Othello’s Inferiority Complex

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Abstract: The paper tries to interpret Othello’s ridiculous action of killing his innocent wife from the perspective of his physiological defect—-inferiority complex which is shown in three aspects: self-pride, lack of confidence, self-centered.

Key words: Inferiority complex self-pride self-centered

Othello is one of Shakespeare’s Four Great Tragedies. Many readers and critics center on the leading character---Othello, and try to interpret his motivations and reasons of his killing of his wife, Desdemona. Coleridge thinks that “Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago”(Coleridge, 247). Luo Yiwen, professor in Sichuan University, holds the view that “Othello kills Desdemona out of love” (Luo, 112). Someone tries not to relate his killing to revenge. Siegel says that “when Othello comes to kill Desdemona, he does so in the exalted mood of being about to render divine justice, not to perform revenge” (Siegel, 1957: 128). Others emphasize Othello’s disadvantages in his nature. F.R. Leavis takes it for granted that “Othello’s noble lack of self knowledge is shown as humiliating and disastrous”. “Othello dies belonging to the world of action in which his true part lay” (Leavis, 251). Someone expresses the suspicion of Othello’s love to Desdemona. D.A. Traversi gives account in his essay that “his (Othello’s) happiness in the opening scene is like everything else in his character, self-centered, naive, even egoistic; It was, in fact, by his passionate, simple-minded delight in his own magnificent career that he won her” (Traversi, 211).

The views above sound reasonable in interpreting the causes of his killing. However, they pay much attention to the external causes. As a matter of fact, one’s internal motivation is of more severe significance in guiding one’s behavior. It is probable that Othello’s ridiculous action of killing his innocent wife lies in his physiological defect—-inferiority complex, which could not be overcome easily by one, especially by Othello. Inferiority Complex refers to a state of mind when one feels oneself of less value than others, sometimes resulting in avoiding other people, sometimes in one’s trying to attract attention (Longman, 573). Inferiority complex is shown in three aspects: self-pride, lack of confidence, self-centered.

Othello was born of a lower origin. In the play, he is called a Moor. Many critics have argued fiercely about his skin color—-whether he is black or not. A.C. Brandley thinks that Shakespeare “imagined Othello as a black, and not as a light brown one”(Brandley, 249). No matter how the arguments have been proceeded, there is one thing that can be confirmed---Othello is at least not a White. That is to say, it is rather difficult for him to be recognized in the White Christian world. He must be aware that he could not gain the equal chances as a White. As a colored person and pagan in the Christian world, he must pay much greater effort if he wants to be recognized. His unfavorable situations determine that he probably feels inferior in his mind. Once he gets successful in his position, he will go to another extreme---he looks extremely proud externally. His self-pride is a good means to cover his inferiority.

Othello’s self-pride wins him his beautiful wife, but it is also a potential threaten to the final tragedy. His
position is a great attraction to the upper class, though he is of Moorish blood. The constant invitation by Brabantio offers him an opportunity to get in touch with Desdemona. His self-pride prompts him to tell her his bitterness, many of his adventures and great deeds in fighting, which can arouse one’s sympathy and admiration easily, especially the girl’s. His self-pride helps him gain the admiration of the duke and the senator. The more Brabantio oppose to their marriage, the more Othello wants to get Desdemona. As a result, he is successful in winning Desdemona. However, self-pride makes him determine to act once it is to be challenged. As a pagan and colored, he is afraid greatly of being despised by others. Desdemona’s so-called “unfaithfulness” would be a great humiliation to him, which blinds him to lose power of rationality.

The second aspect of one’s inferiority is that one lacks of confidence. If he is not confident of himself, he will become sensitive; if he is too sensitive, he will surely be very suspicious. Othello’s Moorish blood determines his inferiority in his mind. Although he is high in his rank, he cannot be regarded equally as the Venetians themselves. Desdemona’s passionate love to him makes Othello bewildered, because Desdemona was born of noble origin. Her beauty, her innocence and graceful manners attract a lot of pursuers. Othello is lucky enough to marry Desdemona. The remarkable distinction is the direct cause in Othello’s lack of confidence to keep Desdemona faithful to him forever. In this way, he is easy to be gullible. He would rather believe in Iago than in his wife. The more Desdemona sings praise of Cassio, the more disgusted and suspicious Othello feels. The normal persuasion becomes abnormal in the mind of Othello. He loves Desdemona heart and soul, but his lack of confidence prevents him from trusting Desdemona. He is afraid of losing his wife, of being humiliated. If he were a White Venetian in the upper class, he might not mind her wife’s contacting with other men so much, and he might ignore Iago’s lies. Therefore, lack of confidence might lead to sensitivity, which leads to suspicion, which leads to his extreme behavior.

A man of inferiority often appears self-centered. A self-centered man possesses the egoistic elements in his nature so that he has a strong desire to own something. Once he feels that he cannot lose what he owns, he will usually go to extremes. That is, other people must not have it if he cannot own it. This is, in fact, an embodiment of his selfishness.

The egoistic elements in Othello’s love are understandable, but he is possessed with egoism so powerfully that he becomes extremely jealous of any male who approaches to Desdemona. His internal jealousy is stirred out by Iago’s “reasonable and true” lies before his ears. His egoism makes him become rather irrational. It seems to him in his blinded eyes that everything that Desdemona does shows her unfaithfulness. Her “unfaithfulness” is a great challenge to his self-centered mind. Since he cannot own her body and soul, it would be unimaginable if Desdemona were owned by others. His egoistic elements in love promote and accelerate his drastic action.

The tragic ending is inevitable owing both to the internal causes and external forces. It is mainly due to Othello’s inferiority complex that Desdemona dooms to be tragic in her fate. It is too late when Othello is aware of it. Only when one is able to overcome such complex, can he control himself in his behaviors and actions. The great gap confronted between different races, different classes and different social status is the most probable element to be of great inferiority complex. It is a great task for mankind to eradicate such distinctions between people. If everyone were equal both spiritually and physically, the word “inferiority complex” would disappear forever.

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