

# Othello, “Dull Moor” of Cyprus: Reading Racial Trauma and War Trauma

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*Outside, the sun shines.  
Inside, there's only darkness.  
The blackness is hard to describe,  
as it's more than symptoms.  
It's nothing that becomes everything there is.  
Justin Ordonez, Sykosa*

## I. Introduction

The concept of trauma has emerged as a key concept in our lives and consequently literature in the twentieth century which is marked by gloomy concepts such as terror, horror, and agonies of heart; historical violences such as World War I, World War II, atomic bomb attacks, and civil wars; social troubles such as domestic violence, sexual abuses, and child labor; and economic crises and, eventually, natural disasters. Representations of these concepts and events in the form of movies, fictions, documentaries, and news bulletins shaped the worldview of the twentieth century man. Shoshana Felman describes the age very well when she remarks that the age is “the age of testimony” (Felman and Laub 5), which is notorious for being marked by millions of trauma victims, the survivors of various catastrophes, who have miserable histories within themselves, which are like an airplane’s “black box” which has witnessed the final moments before the crises (Berger 571).

The word trauma comes from Greek, meaning wound, but it is a very strange form of wound as in psychoanalysis it is a wound inflicted upon the mind and not upon the body. Freud understands trauma as “a theory of the peculiar incomprehensibility of human survival” (qtd. in *Unclaimed Experience* 49) and Lois Tyson defines it as “a painful experience that scars us psychologically” (21).

According to *The Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2009), "trauma is a condition that arises from exposure to extraordinary life-threatening events; these conditions are marked by chronic arousal, emotional numbing, and avoidance of reminders of trauma and intrusive thoughts or dreams related to trauma events" (Doctor and Shiromoto 276). Finally, Caruth defines it as "peculiar and uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them" (qtd. in Wolfreys 134).

Traumatized individuals are victims to a painful history, who have undergone a catastrophic experience in the past and are frequently being haunted by its return in different forms of hallucinations; they do not feel normal like other people as they think they have been alienated. They are frequently reconstructing the catastrophic moment's memory as they cannot forget it and cannot even define it, because "trauma turns out to be not an event per se but rather the experiencing or remembering of an event in the mind of an individual" (Micale and Lerner 20). The victim desperately tries to forget the painful memory, because according to Freud not thinking about trauma gives more pain and suffering than the memory itself, "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (qtd. in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 9). After a period of latency, that is to say, "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (7), the survivor successively moves from remembering the event to its repression; to having to face it; this tortures and splits his mind. This breach in the mind is caused, Freud suggests, by "lack of preparedness to take the stimulus that comes too quickly" (qtd. in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 53). At the moment of crisis, the victim is unaware and, therefore, unprepared; s/he is only busy surviving the event; the traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment of crisis but, belatedly, at a different time and place. Freud argues that a victim of car crash, as an example of a traumatized individual, is not conscious at the moment of crisis; "the person gets away apparently unharmed", but re-experiences the event more strongly and more devastatingly later on at a later stage (qtd. in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 7).

Literature and literary characters can reflect the characteristics of real trauma victims well; literary characters speak of the pain the real victim cannot communicate; in fact, reading about fictive traumatized characters will help with the impossible sayings to get a voice and "since the trauma of fictional characters take place in a highly controlled, artistic way in the literary world, the impact of fictional characters' trauma on the reader is much more mediated and controlled" (Hwangbo 5). Readers of literary works use these works to develop their understanding of their own inner lives and, in this way they achieve a kind of self-

discovery. Trauma victims, by transforming their traumatic and unsayable memories into narration, will find a soothing way to, at least partially, master their traumas. In this regard, drama is considered as a proper genre in which trauma and its effects on human community are discussed. In drama, performance leads the audience to delve deep into the layers of a play and makes them sympathize and empathize with the characters onstage.

In his paper, "Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma" (2007), Patrick Duggan describes how a performance made him remember and re-experience his own personal trauma. He is of the opinion that "theatre more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with trauma" (46), because of the physical presence of the characters on the stage which together create better intrapersonal connections. And, in his book, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (2001), Philip Armstrong argues that psychoanalysis and tragedy can cooperate with each other in order to heal psychic insecurities such as trauma, since "both offer a form of psychic hygiene in which the repressed can be gratified safely and without threat to either the social order or the individual ego" (29).

In this article, we have attempted to study *Othello* in the light of race and war trauma theories. Mention must be made of the fact that amongst Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Othello might seem to be the least traumatized, because the play has nothing to do with the hallucinations, traumatic hauntings, and other ghostlike recollections which exist in Shakespeare's other major tragedies. A careful and meticulous reader might think that *Othello* begins in medias res, because there have been lots of events pertaining to Othello's origin, career, slavery, and other dangerous adventures before the beginning of the play. The protagonist of the play has had a chaotic past, a traumatized character before the play starts. A. C. Bradley believes that amongst Shakespeare's tragedies, "*Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible" (176), because it is replete with vices, villainy, fear, and pity. This tragedy of intrigue depicts the glorious life of a brave Moor, his downfall, and finally his tragic end. The play does not explicitly relate to trauma as it deals with hidden traumas. At this stage, it is worth remembering that normal post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is different from a race-based trauma:

Nor is a race-based traumatic stress reaction a complex PTSD (C-PTSD), involving repetitive traumas of great magnitude over a long time. Like C-PTSD, race-based traumatic disorders alter the character of the person because of the chronic and noxious element present. But a key difference is that in C-PTSD the stressor is overt and severe (e.g., continuous physical abuse of a child), whereas in most race-based disorders, the stressor is subtle or disguised. (Miller 42)

This article discusses Othello’s hidden traumas inflicted upon him because of his race, and their negative effects on the other characters in the play. Scholars have already read *Othello*’s major characters through the lenses of psychoanalysis. They have put emphasis on issues such as jealousy in the character of Othello and mentioned racial inferiority complex in him; accordingly, what we are planning to do in this article is to relate these psychological signs to trauma and highlight one newer trauma regarding Othello: his war trauma. We will also examine the ways other psychological problems such as jealousy and inferiority complex can trigger more severe problems such as traumatic disorders, because “trifles light as air, / Are to the jealous confirmations strong” (3.3.323).

## II. Discussion

Othello is one of Shakespeare’s most bewildering characters as he is a mixture of contraries, opposites, and paradoxes. He is black, at the same time he is noble. He is a military general who attends several wars and engages with adventures of various sorts; therefore, he is gratified by Venetian society and appointed as the governor of Cyprus; yet, despite his soldierly behavior, he falls in love with soft, delicate, and beautiful Desdemona and the two marry despite Desdemona’s father’s disapproval. Finally, their conjugal life undergoes threats due to hidden effects of unresolved racial and war traumas in his character.

In his paper entitled, “Freud on Shakespeare: an Approach to psychopathic Characters” (2012), Chin-jung Chiu applies Freud’s general psychoanalytic perspective to Shakespeare’s *Othello* about which Freud had not written anything. He refers to the psychological term “Othello Syndrome”, coined by English psychiatrist John Todd, which means sexual jealousy from which the hero and the play suffers. In medical terms, “Othello Syndrome” can be defined as:

delusion of infidelity of a spouse or partner. The Othello Syndrome affects males and, less often, females. It is characterized by *recurrent accusations of infidelity, searches for evidence, repeated interrogation* of the partner, tests of the partner’s fidelity, and sometimes stalking ... As in *Othello*, the play by Shakespeare, the syndrome can be highly dangerous and results in disruption of a marriage, homicide and suicide. (qtd. in Chiu 49)

Chiu continues to say that Othello was a narcissistic person who loved Desdemona because she overvalued his glories: “She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d, / And I lov’d her that she did pity them” (1.3.67-68). Chiu believes that Othello’s self-loving was the result of his inferiority complex; he probably overestimates his

abilities in order to forestall any underestimation on behalf of the others. Othello's jealousy, investigated by Iago's villainy, made him vulnerable to psychological threats. Bradley argues that "such jealousy as Othello's convert[s] human nature into chaos and liberates the beast in man" (178). He was used to being praised by Desdemona and required her full attention, but when he realized that Desdemona praised Cassio as well and was reciprocally being praised by Cassio, the flames of jealousy rose in him and liberated the beast in him. At the time when Desdemona remarked that her "noble Moor, / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness, / As jealous creature are" (3.4.25-27), Othello was struggling with numerous psychological disorders which caused extreme jealousy. Othello's idealized image of himself was in his triumphs, both in war and love, but when this image was shattered because he was fooled to believe that Desdemona was infidel, he lost the self-confidence with which he had confronted Desdemona's father in the trial scene and came to realize that he was not what he wished to be. The ideological feelings of inferiority comes to a climax when he contemplates that three main defects in his character made Desdemona betray him: his black skin color, his old age, and his inability in conversing with white noble people: "Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation, / That chambers have, or, for I am declin'd, / Into the vale of years" (3.3.263-66). Chiu is right when he concludes that "Othello breaks down because he realizes, albeit unconsciously, the discrepancy between his idealized image and his true self" (51).

Chui diagnoses Othello with suffering from jealousy but we shall argue that he was not jealous; in fact his sense of confidence and belief foundations were shattered due to a wicked conspiracy perpetrated by Iago, which led to his downfall. Othello was an honest and trustful person, and he wrongly believed in Iago's honesty; whenever, in the play, he called Iago, he emphasized his honesty: "He is a good one, and his worthiness, / Does challenge much respect" (2.1.208); "Iago is most honest" (2.3.6); and "This fellow is of exceeding honesty" (3.3.258). Othello was deeply in love with Desdemona and was very close to his lieutenant, Cassio. Therefore, it was Iago's plan to target and misuse these two characters in order to influence Othello. With a villainous plot, and by stigmatizing Desdemona and Cassio, he deceived everyone: "put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgment cannot cure" (2.1.300-02). With regard to this issue, A. C. Bradley remarks,

No doubt the thought of another man's possessing the woman he loves is intolerable to him; no doubt the sense of insult and the impulse of revenge are at times most violent; and these are the feelings of jealousy proper. But these are not the chief or the deepest source of Othello's suffering. It is the wreck of his faith and his love. (194)

Judith Herman states that the collapse of faith and beliefs is like a traumatic event in one’s life and can be as destructive as traumatic events which “undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith” (qtd. in Duggan 46). Othello was a determined person who could find solutions to all sorts of problems: “A natural and prompt alacrity, / I find in hardness” (1.3.232-33), but he was so paralyzed by villainy that he could not make a logical decision as how to forgive Cassio who did not commit a major offence. Returning victoriously from war with the Ottoman foe, he is vulnerable to the clashes and conflicts in his already traumatized mind.

Othello might be jealous, but there seems to be something more severe than that about him. Racially, he was an “Other” which made him vulnerable to psychological threats in a white community. His Otherness was beneficial, yet it was, at the same time, destructive for him: it was beneficial, because it made him a man of mystery and of a different mindset, who was brave and soldierly. He had a different way of speech: “Rude am I in my speech, / And bless’d with the soft phrase of peace” (1.3.81-82). In his book, *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video, and Art* (1997), Timothy Murray takes Othello’s rude speech and reaction as a defense strategy which he uses to “fascinates his Venetian auditors, to fix their wondrous gaze on his visage and their captive ears on his unbookish, but practiced tales of violent cultural differentiation” (63). It was his different eloquence that made the Venetian senators give him such titles as “the valiant Moor” (1.3.47) and “brave Moor” (1.3.292). His ability in recounting war memoirs was the key for seducing Desdemona who rejected “many proposed matches, / Of her own clime, complexion, degree” (3.3.230-31), in order to marry a distinguished black Moor; she exhibited her deep admiration for his mind and bravery with these terms: “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honours and his valiant parts, / Did I my soul and fortune consecrate” (1.3.252-54). But his race and color and the outburst of his masculine, warlike behavior were features which acted to his disadvantage.

## II. 1. Racial Trauma

In his 2010 commentary on *Othello*, Harold Bloom includes a chapter on the concept of “alienation” in Othello. He divides Othello’s critics into three groups: first, those who “tended to ignore or underplay the issue of Othello’s race” (43) and considered his race to be an unimportant issue, compared to his character; second, those who emphasized the blackness of Othello as an evidence for his savage and violent behavior; “for such critics the play is a study of a character whose innate savagery is disguised by a thin veneer of civilization and Christianity” (44); and

third, those who praised Shakespeare for his sympathy with a minority subject in the Elizabethan society (ibid).

However, in this article, we have tried to take a different outlook with regard to the play, in order to trace the symptoms of a race-based trauma in Othello. It will be shown that Shakespeare was already conscious about human being's psychological disorders which are caused by the surrounding society and individuals.

In discussing Othello's racial trauma, it is noteworthy to remember that this kind of trauma is different from the other kinds. Here we might switch our definition of trauma from that provided by Caruth: "[trauma is] an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (*Unclaimed Experience* 15), to a race-based definition of trauma given by Kai Erikson: "trauma has to be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from persisting condition as well as from an acute event" (3). This means that trauma is not solely created by a violent event as it can be caused by a recurrent oppression such as racial discrimination. Racial trauma is an invisible sort of trauma which can also be "the result of constant stress and a prolonged exposure to the ever-present threat of oppression and humiliation," and is "different from those resulting from one distressing incident" (Hwangbo 6). These marginalized victims feel disoriented, discontented, dislocated, and finally isolated, who cultivate a sense of alienation from themselves and from others. They are the weak members of a racially-oriented society, and the burden of trauma aggravates their vulnerability to it. Othello was vulnerable to Iago's temptations, because he had already been traumatized. In fact, it is the racist attitudes and remarks of the Venetians, which shape Othello's tragedy. Othello was being praised by the Duke and senators, just because he obediently fought for them. But he was also "From men of royal siege" (1.2.22), the descendent of a mysterious family line which was different from others. Othello disclosed this when he was recounting the story of the mysterious handkerchief, his love token to Desdemona; the handkerchief was a gift from Othello's mother who got it from an Egyptian. Othello remarks, "there's magic in the web of it, / A Sybil, that had number'd in the world, / . . ., / In her prophetic fury sew'd the work" (3.4.69-72); Othello gave the handkerchief to Desdemona as a sign of permanent love between the two. This demonstrates how distinguished his ancestors were. There exist other peculiarities in Othello: his numerous battles and the story of his slavery, which add to the mysteriousness of this alienated Shakespearean hero.

While reading *Othello*, the reader recognizes that Othello is an outsider in a white community. This is felt when, in act one of the play, Iago and Rodrigo imparted racist and insulting titles such as “thick-lips” (1.1.66), “old black ram” (1.1.88), “Barbary horse” (1.1.110), “lascivious Moor” (1.1.125), and “erring barbarian” (1.3.356) to Othello. It was not only Iago and Rodrigo who called Othello with racist remarks; Brabantio also expresses his racist opinions when he cannot believe that his daughter might have “run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou; to fear, not to delight” (1.2.70-71). Edward Berry believes that even Emilia has cultivated racist views regarding Othello. She was not in any remarkable communication with Othello; but after Desdemona’s murder, she raged at Othello and cried: “O! the more angle she, / And you the blacker devil” (5.2.129-30). Concerning the outburst of Emilia, Berry asserts, “her savages and reductive outburst of racist feeling at this crucial moment in the play enables audience to vent and, ideally, to exorcise their own latent hostility, as well as their suspicions that Othello would eventually conform to type [of a black savage]” (qtd. in *William Shakespeare’s Othello* 48). He is rarely called by the name Othello, and almost everyone calls him the Moor. The other less racist characters such as the senators and the Duke lessen the title’s negative tone by calling him “the noble Moor” (2.3.138), “the valiant Moor” (1.3.47), and “brave Moor (1.3.188), which still denotes Othello’s black skin color and connotes his non-western, non-white origins.

The sense of alienation and selflessness, in a modern sense, is very tangible in *Othello*: the actions of the play mostly take place in Cyprus, an isolated island which symbolizes Othello’s loneliness; he was the governor of this isolated island which represented his isolated self. But unlike in his war victories, he was not anymore successful in doing his duties as a governor. In her book, *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead maintains, “Othello’s preoccupation with proving himself equal of his Venetian masters and his anxious desire to integrate into Venetian society derive from his failure to come to terms with his own former slavehood” (95). He had an unresolved racial trauma which created a sense of self-loathing and this led ultimately to a dangerous sense of hating others. Psychologically speaking, he who does not like himself cannot like others. We love others, because we love ourselves, first. We feel pity towards others, because we pity ourselves, first. In this regard, Bloom remarks that “[H]aving been convinced of Desdemona’s treachery, Othello projects his self-loathing upon her” (55).

Othello did not belong to the white society in which he was living; he was considered as the dark shadow of the honored Venetians. His sudden outburst and his violent behavior towards Desdemona are signs of his savage passions because of his Moorish race; Bradley attributes Othello’s suspiciousness towards his wife to



his oriental roots (186). Though Othello tried to adapt himself to the Venetian culture, he was unsuccessful: “when the otherness or alienation caused by trauma is too much to bear, it erupts as a violent acting out” (Hwangbo 12), thus he savagely snubbed Desdemona out. Though Othello was an eloquent speaker who in the opinion of Bradley was “the greatest poet” (188) among Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, he did not have the language to speak his unspeakable racial pain. For a victim of trauma, “silence is the proper response . . . [but] not to speak is [also] impossible” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 154). Othello wanted to express his pain, but for him, as a trauma victim, narration of a comprehensible story was impossible despite the reality of the story; and this begs for the crucial need for a literature which contains the language for the silenced and sometimes marginalized trauma victims.

As far as psychoanalytical studies are concerned, the repressed feelings, attitudes, and experiences will certainly return to haunt the present, but there is always a barrier which still prevents the haunting. In *Othello*, there was a defensive wall between the black Moor and the society and since this wall “is set up to prevent the return of repressed . . . the Other provokes anxiety, and fear” (Hwangbo 9); As a soldier, Othello was brave enough in the battle fields but, as an individual, he was not secure in the white society. He did not rank on the social level, with delicate and gentle Desdemona; Iago enumerates Cassio’s merits which are lacking in Othello, with such terms: “the knave is handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after” (2.1.245-47). It was evident from the very beginning of the play that Othello’s social position was insecure despite his admirable capabilities, and therefore he could be abused. He was conscious that his rank did not match with his present vulnerable situation and that he was a different sort of person who belonged to nowhere: a “wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere” (1.1.138-39). Shakespeare created a tragic character whose racial trauma, nourished with public villainies, weakened him and led to his tragic flaw. Whitehead believes that “. . . the pressures placed upon him rendered his life a tragedy (*Trauma Fiction* 95); it was this society that created the perception of Othello as an “Other”.

Throughout his life, Othello had to repress his anger due to his Moorish origins. His anger was always pushed back and repressed because he was expected to be noble and behave like a real soldier. He had a dark skin and had to be more careful about his behavior in a white community. Othello tried hard to adjust himself to the Venetian society because “he is either assimilated into Europe or expelled from humanity” (Bloom 46). No one could believe that Othello beat Desdemona in the presence of others. When Iago hears about Othello’s violence against Desdemona, he exclaims astonishingly, “Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon, / When it

hath blown his ranks into the air, / And, like the devil, from his very arm / Puffed his own brother; and can he be angry?” (3.4.132-135). Iago is cunningly suggesting that Othello is a coarse and rough character. Lodovico also expresses his surprise when he hears that Othello’s hitherto suppressed anger is disclosed; he says, “Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate, / Call all-in-all sufficient? Is this the nature, / Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue, / The shot of accident nor dart of chance, / Could neither graze nor pierce” (4.1.260-64). Some critics might call it self-control, but it seems that repression of a desire could be a better name for the description of the above quotation. Othello was very much reserved because of his unsafe position as a good general and, primarily, as a suspect marginal, and Iago took advantage of Othello’s reservations.

*Othello* is embellished by some very significant symbols. As discussed above, the setting of the play moves from Venice, a populated ancient city, to Cyprus, an isolated island. It is worth repeating that the island’s isolation and its war distress symbolize Othello’s isolated, race-conscious, and traumatized self. Othello is appointed as the governor of this isolated island (which symbolizes his own isolated self), but he is unsuccessful to overcome its chaotic and traumatized atmosphere. Light and darkness are recurrent symbols in Shakespeare’s plays. In *Othello*, there are several allusions to candles, torches, and light which stand as the white authority upon the black and dark nature of prejudiced Othello. In the first scene of the play, Brabantio’s asking for light – “Strike on the tinder, / Give me a taper” (1.1.139-40) or “Light! I say light” (1.1.143) – reflects the dark shadow of Othello’s self which Brabantio wishes to resist by calling for light. The white characters usually appear with light, candles, and torches and if Othello asks for light, it is because he hopes to whiten his blackness. The most beautiful light imagery occurs in the beginning lines of the last scene where Othello enters Desdemona’s bedroom with the light. In poetically beautiful yet desperate lines Othello utters the word “light” five times. By “light” in the phrase, “Put out the light” (5.2.7), Othello meant the prosperous life of Desdemona who was a member of the white community; the light was going to be extinguished and fair Desdemona was to be murdered by black Othello’s darkness. He enters the room with a light to extinguish the light of guiltless Desdemona’s life.

Turning from the hero to the heroine of the play, we perceive that Desdemona is extremely passive, helpless, and, of course, traumatized. She is a pure, selfless, and beautiful woman: “she’s full of most / blessed condition” (2.1.249-50) and, importantly, she is in deep love with Othello. A. C. Bradley describes Desdemona in this manner,

There is also, in addition to her perfect love, something which is very characteristic. She is, in a sense, a child of nature. That deep inward division which leads to clear and conscious oppositions of right and wrong, duty and inclination, justice and injustice, is alien to her beautiful soul . . . . She seems to know evil only by name. (205)

As described by her father, she was “a maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself” (1.3.95-97). Pointing to the murder scene and the scenes in which Desdemona is humiliated by Othello, or the scene where Othello strikes Desdemona, Bradley states that these scenes are “the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us” (179). In fact, this is true because in these scenes, Desdemona is traumatized by Othello’s attitude and, like Hamlet’s Ophelia, she is trapped in the abyss of her partner’s trauma. She had a “guiltless death” (5.2.119) and was the victim of false accusations. In this play, there are three women who are extremely in love with and in service of their male loves, and all become mad and traumatized in the absence of these men. Like Ophelia who sings after being rejected and traumatized, Desdemona desperately sings the song of the willow in the hope of being heard by outraged Othello with whom she is still in love. Like the traumatized Macbeth couple, Desdemona hears illusionary sounds of knocking which is only the blow of wind. These hallucinations are the evident and immediate symptoms of an unresolved trauma. She becomes traumatic, because, gradually and piecemeal, it becomes known to her that her husband is traumatic.

Desdemona’ naivety is a source to stimulate Othello’s jealousy. Instead of designing a cunning plan to restore Cassio, she openly asks her husband to restore a man who gets drunk easily, who is responsible for a brawl, and who loses his general in the war. She is too innocent and too gullible to defend such a fallible person against her raging husband. “She attempts to win [Othello’s] favor by coyness and indirection” (Bloom 49). In the first scenes of the play, she demonstrates a brave and active woman who prefers to go to Cyprus with Othello and not to stay at home in Venice, but after being psychologically and physically hurt by Othello, she is numbed and paralyzed. Her passiveness results from trauma, because “traumatic incidents thus overwhelm the memory-making facilities of the person to create a numbness close to the event” (Jennings 50). In fact, numbness is the first reaction of the victim when confronted with the reality of his / her trauma. Instead of taking action against Othello’s rage, she submissively continues loving him and lets him expand his anger to the point that he murders her. In the last moments of her life, while nearly dead, Emilia asks Desdemona who committed this act and she gives her a response by admitting her own fault and passiveness:

"Nobody: I myself; farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell"  
(5.2.121-22).

After being duped by Iago, Othello changes his sweet and soft language to a harsh one when meeting Desdemona. The former "gentle love" (2.3.237) and descent lady are now nothing more than a "lewd minx" (3.3.476) and a licentious woman. It is important to note that after being deceived by Iago's plot, Othello attributes the racial defects he is accused of, in the trial scene, to Desdemona; "her name, that was as fresh / As Diana's Visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (3.3.387-89). This implies that Othello himself is aware of his black skin.

## II. 2. War Trauma

So far this article has focused on the review of literature which generally distinguished racial trauma as being the main defect of Othello. *Othello* henceforth will be read as a play which invisibly shows the hero as a victim of war trauma. Based on a research published by California State University in the United States, in August 2002, "five soldiers at Fort Bragg murdered their spouses following their return from Afghanistan, and two of those soldiers subsequently committed suicide" (Scurfield 78). The above study shows the aftermath of an unresolved war trauma which affects families. Those who return from war are not the same as before, because war changes them drastically. They want to master their battlefield violence trauma by exercising violent events in their lives; in this vein, Anne whitehead, furthers Freud's argument with regard to "preparedness for anxiety":

For Freud, 'preparedness for anxiety' constitutes the vital mode of defence (*Sic*) against trauma; accordingly, the traumatized individual seeks to establish these mechanisms of preparedness after the fact, through repetitive dreams and behaviours which build up anxiety by returning him to the original fright. (*Memory* 96)

In this case, wives and children are helpless victims to the traumatic hauntings of their male family members who went to war. Desdemona was the victim of General Othello's hidden war trauma. Men go to war because of an honorable mission; they return home as traumatized victims. The shock, horror, and fear of what they have seen or experienced influence all they love or respect now. They cannot go back to the status before they went to war; they cannot be what they were because of the experienced trauma as "in trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine, and that's why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experimental in the past" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 137). Othello has gone to battles and has seen terror, violence, and bloodshed, the memory of which he cannot get rid of in his

peacetime life; he admits that he is used to the war-like life when he says, “For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith, / Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us’d / Their dearest action in the tented field” (1.3.83-85). Though he was a source of amusing stories of “battles, sieges, fortunes” (1.3.130), he was dangerously a reservoir of hidden negative memories which were stored in his psyche, which would later on burst out in violent acts. His callous murder of Desdemona whom he always called with delicate and lovely titles such as, “honey”, “my sweet”, and “my gentle love”, was a symptom of his war trauma “Of hair-breadth ‘scapes i’ the immediate deadly breach, / Of being taken by insolent foe” (1.3.135-36). Othello returned from war with both honor and trauma; war and its honor are over and now its traumatic effects are haunting his peace of mind: “O! now forever, / Farewell the tranquil mind; farewell content! / Farewell the plumed troop and big wars, / That make ambition virtue! O, farewell” (3.3. 347-50). His virtues exhibited in the war zones are now undermined by the loss of tranquility of his mind.

Before delving deep into a discussion of war trauma, it is significant to look back into history and trace the symptoms of PTSD on war veterans. “Combat fatigue” or what is today called war trauma is not a modern concept; it exists from the time of Homer; but it was not officially and publicly recognized as a mental disorder until World War II, when its symptoms appeared among thousands of war veterans returning from the battlefield. In his paper, “Combat trauma, Memory, and the World War II Veteran” (2011), Ron Langer states that anguished veterans “received such diagnoses as Anxiety Neurosis, Depressive Neurosis, Melancholia, Anti-social Personality, or even Schizophrenia because the correct diagnosis did not yet exist” (52). In 1980s, with the acknowledgement of PTSD as a mental disorder by American Psychiatrists Association, it became obvious that these veterans were struggling with PTSD or war trauma. Later, Langer published the results of a study carried out by Port et. al. (2001), which shows that the symptoms of PTSD in war veterans become prominent in midlife and after retirement. It is also maintained that these symptoms are triggered by “deaths of friends, one’s own deteriorating health, children becoming autonomous, divorce, and other losses associated with aging. Other precipitants include current events that trigger memories of one’s own combat experience” (54). Othello started to demonstrate PTSD symptoms in his mid-ages when he was disarmed and not valiant anymore, when “Othello’s occupation’s gone” (3.3.358), and after a divorce-like relation broke up.

In his book, *War Trauma: Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam to Iraq* (2006), Raymond Monsour Scurfield states that war trauma victims might have symptoms such as isolation, numbing, and irritability which are what war has bequeathed unto

them; in the case of Othello, the symptoms of shellshock are evident when in the first scene of act four, he falls into a trance and faints. When Iago says, "My lord is fallen into an epilepsy, / It is his second fit; he had one yesterday" (4.1.50-51), it becomes evident that Othello is suffering from the impacts of war trauma triggered by an external factor, because PTSD symptoms can exacerbate when triggered by "strong emotional states similar to those experienced during deployment, e.g., rage, grief, fear, adrenalin rush" (Scurfield 83). Othello was alienated not only because of his racial difference but also because he was mentally wounded. The reader of *Othello* joins the play in Othello's mid-ages. He was lonely and free till this age when he decided to marry Desdemona, establishing a relationship which was very short-lived. All his life, he did not threaten his freedom by sharing his life with anyone, until he met Desdemona and fell in love with her: "But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth (1.2.25-28). This testifies to the evident symptom of isolation resulting from combat-related trauma in Othello.

War trauma victim is a "person [who] has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others, and his / her response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (Langer 55). In the chaotic scene of battlefields, the victim is not fully aware of the traumatic experience s/he is undergoing because s/he is busy surviving it. But years later he / she remembers those traumatic moments and contemplates what he / she did in those moments; this might create a feeling of guilt. In the last scene of the play, when Othello is thoroughly helpless, he indirectly confesses one of his guilt: "that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him, thus" (5.2.351-55). What was considered right in the battlefield is considered wrong in the peacetime; in the words of Bloom, "his courage serves him well in war but is ill-adapted to the complexities of peace" (45). So, he was incapable of adjusting himself to ordinary life.

Though a war trauma victim needs to talk about the miseries of war in order to forget the unsolicited memories, s/he stands aloof from the society; Scurfield maintains, "such avoidance and detachment was a way to prevent the tragedy from triggering a resurgence of pain from previous traumas" (24). On the other hand, such victims keep silence, because the society is not interested in realities of war; "soldiers in every war, even those who have been regarded as heroes, complain bitterly that no one wants to know the real truth about war" (Herman 8). Though Desdemona and other Venetians listened and praised Othello's war glories and escapes, they were not interested in the horrible reality of war. Othello could not

bear witness to his war traumas, because “for the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of the other---in the position of one who hears” (Felman and Laub 70). Without a supportive listener, the victim keeps silence, who “may find that the most traumatic events of her/[his] life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality” (Herman 9). This silence is very dangerous because it distorts the reality of traumatic event to the extent that “the survivor doubts the reality of the actual event” (Felman and Laub 79).

Apart from his racial consciousness, war survival and trauma were other factors in Othello’s isolation. The war veterans may feel that they are still in the battlefield and demonstrate violent acts such as murder which is evident in *Othello*’s murdering scene. Though Othello has experienced glorious wars and has victorious memories, he could not overcome his negative memories; when he says: “Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump, / The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife, / The royal banner, and all quality, / Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war” (3.3.351-54), he is actually saying goodbye to the memories of victory under the pressure of traumatic memories of slavery, misery, death, murder, and loss associated with his war experience, because

You may have either significant ‘positive’ and/or ‘negative’ outcomes or impact from your war experiences, both while deployed and following your return . . . . However, having even many positive war experiences will not necessarily resolve or ameliorate the grief, hurt, fear or loss of war trauma. (Scurfield 61)

Othello was very much influenced by his violent war experiences and he used a language replete with violent and military words: “And little of this great world can speak, / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle” (1.3.86-87). He seduced Desdemona by recounting his glorious military experiences such as his dangerous and stirring accidents at sea and land, his “hair-breadth ‘scapes” (1.3.136), the story of his being captured and then released, the story of “Cannibals that each other eat” (1.3.143), and the story of mysterious Anthropophagi men. He even once called his wife with a military tone of a General: “O my fair warrior” (2.1.179). When he plans to take revenge on and murder Cassio, he uses a poetic language which contains military images such as “O! that the slave had forty thousand lives; / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge” (3.3.443-44), and “ Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow cell” (3.3.448).

Military soldiers are taught to rage against the enemy; when they come back home and there is no enemy towards which they can direct their rage, at times, they

become aggressive in their peacetime life; Scurfield is right when he observes that "military personnel can take these unsatisfied, pent-up rages, impulsive and other inappropriate behaviors home with them" (87). Othello directs his unsatisfied rage towards Cassio and towards Desdemona when he says "my heart is turned to stone" (4.1.182). He even becomes more heartless by stating "I will chop her into messes" (4.1.199).

\* \* \*

Finally, there will be a word about the necessity of witness in *Othello*, the implications of which are important in our age, the age of trauma and the "age of testimony" (Felman and Laub 5). In order to cure trauma and prevent its reoccurrence in the future, it needs to be diluted, and there must be a recipient to the traumatic memories. Van der Kolk and van der Hart remark, "the integration of the traumatic memory into normal consciousness necessarily entails that it becomes subject to a 'narrative' memory system" (116). In the unconscious struggle with the unknown, the victim needs to be heard. Like Hamlet who asked Horatio to retell his story to the future generations, Othello wanted his story to be told, "I pray you, in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds report" (5.2.339-38), but he was agonized about the way it could be narrated. Apart from being a sign of testimony, Othello's last speech of the play is the complete description of his traumatic life. The following lines by Othello act like a flashback to the life of a traumatic mind which is suicidal, because its whole traumatic life was, in fact, "a struggle to return to death" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 9). For the sake of beauty, all nineteen lines will be equated here:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know't.  
No more of that. 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: then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;



And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
 And smote him, thus. (5.2.337-55)

Reading these lines carefully one might conclude that in fact Othello unwittingly acknowledges and admits his weaknesses and traumas. He wants his story to be told truly; he admits his vulnerability against malice, when Iago's wickedness tempted his fragile will; he says that his love was not supervised by logic, because he loved Desdemona too much regardless of her social and racial rank; he admits his race consciousness when he says that like a "base Indian" he destroyed an invaluable white pearl such as Desdemona; he was clearly obsessed by his skin color which caused a lifelong trauma in him; and he points to a battle scene in which he bravely killed a Turk for the sake of the security of the Venetians (but was at the same time unknowingly victimized by the traumatic effect of this incident; in this way, he admits his war trauma). After recollecting his traumatic life, Othello commits suicide, which is the cliché act performed by tragic and traumatized heroes who search for tranquility in death. Othello's end was very tragic, because he was both disarmed and unmanned by a "puny whipster" (2.5.242) called Iago who took away his bravery, love, and manliness.

### III. Conclusion

The concluding words of this article emphasize the importance of witness and testimony as crucial parts of trauma studies, and the role of literature in bearing witness to individual and historical public traumas. Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart highlight the significance of transforming "traumatic memory" into "narrative memory," a kind of story: "the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences . . . need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (176). Freud argued about the importance of bearing witness and "talking cure" as "by this method, the dissociated affective memory is made conscious and can thus be discharged or abreacted in the telling, which means that traumatic recall can be verbalized instead of just acted out" (qtd. in Rodi-Risberg 254). Freud's emphasis on the therapeutic role of talking in dealing with trauma finds resonance in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's assertion: "The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to" (57). The trauma must be worked through despite the

victim’s reluctance and, in LaCapra’s words, “fidelity to trauma” (qtd. in Rodi-Risberg 260). Understanding trauma will not be possible in victim’s silence; so, literature can be a means of transmitting the intrusive force of trauma into a meaningful narrative.

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## Summary

### **Othello, “Dull Moor” of Cyprus: Reading Racial Trauma and War Trauma**

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In 1980, American Psychiatrists Association announced that trauma is a mental disorder under the term of PTSD. By that time, trauma became a popular field of study for the literary scholars specially literary critics such as Cathy Caruth, as it offered new insights into traditional literary criticism. The increase of psychological and physical violence all over the world, in the last twenty years has made trauma and witness inevitable realities of life. The evident role of “testimony” and “talking cure” had already been demonstrated by scholars such as Sigmund Freud; but then it has become clear that literature can reflect and even cure the unspeakable pains of trauma victims. This article is an attempt to show that Shakespeare’s Othello is affected by different sorts of unresolved traumas such as racial and war traumas. The writers of this paper have tried to show that the unresolved traumas of a tragic hero can cause tragic ends and affect other characters in the play. The findings of this article might bring about a change in the way we discover and treat the trauma victims. The main conclusion which can be drawn from this research is that not being appropriately heard and diagnosed, Othello, a representative of real racial trauma victims, is bewildered in the clash of knowing and not knowing, between the knowledge of a past event and the inability to understand its frequent reenactments; and this leads to his tragic end.

**Key Words:** Trauma, Testimony, Witness, Tragic Hero, Othello, Shakespeare, race, war.