

Othello, A Jealous Barbarian Or A Noble Fool

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Abstract:

Othello is believed to be one of the noblest characters in English Literature. It is thought that his life and character were ruined by the art and skill of the incredible villain, Iago. And that Othello was actually a simple man who lacks the knowledge of the practical world. He did not know that in this world there could be dishonest people. He even had no idea of evil. He was neither introspective nor reflective. He trusted everybody very easily except his own wife whom he loves dearly. From Coleridge to Bradley, a number of critics are trying hardly to persuade readers to believe in the essential goodness of this character yet they lack at one or the other point. Coleridge and his fellow critics blamed Iago for everything that happens in the play regardless of the fact that it is Othello who is supposed to be the leading character of the play and it should be him and not Iago or anybody else that is the controlling factor of the play. It was only after Eliot, that the critics started seeing the character from a different angle. Then on, for the first time, critics brought a new view to reader that Othello the hard-hearted and hot-headed hero of the play is responsible for the tragic events in the play. This article also tries to explore different aspects of the personality of the character and provides a critical analysis on the same.

Introduction

*Othello*¹, besides *The Tempest*, is 'subject to more 17th century allusions than any other Shakespeare play' (Dobson and Wells, 2001:333). The play has been of especial interest to the critics, including feminists, Marxists, psychoanalysts, due to issues related to racist attitude towards Othello, the adoption of a jealous untrusting husband to a moor and the assumption that adulterous wives should be killed. In this paper, however, textual analysis of the personality of the hero himself and the reason behind his tragic end are done and in the light of both the works of the critics and the actual text some interesting angles are brought to consideration of the readers.

The next section will be discussing Shakespearean tragic trends with especial reference to *Othello*. Following that, the character of the hero and his personality as portrayed by the poet and seen by other characters in play is described. The section that follows is trying to find out the person responsible for the tragedy. This section is divided under several sub-heading discussing the elements of love and trust in the play, the art of Iago and the otherness of Othello. Before coming to the conclusion, there are two other sections on tragic flaw and tragic end of the play.

Othello And Shakespearean Tragic Trends

Although unlike the rest of his great tragedies, in *Othello*, Shakespeare focuses private life instead of public life and 'the play has (often) been described as a domestic comedy gone wrong' (Boyce, 1990:474). Yet like all other tragedies of his, this is also a passion play. And, superficially speaking each of them has just one dominant idea, *excess of anything is bad*. Here, characters are aggrieved, they are made afraid, wrathful, ambitious, materialistic and even devilish and all, excessively. *Othello*, the play, too is, as Murry (1936) puts it, a story of an excessively good man, an excessively innocent woman and their excessive love for each other. Therefore, Murry (1936:43) concludes, "the perfection of human love destroys itself". In reality it is not so simple, Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or the restoration of soul, and of the life of men. Hence, Shakespearean tragedy is not supposed to be reduced to a medieval morality play by believing it to be just a struggle between good and evil forces; by making the black Othello and the white Iago, good and evil respectively, and by making the good unfortunate in the extreme, the evil unprincipled. This play, like all other Shakespearean tragedies, has its psychological as well as social aspect.

Boyce (1990) is of the view that Shakespeare's *Othello* is influenced from medieval Morality plays, in which human soul as the main character is placed between an angel (Desdemona here) and a devil (Iago here) and each of them calling him. And Othello replies to the call of bad angel. Of all the Shakespearean plays, the moral lesson conveyed by *Othello* has closer concerns with human life. It is directly related to life and business of common men, that is why it is more profound and stirring. The pathos in *King Lear*, though more overwhelming and horrifying, yet less related with ordinary occurrence. Also, the degree of sympathy with the passions, in *Macbeth* and the interest, in *Hamlet*, are different and remote. Hazlitt (1916) finds that the greatest interest in *Othello* lies with the completely unpredictable change from the fondest love and the most absolute confidence in that love, to the torturing jealousy and the insane hatred.

Othello, The Man In *Othello*, The Play

'Othello is a grandly positive character (Boyce, 1990:470) and this is the story of a man of dignity, honour and courage. Although Othello speaks of himself as wanting in civility of

manners and the elegance of society and, also, Bradley (1905) says, that Othello is not observant; yet the play reflects little of that. Rather his nature tends outward and the play gives the evidence of it along with his being a brilliant conversationalist and a fine judge of man and events. With his first appearance he proves himself to be a man of noble birth who is held in high estimation by the Duke and the Senators for his great services to the State of Venice. He is, moreover, a plain and honest man, of perfect open nature, devoid of worldly sagacity, or diplomacy. In the very first act, he is presented as a genuine and ardent lover, modest about his own accomplishments, rigidly truthful and open to conviction. Othello was never a weak man to be easily persuaded, forced or suppressed by anybody. In Act II, scene iii, after Cassio's fight with Roderigo, Othello's strong character is shown as a commanding and dominating figure. He, only, outbursts when all refuse to answer. But soon he becomes calm and firm again. He speaks of his affection for Cassio, but does not talk with earlier intimacy. He deliberately avoids calling him, Micheal, as he otherwise used to. His calmness shows that he really means affection for Cassio but he has to punish him as he has already announced.

But the grandeur of Othello's character is balanced by the excessive passion in his personality, his jealousy. Onions (1919) describes jealousy in terms of Shakespearean context, as suspicion, apprehension of evil, mistrust. The next section will be discussing the causes and reasons of this jealousy and whatever follows that.

With Whom Does The Fault Lie?

Critics including Coleridge (cited by Raysor, 1930) and Bradley (1905) believe that Othello is a strong and virtuous hero, a man nearly faultless and the story of his marriage with the gentle and innocent Desdemona is in fact a true love story which would have a happy ending only if the demi-devil Iago would not have come. Coleridge even writes that it was not the jealousy of Othello but the superhuman art of Iago that killed Desdemona. He wants the reader to differentiate the 'solemn agony of the noble Moor' from the 'wretched fishing jealousies' (15) of other characters present in the dramatic art. Some critics went to the extent of saying that the qualities that make Othello vulnerable are within his very goodness and simplicity. He himself is unaware that passions lay hold of him, not the primitive passions of any simple savage but those passions, which are commonly present within any human. It was not his fault that he was unable to pause and reflect. The fault lies with the circumstances that they did not give the couple ample time to know each other before the events of the tragedy. Coleridge mentions that in Giraldi Cinthio's tale *Gli Hecatommithi*, from which Shakespeare's plot is largely taken, the couple was given enough time but this change with Shakespeare is, no doubt, not without reason. The fault lies with the fate, which made Othello gullible, hasty and credulous. Would that he was Hamlet and there was no tragedy.

But these ideas are not enough to lend credence to Othello's nobility and to justify his innocence. A good, strong man is one who can mould the circumstances according to his purpose. The critics above, and even Othello himself, rather blame fate. Othello did everything himself but refuses to take the responsibility and groans like a weak man, "But, oh vain boast! / Who can control his fate?" ("Othello" 5.2. 263-4).

Therefore the idea that if it would have been Hamlet, means he lacks something that Hamlet has and the truth is that there can never be Hamlet in this situation because it is Othello who had to face these circumstances, and he, who is never defeated in the field, was defeated in his home, in his personal life. If he would have come out of his misery successfully he would be flawless

but since he could not it is his fault. And in an attempt to save Othello, the critics forget that they are giving supreme importance to the chameleon-like Iago instead of Othello, who is, in fact, the moving and controlling factor of the play, our tragic hero. So, a Shakespearean tragedy is all about the passion, without reason, which leads men on to their doom. It is this passion, which creates the Shakespearean tragic hero. Campbell (1959:111) is absolutely right when he talks of 'Othello's self-idealization, his brutal egotism and his promptness to jealousy' as causes behind his blindness.

Love Without Trust

Coleridge's another remark, which is echoed by most of the later critics, is that jealousy is not the complete passion that causes the fall of Othello; it was in fact the agony of being compelled to hate somebody he supremely loved. Desdemona was the inspiration of his life; her purity and innocence were the very sources of his living. 'Othello had no life but in Desdemona: the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence, wrought a civil war in his heart' (Halliday, 1958:248). And he died the moment he was persuaded about her infidelity. Having found his wife and his friend betraying him he realized that honour was the only thing he had and therefore he had to save it. Critics portray circumstances in a way as to show that Othello had no choice but to do what he did. Coleridge says that another man in his place would have acted ferociously but he does not lose his majesty and composure except once, that is, when he hits Desdemona in Act IV, scene i. His attempt to kill her was an attempt to avenge his own spiritual death. And he calls Othello's to be 'strange reasons' for murdering Desdemona. Bradley (1905) believes it to be rather a sacrifice, done in honour and in love, in order to save Desdemona from disgrace. But the question is, if he loved her so much why did he never ask her himself? In fact, Othello never trusted his wife; he never trusted his own love; though he asked her once about the handkerchief but not with the intention of believing her, not even with that of listening to her. He asked for the handkerchief only because he knew she had none. He only wanted to please his jealous self.

The love between Othello and Desdemona is given a beautiful comparison by Dowden (1985:232) with the love between Brutus and Portia in *Julius Caesar*. He writes, 'While Brutus and Portia were indissolubly bound together by their likeness, Desdemona and Othello were mutually attracted by the wonder and grace of unlikeness'. Dowden even points that no misunderstanding was possible between Brutus and Portia because they know each other's nature and trust each other as they trust themselves and this is where they can easily understand the sufferings of the other and can ask and share their greatest secrets with each other. But this was not so with the other couple.

Othello had never achieved a height of love and trust for his wife. On one hand Desdemona sees her god in Othello, Othello never understands what true love is. 'Othello comes to see love through Iago's eyes rather than Desdemona's' (Boyce, 1990: 474). 'Unable to trust Desdemona- he lacks this basic element of love- Othello disintegrates morally' (Boyce, 1990:470). Thus Boyce agrees that Iago became successful in affecting Othello to an extraordinary way only because Othello lacked trust.

The Couple Versus Iago

The relation between Othello and Desdemona seems to be based on hope more than on achievement. The rationale is unable to accept that both of the following sets of dialogue are delivered by same man with only an interval of little time in his life,

I. It gives me wonder great as my consent

To see you here before me. O, my soul's joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,

May the winds blow till they have wakened death.

(2.1. 177-80)

II. O, ay! As summer flies are in the shambles,

That quicken even with blowing, O, thou weed,

Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet

That the sense aches at thee, would that thou hadst ne'er

been born!

(4.2. 65-8)

The senses are not ready to believe that the same man can change so much. Othello, simply lacked common understanding of everyday life issues. As do Othello's supporters argue that as he is presented as a newly married, middle-aged man who does not have any knowledge of practical love; his is an ideal love where he considers his beloved a goddess, who can only be worshipped and not a woman with whom he can talk and share. Due to his newly roused passion he finds Iago's suggestions against Desdemona's betrayal convincing. Iago himself approves that Othello is not revengeful; therefore the feeling lying within him in a dormant state is excited by the grave provocation received by him. Love of Desdemona was his life, his very existence and he loses his existence, his being when he finds Desdemona infidel; in fact he becomes infidel to his noble self. If vindictiveness had been a part of Othello's nature, he would never have been so gentle and respectful in answering to the heaps of severest abuses by Brabantio at the beginning of the play. McLauchlan (1971: 36) seems extremely convinced that "Othello is no mere naive, self-esteeming dupe: he has no reason for distrusting Iago, nor has anyone else in the play". Iago's behaviour and style, his pretensions and pauses and his unwillingness to open up, forces Othello to exclaim:

I think thou dost,

And for I know thou art full of love and honesty

And weighest thy words, before thou give 'em breath,

Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more:

(3.3. 121-4)

No doubt, Iago's plan was to hit Othello with a blow one after the other so that he may never recover but it even is undeniable that Othello was ready to be hit. When Iago shows his doubt for the first time Othello becomes more than curious to get a confirmation. And even when he decides to ask Emilia about the matter it was not with the intention of listening to anything else but what he wanted to listen, that is, a surety that Desdemona is disloyal. It seems as if his veins were filled with poison of jealousy and the noble blood was squeezed out of them. So the

moment destiny tried him, he failed. All that had been glorious about him all of a sudden became remote and impossible.

Foreignness of Othello

Desdemona worships the man she is married to and in the most troubled circumstances she does not doubt his godliness; "My noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are" ("Othello" 3.4. 25-7). Whereas Othello is a man with a rough and tough life on one hand and a gentle and noble wife on another and he is at his best in keeping harmony between them. But somewhere he has a sense of his own inefficiency in dealing with the complex and subtle conditions of life in his adopted country. Therefore the concept of differentness offered in this play is complex; "Othello is different." He is a victor among warriors; an advisor among councilmen; yet a Moor among Venetians. And this last difference that Othello is a Moor is noteworthy although almost irrelevant in the beginning of the play. Even then some characters had the realization of this fact since the very beginning.

Iago.	Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe.	(1.1. 89-90)
Brabantio.	To fall in love with what she feared to look on!	(1.3. 98)

Desdemona has the power to see Othello as even he himself cannot. She is powerful female character who has a woman's inner eye to see through the lens of love. Othello's blackness, which is visible to everyone else, is of little importance to her. She speaks of her love, while asking to accompany him to Cyprus, as;

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.
I saw Othello's visage in his mind
And to his honours and to his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate?
(1.3. 245-51)

But slowly and gradually the otherness of Othello gains importance, not with Desdemona, rather never with Desdemona, but with Othello himself. It was, for sure, Iago's villainous skills that made Othello accept the fact that he is a foreigner, an outsider, and especially a Black among the White. Bradley (1905:56) hits it right when he points that 'Iago's most artful and maddening device is to realize Othello that he is not a Venetian, nor even a European and that he is ignorant of the nature and thought of a Venetian woman who does not regard adultery a sin, therefore he should also accept the situation like a Venetian husband' (56). Bradley is even right

when he says that anybody in place of Othello would have trusted the reluctant warnings offered by an honest friend. But when Bradley (1905:155) declares 'his trust, where he trusts, is absolute', does he mean that Othello never trusted Desdemona? Did Othello only trust Iago in his life? Iago, who never was very close to Othello all of a sudden, became everything for him and Desdemona... nothing.

The Tragic Flaw

In effect, Othello appears never as a lover but at once as a husband. His love is calm, serene and happy as long as happy circumstances prevail, but the moment his love is disturbed by Iago's malignity, it changes into a fearful passion. Othello slips into the hands of his fate by giving up reason. He begins to be ruled by that single flaw of his personality and as he sinks into it, chaos prevails in his life. Then, he is unable to stop his fate from taking him over.

No doubt Iago deliberately keeps on stirring up the passions within his victim and pushes him on the path of his downfall. As when he charges to Iago that Cassio will not be alive for more than three days, Iago skillfully cries that he should let Desdemona live and there Othello determines to kill her, to "damn her" (3.3. 475). And when the thought of killing Desdemona grieves him, Iago very cunningly suggests that he should forgive her since if her offence does not injure him, he should not be worried about anybody; and Othello cries, "I will chop her into messes" ("Othello" IV, I, 199).

Othello, undeniably, lived in a wicked world. Dowden (1875:238) writes, 'Shakespeare would have us believe that as there is a passion for goodness with no motive but goodness itself, so there is also a dreadful capacity in the soul for devotion to evil independently of motive'.

Halliday (1958:251) discusses Othello's lack of self-knowledge as making him an easy prey for Iago, in these words, 'Self-pride becomes stupidity, ferocious stupidity, an insane and self-deceiving passion...Othello's noble lack of self-knowledge is shown as humiliating and disastrous...'. Jealousy is, without doubt, the darker aspects of Othello's personality. Thus, once activated by Iago's cunning craft, nothing could stop it. The third act of *Othello* is the finest display of the suffering, of the bursting agony, of the raging torture and of the uncontrollable pain. Othello is blindly challenged, attacked, assaulted and finally broken by Iago. Iago influences and controls the fallen Othello. He plays and enjoys, by putting more and more ideas into his head, like those of the handkerchief (4.1. 195), or Cassio's dream about Desdemona, "In his sleep I heard him say, Sweet Desdemona, let us hide our loves" (3.3. 475).

All this brought Othello's inner evil out and made it irrepressible and he turned wild. All he could think of was revenge. He is no more the same loving, trusting Othello who was full of integrity. Now he was full of hatred, anguish and dejection. Iago has succeeded and Othello's moral essence was completely destroyed. Thus, when Iago suggested strangling her in the bed that she has contaminated, instead of giving her poison, Othello replies: "Good, good; the justice of it pleases; very good" (4.1. 209).

As Othello proved it even earlier in case of Cassio that justice and love are separate values and out of these love is subordinate. Likewise as revenge always cries for justice and therefore here too Othello talks of that cunning justice that fits the offence regardless of the offender. In all three situations he is convinced he is administering justice, and so despite personal feelings: first on Cassio, who is not only his trusted subordinate but his friend; then on Desdemona whom he loves deeply; and finally on himself.

Othello was simply a passion's slave and never the executioner of God's justice. Actually he has no faculty for the curious inquiry of the complex facts; if his ears are poisoned, the poison hurriedly runs through his veins, which ultimately results in rage and agony. Swinburne (2003:93) remarks, 'Noble are the most blessed conditions of gentle Desdemona. Othello is yet nobler of the two; and has suffered more in one single pang than she could suffer in life or in death'.

But why did he let his temperament and ideals remain completely misfit? Why did he get his intellect confused and dulled? His pride, his self-centredness, his impulsiveness and his hot-headedness were the defects of his personality, which plunged him into the tremendous follies of his later action. Othello falls because he was deficient in prudence and discernment, because he was too open and credulous, and thus he fell prey to evil machinations. Likewise Desdemona falls because she was simple-minded and childish and too trustful, generous, considerate and indiscreet. Desdemona's flaw was her lack of intellect and tendency to reflect. She was so simple and innocent that on finding Othello behaving strangely in Act III, sc. iv, she considered some distressing business of the state to be the cause of his apparent anger. But the experienced Emilia wished that it might be so yet she comments from her wisdom that jealousy is such a monster that gets birth on itself and it needs no reason. Even then Desdemona did not understand anything, not even when she sees Othello's agitation about the handkerchief; since she had a blind faith and can never even dream of Othello to be jealous or suspicious about her.

Emilia. I would you had never seen him.

Desdemona. So would not I: my love doth so approve him

That even his stubbornness, his cheeks, his frowns-

.....-have grace and favour in them.

(5.3. 18-20)

Even then Bradley (1905:151) remarks:

His tragedy lies in this- that his whole nature was **indisposed to jealousy**, and was such that he was unusually open to deception, and, if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay and in most decisive manner conceivable.

But his virtues should not be allowed to obscure his limited feelings for others, his habit of self-deception, his egotism and his self-love, his constant need of reassurance (especially of being loved). Would that he had realized and regretted even after listening to the last words of Desdemona,

Emil. O, who hath done this deed?

Des. Nobody; I myself. Farewell!

[Dies.]

Oth. Why, how should she be murder'd?

Emil. Alas, who knows?

Oth. You heard her say herself, it was not I.

Emil. She said so: I must needs report the truth.

Oth. She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell:
 'Twas I that kill'd her.
 Emil. O, the more angel she,
 And you the blacker devil!
 Oth. She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore.

(5.2. 124-34)

It is astonishing that Othello is not thunder struck, not even startled to hear the dying words of a faithless wife. Othello's hard-heartedness surprises everyone who has read the play even once. Here for the only time, Othello's greatest supporter in the world of criticism, Bradley (1905:374) accepts that he does not feel sympathy for Othello. Othello regretted only when he got ample proof of everything. Here Othello was finally acting by his mind. But the problem is that here he should have acted by heart. When the troubled times started, he was always wrong in utilizing his faculties of heart and mind in the affairs related to his married life.

The Tragic End

His first speech can be compared to his farewell speech, in the former, he described the whole story of his love and courtship of his wife, and in the latter, he gives his reason for murdering of her. And here too, instead of admitting his dark trait, Othello tries to defend himself and says,

I pray you in your letters
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
 Speak of me as I am: nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice.

(5.2. 336-9)

These last words reveal an unpleasant streak of showmanship in his make-up. Therefore, defending Othello is not like defending Hamlet because where Hamlet does not want to be misunderstood; Othello does not want to be understood.

Hence, in his attempt to secure the approval of others for his own dubious behaviour, Othello provides his own pithy definition of himself as "one that lov'd not wisely, but too well"; and this as well can be argued, as it is essentially a dishonest apology, since he allowed his vices to override his virtues and became one who *loved neither wisely nor enough*.

Even if his suicidal act was a way of punishing himself in the way he punished Desdemona, he would have never said to Iago;

I'd have thee live;
 For, in my sense, 't is happiness to die.

(5.2. 289-90)

If he really wanted to punish himself he should have lived with public disgrace and personal guilt regretting all his life that he killed somebody who loved, rather worshipped him. He quickly

killed himself before even the moment of shame came over him. Therefore, Boyce (1990:471) concludes that by killing himself, 'Othello acknowledges his fault ... recovers something of his former nobility'. Boyce (1990:477) finds his final compensation to Desdemona in the form of suicide completely useless for her but as at least offering the readers and audience 'a cathartic sense of reconciliation with tragedy'.

However, Rymer (2003) complains, 'If this be our end, what boots it to be virtuous?' Johnson (1959) found the last scene unendurable; Bradley (1905) thought the play evoked feelings of depression; and Granville-Barker (1969) declared that it was a tragedy without meaning. It is not merely that an innocent woman is murdered –for Lady Macduff and Cordelia are as innocent and Ophelia's fate is equally undeserved- but that the hero himself is degraded and destroyed by the villainy of his sub-ordinate.

Conclusion

Othello is a worthy commander, a brave soldier, a faithful statesman, a trustworthy friend, a loving husband and a physically strong man; yet he was human. All the characters in the play, who speak of him and whenever they speak of him talk of his nobility. Brabantio, Lodovico, Montano, the duke, even Cassio, who has a good cause to hate him, praise him. Iago, the man who hates him and brings his downfall, confesses that the state could not withdraw Othello because he is the only of his calibre. But his general goodness and outward nobility should not be mistaken as the flawlessness of his character. In fact he was a man, an ordinary man who failed in life due to his own flaws and faults of which extravagant passion tops the list.

Othello, therefore, is the story of two people, who followed their hearts and in doing so, defied society yet the decision proved **wrong**.

Notes

1. The word 'Othello' is used in italics for the name of the play and otherwise for the name of the hero.
2. All the text quoted in the paper is taken from Muir, K. (ed). (1968). *Othello William Shakespeare (Text)*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.

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La réécriture des *Mille et Une Nuits* dans le roman algérien
contemporain. L'exemple des "1001 années de la nostalgie"
de Rachid Boudjedra.

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Il est admis que ce conte est un fleuron de la littérature universelle. L'écrivain Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Prix Nobel de littérature en 1982, et dont l'œuvre en est fortement imprégnée¹, considérait, à juste titre, que les *Mille et Une Nuits*, constituent l'œuvre monumentale par excellence. Sa traduction, en français, par Antoine Galland² (Une traduction qui s'était étalée de 1704 à 1777) a contribué largement à son rayonnement international. D'autres traductions, dans différentes langues européennes suivirent. Durant le dix-huitième siècle, il était le livre le plus lu en Europe après la Bible. L'imaginaire occidental, au contact de cette œuvre, s'est profondément métamorphosé. Cette fortune considérable s'est prolongée jusqu'à nos jours avec de multiples adaptations, transformations et réécritures. Sur les décombres d'un classicisme agonisant, aux références gréco-latines, émerge un nouvel horizon culturel et civilisationnel qui va exercer une influence inouïe sur l'Europe des Lumières et celle du dix-huitième siècle³. C'est l'Orient avec ses splendeurs, ses merveilles, ses contrastes, son exotisme et ses fabuleux trésors. Et c'est toute l'identité européenne qui se trouve ébranlée par cette altérité, source de fantasmes, de hantises, de peurs et d'émerveillement. Les conséquences de cette rencontre ne tardent pas à venir. Elles sont immenses à tous points de vue: imaginaire, art, littérature, culture, société, idéologie, etc. La rencontre avec l'Autre draine le meilleur et le pire. On ne fréquente pas impunément la diversité et la différence.⁴ Ainsi, l'épreuve de l'étranger⁵ fonde la connaissance, la co-naissance et la reconnaissance. Oeuvre de génie collectif et creuset des différentes cultures et civilisations (Indoue, perse, arabe, grecque), ces contes consacrent la dimension et la vocation "médiane" et intermédiaire de la civilisation arabo-islamique qui coule dans son moule et dans son génie les différentes temporalités et les différentes spatialités.

Des écrivains, des poètes, des dramaturges, des musiciens, des peintres, des cinéastes, des artistes, des illustrateurs, de par le monde, se sont passionnés pour ce conte afin d'exprimer leurs visions du monde, les grandes mythologies et les différentes sensibilités collectives des temps modernes.

Ce conte n'a jamais cessé de fasciner l'imaginaire universel et d'interpeller les créateurs de tout genre. Car il est, à l'instar du mythe, porteur d' "une très vieille parole où l'humanité se reconnaît depuis

longtemps et qu'elle veut charger de significations nouvelles", affirme André Breton.

L'immense richesse du conte, sa symbolique, sa flexibilité illimitée, son irradiation ont exercé un pouvoir illimité. Des sommités de la littérature mondiale, tels que Voltaire, Gautier, Henri de Régnier, Péric, Proust, Marquez, Borges, Taha Hussein, Tawfiq Al Hakim, Nadjib Mahfoud, pour ne citer que les plus illustres, ont puisé leurs inspirations aux sources vives et salvatrices des *Mille et Une Nuits*.⁶

L'étude des sources du conte révèle des origines brouillées mais riches en apports multiples et symbiotiques. A l'image de la civilisation arabo-islamique, il est le résultat de différents brassages de cultures et de civilisations. Sa présence est signalée, dès le dixième siècle. Mais son ancrage oral le confine dans le genre au divertissement. Cet ostracisme le maintient, en tant que genre mineur, des siècles durant, dans la marge, face à la littérature arabe classique de l'âge d'or. Hiam Aboul-Hussein et Charles Pellat notent à propos des *Mille et Une Nuits* que :

"Les Arabes, les considérant, en effet, comme un divertissement populaire indigne d'entrer dans la littérature, ne se préoccupèrent nullement d'en procurer une recension [...] après l'abandon par les copistes du premier manuscrit signalé au Xe siècle, et les narrateurs ne se firent pas faute, au cours des temps, de broder, de déplacer des contes et d'en ajouter de nouveaux, au gré de leur inspiration, à un ensemble qui ne fut jamais définitivement fixé. Cependant, certains conteurs d'une époque moins reculée, mirent par écrit dans leur répertoire pour parer aux défaillances de leur mémoire, et c'est ainsi que l'orientaliste français Antoine Galland [...] put recueillir suffisamment de manuscrits pour songer à entreprendre et à publier à partir de 1704, une traduction qui fut pour l'Europe une révélation et favorisa grandement l'orientalisme littéraire et artistique".⁷

Le contact avec l'Occident, dès le dix-neuvième siècle, a permis aux écrivains arabes de redécouvrir les fabuleux trésors enfouis dans leurs héritages. Les grandes figures emblématiques de la civilisation arabo-islamique sont ainsi réappropriées, réactivées et mises en valeur. Des textes prodigieux retournent à leurs aires culturelles originelles pour être chargées de nouvelles significations et de nouvelles mythologies. Mais ce retour est toujours ambivalent et problématique. Car l'histoire est irréversible et l'acculturation a fait son œuvre. Les *Mille et Une Nuits*, de nos jours, peuvent alors revendiquer une double appartenance : orientale et occidentale.

La littérature algérienne contemporaine, dans ses différentes expressions : roman, poésie et théâtre, a récupéré ce conte pour le

réactiver et le charger de nouvelles significations et de nouvelles visions du monde.

Le roman algérien contemporain, dans son souci de réaliser une maïeutique riche et vivante entre l'héritage narratif arabe et la narrativité moderne, s'est réapproprié ce conte pour lui insuffler vie et lui imprimer de nouvelles significations esthétiques, idéologiques et civilisationnelles. Sommé par l'Histoire, le romancier algérien parvient, grâce à ce conte, à dessiner les contours d'un imaginaire collectif, à figurer la sensibilité d'une époque et à fonder le mythe personnel de l'écrivain. L'engouement pour le conte est visible chez plusieurs romanciers algériens, notamment Wattar, Wacini et Boudjedra.

Et c'est dans cette perspective que Rachid Boujedra parvient à accomplir, dans son roman, *Les 1001 années de la nostalgie*, au titre particulièrement programmatique et significatif, tout un travail de réécriture⁸. La titrologie, en tant que sémiologie du titre, nous enseigne que le titre constitue le noyau dur de la signifiante. Il en est la programmation, la condensation, le modèle réduit et la mise en abîme. Le travail de transformation opéré sur le titre initial instaure une intertextualité riche, féconde et illimitée.

Le chiffre 1000 renvoie à la symbolique du nombre. Dans les structures anthropologiques profondes de l'être humain, ce nombre est associé à l'illimité et à l'infini. Sa conjugaison avec le futur fonde une vision euphorique du temps et de l'Histoire. Ici, le chiffre se veut fidèle et respectueux du modèle originel. L'ajout d'une nuit oriente la lecture vers l'innombrable, vers l'infini des nuits et vers tous les possibles. L'imaginaire peut ainsi triompher majestueusement et exercer sa liberté absolue.

Mais l'écriture ne se réalise pleinement que dans l'écart et l'Œdipe. L'horizon d'attente habituel est vite transgressé par le nouveau titre. Il ne s'agit plus de *Mille et Une Nuits*, mais de *Mille et une années de nostalgie*.

L'horizon se déplace vers la nostalgie, vers le mythe du "paradis perdu". Selon la théorie de l'information, une véritable information est toujours proportionnelle à son degré d'imprévisibilité. Le vocable "nostalgie" introduit l'idée de paradoxe et d'insolite. C'est-à-dire, un espace poétique qui va informer le texte de bout en bout.

Nous sommes confrontés donc à une intertextualité tout azimut qui s'empare du texte initial pour le démembrer, le parodier, le subvertir et le miner de l'intérieur. L'écrivain recourt à toute une stratégie d'écriture qui déconstruit les textes anciens pour construire sur leurs décombres un nouveau texte, grâce à l'alchimie de l'écriture.

Mais le travail de subversion ne peut éliminer l'origine et la « trace ». On ne fréquente pas impunément ce texte prestigieux et fondateur. Prendre quelque chose c'est être pris. C'est le phénomène de l'arroseur arrosé, comme on dit. Le palimpseste est toujours là inépuisable et incontournable.

Le discours romanesque trahit souvent, au plan de la forme, des techniques et des dispositifs narratifs plus ou moins inspirés par le conte, tels que les récits enchâssés, les micros récits, la duplication, la répétition (les formules ressassées et reprises indéfiniment), la circularité, la dégression et la multiplication des instances narratives. Il y a aussi le recours parfois au célèbre incipit "il était une fois", pour introduire un nouveau récit.

Ajoutons à cela que ce roman s'écrit comme un conte et exploite amplement les prodiges et les ressources du merveilleux, du fantastique et du surnaturel. L'influence du réalisme magique est considérable. Dans le conte, le surnaturel détermine la causalité, la succession des événements et leurs aboutissements. Le conte initial est peuplé de génies qui interviennent souvent pour infléchir aux événements une issue particulière. Ils sont répartis entre deux catégories : les génies bienfaisants et les génies malfaisants (en termes greimaciens, adjuvants et opposants).

Dans le roman, il n'y a aucune trace de ces êtres fantastiques qui président au destin des protagonistes. Certains de ces derniers tirent leurs forces et leurs qualités exceptionnelles de leurs dons, de leur intelligence et de leurs génies propres, à l'instar des personnages des contes philosophiques de Voltaire (notamment Zadig et Candide).

Il y a donc tout un travail de sécularisation et d'adaptation du conte de manière à l'expurger de ses éléments religieux et métaphysiques, conformément à l'idéologie de l'écrivain et à sa vision du monde. Cet humanisme fantastique met sa totale confiance en l'homme qui serait "la mesure de toute chose", comme l'affirment les penseurs grecs.

Le temps n'est pas linéaire. Il ne procède pas par enchaînement et successions. Il obéit au temps cyclique, celui du mythe de l'éternel retour. Une obsession centrale imprime à la dynamique du récit un va et vient constant entre les différentes temporalités. Ce mouvement affecte également l'espace qui n'est plus euclidien, mais un espace fragmenté, dédoublé, atomisé et irréel. En matière de temps et d'espace, tout est enchevêtré et imbriqué, qu'il est impossible de faire la part des choses, de séparer le réel de l'imaginaire et de démêler les écheveaux.

Le dialogue avec le conte ne s'arrête pas au niveau de la forme. Ainsi, au plan de la thématique, du contenu et de la vision du monde, le roman

adopte des positionnements et des perspectives qui constituent des métatextes et des textes réflexifs qui déconstruisent le conte pour en dynamiter la vérité, la portée idéologique et la légitimité. Le texte, dans ses micros structures, interroge les béances du conte pour fonder toute une archéologie du savoir et participer ainsi au débat controversé sur l'origine du conte et sur son historicité : Était-il "une œuvre collective écrite par le petit peuple de l'immense empire musulman de l'époque?"⁹ ou plutôt serait-il "réalisé par les marins de Basrah lorsqu'ils commencèrent à voyager en Inde et en Chine ? Eblouis par les deux civilisations, ils imaginèrent l'histoire une fois sur le chemin du retour. C'est pourquoi il y a tant de sirènes et tant de poissons fabuleux"¹⁰.

Sur un ton apologétique, Boudjedra fait l'éloge de cette civilisation qui a produit cette œuvre singulière. Il s'installe pleinement et fièrement au cœur de cette splendeur, à son âge d'or, pour la transmettre à l'Occident. Les apports indous et persans tant exhibés par les exégètes du conte sont refoulés des textes et occultés. Car il a choisi d'être le porte-voix et le porte parole de cette civilisation.

Le personnage de Cheherazade va connaître dans ce roman de multiples transformations et de multiples avatars. Ce personnage, souvent associé à l'exotisme, au harem, à l'esclavage et à l'asservissement de la femme par l'homme, va s'effacer progressivement dans le texte, pour permettre la naissance d'une nouvelle Cheherazade qui brille par son absence :

"Alors, il était une fois, non pas Cheherazade et ses *Mille et Une Nuits*, mais Hamdane Carmate et 164.615 jours. Dix-neuf ans après les Zindjs. En l'an musulman 289, le sous-prolétariat de Mésopotamie, déferla sur les villes, sous la direction de Hamdane Carmate. Les Carmates ne firent pas de quartier. Ils se répandirent partout [...] installèrent le communisme"¹¹.

Plus loin encore : "On était loin des *Mille et Une Nuits* qui n'avaient pas osé mettre en scène un dramaturge capable d'arrêter la pluie"¹².

Le roman se veut aussi une entreprise de démystification et de réflexion sur le conte et sur l'historiographie arabe. Il opère par distanciation, interrogation et transgression. Il se veut le surgissement et le dévoilement de " la partie cachée de l'iceberg"¹³. Au texte-opium du conte tant vénéré par les khalifes musulmans, parce qu'il les aide à endormir les peuples et à asseoir leurs dominations, il brandit un texte apocryphe et démystificateur. Il s'agit pour l'écrivain de démythifier le socle culturel arabo musulman et réécrire l'"histoire/Histoire autrement, à partir d'un nouvel imaginaire et de nouvelles interrogations et visions du monde (qui reflètent en réalité le mythe personnel de l'écrivain, le goût de

L'époque et l'esprit du socialisme triomphant des années soixante-dix en Algérie et dans le monde).

Ce discours romanesque ne se pose qu'en s'opposant. En effet, l'auteur s'inscrit contre tout un imaginaire occidental saturé et qui n'appréhende l'Orient qu'à travers des clichés, des stéréotypes et des représentations viciées à la base. C'est l'Orient des *Mille et Une Nuits* avec son imaginaire inouï, ses fantasmes, ses rêves, et sa volonté de puissance (élucidée magistralement par Edward Said)¹⁴ qu'il suggèrent et que l'auteur tente de démystifier en lui opposant un autre Orient, plus vrai, plus réel, plus poétique et plus fulgurant. Le texte tente de développer une sorte de contre-Orient¹⁵, c'est-à-dire un monde inédit et jamais soupçonné l'existence.

Et c'est dans cette perspective qu'on doit comprendre la farouche résistance des habitants de la petite ville de Manama au tournage d'un film américain sur *les Mille et Une Nuits* dans leur cité. Ils estiment que cette superproduction hollywoodienne accomplirait, au plan de l'imaginaire, une sorte de mise à mort symbolique de l'humanité orientale (l'Orient relégué au rang de musée exotique et ethnographique, devient le vestige et la trace d'une civilisation à jamais perdue). Ce film, financé par un monarque du Golfe consacre l'alliance sacrée entre l'impérialisme américain et le despotisme oriental moderne, dans le dessein d'endormir les peuples et de les infantiliser pour pérenniser l'assujettissement et la domination. Cette culture cinématographique de masse, participerait en tant qu'appareil idéologique d'Etat à cet asservissement et à cette aliénation.

Le compte devient de la sorte un espace dialogique où s'affrontent les discours, les idéologies et les imaginaires. Au "conte-opinion", la petite communauté oppose une autre version "apocryphe", révolutionnaire et vertigineuse. C'est l'Histoire basée sur la lutte des classes en tant que moteur de la vie et en tant que principe universel. D'où les références fréquentes aux insurrections des Zinjs et des Carmates. Le texte historique est récupéré par une nouvelle lecture et par une nouvelle interprétation. De ce fait, surgit du silence et des ténèbres une nouvelle Histoire inter-dite et occultée du monde musulman. Une Histoire tantôt épique, tantôt tragique, au gré des frémissements des empires, des Etats et des événements. Dans cette frénésie et dans cette folie meurtrière, les civilisations s'affrontent et se déchirent : "De cet Orient qui s'étendait jusqu'à l'Occident et où les civilisations se firent, à coups de dents, de griffes, de sabres et de cimenterres, en attendant les canons, la poudre et les fusils"¹⁶.

Le répertoire onomastique du roman révèle toute une stratégie dans la production du sens. En effet, les noms propres, loin d'être neutres, constituent le noyau dur de la signifiante. Ils fournissent au texte des générateurs et des constellations de sens. Ils relient l'infini petit à l'infiniment grand et programme la lisibilité du texte. En ce sens, ils jouent le rôle de métatexte. Ils trahissent également une multitude de références en rapport avec l'histoire, la culture, le mythe, le surnaturel, l'irrationnel, le ludique, etc. Le texte fait défiler devant nos yeux toute une galerie de noms illustres appartenant à la civilisation arabo-islamique, témoignant d'un ancrage culturel précis. Il introduit également des noms insolites et rébarbatifs pour créer une impression d'étrangeté, de dépaysement et de dérèglement des sens (et du sens). Le modèle onomastique des *Nuits* trouve quelques résonances dans le roman. Sa réactivation instaure une sorte de fidélité/trahison avec le texte originel. Certains noms à consonance perse (ce qui est le propre des *Nuits*) se sont imposés à l'auteur en tant que garants d'un effet de réel et d'une filiation, tels que : Cheherazade, Shahzaman, Chah, etc. Et c'est ce jeu de miroirs et ce simulacre qui participent activement à l'immortalisation du mythe.

L'oralité est tout à la fois femme, mère et nature. Le conte tente de concilier nature et culture, principe de plaisir et principe de déplaisir, "Eros et civilisation" pour paraphraser le titre d'un ouvrage de Herbert Marcuse.¹⁷ L'auteur s'installe pleinement avec jubilation dans cette dialectique qui tourne à plein. "Au début était le verbe" proclamait la Bible. Boudjedra.

Le texte permet ainsi l'émergence d'une oralité inédite, car organique, féministe et révolutionnaire. Et c'est elle qui va prendre en charge la narration du non-dit, du silence de l'indicible, du refoulé et de l'occulté. Dour, la femme du héros, conquérant et civilisateur, Mohamed SNP, par un glissement sémantique, et par un changement de rôles, va succéder à Schéhérazade disqualifiée et éjecté de l'imaginaire romanesque. La nouvelle narratrice se veut provocante et souveraine. « Alors Mohamed SNP demanda : Raconte-moi les *Mille et Une Nuits* ». Dour raconta. Faudrait-il te faire remarquer (..) que les femmes sont toujours plus intelligentes que les hommes ? Que les Noirs sont beaux et puissants ?¹⁸

La narratrice, devenue actrice et sujet de l'histoire produit les épopées des Zinjs, des Carmates et des récits tant étranges qu'insolites. De ce fait, cette oralité féminine et féministe, poussée à ses extrêmes limites parvient à libérer la féminité de la vie végétative de l'intra-muros, du terroir et du patriarcat¹⁹, pour dessiner les contours de la nouvelle géographie humaine et affronter l'Histoire-monde, et chanter avec le poète que « la femme est l'avenir de l'Homme ». Dans ce roman, la gent féminine occupe une place centrale. Elle régent la vie et décide de tout.

Messaouda la Bienheureuse, comme son l'indique, est l'être le plus redouté des monarques et des puissants.

Un matriarcat à fleur de texte esquisse de nouveaux horizons et figure une nouvelle utopie. L'exemple de la prise de parole de Dour, Une scheherazade métamorphosée, constitue une prise du pouvoir, de tous les pouvoirs. L'invention du récit en est le pouvoir suprême. Car inventer le récit, c'est inventer la vie.

Le personnage de Schéhérazade, compte tenu de ses ressources et de ses virtualités symboliques et imaginatives illimitées, est devenu, de nos jours, un mythe universel repris et réécrit indéfiniment. Les armes de l'intelligence et de l'imagination créatrice sont invincibles : « Avec *les Mille et Une Nuits*, écrit Marie Lahy-Hollebecque, nous assistons donc au duel de l'esprit contre la force, de la science contre l'ignorance, de la lumière contre les ténèbres²⁰

Les mythes foisonnent dans ce roman : mythe des origines, mythe du fondateur, mythe de la genèse, mythe de l'indifférencié, mythe de l'androgynie, mythe du voyage céleste et mythe cosmogonique, etc. Ainsi, *les Mille et Une Nuits*, même dans leurs expressions les plus fragmentaires et les plus élémentaires, parviennent dans ce roman à fonder toute une mythologie. Ceci illustre, si besoin est, la théorie de la mythocritique de Pierre Brunel²¹ qui fonde sa conception du mythe littéraire sur la triade : émergence, flexibilité et irradiation.

Boudjedra réécrit ce conte en lui insufflant un dynamisme nouveau et une nouvelle vie. Et le texte s'y prête aisément, en ce sens qu'il est scriptible, selon Barthes, et n'a jamais cessé de venir au monde. Les multiples transgressions et les différentes subversions contribuent au rayonnement du conte qui, à la manière du phénix, renaît chaque fois de ses cendres. Cet immortalité du conte répond un besoin irrésistible et insatiable chez l'homme et aux aspirations profondes de l'âme humaine. En ce sens qu'il est consubstantiel à l'existence humaine où s'affrontent les pulsions de vie et les instincts de mort, les puissances de la loi et celles du désir.²² C'est la figuration de l'éternel combat entre Eros et Tanatos.

Par le biais de ce conte remanié profondément, Boudjedra érige un mémorial au patrimoine arabo-musulman pour réhabiliter une civilisation grandiose dont l'apport au progrès humain est immense et aussi pour combattre les préjugés et l'incommunicabilité. En filigrane du texte se dessinent les contours d'une grande utopie : l'humanité de demain sera celle du dialogue, de l'échange, de la convergence et de la civilisation sans frontières.

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- ¹ Cette influence est surtout visible dans son roman *Cent ans de solitude*, traduit par Claude et Carmen Durant, Paris, Seuil, 1988.
- ² Antoine Galland (trad.) *Mille et Une Nuits*, Paris, Garnier – Flammarion, Paris, 1965, 2001
- ³ Jean Paul Germain, *Les Mille et Une Nuits en Orient et en Occident*, Paris, Desjonquères, 2009.
- ⁴ Aboubakr Chraïbi (dir.), *Les Mille et Une Nuits en partage*, Arles, Paris, Actes-sud, Sindbad, 2004
- ⁵ Antoine Berman, *L'Epreuve de l'étranger*. Paris, Gallimard, 1984
- ¹ Christine Achour, *Les Mille et Une Nuits et leurs réécritures au XX^e siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004
- ² Hiam Aboul-Hussein et Charles Pellat, *Cheherazade, personnage littéraire*, Alger, SNED, 1981, 2^{ème} éd. PP. 8.9
- ¹ Christiane Achour, "L'envers des *Mille et Une Nuits*, selon Boudjedra", dans *Boudjedra, Une poétique de la Subversion* de Hafid Gafaïti (dir), Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, tome II, pp.217-236
- ⁹ Rachid Boudjedra, *Les 1001 années de la nostalgie*, Paris, Denoël, 1979, pp. 213
- ¹⁰ Ibid, pp.213.214
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 256
- ¹² Ibid, p.256
- ¹³ Ibid, p.252
- ¹⁴ Edward Saïd, *L'Orientalisme. L'Orient créé par l'Occident*, Paris, Seuil, 1980
- ¹⁵ Jean-Paul Charnay, *Les Contre-Orients*, Paris, Sindbad, 1981.
- ¹⁶ Rachid Boudjera, op.cit. p.96
- ¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros et civilisation*, Paris, Minuit, 1963
- ¹⁸ Rachid Boudjedra, Op. cit, p.235
- ¹⁹ Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, *Les Mille et Une Nuits où la parole prisonnière*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.
- ²⁰ Marie Lahy-Hollebecque, *Le Féminisme de Shéhérazade : La révélation des Mille et Une Nuits*, Paris, Radot, 1927, p.20
- ²¹ Pierre Brunel, *Mythocritique. Théorie et parcours*, Paris, Puf, 1992
- ²² Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, Op.cit.