

Paradoxality of Women Positions in *Othello* by Shakespeare: The Study of Class and Race Intersections

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Abstract

This research studied about the positions of female characters in the play *Othello* by Shakespeare. By applying the intersectional concept of Chandra Mohanty, the research identified that the women positions were determined by the aspects of race and class. The high-class woman in patriarchal system was subordinated by lower class man due to gender relation. Meanwhile the research also exhibited that women could have strong domination toward men in regard to race relation. It asserted the intersect relation of race, class, and gender. In this case, under certain circumstances, women were not always positioned inferior toward men and men did not always have ultimate power on women. The relation of both gender in the novel indicated that other aspects such as race and class also played the significant role in determining the position of each.

Key words

class and race intersection, othello, patriarchal system

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was a leading playwright in the period of Elizabeth reign, the era of the rapid development in art, literature, science, and politic (Craig, 1965). In spite of all the improvements under the sovereign of Queen Elizabeth, women unfortunately did not experience any cultural advancement. Their position was still beneath the domination of men. In Elizabeth monarchy, men held power and authority and women did not possess independence both in public and private sphere. The control of men began from the small institution which was family.

There was a kind of social convention which asserted to treat husband as a king in domestic arena who has privilege which disadvantaged the woman position (Lamb, 2000). It is undeniable that the works of Shakespeare are much influenced by the social political condition at the time. The way Shakespeare depicts the female characters through his works is regarded as the reaction and critic toward the patriarchal and hierarchical system during his time.

Shakespeare is very well known as a prolific playwright who has produced a lot of plays. His tragedy plays are the most favored genre. His works still appeal to contemporary readers since they are timeless which present the view of the human condition. Gender issues frequently appear in Shakespeare's plays related to the role of men and women in society. Nevertheless, Shakespeare offers the female characters who challenge the established values in society. Those women are depicted to confront the roles expected by society.

One aspect which makes Shakespeare works attractive is the portrayal of women characters that are far from the ideal type (Peck & Coyle, 2002). The female characters in Shakespeare's works play the significant roles. They even sometimes dominate males. They often influence male characters in the story but they also are occasionally humiliated and subordinated under certain circumstances.

One of Shakespeare's masterpieces which lift up gender issue is *Othello*. The play describes gender relation based on social class distinction of female characters which then influence their position in society. The story demonstrates that men do not always dominate women or women are not always in subordinated state. There are three female characters in *Othello*. First, Bianca, the woman from lowest social class, exhibits independence and freedom also domination toward man. Second, Emilia who comes from the middle class looks submissive toward her husband, but ultimately she shows boldness against the injustice experienced by women and voices equality. On the contrary, Desdemona, a noble woman, does not experience the same freedom as two other women characters. Her life is full of restriction and control and she dedicates her life to obey and to be submissive toward her husband. Women from high social class are insisted to fulfill the social standard and values as a wife in terms of self-honor and purity, also submission to husband, hence Desdemona tends to be passive over the oppression of men.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare reveals the other side of women's life. The women positions are interesting to be deeply analyzed by making use the intersection concept of

Chandra Mohanty which explains the relative nature of gender relation (Mohanty, 1984). The hierarchical structure of man and woman is fluid and is able to change by several factors. Furthermore, *Othello* indeed exhibits the intersection between gender and several social categories such as class and race. In connection with the background explained above, the research question is how are the women positions portrayed by Shakespeare in *Othello*?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mohanty (1991) explains that women have been defined discursively as a homogeneous group that indirectly ignores their historical heterogeneity. Gender relation and sexual difference were presented monolithic, in the patriarchal system or men domination. The assumption that women are in a coherent group with identical goals and desires ignores the reality that the conditions of each woman are different because they come from different classes, religions, cultures, races, ethnicities or social castes. The universal and cross-cultural hierarchy dichotomy always places men as superior who exploit and women on the contrary as inferior, exploited, ignorant, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic-oriented, or a victim. Women are categorized in a single group based on the shared oppression.

According to Mohanty, this universal idea is a mistaken since it is a-historical power hierarchy. Thus, there is such a tendency to label women as powerless, often accepting sexual harassment, or being exploited. Women in this case are positioned as objects while men as powerful subjects. Therefore, there is a universal unity which places women as subordinate and power is defined in binary opposition. Mohanty argues that kind of formulation is necessary to be reinterpreted because it is a reduced and ineffective form. In the same way, it neglects the fact that the position and role of women vary by class. Women are constructed through the class interaction, culture, religion, or the complex ideological framework. They are not merely in a coherent group. In other words, Mohanty wants to emphasize that women's positions in society are different because they are influenced by several factors such as ethnicity, class, race, or social status (Mohanty, 1984).

Mohanty argues that there is such a complex relation which constructs the social and political life of women. The power relation could not merely be reduced in binary opposition between oppressed and oppressing. She states that domination structure is fluid and multiple which intersect to position women differently. In other words, race, class and gender system do not give the same effects toward women. Domination system operates under certain circumstances. She strongly posits "It is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, heterosexuality, nation, then, that position us as 'women' (Mohanty, 1991).

Mohanty criticizes the second wave feminism in terms of gender relation. She states that gender relation never bears the similar pattern. The notion of winner does not always win in every battle means that men do not always dominate women. Men will not necessarily be superior when dealing with women from certain circles.

Women from majority ethnic group could have a stronger bargaining position than men from minority one. Thus, Mohanty criticizes the notion about the similar pattern in the relation of gender which position men as superior or subject and women in inferior state. She proposes that the social environment influences the relation between men and women in society. Women are no longer seen as the homogenous entity since there is the intersection class or ethnic which influence women positioning (Udasmoro, 2015).

There have been many researchers who have studied about race and class intersection in literary works. Mirza (2014) exposed the real experience of Diasporas black and ethnical female academics in higher education. The research exhibited that racial and gender difference influenced the position of color women in academic environment. They were regarded inferior and were under control in the hierarchical relation to white superiority. The black and ethnical female struggled along the prejudice and discriminatory practices in the academic context by persistently pursue knowledge and education.

Another study conducted by Bonvillain (2016) who analyzed about the life experience of two immigrant characters. Through the intersectionality perspective, the researcher found that the female character in the novel “Americanah” got into difficulties due to her race and gender in the middle of patriarchal realm in America. The man character, Ifemelu also struggled with being a black man in England. The researcher further identified that different geographic location had distinct perspective of race and class. In this case, the characters established their identities in their homeland Nigeria, while in America, their identities were constructed by external social categories.

Rosida and Rejeki (2017) also studied about gender and social class relation in the short story “Bob Darling” by Carolyn Cooke. By using the concept of gender discrimination by Mansour Fakih and intersectional concept by Kimberle Crenshaw, they found that social class generated gender inequality. It was depicted that the major female character living in patriarchal culture experienced verbal and nonverbal violence. The oppression faced by the character was not only caused by the gender duality but also the lower position in class division.

Furthermore, Istrefaj (2018) examined about gender, race, and class relation experienced by three characters in the novel “My Antonia”. The inequality issues were analyzed by combining the theory of intersectional and critical literacy. The research identified that white male character had privilege in society due to gender, race, and successful job. Meanwhile the other two female characters had no power and got oppressed. Antonia was an immigrant and poor woman while Blind’d Arnault was a black and disabled woman which disadvantaged them in social relation.

Based on the literature review above, this research intends to further examine the issue of race, class, and gender intersectional in the classical work of Shakespeare entitled *Othello*. The intersection theory by Chandra Mohanty is used to find out the women position in the fluid and multiple hierarchical relations.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method is qualitative descriptive method which consists of data collection and data analysis. Data is collected primarily from the play *Othello* based on the categories of gender, race, and class which determine the position of both male and female characters. The collected data are then analyzed by the concept of gender, class, and race intersection of Chandra Mohanty to identify the position of women in social relation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Female characters in *Othello* demonstrate how their positions determine their action. Those three female characters are Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. Each of them represents different social class. Desdemona is a noble woman of a highest social class, while Emilia is a woman of middle class. Bianca occupies the lowest social stratification. The distinct social class of each of those women has a significant influence in gender relation.

In the practice of gender relation occurring in the play *Othello*, it is seen how intersection takes place because of the influence of social status as well as race. Othello, a Moor, has a low position compared to other characters of the white majority race. However, his position as general made him occupy a high social class and is able to marry Desdemona, a noble white woman. It nevertheless can be seen in more detail that the relationship between women and men in this play is fluid. The fluidity is observed through the domination and oppression conducted by certain gender. As a noble woman, Desdemona has a power to resist the unfair treatment of men who are from lower social class, such as Iago and Cassio.

Iago:She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind, see suitors following and not look behind, she was a Wight, if ever such weights were—

Desdemona: To do what?

Iago: To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

Desdemona: Oh, most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband. How say you, Cassio? Is he not a most profane and liberal counselor?

Cassio: He speaks home, madam. You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar

(Act 2, scene 1, page 951).

The quotation above shows the position of Desdemona and Emilia between Iago and Cassio. Desdemona who has a highest social status among the other characters makes her able to talk more than Emilia. Iago's manner which explicitly views that women are always positioned lower in relation with men is deniable. Different attitude is shown by Emilia who tends to passively accept what her husband says. Also, it can be observed how Cassio who has higher status than Iago treats Desdemona with more

honors, unlike Iago who speaks frankly what is on his mind. Cassio tends to please Desdemona and at the same time defend her position as a woman.

However, Desdemona has lower position in relation to her husband, Othello, compared to other male characters in the story. The fact that Othello comes from the minority race in society in which the setting of the play takes place does not make Desdemona has dominant position. She is subordinated by Othello as her husband and a person of high degree, the general of the Republic. In addition, Desdemona seems powerless to resist or to voice the truth she believes. In fact, Desdemona has both moral and real role toward Othello and his power. She nonetheless tends to be passive to what Othello does to her and she does not even try to save her life. Desdemona's tragic death due to her inability to resist the domination of Othello implies that woman of highest social class is also oppressed by man in a marriage relationship.

Desdemona: Alas, he is betrayed and I undone.

Othello: Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?

Desdemona: Oh, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Othello: Down, strumpet!

Desdemona: Kill me tomorrow—let me live tonight!

Othello: Nay, if you strive—

Desdemona: But half an hour!

Othello: Being done, there is no pause.

Desdemona: But while I say no prayer!

Othello: It is too late. (he smothers her)

Desdemona: (within) My lord, my lord! What, ho! My lord, my lord!

(Act 5, scene 2, page 973).

This is slightly different with Emilia who has lower status than Desdemona. Emilia, a maid of Desdemona exhibits ambivalence or opposing attitudes. She shows obedience and weakness when she gets along with her husband, but on the other side, she often criticizes and expresses her opinions which reject the domination of men. It can be observed when Emilia gets along with Desdemona. She frequently expresses her opinions as a response toward gender relation issue. She shows her defense of the position of women perceived to always get oppressed by men. In Emilia's point of view, men are always in dominating position. The way Emilia views men is influenced by her position and experience which makes her easily identify the males' intrigues around her.

On the other side, Emilia's loyal attitude toward fellow woman is shown when defending Desdemona who is treated unfairly by Othello. Emilia does not even hesitate to violate the rules or traditions which insist her to be a submissive servant and to respect her master. Emilia's decision to break the established values which has kept her silence and continuously in male domination is committed as a defense of women's rights. Emilia no longer cares whether her husband or Othello of high social status will

treat her worse than previously, she keeps voice the truth to defend Desdemona who has been a victim of men's cruelty.

Iago: What, are you mad? I charge you, get you home.

Emilia: Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak. 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now. Perchange, Iago, I will ne'er go home.

Othello: Oh! Oh! Oh!

Emilia: Nay, lay thee down and roar for thou hast killed the sweetest innocent that e'er did lift up eye.

(Act 5, scene 2, page 974).

However, the death that Emilia eventually faces from being stabbed by Iago definitely confirms that her position is ultimately defeated by the power held by men. Yet it can be seen that the ambivalence or contradictory attitudes of Emilia still influence the gender relation in the story. In certain circumstances, the voice of Emilia is more listened and reveals the truth rather than the men having the greater power. Emilia indirectly shows how woman has stronger and more courageous image than her coward husband and Othello who has no wisdom in thought and making decision.

Emilia's attitude to Othello also presents another explanation of how Emilia views Othello as Moor race. She demonstrates despising attitude toward Othello when she learns of the crime and foolishness of her master's husband. Othello who is from the minority race is regarded as lower than Emilia, even though she is only a servant. It emphasizes how the arrogance and domination based on race distinction still appear in gender relation.

In contrast to Desdemona and Emilia, the figure of Bianca appears as a vocal woman who has courage in conveying her opinion and imposing her desire. Her status as a prostitute automatically positions her in the lowest social class below the two women explained previously. Nevertheless, she in fact shows the strong domination in gender relation. Cassio who has higher social status than Bianca could not oppress Bianca as what Iago did to Emilia and Othello toward Desdemona. The rebellion attitude of Bianca who is disobedient to the values and norms which require women to be submissive to men makes her more difficult to be controlled. Moreover, her status as a whore does not make her behave properly like nobles who are restrained by the domination in patriarchal system.

Cassio: 'Tis such another fitchew. Marry, a perfumed one.—What do you mean by haunting of me?

Bianca: Let the devil and his dam haunt you! What did you mean by that same handkerchief you gave me even now? I was fine fool to take it. I must take out the work? A likely piece of work, that you should find it in your chamber, and not know who left it there! This is some minx's token, and I must take out the

work? There, give it your hobby-horse. Wheresoever you had it, I'll take out no work on 't.

Cassio: How now, my sweet Bianca! How now, how now?

Othello: By heaven, that should be my handkerchief!

Bianca: If you'll come to supper tonight, you may. If you will not, come when you are next prepared for.

(Act 4, scene 1, page 965).

The attitude of Bianca is highly different from Emilia when ordered by Iago to take Desdemona's handkerchief. Emilia who obeys Iago's order shows how she still respects Iago as a husband. As a wife who is not completely obedient to her husband, Emilia is still concerned about her husband desires and words. Even though she basically does not understand the reasons beyond her actions. In contrast to Bianca who completely ignores the requests of Cassio. Bianca is only concerned about herself and her interests to Cassio. She does not want to negotiate and grant what Cassio requests.

Her attitude is the result of her disobedience to the social norms which structurally restrain women. As stated by Kemp (2010) that the position of Bianca in *Othello* is certainly a sexual woman not under the official control of man. The social status of Bianca as a prostitute makes her freely to control Cassio in their relationship compared to Desdemona who is engaged in marriage so she gets more restriction and control by her husband, *Othello*.

CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that women position in gender relation is influenced by their social class and race. The woman of high social class in *Othello* is restrained in patriarchal tradition which insists her to obey and to be submissive to her husband, even though her husband is from minority race or lower social status. Moreover, the play *Othello* tends to depict that the lower the social status of woman, the more dominant she is in the gender relation. In this case, it can be observed in the hierarchy represented by Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca who are from different social class. Their social status and domination as well as oppression they receive are inversely proportional.

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