between Othello and Desdemona emphasizing the abhorrence that this relationship still provokes in a white dominated society:⁷

Virgin and ape, maid and malevolent Moor,
their immortal coupling still halves our world.
He is your sacrificial beast, bellowing, goaded,
a black bull snarled in ribbons of its blood. (Walcott, 1992: 84)

Desdemona represents the archetypal version of the passive woman whose whiteness is highlighted against the darkness of her husband. Walcott follows the colonial tradition as he continues with the images of beautiful, desirable women as passive creatures “who await the male decision/ appreciation” (Savory Fido, 1986: 115). One of his most well-known archetypes is the white woman from *Dream on Monkey Mountain* who is linked to the stereotype of Desdemona in terms of the praise for their whiteness and the hesitation of their murderers because of their beauty:

Othello:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, -Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! –
It is the cause.- Yet I'll not shed her blood; Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than
snow, and smooth as monumental alabaster. (V, 2: 140)

Walcott will also praise her whiteness although in *Dream On Monkey Mountain* she encodes all the values imposed by the metropolis:

Corporal:

She is the wife of the devil, the white witch. She is the mirror of the moon that this
ape look into and find himself unbearable. She is all that is pure, all that he cannot
reach. You see her statues in white stone, and you turn your face away, mixed with
abhorrence and lust, with destruction and desire. She is lime, snow, marble,
moonlight, lilies, cloud, foam and bleaching cream, the mother of civilization, and the
confounder of blackness. I too have longed for her. She is the colour of the law,
religion, paper, art, and if you want peace, if you want to discover the beautiful depth
of your blackness, nigger, chop off her head! When you do this, you will kill Venus,
the Virgin, the Sleeping Beauty. She is the white light that paralysed your mind, that
led you into this confusion. It is you who created her, so kill her! Kill her! The law
has spoken. (II, 3: 319)

Makak the antihero of Walcott's play will finally behead her “[man] revolts against the
tyranny of his own fantasies/desires, choosing to destroy that which he cannot otherwise
resist.” (Savory Fido, 1986 :117) Phillips also uses the image of a woman but makes her
black in *Strange Fruit* to represent the difficulty of balancing the values of the white
community in a Caribbean family and D'Aguiar will refer to the metropolis in terms of
masculinity.

In *A Strange Fruit* and *The Shelter* the images of white women are less idealized than in Walcott's but also linked to the Desdemona model. To start with, the action in *A Strange Fruit* takes place in a middle class family, far from the Venetian court where characters are noble by origin including Othello –“from men of royal siege” (I, 2: 14). Phillips's characters have to face every day life in a context where, as British subjects, they think of themselves as unconscious outsiders. The realization of their difference, of their “otherness” comes when living in the metropolis. The mixed couple in *A Strange Fruit* is represented by Shelly and Errol. Shelly is from a white Catholic family and an outsider living through her own conflict in solitude. She is pregnant and does not know how to tell Errol or her parents. That way, Phillips fills the play with great complexity as Shelly experiences white racism from Errol. Errol is so close to Othello in his violent moments that the character suggests the use of intertextuality to create a sort of metatheatre in sharing a quote with the audience who participate in the message and make the connection:

ERROL:

Course it's serious. It's so fucking serious you don't know what the hell you're on about. You might have to leave home but you don't know why! You must think I'm a fucking idiot. Well. Simple really, isn't it. Your wonderful parents can't handle the idea of their virginal lily-white maiden possibly falling prey to the lascivious clutches of an old black ram. Othello, page sixty-one or whatever. Well? Come on. They remember when this area was Cortina-country. You know, all kippers and curtains or whatever, don't they? (I, 2: 34-35)

Errol is extremely violent. It is how he reacts against the trapped situation in which he feels himself. In the third chapter of Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon develops his opinion about “The Man of Color and the White Woman” pointing out that the coloured man searches for a white woman as he wants to whiten himself “I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.” (Fanon, 1986: 63) According to Schnäffer, Errol unconsciously embraces white culture through Shelly “which on the other hand, has to be excluded in the process of defining his black identity. In his satisfaction at dominating the white woman, a tang of revenge cannot be overlooked.” (Schnäffer, 1999: 68) At the end of the play he talks about going to Africa although he is planning to rob a bank. However, when he leaves with Shelly there is an open door for hope although the title of the play acts as a reminder of the difficulty of such relationships “recalling the black men swinging from trees because some white woman had claimed (her husband having overslept that morning and not paid enough attention to her), that the nigger looked at her kinda funny.” (Phillips, 1984: 9-10) As in

Othello, the play shows the difficulties of living as an outsider and how everything crumbles due to the lack of roots. Vivien, the mother and the character around whom all the play moves, ends up like Othello and commits suicide.

In *The Shelter* Phillips focuses the whole play on the white woman – black man relationship. In the first act the characters do not have a name but are just significantly called *her* and *him*. They are the only survivors of a shipwreck condemned to live together on a desert island that becomes a paradise for the black man as he feels liberated from the white society where he was enslaved. The woman will have to change her mind about the prejudice that she carries in the shape of civilization if she wants to survive. In the second act the island is transformed into a pub in England in the 50s. Colour prejudice is shown through the looks of the crowd when Louis, of Caribbean origin, sits next to Irene who acts as a listener. Both will leave the pub with the feeling that society bans any possible relationship between the black man and the white woman as this, can only end in tragedy:

LOUIS: Nigger and nigger-lover. They don't really hate the coloured man with a brick in one hand and terror in his eyes for they're used to that from slavery days. What they are not used to is a coloured man with a white woman on one arm and a spring in his step. (II: 53)

Phillips writes in the introduction to the play that he got the inspiration to develop *The Shelter* from a postcard that showed a white woman who had just cried held by two black hands “obviously power and strength slept somewhere within them but at this moment they are infinitely gentle, describing with eight fingers, that moment when a grip of iron weakens to a caress of love.” (Phillips, 1984: 9) As a black man Phillips feels the responsibility to write about what is happening in our society because he considers it “an arrogant but inevitable task.” (Phillips, 1984: 9)

A Jamaican Airman Foresees His Death recounts the story of young Jamaican men who fought for the metropolis during World War II. The play shares a theme with Andrea Levy's well known novel *Small Island* (2004) as both deal with the benign neglect shown to the Caribbean men and women who participated in the Second World War and the quiet racism of the time. The first part of the play takes place in Jamaica and finishes with an Atlantic trip to Scotland linking the voyage to a new sort of middle passage. The second part is the one where, again, we find conflict when young Jamaican men interact with white society.

However, Kathleen and Alvin, D'Aguiar's mixed couple present remarkable differences in comparison with the above analysed couples including Othello and Desdemona. Kathleen is an active, independent, educated white Scot. Specifically, she meets Alvin when she faces a gang of white men who want to find Alvin's tail. The animalization topic is destroyed by Kathleen who defends Alvin against these ignorant people. She is also bold enough to tell her parents about her relationship with Alvin. Her parents' vision embodies the stereotype of the black man as inferior to the white and as a negative choice for her daughter, what Fanon calls Prospero's complex. Nevertheless, Kathleen seems to be the only one in the play fighting in this divided world. Alvin is depicted as a good, gentle, and caring man whose failure comes from the prejudiced white society that will not allow him to succeed. This failure is expressed through the metaphor of his sexual impotence provoked by the non acceptance of the white society. This ends with Alvin's castration as he is judged severely for shooting at one of their own planes after being shot first. Alvin will not commit suicide but he will be condemned to stay in limbo between his island and the metropolis.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Othello* contains prejudiced elements based on the culture and background of the time it was written. The stereotyped version of the black man is anchored in white society in a complex way and is not easily erased.⁸ Walcott, Phillips and D'Aguiar form part of that society and their reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Moor* enriches the character with a different perspective and particularly they show a deep preoccupation for a future marked by prejudice and the lack of freedom that it represents.

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Notes

¹ Caryl Phillips has also a novel entitled *The Nature of Blood* (1997) where he portrays European racism and Othello's character.

² Miguel Ortiz Karames, personal communication, February 16, 2008.

³ These references correspond to the first scene of the first act of *Othello*. Desdemona's father reacts with horror at the possibility of her daughter being with a *Moor* and goes immediately to the Dux searching for justice as he thinks his daughter has been raped or it is under a spell.

⁴ The images of vodou exported by white society are full of prejudice portraying the black man as dangerous for the white woman and this religion as superstition. This idea comes from the time of slavery and the threat that the white man felt as a minority.

⁵ The essay titled “Orenthal and Othello” was published in Talawa's web page when they performed the play in 1997, from the 9th of October to the 1st of November at the Drill Hall (London). Talawa is a theatre company based in London dedicated to promote theatre by the black community in United Kingdom. Clarke's essay was published for the first time in Italian in Linea D'Ombra.

⁶ Published in Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems 1948 – 1984* pp. 83 – 84 from *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965).

⁷ Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar will remark this binomial divide by the young black man living in a white context.

⁸ At the time I presented my paper last July at the SCS conference I showed a quite controversial video clip related to the survival of racial stereotypes in our society. Due to the insistence of the attendants on keeping on further research I have checked its origin. I have finally found out that the video is part of a publicity campaign carried out by an Italian brand name for washing powder called Coloreria Italiana. The video can still be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6drdI_RBt8.