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### Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

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Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

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Homam Altabaa,<sup>1</sup> Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Muslims in Western writings are usually attributed distorted images and negative characteristics by the writers. It has become a great concern that the misrepresentation of Muslims in Western writings influences the readers' perception of Islam and Muslims, thus contributing to Islamophobia that is still prevalent in the present world. The history of misrepresentation of Muslims in Western literary writings dates back to centuries ago seeing how canonical writers like Thomas Dekker and Christopher Marlowe perpetuated the negative representations of Muslims characters in their works. This study attempts to shed light on the images and portrayals of Muslims in *Othello* (1603-1604), a play written by William Shakespeare during the early Elizabethan period. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of this topic, this study employs the theory of postcolonialism, particularly adopting one of its prominent concepts, Orientalism as the main theoretical framework. The results of the analysis suggest that Shakespeare uses the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims in the construction of the Moor and the Turks in the play. This study contributes to the future discussion of the Anglo-Islamic relations and the representation of Muslims in Elizabethan plays.

*Keywords: Islam and Muslims; Western writings; Shakespeare; Elizabethan period; Othello; and Orientalism.*

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## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

### INTRODUCTION

The representation of Muslims in Western literature is usually accompanied with stereotypical images or portrayals of Islam. For centuries, Islam had always been perceived as a threat or enemy to Christianity and Western as they feared the growing power of Ottoman empire who reigned over three continents in the East.<sup>3</sup> The skewed understanding of Islam contributes to the hatred and resistance towards this religion and later reflected in the negative portrayals of Muslim characters in Western literature, even in this day and age. As the literary works from the earlier periods provide misrepresentation and false information of Islam, this study considers William Shakespeare's *Othello* as the main subject to identify the common stereotypes and images associated with Muslims.

Knowledge of the historical context of Elizabethan England is essential to understand the representation of Muslims in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Therefore, this study explores the historical and political relations of the Anglo-Islamic world while examining the representation of Muslims in other Elizabethan plays in general. Equally important, this study also considers the depth of Shakespeare's knowledge of Islam in order to comprehend the portrayals of Muslims or Oriental characters in his plays. Before this study penetrates deeper, a clarification of key words is necessary as this study incorporates interchangeable usage of words such as the 'Muslims', 'Orient', 'Turks', 'Ottomans', and the 'East'. The usage of these words is inevitable as all of them share a homogeneous characteristic of posing the entity of *Other* in Western literature.

To see how Islam is represented in *Othello*, this paper considers the importance of religious identity in this play. *Othello* features the Moor as a protagonist that is conflicted by his religious views between Christianity and Islam. Berek discusses the notion of social and religious fluidity in Elizabethan plays as he suggests that the theatrical scenes during this era were adamant about exhibiting the possibilities of social and religious identity that could be chosen or changed

<sup>3</sup> Barin, Filiz. "Othello: Turks as "the Other" in the Early Modern Period." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2010, p. 37. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41960526>



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

according to their deeds and actions.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even though Othello was presumed to be born as a Muslim, he eventually converted into Christianity, climbed the social ladder by marrying a woman from ruling class and became the Venetian general that led the military expedition to Cyprus. While Othello repeatedly affirmed his devotion to Christianity in the play by promising to fight against the Turks, Johanyak believes that Shakespeare subtly hinted on Othello's conflicted religious identity.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalent status of his social and religious identity elucidates his *otherness* in the society and tragic ending.

The representation of Muslims in Shakespeare's *Othello* requires a thorough contextual analysis of the work in order to identify the stereotypes and misunderstandings that are historically linked to Muslim characters or Islam in general. This research paper studies the character of Othello, a blackamoor who reverted from Islam. Othello, despite his respectful and reverent status as the general leading the Cyprus army, caused his own tragic ending by succumbing to his barbaric nature as a Muslim and black origin in the end. Even though the identity of Othello as a Muslim is not directly mentioned in this play, the association of Moorishness and Islam are prevalent. This is because, Islam and blackness do share the equivalent stereotypical qualities such as lustful, wicked, and revengeful in Western literature.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of this paper addresses the representation of Muslims by examining the stereotypes and portrayal associated with the aforementioned character.

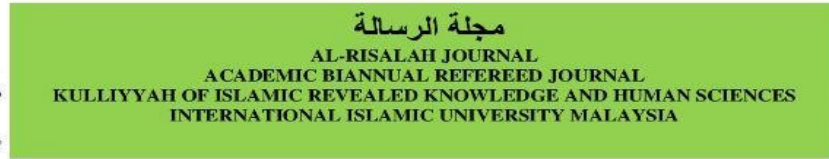
### SHAKESPEARE'S KNOWLEDGE OF ISLAM

Religion has been incorporated in many of Shakespeare's works. While his plays and poems might have hinted at his religious identity, it remains discreet and undiscoverable. The spiritual testament belonged to his father, John Shakespeare, that was discovered at his house in Henley Street might

<sup>4</sup> Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)

<sup>5</sup> Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 1. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)

<sup>6</sup> Loomba, Ania and Martin Orkin. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, p. 13.



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Dec (1444-2022)

## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

have signalled that he was born and raised in a Catholic environment.<sup>7</sup> Religion functions as a component that helps Shakespeare to shape and present the characters in front of the Elizabethan audience.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Shakespeare incorporated matters of the afterlife in eleven of his plays which shows a varied presentation of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Roman religion.<sup>9</sup>

Countless reinterpretations of Shakespeare's plays have found several verbal references to Islam. However, debates on the extent of this playwright's knowledge about Islamic customs and values are still resurfacing.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of the Anglo-Islamic relationship intrigued many English authors to study and write about Muslims, suggesting that Shakespeare's knowledge of Islam largely depended on his reading. Even before Othello was written, literature providing knowledge regarding Islamic cultures and traditions was already present<sup>11</sup> as shown in English literature of Middle Ages, which recorded the interaction between Christendom and the Muslim world. The earliest interaction that began with the agenda of Crusades greatly affected the way Muslims were depicted in Medieval literature. Poets and writers from this time were influenced by the religious authorities who disseminated misinterpretations of Islam and wrong images of Muslims.<sup>12</sup> In Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the characters of Othello and Prince of Morocco were constructed based on his knowledge of Islam that was influenced by anti-Muslim and Orientalist stereotyping that started from the Crusades and medieval literature.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hamlin, Hannibal. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Kastan, David S. *A Will to Believe*. Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Clegg, Cyndia S. "The Undiscovered Countries: Shakespeare and the Afterlife." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 3, 174, 2019. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10030174](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030174); quoted in Urban, David V. "Introduction to 'Religions in Shakespeare's Writings.'" *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 12, 655, 2019, p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10120655>

<sup>10</sup> Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 1. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)

<sup>11</sup> Cox, John D. "Shakespeare and Religion." *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 11, 343, 2018, p. 1. [doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343)

<sup>12</sup> Masood, Hafiz A. "Islam in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature: A Select Bibliography." *Islamic Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2005, pp. 553–629. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20838992>

<sup>13</sup> Vitkus, Daniel. "Islam." *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, by Katherine Rowe et al., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, p. 732.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

In the sixteenth century, the travel narratives which popularized by European interest in trading and traveling emerged. Bayouli mentions “the representation of the Orient on the Elizabethan stage is also linked to and informed by a flourishing travel literature that increased the interest in and fascination with the Eastern world”.<sup>14</sup> Travellers from the West provided information about Islam and Muslims to their countrymen while becoming the source for the English authors to create images of Islam and Muslims in their writings.<sup>15</sup> Not only that, the information about Ottomans and Turks also circulated through reports, poems and stories. The travel narratives provided Shakespeare with second-hand experience and knowledge about the Orient, contributing to Shakespeare's interest in Oriental history and themes.<sup>16</sup> It can be seen from two of his plays, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*. Said as cited by Johanyak mentioned, “the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play *inside* Europe”.<sup>17</sup> This is reflected in the character of Othello, who is a Moorish general that leads the Venetian army.

As Shakespeare lived and wrote during Elizabethan England actively taking part in expansion and trading, it is also believed that his exposure to Islam was also contributed by the diplomatic and economic relationship between England and Middle-Eastern countries.<sup>18</sup> The presence of elite ambassadors from the Ottoman Empire and Morocco in England might have

<sup>14</sup> Bayouli, Tahar. “Elizabethan Orientalism and its Contexts: The Representation of the Orient in Early Modern English Drama.” *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 110. [emuni.si/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1\\_109-128.pdf](http://emuni.si/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1_109-128.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Masood, Hafiz A. “Islam in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature: A Select Bibliography.” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2005, p. 562. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20838992>

<sup>16</sup> Johanyak, Debra. “Turning Turk,’ Early Modern English Orientalism, and Shakespeare’s Othello.” *The English Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Idea of Asia*, edited by Debra Johanyak and Walter S. H. Lim, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 78-79. [doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222_4)

<sup>17</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Routledge, 1978; quoted in Johanyak, Debra. “Turning Turk,’ Early Modern English Orientalism, and Shakespeare’s Othello.” *The English Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Idea of Asia*, edited by Debra Johanyak and Walter S. H. Lim, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 79. [doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222_4)

<sup>18</sup> Vitkus, Daniel. “Islam.” *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, by Katherine Rowe et al., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, p. 731.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

influenced Shakespeare to write about the wealthy and noble Moor in *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>19</sup> It is reported that Shakespeare and his company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men performed several times in front of the Muslim ambassadors in the early 1600s. As he was closely involved in the diplomatic relations of England and the Islamic world, the possible encounter with the ambassadors might have influenced the characterization of *Othello*. This is why Othello's pigmentation is stressed as the purpose of it is to signify his *otherness* and Muslim origin visually.<sup>20</sup> The exposure to Islam during this era might have influenced Shakespeare's conception of this religion and reflected in his works. To conclude, Shakespeare's knowledge of Islam was contributed by his reading and exposure to diplomatic and economic relationship between England and Middle-Eastern countries and it became a great source for him to shape and present the Oriental characters in his plays, including *Othello*.

Shakespeare's *Othello* was written approximately in 1603 during the final year of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It was performed a year later in November, 1604 at Whitehall, London. It is a tragic play that tells a story of a black Moor named Othello who ended his life after killing his own wife. In early English literature, the term "Moor" is used to refer to someone of a Muslim origin with dark skin complexion.<sup>21</sup> Johanyak brings forth the idea of shifting identities in *Othello* that suggests the Moor is actually a Muslim that converted to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> According to her, the Moor wavers between his Christian and Muslim identities and eventually succumbed to his true 'barbaric' nature when he kills Desdemona in response to the false adultery accusation between

<sup>19</sup> Charry, Brinda. "[T]he Beauteous Scarf": Shakespeare and the 'Veil Question'." *Shakespeare*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2008, p. 121. [doi.org/10.1080/17450910802083112](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450910802083112)

<sup>20</sup> Collins, Thomas R. H. *An Inquiry into The Cultural and Political Influences of English Engagement with The Muslims of Morocco and The Ottoman Empire, In the Writings of Three Early Modern Dramatists, and Selected Pamphleteers in The Years Between 1578-1649*. 2016. University of York, Master's thesis, pp. 43-44. *White Rose eTheses Online*.

<sup>21</sup> Vitkus, Daniel. "Islam." *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, by Katherine Rowe et al., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, pp.731-32.

<sup>22</sup> Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

Desdemona and Cassio. The blackamoor in *Othello* represents the stereotyping of the Islamic *Other* in English literature.<sup>23</sup>

*Othello* is known as one of the Elizabethan literary works that unveils the identities and images of the Blacks to its audience. Several past studies on the historical and social contexts of Elizabethan dramas suggest that *Othello* is a portrayal of racial treatments against the Other (blacks, particularly) during Shakespeare's time.<sup>24</sup> The Elizabethan audience was able to recognize Othello's *otherness* from his skin colour as it signifies the cultural and racial differences between him and other characters. Because of these differences, the Venetian society treats him poorly as manifested by Desdemona's father, Brabantio who detests the marriage union. He refuses to acknowledge Othello's genuine love for Desdemona and accused Othello of using black magic on her as he said "thou hast enchanted her" (1.2.65). Brabantio's refusal to accept the marriage of Othello and Desdemona reflects this period's perception towards the union between East and West.<sup>25</sup> In 1600, the first ambassador from Barbary, Abd el Ouahed ben Messaoud, paid his first diplomatic visit to England and claimed that "court officials had great difficulty in obtaining housing and hospitality for them, from either government funds or private generosity"<sup>26</sup> which portrays a fragment of racial treatments against them in their everyday affairs. Thus, it can be understood that the portrayal of the tragic hero as a black man in *Othello* is actually a reflection of this period's treatments towards the presence of black people in England.

Despite trying his best to assimilate himself into the Venetian society, Othello was constantly reminded about his identity as a black man and the *Other*. It is expected for him to be

<sup>23</sup> Al-Abboud, Dalia. *The Question of Islamophobia and Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great*. 2016. The American University, Master's thesis, p. 9. [fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/286/](http://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/286/)

<sup>24</sup> Xiaojing, Zhou. "OTHELLO'S COLOR IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY." *CLA Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1998, pp. 337-38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44323152>

<sup>25</sup> Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)

<sup>26</sup> Xiaojing, Zhou. "OTHELLO'S COLOR IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY." *CLA Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1998, pp. 336. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44323152>



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

an outcast in society because of his racial origin.<sup>27</sup> Before he made his appearance on the stage for the first time, he was indirectly introduced by Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio who insulted him by describing him as “the thick lips” (1.1.66) and “a lascivious Moor” (1.1.126). Yet, Othello remained calm and unfazed by the insults, rather confidently appearing in front of Brabantio. His position as the general of the army elevated his social status and radiated the confidence out of him. He held so much pride in his position and reputation in order to fight the slander against his identity as black man. To gain the respect of society, Othello had to prove himself “to be truly Christian and European” by boasting about his past encounter against the “insolent foe” (1.3. 137) and talked about his fights with “Turks” and “Mohammaten”.<sup>28</sup> However, Othello was respected and honored just because he held a special rank in the military. The antithesis between these scenarios reflects this period's perception on the figures of the *Other* such as Moorish and Ottoman ambassadors in England.<sup>29</sup> While they are treated with respect during official state affairs, they are also treated or perceived negatively as the infidels in their non-official and everyday affairs. In short, Othello's identity as a blackamoor in Shakespeare's *Othello* portrays this period's perception against the Others.

### OTHELLO'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

As one of the objectives of this paper is to investigate the influence of several past works on Shakespeare's *Othello*, it seeks to participate in the discussion of whether these works could contribute to the construction of Othello's religious identities. This study argues that Othello is a representation of Muslims in the Elizabethan theatrical scenes. However, his identity as a Muslim was not directly mentioned in the play. Instead, he is portrayed as a devoted Christian who is keen

<sup>27</sup> Stesienko, Andrew. “The Monster in the Moor.” *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, vol. 13. No. 1, 7, 2011, p. 98.

<https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol13/iss1/7>

<sup>28</sup> Collins, Thomas R. H. *An Inquiry into The Cultural and Political Influences of English Engagement with The Muslims of Morocco and The Ottoman Empire, In the Writings of Three Early Modern Dramatists, and Selected Pamphleteers in The Years Between 1578-1649*. 2016. University of York, Master's thesis, p. 47. *White Rose eTheses Online*.

<sup>29</sup> Collins, Thomas R. H. *An Inquiry into The Cultural and Political Influences of English Engagement with The Muslims of Morocco and The Ottoman Empire, In the Writings of Three Early Modern Dramatists, and Selected Pamphleteers in The Years Between 1578-1649*. 2016. University of York, Master's thesis, p. 45. *White Rose eTheses Online*.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

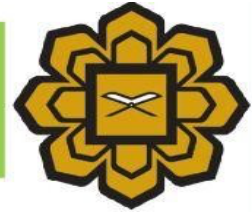
on fighting and winning the battles against the Muslims. Nonetheless, based on his narrative when talking to Brabantio and Desdemona, his original religious identity might have hinted that he came from a Muslim origin. From his narrative in act one, scene two of this play, there is a subtle imprint of Othello's Islamic origin as evident in this line, "taken by the insolent foe/ And sold to slavery; of [his] redemption thence, / And with it all [his] travels' history" (1.2.136-8).

Bullough (1994) claims Shakespeare referred to an autobiography written by Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Histories of Africa* when writing Othello.<sup>30</sup> This autobiography talks about a famous historical figure, Africanus, a Moor who was born a Muslim in Granada, converted to Christianity and baptised in Rome. His Christian name was John Leo and the depiction of his life story is strikingly similar to Othello's, as he was held captive by the Christian pirates and became a slave to the great Renaissance Pope. The pope freed him in exchange for Africanus's conversion to Christianity. From Othello's narrative as mentioned above, it is plausible that he is also a Muslim born who was kidnapped into slavery and converted to Christianity in order to break free from the enslavement. Moreover, Vitkus mentions *Othello* is a depiction of a period where religious conversion from Islam (or other religions) to Christianity is perceived as a redemption from slavery.<sup>31</sup> Moving on, the people who converted to Christianity are referred to as 'morisco' by the Westerners.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the Christians who embraced Islam or derogatorily referred to as "turning Turk" are known as renegades who are often cast aside and resided in the eastern Mediterranean. The likeliness of Othello's life story to this autobiography proves that Shakespeare is indeed influenced by the past works in writing *Othello* and modeled Othello based on the description of Leo's eventful life story, as Butcher suggests that Leo's autobiography is used "as

<sup>30</sup> Collins, Thomas R. H. *An Inquiry into The Cultural and Political Influences of English Engagement with The Muslims of Morocco and The Ottoman Empire, In the Writings of Three Early Modern Dramatists, and Selected Pamphleteers in The Years Between 1578-1649*. 2016. University of York, Master's thesis, p. 43. *White Rose eTheses Online*.

<sup>31</sup> Vitkus, Daniel. "Othello, Islam, and the Noble Moor: Spiritual Identity and the Performance of Blackness on the Early Modern Stage." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, p. 227.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, Adam. "Othello as Morisco." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2015, p. 68. 10.1080/0895769X.2015.1038970



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

a model for Othello's youthful exploits and mature achievements".<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is clear that Shakespeare took the biography of a Muslim who converted to Christianity into a consideration when he was writing *Othello*.

As suggested above, this study argues that Othello is also a 'morisco' as he converted to Christianity. He is perceived as the antipodes to those Christians who converted to Islam. While the terms 'Moor' and 'Turk' are used to refer the people of Morocco or Turkey, they are used to generally signify a Muslim identity as suggested by Bate who claims that during Elizabethan era, the term 'Moor' is more likely used to signify the "religious, not a racial identification".<sup>34</sup> Therefore, this study brings forth the consideration of Othello's probable religious identity in order to relate it to the construction of his character. Even though Othello is pictured as a devoted Christian, he cannot escape his Moorish identity which would have been viewed as being extremely close to a Muslim identity by the audience.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, by choosing Moorish characters as representatives of Muslims, it is indicative of the writers' intention to portray them as scandalous and problematic, which are the common wrong perceptions that Muslims have to bear with.<sup>36</sup> Hence, there is an indication that Shakespeare is making his religious identity as a factor that explains for his misbehaviour and vile action.

### CONFLICTING RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

During the Elizabethan period, the English writers and playwrights tend to write about conflicting religious and social identities of their characters. Berek suggests that the theatrical scenes during this period were focused on portraying the possibilities of social and religious identity that could

<sup>33</sup> Butcher, Philip. "Othello's Racial Identity." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1952, p. 247. [doi.org/10.2307/2866304](https://doi.org/10.2307/2866304).

<sup>34</sup> Hall, Adam. "Othello as Morisco." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2015, p. 68. 10.1080/0895769X.2015.1038970

<sup>35</sup> Shah, Nabila H. B. *At Sea, In Text, and on Stage: Islam and Muslims in Early Modern English Drama*. 2014. University of Birmingham, Master's thesis, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Shah, Nabila H. B. *At Sea, In Text, and on Stage: Islam and Muslims in Early Modern English Drama*. 2014. University of Birmingham, Master's thesis, p. 40.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

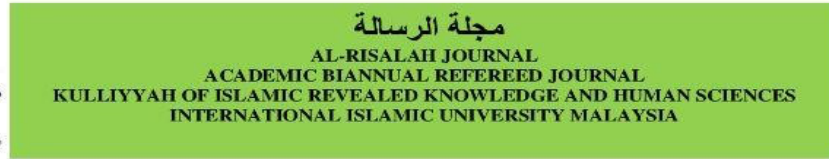
be chosen or changed according to their deeds and actions.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Degenhart analyzes this matter as an “imaginative process whereby religious identities became fused with national, embodied, and proto-racial categories”. Othello, as previously suggested, is a prime example of a character with conflicting or shifting identities as it is believed that he was born a Muslim, subsequently converted into Christianity and climbed the social ladder after he married into a daughter of Venice’s ruling class. As he was appointed as the leader of the Cyprus military unit, Othello commanded a commercial zone where Christians, Turks, and Jews mingled and traded. In places like this, identity was often unstable or hybrid.

Even though the use of textual references to Muslims or Turks is considered as a difficult subject to discuss in the Elizabethan society during that time, but one’s conversion into Christianity was welcomed by the society, especially if he possessed a fine military skill and leadership that contributed to the advancement of the force, like Othello.<sup>38</sup> If not, given that of his status as a converted Christian, Othello would have never been given the power to lead the army in defense of Cyprus against their eternal enemy, the Ottoman Turks. After all, Elizabethan England during this time was keen on expanding their military power and protecting the confines of their lands. Therefore, the presence of converted Christians like Othello was very needed in the military force as he had substantial knowledge regarding their enemy, Muslims.

However, *Othello* is disturbingly negative against Muslims who converted to Christianity. From this play, Shakespeare presents the ethnocentric fear of contamination that could allegedly result from the integration of the outsiders with the society (i.e. Muslim traders, merchants and government officials) in the society. While the presence of merchants and government officials from the Ottoman empire developed England economically and politically, they were perceived as a threat to Christendom. In this play, Othello was given the mandate to lead the Venetian army in the name of Christendom, despite his status as a baptized Christian. However, he is also subjected to a tragic relapse which might result in him betraying Christianity.

<sup>37</sup> Johanyak, Debra. “Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello.” *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)

<sup>38</sup> Cox, John D. “Shakespeare and Religion.” *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 11, 343, 2018, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343)



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## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

As mentioned in the previous section, the term 'morisco' is used to refer to people who converted to Christianity. However, this term carries a negative connotation as it is also disparagingly used to imply that their conversion to this religion is never sincere, but rather because they want to impress and assimilate into the Christian society. The Christian converts, including the fictional Othello are bound to return to their original faith in secret. This particular belief among Christians was widespread and prevalent during the Elizabethan period, as portrayed in Iago's attitude towards Othello. Iago believes that Othello is a deceitful and dishonest person when he tells Roderigo, "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.347). He also claims that Othello is religiously two faced as exclaimingly says Othello is bound "to renounce his baptism/ All seals and symbols of redeemed sin" (2.3.338-9) which denotes that Othello's conversion through baptism is simply an external seal, which is a symbol that does not reflect his true inner faith. From the image of "seal", Iago insinuates that Othello's conversion and baptism lacks authenticity and loyalty.

Despite announcing his baptism several times and well-respected status in the society, Othello was blinded by his jealousy and obsession of maintaining his honor by succumbing to his barbaric nature as a Moor of a Muslim origin. Somehow, he "registers nascent English anxieties about cultural alterity and the looming threat of losing one's identity to the Islamic Ottoman Empire".<sup>39</sup> Othello retains traces of his Islamic identity in order to serve as a depiction of England's anxieties about how converts to Christianity might betray their new faith. Moreover, Borde claims that the Moors who converted to Christianity tend to keep "much of Mohammed's law, as the Turks do".<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that even though Othello is Christianised Moor, he is still shadowed by his previous religious identity.

<sup>39</sup> Johanyak; as cited in Cox, John D. "Shakespeare and Religion." *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 11, 343, 2018, p. 2. [doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110343)

<sup>40</sup> Borde, 1547; Johanyak, Debra. "Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in Othello." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 10, 587, 2019, p. 5. [doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100587)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

Despite working his way up to the Venetian ruling class, Othello becomes the embodiment of Elizabethan era “phobic fantasy” regarding Islam and Muslims in general,<sup>41</sup> which is a black moor who has turned Turk. By coldly murdering Desdemona, Othello is seen as a dangerous creature who is governed by jealousy and violence to the Elizabethan era playgoers, in which his merciless action is perceived as a defining quality of a Moor of Islamic origin. Even though Othello tried his best to assimilate to the Venetian society by carrying his position with utmost regard and mimicking the behavior of the people, his previous life as a Muslim man and black origin would not allow him to fully integrate to the society. Othello is conflicted by his true identity as Barry suggests that there is “an emphasis on identity as doubled, unstable”<sup>42</sup> in the construction of Others in Western writing. His status as the noble Moor of Venice has been tarnished due to his rash, momentary decision which he had deeply regretted in the end.

### STEREOTYPICAL ATTRIBUTES OF MUSLIMS

This section specifically discusses the way Othello and the Turks are depicted as problematic according to Western perspectives. Two types of Muslim characters are portrayed in this play; the *good* and the *bad*. These two types reflect the Western attitudes towards the East or the Orient, which constitute a clear pattern of binary concepts in this tragedy; Islam and Christianity, black and white. This study believes that the representation of the Orient characters in this play should be treated as a serious problem as it expresses the hostile stereotypes and prejudices directed against the Orient that are deeply ingrained and internalized in the society. Western writers during this time had no accurate source of the Orient or Muslims at all, so they depended on the travel narratives or books about these people, which were often biased or “not altogether innocent” as Kabani writes: “If it could be suggested that Eastern people were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent, and incapable of self-government, then the imperialist would feel himself justified in

<sup>41</sup> Vitkus, Daniel J. “Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1997, p. 176. [doi.org/10.2307/2871278](https://doi.org/10.2307/2871278)

<sup>42</sup> Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed., Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 129.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

stepping in and ruling".<sup>43</sup> This study draws heavily on Edward Said's notions of Orientalism while comparing how the construction of Othello and the Turks are similar to the other Muslim characters in English writings.

### THE *BAD* MUSLIMS

In this play, through the character of Othello, Shakespeare presents an ethnocentric version of the Moor who is feeble-minded and "easy-led person, who could be easily victimized".<sup>44</sup> This is because Othello absolutely had no idea about the danger that was about to befall him as Iago mentions, "The Moor is of a free and open nature/ that thinks men honest that but seem to be so;" (1.3.401-2). From this line, Othello is depicted as someone who is an ignorant as he is not being watchful of his surroundings. Iago, who was unhappy and lamented about how he felt unappreciated by Othello as he was not granted the lieutenant position despite being his most loyal comrade and long-time friend, started to question Othello's judgement, as in "his Moorship" (1.1.32). Iago claimed that he possessed a far better military set of skills and fought in real wars before, unlike Cassio whom he described as "never set a squadron in the field/ nor the division of a battle knows" (1.1.22-3). From this scenario, Shakespeare depicts the stereotypical thinking of the Elizabethans who perceive the Muslims as lesser, unable to govern and make good decisions. Hence, this will predispose the audiences' perception of Muslims in general.

Next, Othello is painted as an Eastern man who possesses abnormal sexual desires by Roderigo, who was sulking because he was rejected as Desdemona's suitor. After insulting Othello's physical appearance by calling him the "thick lips" (1.166), he then proceeded to insinuate that Othello married Desdemona for her money and social position by calling Othello a thief, "Look to your house, your daughter, your bags!/ Thieves! Thieves!" (1.1.80-1). The scene

<sup>43</sup> Miller, Robin K. "An Imperialism of the Imagination": Muslim Characters and Western Authors in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Student Publications*, Gettysburg College, 2013, p.

3. [cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/197/](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/197/)

<sup>44</sup> Zid, Mounir B., and Humoud Al-Amri. "A Fresh Look at Shakespeare's Dramaturgy: Towards an Orientalist Approach to 'Othello'." *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2019, p. 54. Online ISSN: 2055-0146.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

continues with Iago using derogatory remarks about Othello and Desdemona's elopement by using animalistic reference in order to agitate Desdemona's father, Brabantio for the seriousness of the situation, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise!" (1.1.88-9). From this line, Iago is picturing the image of a sexually abnormal black man by using animalistic references such as ram, tugging and ewe.<sup>45</sup> However, since Brabantio refused to heed Iago and Roderigo's warning, Iago then triggered him once more by saying, "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for Germans" (1.1.110-4). By referring Othello as a "Barbary horse", which is the famous Arabian breeding horses, Iago was actually insinuating that Othello is a man of "overactive sexual drive". The use of brute imagery and animalistic reference imply that the Moor is a beastly wild man that pursues his abnormal sexual desires without hesitation, which is identical with the common stereotype thrown against the blacks and Muslims; uncivilised beastly Others with abnormal sexual desires.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Othello becomes the epitome of sickly sexual indulgence that is so often a marker of the *bad* Muslim.

As Othello professed his love for Desdemona which she lovingly reciprocated, Roderigo, who was listening in dismay all the time, wanted to kill himself as he felt dejected. Having said that, Iago advised him to get a hold of himself and find more fortune because he believed that the union between Othello and Desdemona was simply a momentary thing by equating the love to "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.356-7). He then proceeded to say, "It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love for the Moor- put money in thy purse- nor he his to her. It was a violent commencement, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration- These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.344-9). This suggests that Othello's love for Desdemona is not genuine but rather driven by his lust for her and is bound to change as he gets tired of her. Following this, Miller claims that Oriental characters in English works are often

<sup>45</sup> Kalt, Andrea. *The (De-) Construction of Racial Stereotypes in Shakespeare's Plays*. 2019. Universität Innsbruck, Diploma thesis, p. 47. [diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114](http://diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114)

<sup>46</sup> Kalt, Andrea. *The (De-) Construction of Racial Stereotypes in Shakespeare's Plays*. 2019. Universität Innsbruck, Diploma thesis, p. 47. [diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114](http://diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114); Miller, Robin K. "An Imperialism of the Imagination': Muslim Characters and Western Authors in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Student Publications*, Gettysburg College, 2013, p. 10. [cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/197/](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/197/)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

depicted as a raunchy man who is violently attracted to the appearance of a white woman.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the accusation of Othello's insincere love for his wife is heightened by the fact that Desdemona, who is referred to as a "sweet Desdemona" (5.2.123) and an "angel" (5.2.131) is unable to sense the hidden deceit of her husband as she innocently thinks her husband, Othello genuinely loves her for who she is. Hence, Brabantio furiously accused Othello for enchanting his daughter with black magic, "Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!" (1.2.63). By constructing a naive and clueless female white character like Desdemona, the audience is able to sympathize and see her as a flawless victim while putting the utmost blame on the black, orient character like the Moor as he is perceived as an atrocious man who has the heart to murder his own wife over some petty dispute.

Furthermore, Othello is also associated with evilness. Even though Othello claims that he genuinely loves Desdemona for "She loved me for the dangers I had passed/ And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.167-8). Teo claims that the construction of a white female character that evokes strong romantic interest from the Orient is to allow the Western audience to imagine the downsides of an ill-starred interracial relationship, which he describes as "titillation of miscegenation and the underlying horror of hybridity".<sup>48</sup> Hence, Shakespeare presents the underlying notion of how interracial marriages and the mixture of Western-Eastern cultures can possibly be destined for destruction and end in tragedy, like so happen in the union of Othello and Desdemona. The aforementioned union is used to envisage the binary opposition between black vs white and west vs east, which is common among early modern authors. In addition, this union is used to endorse whiteness by associating it with moral goodness and purity while blackness, on the other hand, is alluded to immorality and impurity.<sup>49</sup> For instance, the blackness in *Othello* is

<sup>47</sup> Miller, Robin K. "An Imperialism of the Imagination': Muslim Characters and Western Authors in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Student Publications*, Gettysburg College, 2013, p.

10. [cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/197/](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/197/)

<sup>48</sup> Miller, Robin K. "An Imperialism of the Imagination': Muslim Characters and Western Authors in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Student Publications*, Gettysburg College, 2013, p.

10. [cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/197/](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/197/)

<sup>49</sup> Zid, Mounir B., and Humoud Al-Amri. "A Fresh Look at Shakespeare's Dramaturgy: Towards an Orientalist Approach to 'Othello'." *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2019, p. 51.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

often associated with the language of damnation and evilness, as evident from the passage uttered by Emilia, “And you the blacker devil!” (5.2.133). Othello’s dark skin has been used to attribute Muslims with evilness, for Westerners perceive the dark skin as a reflection of dark heart and spirit.

Next, Othello is painted as someone who is ridiculously governed by jealousy, which is also identical to the description of Muslim characters in Elizabethan stage who are often pictured as embodiment of men with “deadly concoction of jealousy, lust and violence”.<sup>50</sup> Othello claimed that he was not jealous and would never not act rashly over some mere circumstantial evidence when he said “I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove” (3.3.190). However, Iago slyly planted the seeds of doubts in his head over Desdemona’s faithfulness, which triggered him to act on it and eventually, succumbed to his jealousy. Johanyak describes Othello as a representation of a “barely restrained Muslim persona who may burst from at any slight provocation to wreak havoc”.<sup>51</sup> Following this, Othello delineated the lethal jealousy of the Muslims which could possibly cause destruction onto people around him, reinforcing the idea that Muslims are capable of irrational thoughts and violence. Furthermore, as this study previously posits the idea that Othello was modeled on Africanus, Othello is eerily comparable to his description of the Moors in the ethnographic compendium as he writes, “No nation in the world is so subject unto jealousy, for they would rather lose their lives, ...”.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is proper to deduce that the portrayal of Othello as a jealous man is analogous to the depiction of Muslims and Moors in other Western writings.

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Online ISSN: 2055-0146; Vitkus, Daniel. “Othello, Islam, and the Noble Moor: Spiritual Identity and the Performance of Blackness on the Early Modern Stage.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, p. 220.

<sup>50</sup> Shah, Nabila H. B. *At Sea, In Text, and on Stage: Islam and Muslims in Early Modern English Drama*. 2014. University of Birmingham, Master’s thesis, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> Johanyak, Debra. “‘Turning Turk,’ Early Modern English Orientalism, and Shakespeare’s Othello.” *The English Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Idea of Asia*, edited by Debra Johanyak and Walter S. H. Lim, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 78. [doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230106222_4)

<sup>52</sup> Shah, Nabila H. B. *At Sea, In Text, and on Stage: Islam and Muslims in Early Modern English Drama*. 2014. University of Birmingham, Master’s thesis, p. 33.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

Moving on, this study also inquires about the textual references to the Turk in this play several times as a part of representation of the Muslims. The term *Turk* carries negative connotations and with the reference to this, Muslims are attributed to all sorts of destructive villainy in early modern English writings. For instance, Iago promised that he was being honest or else “I am a Turk” (2.1.114). From this line, it can be deduced that a Turk is oftentimes considered as someone who is deceitful and dishonest in the eyes of English writers. Another evidence in this play is when Othello scolded Cassio and Roderigo for fighting with each other by questioning whether they were “turned Turks, and to ourselves do that/ Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?” (2.3.161-2). In Elizabethan plays, turning or becoming a Turk is a famous derogatory expression that has been utilised by English writers when describing misbehaviour, roguery, or deceit.<sup>53</sup> By saying this, it means that the character is behaving inappropriately and condemned in the eyes of the English audience, which is similar to how they perceive Muslims in their narratives. Moreover, At the end of this play, during Othello’s long speech about his regretful decision, he drew the audience's attention by comparing himself to the “malignant and turbaned Turk” (5.2.354), who is Venice's forsworn enemy. He then stabbed himself with the same sword that he used to fight the “circumcised dog”, which was the Ottoman Turks (5.2.365). When Othello perceives himself as a Turk, he conforms to the English perceptions of the treacherous and destructive Muslims. The Turks, according to *Othello*, refers not only to the historic enemy of Christendom, but also to those values that are perceived directly antithetical to the enlightened values of Christian Europe. Hence, it can be deduced that English writers and audiences tend to position the Turks as morally inferior to the idealised virtuous Christians.

To conclude, the construction of Othello in this play as a Moor who is feeble-minded, possesses unhealthy sex drive, overdriven by jealousy as well as an evil man with deceitful tricks are similar to the bad stereotypical qualities attributed to other Muslims characters in Western writings. Moreover, it is reasonable to suggest that the textual reference to the “Turk ” that is disparagingly used to refer to any sort of misbehaviour or unpleasant occurrence in Western writings, including *Othello* reflects the societal perception of the Muslims in general.

<sup>53</sup> Alshammari, Adel. “Representations of Muslims in English Renaissance Drama.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 12, 2020, p. 3. doi: 10.30845/ijhss.v10n12p1



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

### THE GOOD MUSLIMS

The previous section unfolded the bad stereotypical qualities that are attributed to Muslim characters in *Othello*. Subsequently, this study also probes the positive qualities associated with Othello. As previously mentioned, Othello is described as “lascivious Moor” (1.1.126), and “an old black ram” (1.1.89) which are equivalent to the Eurocentric views of Muslims or Moors that are perpetrated by English writers in general; barbaric, animalistic and almost good for nothing except to be enslaved as properties of the white men.<sup>54</sup> However, several lines from this play also presented the description of Moors that are contrasted to the Eurocentric views. Shakespeare negates the common stereotypical attributes by presenting a Moor that is brave, smart, and charismatic to exhibit a complicated tragic hero who is both good and bad.

When the play was performed in 1604, the issues of racism and subjugation against the Others were becoming prevalent due to the integration of the non-whites with the society. Because of this, the presence of Moors in the Elizabethan plays was not considered as something new as playwrights were eager to include the representation of Others in their works. There are two types of Moors when they are presented in front of the audience. These two types pose the same figures and characteristics, but they are discernible. The Moors can be portrayed as the conventional Eurocentric description that demeans or dehumanizes them, or the noble, well-respected version of Moors referred to as “white Moors”<sup>55</sup> and “non-villainous Moors”.<sup>56</sup> One of the examples of the latter description being the Prince of Morocco, one of Portia’s suitors in *The Merchant of Venice* (1599). Therefore, this study argues that Shakespeare seems to incorporate both types of Moors in the embodiment of Othello as it is a good strategy to envision the tragic fall of a “Valiant Moor” in the beginning to the “turbaned Turk” in the end of this play.

<sup>54</sup> Shaw, Rudolph and Rudolph A. Shaw. ““Othello” and Race Relations in Elizabethan England.” *Journal of African American Men*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, p. 1. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41811353>

<sup>55</sup> Shaw, Rudolph and Rudolph A. Shaw. ““Othello” and Race Relations in Elizabethan England.” *Journal of African American Men*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, p. 1. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41811353>

<sup>56</sup> Kalt, Andrea. *The (De-) Construction of Racial Stereotypes in Shakespeare's Plays*. 2019. Universität Innsbruck, Diploma thesis, p. 45. [diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114](http://diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhs/content/titleinfo/3529114)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

While the use of animalistic and brute images are successful in invoking the prejudice against Moors and Muslims in general, Othello's state of being and words seem to negate the previous remarks directed to him. He was eloquent, valiant and in control of the situation which captivated the audience. Despite being accused of using black magic and deceitful tricks by Brabantio, he steadily explained that his feelings for Desdemona were sincere and their relationship had transcended the contrasting states of their origins, skin colors and cultural differences. When Brabantio asked for Othello to be punished and the marriage to be nullified, the Duke of Venice denied his request. He asked Brabantio to not worry about Othello by saying "If virtue no delighted beauty lack/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.285-6) which can be paraphrased as follow, "if goodness is beautiful, your son in law is beautiful, not black".<sup>57</sup> This suggests that Othello is viewed as a man of good manner and virtue by the members of the society.

It goes without saying that Othello is a good general and is highly respected and admired by the society. For example, Montano, who used to be under the command of Othello, described his ability to command and lead the army in a favourable light by saying, "For I have served him, and the man commands/ like a full soldier" (2.1.35-6). Not only that, Othello and his mercenaries were dispatched to defend the island from the advancement of the Turks even though there was already a military commander in Cyprus, proving that the Venetian Senate thought highly of his ability to lead the army by praising him "Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you... yet opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects, throws a safer voice on you" (1.3.221-6). Othello was adored by the Venetian Senate as he is an incomparable man and in every pressing matter concerning the state, they required Othello's "haste-post-haste appearance" (1.2.38). Thus, despite his origin and skin colour, Othello's presence was very much needed in the society, seeing how his opinions and insights are heeded by the senate.

Additionally, several instances from this play also prove that Othello is an experienced and skillful soldier. His military prowess is, without a doubt, distinguished and known by many. For example, the Duke instructed him to leave for Cyprus right away by saying, "Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you/ Against the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.48-9). As a war is about to

<sup>57</sup> Cheesman, Tom. *Othello 1.3: "Far More Fair than Black"*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 1156.



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

break out, the Venetian army is in dire need of its esteemed general to counteract the threat from the Turks. In relation to this, Ghanim mentions that “noble moors” in Elizabethan plays are known as one of the prominent figures who aided the wars against the Ottoman Turks.<sup>58</sup> This is because they know the situations and strategies of warships like the back of their hands, which is contributed by years of experience in assisting wars. Othello even claims that he was involved in a war at the tender age of seven (1.3.83) and Brabantio oftentimes invited him to his house so that he could listen to Othello’s stories of his “battles, sieges, fortunes” (1.3.130).

Moving on, English writers also tend to describe the Ottoman’s expertise and preparation in a great light and respect especially in matters revolving around wars and battles. This is due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire is regarded as the strongest military and economic power in the world during the time.<sup>59</sup> For instance, the Duke of Venice mentioned “The Turks with the most mighty preparation/ makes for Cyprus” (1.3.221-2), acknowledging the potential and magnitude of their forsworn enemy. Muslims were conquering a massive part of the Eastern world and England feared their growing power. Ironically, this scenario impugns the deprecatory attributes of the Turks or Muslims as discussed in the former section.

To sum up, even though Othello is poorly attributed to negative stereotypes, the analysis that is previously done can be substantial to prove that there are a few good qualities in the construction of his character. For instance, he is presented as someone who is valiant, charismatic, respected by the society, skillful and knowledgeable. His opinions and instructions are very much heeded by the higher-ups and his subordinates despite his skin colour and origin. Moreover, the Turks are also described in a positive manner especially when it comes to their military capability and strengths. All in all, it is safe to suggest that *Othello* appropriates the conventional and stereotypical attributes of Muslims in its description of the Muslims characters in this play.

<sup>58</sup> Ghanim, Fawziya M. “The Moor as a Muslim in William Shakespeare’s Othello”. *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, p. 153. doi: 10.2478/ejser-2018-0016.

<sup>59</sup> Heidari, Nastaran F., and Öz Öktem. “The Other in Othello: Backsliding and Re-turning Turk of the Moor.” *International Journal of Media Culture and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, p. 17. [dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijmcl/issue/55083/757314](http://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijmcl/issue/55083/757314)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

### CONCLUSION

This study inquired into the representation of Muslims in *Othello* by examining the construction of characters and the stereotypical qualities attributed to the Muslim characters in this play, which are Othello and the Turks. During the early Elizabethan period, England was still one of the “peripheral players in the world geopolitical structure of the 16th century”,<sup>60</sup> unlike the Ottoman Empire who was feared by the entire Europe as they were ambitiously expanding their power and sovereignty. Hence, the sense of insecurity and jealousy crept inside the English society, driving them to depict the Muslims and Islam in a negative light to compensate for their lack of power and “to define martial Christian valour and to demonise enemies [Muslims]” in the public eyes.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, by ‘inventing’ the Orient as a stereotype, it affirms the orientalist perception that puts the West and East in a binary opposition. The West, in every sense, was perceived as civilised, superior and positively described but unfortunately, the East was seen as the uncivilised, inferior and negatively pictured among them.

In order to proclaim the ‘supremacy’ of the West over the East, the portrayal of Islam and Muslims was deliberately circulated through the representation of the Muslim characters that were attributed to the Orientalist stereotypes. The Western writers presented a biased and prejudiced image of the Orient, which was majorly based on their assumptions and incorrect facts that they obtained from various resources. This is reflected in the literary works of Western writers including Shakespeare and Marlowe. For instance, the description of Othello as a sex maniac, absurdly jealous, and malicious as well as the use of textual reference of ‘Turks’ that carries deprecating and condescending tones in this play are synonymous to the usual depiction of Muslims in other Western writings.

This study explores whether Shakespeare, in his portrayal of Muslim characters in *Othello*, may have built upon any convention and Orientalist stereotypes of the Muslims or the Moors that were common among the Elizabethans. Did Shakespeare make Othello’s religion as a factor that

<sup>60</sup> Tilwani, Shouket A. “The Orient: Villains in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare.” *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanity*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2020, p. 2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n1.35>

<sup>61</sup> Tilwani, Shouket A. “The Orient: Villains in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare.” *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanity*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2020, p. 3. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n1.35>



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## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

contributes to his misdemeanour and temperament and was he influenced by the Elizabethan dramatic convention in the representation of Muslims character? Stoll claims that Shakespeare is merely following a dramatic jealousy tradition in *Othello* but he “leans on the convention of slander and diabolical soliciting”.<sup>62</sup> This study has come to deduce that the representation of Muslims in this play adhered to the Orientalist stereotypes and prejudice against the Muslims in the Elizabethan theatrical scenes.

<sup>62</sup> Whitney, Lois. “Did Shakespeare Know Leo Africanus?” *PMLA*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1922, p. 470.  
[doi.org/10.2307/457156](https://doi.org/10.2307/457156)



## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

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## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

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## Representation of Muslims in William Shakespeare's Othello

Homam Altabaa - Maryam Shofia Mohamad Nasir

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