

The Renaissance and Shakespeare
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Lecture – 06
William Shakespeare Othello

Hello, friends the following modules will be a lecture on Othello by Professor Rupin Walter Desai; retired from the Department of English University of Delhi. Professor Desai focuses on an often neglected side of the play Othello. If you read contemporary criticism on Othello; it deals primarily with issues of race and gender; however, professor Desai looks at the military aspect of the play and how crucial that is as an understanding of what collar age cold, the motiveless malignity of the character of Iago.

He also looks at elements like the age difference between Othello and Desdemona and how that could be a cause for a rift between the two of them. So, I hope you enjoy this extremely original and incisive lecture on Shakespeare's great tragedy Othello. Othello is a perhaps can be regarded as Shakespeare's most remarkable play. One reason being that the heroes was a black man and in seventeen century England; the blacks there were blacks in England, but not too many.

And it is quite remarkable that the slave trade had already started in America. England was not involved directly, but indirectly; yet Shakespeare chose to make the hero of Othello; a black man. We also have another very prominent black character even in an early play of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. Those of you who are interested in the racial element in Shakespeare's place might like to look at Titus Andronicus in addition to Othello of course.

However, my emphasis in this introductory talk is not going to be so, much on the racial element in Othello, as in the military background to the play; Shakespeare wrote the play most probably in 1602; it was performed in 1604 in the presence of the King James the first and as we look at the play today many issues come to the surface; a close reading of the play suggest that the military background is very prominent. As many of you will recall L. C Knight's; well known (Refer Time: 03:15) and path breaking essay.

How many children had Lady Macbeth; seeks to frame the work of art within clearly defined boundaries, discouraging the reader from speculating on absence and interesting on focusing on presence. This kind of prescription of course, works fairly well in place like Macbeth and King Lear, but I would like to suggest that in place like Hamlet and Othello; the background is important and needs to be investigated by the alert reader.

Let me give you one or two examples; at the very beginning of the play Iago tells Roderigo that he has seen military action along with Othello in roads and Cyprus act 1; scene 1; line 29. Straightaway, the alert reader should address himself or herself to the question; what was going on in roads in Cyprus? Why the Shakespeare put these two places in prominence at the very commencement of the play.

Now, the military background has been looked at by Henry Web, John Robert Moot, Virginia Mason Bong and Harold Bloom's the most recent book; Shakespeare and the invention of the human, but surprisingly the art in addition of Othello edited by M. R. Ridley has nothing to say on Roads and Cyprus. Let us then look a little carefully at this Cyprus was invaded by the Turkish navy. Please look at act 1; scene 3 lines; 14 to 42 and they were repulsed by the (Refer Time: 05:17) at sea in 1570; as you will recall that is feature in Shakespeare's Othello as well.

But then the following year; they were able to invade the island. The psychological, metaphorical, theological aspects of the play; particularly Coleridge's famous phrase; the motive less valid malignity of Iago; these have occupied critics for over 200 years. Unfortunately, it clipping this military background and I think we should recognize that it was both these events that took place in Roads and Cyprus the major event in terms of warfare; Sultan Suleiman the first lost 19000 men, when he tried to invade Roads; just imagine, just because the figure. In 1570; Saleem the second landed an army of 60000 men on Cyprus and a bid to conquer the island.

So, this is the background to the play and at the very commencement; we encounter this kind of an environment. Because there is all of you know students of Othello; this action of the play begins in Venice; the more Venice that is the subtitle, but then it moves as you all know to Cyprus. So, what I am trying to do is to link up the background with the focus of the play itself; which is centered on the island of Cyprus. These tumultuous events, war and old Cyprus are Shakespeare's strategy; dramatic strategy, is dramatic art

to alert us; to what the remainder of the play is about. So, with this background; we have the pleasure religious cultural and racial differences that are an integral part of the place.

Now, let us move on to the villain of the play as he is called Iago; I just referred to the motive less malignity of Iago; Coleridge's memorable a iterative description of Iago which has occupied the attention of humorous critics; as all of us know through the centuries. Iago is 28 years of age as he himself declares; in act 1, scene 3; line 311.

So, he is an enzyme or an ancient; the term ancient which is his title in the play is a kind of a corruption derived from enzyme. The enzyme was the standard bearer; the junior officer in the army who gathered the flag. Very important function because as long as the flag was flying, the army supporting the particular brigade or battalion would recognize that the fight was still on but the moment the flag was lowered or was wrenched from the hand of the enzyme; that would be a signal of it would be a sort of a signal of impending catastrophe of defeat; of fleeing from the enemy.

So, the duty of the enzyme was to hold the banner aloft through all the vicissitudes of the combat in order to keep the morale of the men high. Let us look very briefly at Julius Caesar whereas, you all will recall Caesar; an important character in the play on the battlefield says that he had to kill his own enzyme or ancient for turning back. I will read the lines; Caesar kills his own enzyme for turning back and deserting his pivotal role in the action; look Titanius look; the villains fly myself have to mine own turn enemy. This enzyme here of mine was turning back; I flew the covered and did take it from him.

So, I am trying to stress the significance of Iago's position in the army. Now, since I began by saying that the background of the play is the military setting. I would like you all to consider briefly the structure of the Italian Army; the Roman Army I should have said the Roman Army because the Romans as you all know had tremendous martial skill and it went on then to become the Italian Army and in England and the rest of Europe too; the Roman strategy of warfare was adopted.

The enzyme or the ancient was among the lowest ranks of commissioned officers; then the highest rank was the General or the Field Marshal or fellow is a general. In between I will quickly go over the ranks; there was the Lieutenant, The captain false staff; if some

of you may recall is a Captain; then the Lieutenant Colonel, the Colonel, the Brigadier, the Major and the Lieutenant General followed by the General.

In the army; relationships between officers may not be based on friendship, but is based on comradeship. I would like to distinguish between these two terms friendship and comradeship. Friendship is something personal, comradeship is a relationship within the context of a much larger; shall we say structure, the Army. And it is not connected with friendship; officers who belong to the same battalion of the same regiment, they have a loyalty first of all to the regiment or the battalion. And all those who belong to that regiment or battalion are a part of this larger structure.

So, that is an important kind of setting which I think we have to recognize. Did Shakespeare have any experience in the army himself? There is a book by Duff Cooper; in which he argues; persuasively that Shakespeare did spend some time in the army as an officer; a sergeant in fact, serving under in the low countries; under the Queen's Commander in Chief; Robert Earl of Leicester. Now, let me look at the wages of these officers in the Army; why do I suggest that the wages are important? Because as many of you if not all of you will recall Iago repeatedly talks of money; put money in diapers; he tells Roderigo; why is this emphasis on money and salary so, important?

Let us look at the wages the corporal was the lowest paid officer; he drew a salary of 3 shillings per day, the sergeant 5, the ancient 10 and the Lieutenant 20. Now, notice that the ancient 10; the Lieutenant 20; so, if the rank of Lieutenant is one of the coveted positions for which both Iago and as you all know Casio are contenders; then this might explain why Iago is so bitter towards Othello for having failed to promote him to a rank in which he would have drawn double the salary that he was drawing; as ancient.

Now, these are subtle points; they pertain to the background of the play, but as all of you know, the new historicist approach to literature is to try to uncover what is generally ignored by the broader brush of history; which paints the deeds of Kings and Queens and Dukes and Duchesses and so, on; not looking minutely at the supergun areas, which according to the new historicist are equally; if not more important because the struggles by these aristocrats are really the result of a certain kind of a situation prevailing among the lower classes.

So, the new historicist tries to dwell deep into the economic, the social background of the times; that is what we are trying to do in this approach to Othello. This approach I think I should say does not obliterate other approaches; it supplements them and suggest that a more holistic approach to literature will make us more deeply aware of the manner in which all these strengths are into a oven and result in the creation of a work of art.

Let us then ask a further question what kind of a training does an officer receive in the Army? What was the kind of training in England, in Italy and going back to earlier times? The roman army; the military training was extremely rigorous as it is today even in the Indian Army and I will come to that a little later. Look at the way in which when Othello is told that he must take charge of Cyprus and must immediately leave for that island in order to assuage the fears and alarms of the residence of that island because of the Turkish fleet approaching as all of you will recall.

Desdemona is shocked and she says tonight my lord that is their marriage night; the Duke says; this night and Othello says with all my heart just three lines, but notice Desdemona's response is one of consternation; tonight's my lord the duke of course, is emphatic he says; this night and Othello an army man; a general born and brought up in that kind of an atmosphere says with all my heart.

So, far Othello; military duty is meat and drink, he has made the flinty and steel culture war his thrice driven bed up down. Act 1; scene 3 line 230 to 241; he obeys without demure; later at Cyprus as you all will recall, when the newlywed couple are interrupted in bed by a drunken brawl which as you all remember has been instigated by Iago; in which ghastly is involved to the detriment of his reputation.

Desdemona is shocked; Othello apologizes to her for the cruelty of army life; come Desdemona just the soldiers life to have their bamhislumbers wait that strike. Ignorant of camp life Desdemona of course, can know nothing at this stage of the callousness and brutality that military training necessarily enforces upon its officers and men. She does not know that incessant humiliation and degradation are at the core of the successful transformation of raw recruits into disciplined soldiers; who must shoot, engage in bayonet charges, kill. The Duke of Venice knows what the army does to it men; in order to amaze make them obey rules to kill without a qualm of conscience.

Notice what I am trying to stress is that to have a good army, a powerful army. The soldiers have to be trained to obey; all of you perhaps know Tennyson's; famous poem the charge of the light brigade, there is not to reason why; there is go do and die. Let me read out a brief description of the way in which soldiers are trained and have always been whether it is the Indian army, the British army, the American army or armies all over the world.

Brutalization, torture and the glorification of savagery are integral parts of the (Refer Time: 20:55) line; it is ludicrous to question punitive night marches without raising a voice against bayonet' practice in which a man is taunted into a seething rage by his drill instructor. Then told to save his hatred for the enemy; can a warrior be trained in the proper method of kicking an opponent in the testicles or giving his bayonet adequate penetration without first being stripped of human dignity himself.

Training for warfare requires both the sadistic system and sadistic instructors. It is a very harsh indictment of the way in which soldiers are trained, but it is a harsh reality and I think that is why all of us should recognize that it is a good strong army that can protect us against.