Chapter III

OTHELLO

(The Closet Scene)
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout
To his own scandal.

*(Hamlet, I.iv, 33-38)*

If this reflection on human nature by Hamlet corresponds to one of the commonplace beliefs of the Elizabethan age, it aptly summarizes the cause behind the tragic fall of “Valiant Othello” as well. When interpreted and analyzed in terms of the theological beliefs of the age, *Othello* undertakes the study of “a man of essential nobility”, who is, “debased by humiliating passion to a level not far above the animal, a level far lower than that to which any of Shakespeare’s other heroes sink.”¹ The innocent blindness and ‘unsuspicious trust’ of the “worthy governor” in domestic matters is “that particular fault” which transforms “the noble Moor” into a “gull”, a “dolt” and to quote Emilia’s words – “a blacker devil”. His heavy ignorance as well as lack of deep understanding along with the provoked “barbaric crazed fury of physical jealousy, the jealousy that is the counterpart of lust, not that which is the counterpart of love”, ² results in his tragic fall and Desdemona’s tragic demise. Under the sway of jealousy, a deadly sin in Renaissance terms, he converts his rational self into a passionate self and reverses the harmonious pattern of his domestic world. This time the conflict between reason and passion, in theological terms, is taken up at domestic level. Under the sway of passions, provoked by a base spirit, Othello turns into a ‘spirit of negation’ from the ‘spirit of creation’. S.L. Bethell, in his article *The Diabolic Images in Othello* interprets
Othello’s transformation in terms of the diabolic images thus: “Iago has only his fair proportion of diabolic imagery, yet we undoubtedly gain the impression that in this play the theme of hell, as it were, originates with him and is passed to Othello later as Iago succeeds in dominating his mind. Statistics show this impression to be well founded. In Act I Iago has eight diabolic images and Othello none; in Act II he has six and Othello one. The change comes in Act III, where Iago drops to three and Othello rises to nine. In Act IV Iago has only one while Othello has ten, and in Act V Iago has none and Othello six.”^3

His ancient Iago may be held responsible for initiating chaotic conditions in his home-affairs, nevertheless, Othello alone is responsible for all that takes place. He accepts, without deep interrogation, Iago’s insinuations, which are defined by Parker as “more absurd in content but more subtle in technique.”^4 Undoubtedly “like a spider’s web, Iago’s plot is the most fragile of lethal constructions; the merest wave of the hand could tear it away. If any one of the characters made a single, almost self-evident connection, the whole world picture would instantly become clear.”^5 Ironically all his victims fail to see his reality; either they do not want to see or they are incapable, under the sway of their own passions, to see. Hence a noble soul is betrayed by ignorance in domestic matters and destroyed by apparent knowledge. In his irrationality, Othello not only thrashes his wife; he reverses the creative pattern of nature by misconceiving himself a divine minister and her wife a “whore”. Though Iago is an evil incarnated and causes Othello’s tragic downfall, yet Othello alone is responsible for reversing the pattern of values and degenerating his celestial self into bestial form and for
reducing himself to sub-human state. Commenting on the nature of evil, Ribner writes: “evil needs no specific reason to seduce man that its very nature is to do so.” In a way lago is a ‘motiveless malignity’; he is like the morality Vice, whose aim is to destroy all that is good in society. He is contemptuous of the virtuous, has low opinion about woman, and gulls Roderigo. Othello, like Gertrude, defies the marital vows and transgresses the ‘primary law’ of Nature by disturbing the ‘lawful conjunction of men and women’. Hence, in wider perspective his sin is no ordinary sin rather one against the divine order of the cosmos.

Due to this violation of order, chaos, which in Othello is mainly domestic, is but inevitable. ‘Degree’ is, nevertheless violated though at low level. Hence, chaos, in Othello is mainly domestic and not cosmic and prolonged as that of King Lear and Macbeth. This time order is violated, not by a King or a prince rather by a military general – a man of comparatively lower rank in the hierarchy of rational souls. Moreover, his sin is not against a king rather against his wife alone: both of them belong to a comparatively low scale in the human hierarchy. Hence, when interpreted in terms of the doctrine of correspondence, the impact of the reversed order on the cosmos is slight and is foregrounded in Othello’s speech:

O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration
(V.ii, 99-102)

Commenting on various ‘degrees’ in Othello M.R. Ridley writes: “In Othello the figure in the highest station is the “Duke” of Venice,
who is no more than a figure-head and apart from him, we have a senator and his daughter, and three army officers, one of the highest rank. This man of ‘the highest rank’ fails to judge the evil intentions of Iago, who, according to Ribner, is “the masquer or dissimulator, the conventional figure of evil disguised as good”, believes sincerely in his fascinating though fake tales and seals his tragic fall. Ironically, in his irrationality, he fails to see all that is natural and good and accepts all that is ‘Satanic’ and unnatural. He is too blindfolded by his passions to accept anyone’s honest pleadings except that of Iago, and reduces his rational capabilities to the level of a puppet. Hence, his incapability to look behind the curtain seals his doom.

Undoubtedly, if not worked upon by Iago, Othello could have proved a loving husband, a fact accepted by Iago too:

The Moor, how be’t that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, noble, loving nature;
And I dare think, he’ll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband:

(II.i, 283-286)

But he could have been a better man as well if he had used the ‘given’ reason wisely instead of diverging it from the divine ‘Reason’. Nevertheless, his fall is sure, once he has given himself to satanic impulses.

The conflict between the ‘spirit of creation’ and the ‘spirit of negation’ is projected from the very beginning of the play. Just because Iago is passed over for the post he aspires to, by Cassio who “had the election” and who according to him is more a Florentine and “A fellow almost damn’d in a fair wife”, Iago decides to avenge his General.
Initially, Iago, alone, is responsible for contaminating the harmonious pattern of Venice—a highly civilized and cultured city whose government is controlled by wise people. The setting despite the early threat of the Cyprus wars is a peaceful one. According to Bernard, “the world of Venice has its problems impending war, midnight elopements and outraged fathers—but it also has institutions capable of dealing with them. The Senate, though meeting in a crisis atmosphere, displays exactly the kind of level headedness that will be so lacking on all sides at Cyprus.” Conflict between good and evil sets in the play, the moment Iago announces his evil intentions thus:

In following him, I follow but myself.
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end.
(I.i, 58-60)

Iago’s diabolic or ‘Satanic’ intellect comes forth in these lines. Iago is such a grave threat to Venice that critics like Catherine Bates, are bound to see him in following terms: “The Venetian state is in fact, less imperiled by the Other – the Turkish barbarian against whom Othello is engaged to fight, or indeed by the Moor himself – then it is by his own kind, a super-subtle Venetian whose evil is the more invidious for being home grown. Iago is a perfect picture of that unsettling contradiction who reveals civilization’s claims to natural order and cultural superiority to be nothing but a sham.” He too is no less a sinner than Othello because his every act defies the ‘Laws’ one way or the other. He is a villain in the state of Venice. Iago may be just in his revenge, nevertheless, in wider perspective, his every act defies “the master-servant relationship”, which “was the bedrock of the Elizabethan—
Jacobean society because each party was expected to perform his role in harmony with nature’s rule of order and degree.”

Hence, critics aptly call him a man of no morals and unsound judgements. According to S.L. Bethell: “he has clearly much in common with the stage Machiavel; the fundamental principle he professes is that of pure self interest. His speech on master servant relationship is the very inversion of feudal duty, a deliberate throwing over of the old morality based on traditional religion ... Iago’s practical materialism is evident in his attitude to love, “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will”, and in his contemptuous remark to Cassio, bewailing his wounded reputation: “As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound.”

From the very beginning Iago’s morality is slight. He is utterly contemptuous of all those values, which were the basis of social order in the contemporary society. His selfish reason is in conflict with all sorts of virtues and like a Renaissance skeptic his reason is used for selfish motives.

Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time much like his master’s ass,
For nought but provender, and when he’s old, cashier’d,
Whip me such honest knaves:
(I.i, 45-49)

Iago, in the words of Knight “is a kind of Mephistopheles, closely equivalent to Goethe’s devil, the two possessing the same qualities of mockery and easy cynicism.” Iago is symbolic of all pervasive evil in Othello’s domestic world. He is evil for the sake of evil and not out of any just motive. This is explicit in his gulling of Roderigo- a Venetian
gentleman who is a foolish lustful fellow and desires to marry or at least
sleep with the beautiful Desdemona, daughter to the respected Senator
Brabantio.

The harmonious pattern of Venetian body politic is initially
threatened by Iago and Roderigo's immoral acts and attitudes. Hence,
the "odd-even and dull watch o' the night" perfectly corresponds to
Iago's satanic nature and evil designs as well as to Roderigo's lust. They
disturb the moral and social order of Venice through their wicked and
evil deeds. In a way they impose social chaos, though partial, in
Venetian body politic. If their terrific cries disturb the social peace of
Venice, their evil intentions usurp its moral peace. These men of bestial
instincts, ironically, pretend to be the upholder of 'Natural Law' and see
Desdemona's elopement in terms of gross violation of 'Laws'. Himself
a 'passionless rationalist', Iago affirms confidently as, "I am not what I
am". Iago sees lust as at the bottom of human nature:

These Moors are change­
able in their wills: ... Fill thy purse with money.
The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts,
shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida.
When she is sated with his body, she will find the
error of her choice;

(I.iii, 347-52)

That is why he sees Desdemone's love for Othello as a temporary
passion. Undoubtedly love for him is "merely a lust of the blood and a
permission of the will".

Though Iago is very much aware of his irrational acts,
nevertheless like a Renaissance skeptic he is confidant of his self. His
reason, hence, his is the reason of pride and not in accordance with the
divine ‘Reason’.

Desdemona’s love to the moor and her consequent elopement
may be a violation of Venetian law, but she, in no way, transgresses
Nature’s law. That is why Ribner views her love “in the highest scale of
Christian neo-Platonism, love of the mind and understanding.” If she
faces the senate courageously it is because of her sense of righteousness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,} \\
\text{And to his honours, and his valiant parts} \\
\text{Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate:} \\
\text{(I.iii, 252-54)}
\end{align*}
\]

For Iago, her elopement may be out of lust, but for Desdemona it is
celestial and divine love. True it is that love has made her bold and she
emerges from a meek and humble lady to that of ‘strong-sense, courage
and plain-speaking’. Neither she nor Othello’s love is out of lust rather it
all began with his fascinating tales and her showering of sympathies for
his grief. Othello’s court address too makes clear that his love for
Desdemona is one of mind and spirit and it is far away from carnal
desires. Othello himself reports to the Court:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d,} \\
\text{And I lov’d her that she did pity them.} \\
\text{This only is the witchcraft I have us’d:} \\
\text{(I.iii, 167-69)}
\end{align*}
\]

For the first two acts and the first two scenes of the third act,
Othello is portrayed as the great general, the trusted servant of the state,
as the devoted lover and husband. The negative image portrayed by
Iago, a superbly skillful and opportunist tactician, projects the
protagonist in all sorts of negative shades, nevertheless the negative image ‘falls to pieces’ with Othello’s first appearance. Iago’s initial verbal projection of Othello mismatches with his actual appearance in Act I scene ii. According to Gabriel Egan, “when Othello appears in the next scene he performs the traditional good-character acts of preventing two armed parties falling to blows and of reverencing the old, but the serious test of his character is what the Venetian senate makes of him and his surreptitious marriage to Desdemona.”¹⁵ Instead of a man of “pride and purposes”, one who presents everything with “bombast circumstances”, one who is “horribly stuff’d with epithets of war” appears a man whom Ridley calls ‘laconic, dignified and courteous’. Like a good character he prevents the brawl, full of respect for Brabantio and courageously faces Senate. Thus he maintains social and moral peace. In the words of R.F.Wilson, “Venice and Othello represent powerful reason in control of destructive passion.”¹⁶ Despite so many provoking allegations by Brabantio such as “O thou foul thief”, “sooty bosom”, “abuser of the world”, he does not lose his control, his dignified and courteous tone, rather like a soldier he is ready to answer all the allegations. As a matter of fact, as a general and as a husband, he is a part and parcel of the harmony and coherence of the divine order, who not even for a moment shirks from his duties. Hence, because of this sense of duty he is ready to depart to Cyprus despite his recent marriage, and wage a war against Turks:

I find in hardness, and would undertake
This present wars against the Ottomites.
Most humbly therefore, bending to your state,
I crave fit disposition for my wife,
Due reference of place, and exhibition,
(I.iii, 233-37)

He preserves the divine order as a trusted general and as a caring husband. By performing his duties in accordance with the divine laws he is, thus, maintaining ‘degrees’. Hence, he successfully fights the Turks and readily takes upon the fury of the elements. Against the ferocity of the elements, reported by the second gentleman thus:

The chiding billow seems to pelt the clouds,
The wind-shak’d surge, with high and monstrous main,
Seems to cast water on the burning bear,
And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole;
(Il.i, 12-15)

Othello commands like a “full soldier”. He is thus a brave and dear Othello for everyone and not a “gondolier” as verbally projected by Iago. He bravely faces the political crisis in Cyprus, restores its peace and harmony and thus restores Nature’s ‘civil law’. Othello bravely faces the cosmic forces as well as civil disturbances caused by barbaric forces and successfully tames the external barbarism of the Turks.

Along with this soldiership, his love for Desdemona is intact. He is ready to take on any Promethean challenge for her:

O my soul’s joy,
If after every tempest come such calmness,
May the winds blow, till they have waken’d death,
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,
Olympus-high and duck again as low
As hell’s from heaven.
(Il.i, 184-89)

Ironically this brave man, who successfully takes upon the fury of elements successfully, curbs uncivilized powers, is ready to face the fury
of anything, fails to control his internal passions and under the sway of jealousy diverges from the prescribed ways of living. Blinded by his passions he thrashes his wife. His sin is in turn against the divine Providence that saves Othello, Desdemona and Cassio from the fury of the elements. He not only violates his degree; he reverses the creative pattern of divine Providence.

According to R.F. Wilson, “The terrible storm signals not only the revolt of nature but also revolt of passions; it foreshadows the fate of Othello and Desdemona by suggesting that though they have survived nature’s tempest, they will soon enough “drawn” in their own tempest tossed “seas.”

Harry Levin views “the removal of Othello and Desdemona from the rich orderly society in which their love flourished, through storm and danger to an isolated and besieged outpost where their love will be destroyed is but the first step in a far more profound estrangement.” “The heavens” could have defended him as long as he was in accordance with the law, but the moment he willingly diverges his self from divine law, he is bound to suffer. Though, he is a much travelled soldier, having little domestic experience nevertheless, he could have saved himself by using his reason well.

From this point onwards Iago “the Turk who has burrowed under the castle walls to produce his kind of paganism from within rather than without,” sets on to “untune” their music which according to Knight, is presented poetically in terms of heavenly bliss and cosmic order. Iago, a Turk now, fails to see that by untuning Othello and Desdemona’s music, he will untune the harmony and coherence of the divine order too. He
fails, being a skeptic, to realize what this disturbance, means. According to Bethell, “he deliberately throws over the old morality based on traditional religion.”

[Aside]O, you are well tun’d now,
But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music,
(II.i, 199-200)

“Valiant Othello” is never far away from the sense of sin and redemption as far as his duties as a general is concerned. The following speech foregrounds his sense of duty:

That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my reputation!
(I.iii, 271-274)

Undoubtedly, in Cyprus, Iago is the external force of evil; but the evil within Othello coincides with this objective evil and leads him towards his self-destruction. The passions within him alone are responsible for his tragic demise. Hence his little experience in matters domestic and his corrupt understanding charts his course towards damnation. The desperate tempest of jealousy, an unknown emotion to Othello, bangs him completely. Though this tempest of jealousy is initially personified in Iago, but later transferred in Othello, it makes his domestic conditions chaotic. Commenting on Iago’s jealous nature, Ribner writes: “Iago is the dramatic symbol of jealousy itself, and he mirrors jealousy in all of its possible forms. He is jealous of Cassio’s position. His suspicions of Emilia, of which Shakespeare reminds the audience throughout the play, show the same kind of sexual jealousy he is to arouse in Othello. Iago in his soliloquies reveals himself to the audience as a personification of
jealousy.” His “virtue speech” has made his identity clear i.e. under an appearance of sanctity lies a serpent.

In order to secure his motive, Iago first directs his canons, in a planned way, against Cassio so as to “cause these of Cyprus to Mutiny” and thereby achieves “the displanting of Cassio” which has been foreshadowed in:

The great contention of the sea and skies
   Parted our fellowship:

(II.i, 92-93)

Act II scene iii is important for two significant reasons: Iago secures one of his motives by displanting Cassio from his lieutenancy and it forwards Cassio’s through and through redemptive nature. He is otherwise a courteous, responsible and a brave soldier except his infirmity for excessive drinking. His infirmity is deliberately worked upon by Iago, which leads to social chaos in Cyprus. Though Cassio disturbs social peace, but in no way transgresses any of Nature’s ‘Laws’. According to Bernard, “a cup of wine which Cassio takes to please the gallants precipitates a quarrel, the quarrel develops into a brawl, the brawl into a riot, and the riot leads to his dismissal and the loss of his reputation.”

He is through and through redeemed because of his knowledge of self that he forwards thus:

I ha’ lost my reputation! I
   ha’ lost the immortal part, sir, of myself and what remains is bestial;

(II.iii, 254-56)

Along with this knowledge of dual human nature, his knowledge of divinity is perfect which he expresses thus:
God’s above all, and there be
souls that must be saved, and there be souls must not
be saved.

(Il.iii, 96-98)

Or

God forgive us our sins!

(Il.iii, 105)

Commenting on Cassio’s character, Siegel writes thus: “If in Othello
Shakespeare’s audience had a terrifying reminder of the possibility of
even the noblest men succumbing to the wiles of devil, in Cassio it had a
hopeful reminder of the possibility of the ordinary man – one who like
each of them, was subject to mortal frailty – achieving salvation through
faith and repentance.”

His knowledge of divinity, of his corrupt soul and fallen self all
these are redemptive. He knows what can transform a man into a beast
and in the following speech forwards a moral thus:


O God, that men
should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away
their brains; that we should with joy, revel, pleasure,
and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!

(Il.iii, 281-84)

He exemplifies what master and servant relationship means, which Iago
betray. Hence, his sorrows are not due to his demotion from his post
rather due to his sense of failure. He is grieving not out of sense of
injustice but because he fails to execute the duties to which Othello
appoints him:

I will rather sue to be despis’d, than to deceive so
good a commander, with so light, so drunken, and
indiscreet an officer.

(Il.iii, 269-271)
Meanwhile, Othello is yet to lose his control, his reason under Iago’s spells. This scene, therefore once again, establishes Othello’s duteous self. Whether it is the reporting of the Turkish invasion to Venetian government, appointing Cassio to guard the place or to watch the fortification of the island on his own, his every movement contributes to the harmony of the order. He is still a preserver of God’s harmonious order. He is yet to yield to Iago’s devilish intellect. He is still a fine soldier and can distinguish between ‘seeming’ and ‘being’:

Are we turn’d Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven has forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl;
(Il.iii, 161-63)

As a matter of fact, Othello, as a general, never diverges from Nature’s ‘civil law’. By performing his soldierly duties he is very much in accordance with it. Ironically, this sense of duty is too much within, that in his executing of Desdemona, he thinks that he is preserving the divine order blotted by her lust. Hence he says:

It is the cause, yet I’ll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth, as monumental alabaster;
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
(V.ii, 3-6)

In the name of preserving the order, he violates it. According to Prosser, “By identifying himself with the relentless course of the Pontic Sea, Othello confers nature’s sanction upon the new self of the just avenger. By implication patience and ‘humble love’ are rejected as ‘unnatural’, and vengeance is exalted in their stead. But the ‘nature’ Othello adopts here is not the orthodox, the one Christian humanism posited, the one we have come to identify with Shakespeare.”24 He
breaches ‘primary law’ of Nature by breaking the ‘lawful conjunction of men and women’. Ironically, on the one hand, he preserves Nature’s ‘civil law’ by executing his soldierly duties and on the other hand, he destroys its ‘primary law’ by thrashing his wife “divine Desdemona” in the name of justice. Hence, he alone is responsible for bringing havoc in his domestic life. Like Shelley’s West wind he is the destroyer as well as preserver of the ‘cosmic order’. On the one hand Othello maintains civil peace, repeatedly destroyed by Iago, who constantly threatens to disturb the order like evil. On the other hand he usurps his domestic peace due to his lack of experience and deep understanding in such matters. R.B. Heilman is apt enough in his estimation of Othello: “Othello’s failure to treat Desdemona more humanely can be in part explained as the result of the limited sort of training he has had and the limited sort of experience to which he has been accustomed.” But Bradley holds a different notion, according to Bradley, “His warriorship should not be limitation in domestic life.”

His rise as a soldier is complete by Act II, scene iii and from Act III, scene iii onwards the play takes up the fall of “our noble and valiant Othello” as a domestic man. At the beginning of this scene, his personality is very much like that of earlier Othello: tender and confident. Despite several initiatives, Iago’s plan backfires for Othello is still a man of unshakable confidence. Hence he rejects Iago’s implied allegations thus:

To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous:
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw

64
The smallest fear, or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me.

(III.iii, 188-93)

His reason is very much in accordance with the Divine ‘Reason’ and he knows that foul knaves use the rhetoric, used by Iago, only. The misconception that Iago is “just” is the only cause that leads him to believe whatever Iago has to say.

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:
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom;

(III.iii, 122-126)

“By the end of the scene, he has wilified her in the coarsest terms, renounced his love with a solemn oath and is determined to murder her.”

His fall is gradual. His rational self debases by and by into bestial self because he fails to use his reason well. Iago creates a reality which does not exist, tricks him, traps him by working on human psychology through his oratorical devices and Othello one by one, keeps on accepting them. Evil within provoked by external evil leads Othello to his ultimate self-destruction. Initially the good or his judgement capabilities resist the temptation but ultimately the good yields to the subjective evil. If Iago is the ‘devilish, disruptive force’ that transmutes heaven into hell and order into “chaos”, Othello, once transformed is no better than Iago. He too transmutes heaven into hell and his domestic order into chaos. His fall is not sudden like that of Lear but gradual. From this point onwards, within a hundred lines he is on the rack, later
in the same scene his occupation's gone and by the end of it he pronounces death of Cassio and Desdemona, and "Chaos" is come again. As a general he pursues his professional business, makes an inspection of the fortifications of his commands but loses his rational self and power of judgment as a husband, as a domestic man. Hence Iago successfully executes his professed plan on Othello:

I’ll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,  
Abuse him to the Moor, in the rank garb  
.................................................  
Make the Moor thank me, love me and reward me,  
For making him egregiously an ass,  
And practicing upon his peace and quiet,  
Even to madness:

(II. i, 300-306)

Iago truly puts him "into a jealousy so strong" that Othello’s inexperienced "judgement" in domestic matters fails "to cure it". Blindfolded by his own passions, he takes good for evil and evil for good. Nonetheless if Iago successfully works out his plan, it is only because Othello has several severe infirmities. His infirmities are those unknown aids, which Iago uses to make him jealous of Desdemona and pronounce death on Cassio. If Iago’s "boat sails freely, both with wind and stream", it is because each of his victims fails to apprehend his truth, fails to judge the truth on his own. It is their own follies that lead to their tragic falls and sufferings of innocent people like Desdemona and Cassio. His victims err and Iago traps them in their own follies. It is not the "planets" which "had unwitted men", rather their own follies which are responsible for their fall.
Iago perceives Othello’s weakness in the cashiering of Cassio i.e. “the thing most apt to break Othello’s normal control is failure to get a straight answer to a straight question”\textsuperscript{28} and begins with working on this weakness. “Iago is a Machiavel in the precise sense of the term; like the Florentine political philosopher, he works empirically, observing man’s actions, noting the difference between the way they purport to act and the way they do really act, and pointing to the fact that event always favours the shrewd, unscrupulous operator rather than man of honor and principle.”\textsuperscript{29} He deliberately keeps on delaying the revelation of what exactly he intends to reveal and puts Othello straight into suspicion. He uses Othello’s unsuspicous trust because he knows that “The Moor a free and open nature too, / That thinks men honest that but seems to be so”, his loss of self-control in certain conditions puts him into a strong jealousy which despite his use of reason to a certain extent, he fails to cure. Othello does use reason but not completely. He does not believe Emilia despite her honest explanation because he is convinced:

\begin{center}
She says enough, yet she’s a simple bawd  
That cannot say as much: this is a subtle whore,  
A closet, lock and key, of villainous secrets,  
And yet she’ll kneel and pray, I ha’ seen her do’t.  
(IV. ii, 20-23)
\end{center}

He does not listen to his instincts that are more loyal than his reason-

\begin{center}
A balmy breath, that doth almost persuade  
Justice herself to break sword: once more:  
Be thus, when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,  
And love thee after: once more, and this the last,  
So sweet was ne’er so fatal:  
(V. ii, 16-20)
\end{center}
Neither does he listen to “divine” Desdemona’s honest protests because he is convinced of her illicit relationship with Cassio. For him, she is no more than a “public commoner”, a “whore”, a “strumpet”. To him her sin is so gross that the cosmos itself is ashamed of her act:

Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon winks,  
The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,  
Is hush’d within the hollow mine of earth,  
And will not hear’t:

(IV. ii, 79-82)

Ironically a sinner himself asks an innocent lady to confess. This shows his total corruption of rational self, of the victory of passion over reason. “Heaven doth know” that she is honest but he fails to understand this. Because of this sense of injustice, of the tag of a cuckolded husband, he suffers, grieves, and agonizes, but in his sufferings he does not learn anything. His agonies and sufferings are not like those of Lear which purges him of his pride and power and pushes Lear towards redemption, rather, Othello’s sufferings, his physical suffering e.g. headache, weeping, pushes him one more step towards his fall. Othello does not learn anything from them. In fact his suffering and agonies turns him into a stone where no innocent and honest pleading of Desdemona will work, where her pleas are as good as water off duck’s back. Othello if not for love, at least in his revenge definitely renounces “his baptism” and “all seals and symbols of redeemed sin”. Hence lago successfully out of his “goodness make the net” either deliberately or out of necessity “that shall enmesh’em all”. He is definitely the agent of hell, an incarnation of Satan itself because in all his soliloquies he
denies divine Providence, and thereby transfers his jealousy into Othello. Iago’s association with hellish powers is explicit in his speech:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will their blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now:

(II. iii, 341-344)

“Jealousy”, so says Ridley in his introduction, “is to him an unfamiliar emotion which he has no notion how to handle. Loss of control in other spheres he has experienced, can foresee, and can guard against: but not in this sphere. Here, if control is once lost, it is lost beyond all recovery.” Iago’s pestilence in Othello’s ear has really undone “her credit with the Moor”. His moment of fall is when he pronounces her death.

In a way Othello’s knowledge of divinity, of man’s sensual nature is absolute but he fails to understand, to recognize his own debasement to that sensual self. He knows that certain acts can transform a man into beast:

No, to be once in doubt,
Is once to be resolv’d: exchange me for a goat,
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,

(III. iii, 183-186)

He fails to understand that he has turned into a “green eyed monster” which Iago wants him to be and violates the ‘Law’ itself, instead of being its follower. “He takes upon himself the justice of God and murders Desdemona in what his delusion tells him is justice, but what is really a devilish and bestial revenge.” He is thus damned. His
irrationality, his ignorance, his inability to learn leads him towards his damnation. He is damned the moment ‘he stifles her’. There may be numerous reasons e.g. his colour, his sense of an outsider in the Venetian society, his own demerits, his lack of experience in domestic affairs, worked upon by Iago, nevertheless these reasons can not justify his deed for he diverges his self from divine ‘Reason’ by not using his reason well.

Desdemona, the most virtuous of all, is no more than a “whore”, a “mistress” or a “strumpet” to him. She is through and through redeemed because of her absolute knowledge of her true self and of divine Providence. Not even for a moment she diverges her ‘wit’ and ‘will’ from ‘Supreme Being’. Her patience is tested many a times e.g. when Othello publicly strikes her, when he calls her a whore and when he is determined to kill her; she never for a moment chides him, curses him, never loses her control. Instead of cursing him, she obediently follows him, does all that he asks even when her soul is in agony, looks him after well. She performs her duties as a wife, very much in accordance with ‘Nature’s Law’. She says to Emilia that not even in her dreams she can think of diverging from virtuous path:

Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong,
For the whole world.

(IV. iii, 77-78)

Emilia is ready to first commit a sin and then reside in purgatory but Desdemona cannot even think of committing sin. “Unlike Othello, she does not follow Emilia’s ethic of revenge; she obeys the vows she had made, kneeling in the presence of Iago as Othello had kneeled to vow
hatred and revenge that she would continue in her love and devotion for Othello no matter what he does to her. In doing so she follows the Christian ethics of returning well for evil."^^

Good night, good night: God me such usage send,
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!
(IV. iii, 104-05)

Such a virtuous and honest lady as she is that not even in her death, on her deathbed, she blames Othello for the wrong he does. Instead of cursing him, she begs pardon for his soul too. It is no exaggeration if she is called ‘Lady-Christ’. She begs pardon for every Christian soul and atones for mankind very much like Christ:

And have you mercy too! I never did
Offend you in my life, ... never lov’d Cassio,
(V. ii, 59-60)

When Emilia asks her, instead of alleging Othello, she owes the fault on her own

Nobody, I myself. farewell:
(V. ii, 125)

She never, even in her thoughts demotes herself to sub-human state. Desdemona truly dies a “guiltless death”. This moment “black Othello” has literally turned into a “blacker devil”. “Just as Brabantio has been made to see the marriage in a false light and Cassio has been robbed of his senses, Othello is “unwitted” and made to see Desdemona as a “fair devil.”^^

If Othello’s colour is black, his heart too is black now. He may be a great general, but fails to be a compassionate and understanding husband. Commenting on the play, R.F.Wilson writes in his essay: “if
one reads the play relying heavily on Christian imagery, however, Iago’s betrayal of his master leads to the Christ like sacrifice of Desdemona.\textsuperscript{34} Besides this if critics assess the rapid movement of the action one from civilization to barbarism, Christianity to paganism, reason to passion they are absolutely right. Iago’s treachery and Othello’s irrational act has usurped and breached all that is civilized, Christian and reasonable. The remaining that prevails is passion, paganism and bestiality. Othello’s transformation into a beast is complete. He sees the heavenly Desdemona as a ‘fair devil’, and gives himself over to ‘the devil of cynicism.’

Othello’s fall is definite the moment he yields to Iago’s power, though the ‘oscillation of feeling’ suggest the dilemma between good and evil. He can intuitively see the good but rationally he cannot for, his reason is of Iago and hence, he fails to see. He is destroyed by the evil within; the recognition of which, in the last scene, will redeem him. Despite the regrets and ‘internal cleavage’ i.e. struggle between passion and reason, he reaffirms his pact with Satan and seals his doom. Despite his internal sufferings, he avenges, in the name of justice, on Desdemona and brings not only chaos in his domestic life but also “perdition” to his soul. The divinity in him is reduced to bestiality due to this irrational violation of the law of God. According to Bethell, “At bottom Othello’s sin is the sin of Adam: he allows passion to usurp the place of reason.”\textsuperscript{35}
Hence, Desdemona’s murder, which in turn is a negation of the Divinity, confirms that Othello is a damn’d soul. As a matter of fact, later he himself realizes this; so says he:

O ill-starr’d wench,
Pale as thy smock, when we shall meet at count,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it:
(V.ii, 273-276)

Truly, when the truth is finally revealed to him, the feeling that he is damned overwhelms him. Siegel too echoes similar feeling thus: “His behaviour in his last moments, therefore, would have confirmed Elizabethans in the impression that his soul is lost which they gained from observing the dramatic irony of his offering Desdemona an opportunity, as he supposes, for salvation and then withdrawing it in a rage, not realizing that his own salvation is at issue and forgetting that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven.”36 In the words of Siegel, Othello has lost his soul. Hence Siegel interprets his last words in the following words: “His last words however are not those of heartbreak or of self-torture. They are spoken with the resolution of one who knows his irrevocable fate and the regret of one who knows the preciousness of what he has lost.”37 His sighs are but an expression of his agonized soul. Previously, he could console himself as a soldier, as a just avenger, but now he cannot even do that because he knows that along with Desdemona, he has lost his soldiership as well. He knows that his act is not that of “Justice” rather of injustice. Desdemona is no more a “whore” rather in the words of Emilia; she is “the sweetest innocent/That e’er did lift up eye”. These are the most tormenting moments for he
is aware of the havoc wrought by himself in his household. His spell is completely broken when Emilia discloses the truth of the only ocular proof i.e. handkerchief, which Iago could have provided in support of his arguments:

O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak'st on,
I found by fortune, and did give my husband;
For often with solemn earnestness,
More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle,
He begg'd of me to steal it.

(V.ii, 226-29)

Undoubtedly, Iago’s “odious damned lie” has blown the trust between Othello and Desdemona to air and has ‘set the murder on’ in Act III itself. The spell laid on Othello’s is such that despite feeling the truth intuitively, he fails to judge. His corrupt wit ultimately coincides with his equally corrupt will and culminates in a ghastly murder. His notion of his wife whom he thinks is “false to wedlock” and of Iago who “hates the slime/that sticks on filthy deeds” is as unnatural as his role of ‘just avenger’. Ironically, the truth is just reverse; it is he who deserves to go to “burning hell” instead of “divine Desdemona”. Though his love for Desdemona is subtle till the end as he himself tells Emilia:

had she been true,
If heaven would make me such another world,
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I'd not have sold her for it.

(V.ii, 144-47)

Nevertheless he fails to see that things are just reverse from what he sees: that he is not executing divine justice rather he is defying divine justice, that he is losing his own claim to God’s mercy. His agonies over
the discrepancy between her beauty and her act are but symptomatic of his unresolved state.

Ultimately, Emilia discloses the truth of his ‘just revenge’ to him and this makes him realize that it is not Desdemona who deserves to go to “burning hell”, rather it is he. Emilia unveils the truth that Desdemona is “heavenly true” and not a “whore”. Othello, then only, learns that neither his deed nor he is worthy of heaven.

Besides this, Iago is, for the first time, uncovered and his truth is brought forth in front of everyone. When Emilia asks him to disclaim all the allegations:

Disprove this villain, if thou be’st a man;
He says thou told’st him that his wife was false,
I know thou didst not, thou art not such a villain:
(V.ii, 173-75)

But Iago is “such a villain” and hence he fails to make his position clear. Then only Othello learns his mistake: though Iago fails to refute all the allegations, nevertheless one of his speeches suggests the truth behind Othello’s fall:

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true.
(V.ii, 177-78)

Just like the Vice of the morality plays, Iago is a man of diabolic intellect who can never see the good in society and whose aim is to destroy all that is virtuous. Hence, it is the task of the good to save themselves from evil’s wicked deeds that Othello fails to do. Iago told him what he thought but why did Othello accept all that?
As far as Iago is concerned, he is the most unscrupulous person in the play and is utterly beyond redemption. He is undoubtedly “superbly skillful and opportunist tactician” but he is no less a sinner because his reason is the reason of pride which rejects divine ‘Reason’ and divine virtues. For him, material gains are much more important than the advancement of celestial self. His silence suggests that either he is not willing to converge his reason with the divine ‘Reason’ or he has Caliban within him. In theological terms he has reached to the lowest ‘degree’ in the link below man e.g. to lowest sensual level from which he can never elevate. Iago, symbolic of white racism, may successfully exploit all those who hail from uncivilized background, but he forgets that ultimately divinity asserts itself, that “Gods are just” and good as well as evil, everyone is ultimately answerable to him. In the words of Bethell, he is mastered by the sins, which caused the angels to fall, Pride and envy.

As far as Othello’s redemption is concerned, critics are a divided lot. According to Siegel, his self-murder may be an act of true justice but Othello is beyond redemption. Contrary to Siegel, Ribner argues in favour of Othello’s redeemed soul. Christian studies view Othello’s fall as the fall of mankind: though it is a fortunate fall and like mankind itself, Othello too can acquire redemption. According to Knight, “Othello definitely loses his control but the Iago spirit never finally envelops him, masters him and disintegrates his soul.”38 Undoubtedly Iago leads Othello to doubt his own powers of judgement and perception’ but Emilia’s revelations ultimately makes him realize. Hence Christian critics are assured of the hope of redemption because
his fall is like the fortunate fall. If Siegel and Heilman forward their argument in favour of damnation: Ribner and Parker are in favour of Othello's redeemed soul.

Irrespective of these critical controversies, when Othello’s act and speeches are analyzed in theological perspective, Othello is a redeemed soul. His redemption lies in the last phase of his life. Theologically, his realization of the true nature of evil, of his “ensnar’d soul and body” and of his foolishness is redemptive. This realization saves him from the grip of evil and restores his capability of learning. In the words of Ribner, it can be argued that, “In Othello Shakespeare again gave dramatic form to a Christian view of mankind’s encounter with evil, the destructive power of evil, and man’s capability to attain salvation in spite of it.”

Theologically, Othello is armed with that self-knowledge which is redemptive. For the first time, he can distinguish between the ‘seeming virtue’ of Iago and perfect virtue of Desdemona. He knows that he has lost his precious “pearl” under the sway of the “demi-devil” who has “ensnar’d” his “body and soul”.

The knowledge of evil’s true nature has reunited him with divine good, though he was so far blindly following the evil and ultimately wades himself into sin. Nevertheless, he ultimately learns the nature of evil, through Emilia’s revelations and in his disasters he learns his corruption of body and soul thus attains a victory in defeat. This learning is in itself redemptive because he is no more evil’s accomplice and redemption means the state of being saved from the evil. Othello has ultimately acquired that state. He is aware of external as well as internal evil.
As far as the mode of redemption is concerned, Othello redeems his self in two ways. On the one hand Desdemona’s Christ like atonement saves him, a view echoed by Ribner too, “Desdemona is a reflection of Christ, who must die at the hands of man, but one whose death may spring man’s redemption. Her unconquerable love for Othello will be his redemption.” On the other hand, Othello is armed with that self-knowledge, which is, theologically at least, redemptive. He has learnt, in his disasters, the place of evil, of his self and of Desdemona in the divine order of the created universe. This meditation has paved his way towards redemption. Theologically, a man can redeem from his fallen self by contemplating the divine order of the created things and thereafter by comparing and contrasting his self with that order. Othello’s speeches suggest that he is armed with the knowledge of self and with the knowledge of others. He knows that even if Iago does not have ‘cloven hoofs’ like devil, he is a devil incarnated and that objective evil is deceptive and destructive.

He achieves it by realizing his degraded place in the divine order. The following speeches suggest that he is aware of the order of things in the created universe. He is aware of his foolishness, of his irrationality hence he compares his self to the “base Indian”: he is aware of Iago’s true nature e.g. of his devilishness and of Desdemona’s divinity of which he was ignorant earlier:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar’d my soul and body?
(V.ii, 302-03)
Or

O fool, fool, fool!
(V.ii, 324)

Or
then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well:
(V.ii, 344-45)

Or
of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
(V.ii, 347-48)

All these speeches bring forth his consciousness of his savageness, his bestiality and of Desdemona’s preciousness. These speeches reflect that he has acquired the knowledge of self and of others in the divine order of created things. He has rejoined his alienated self with the divine good. This contemplation paves his way towards his redemption. Othello’s weeping is unlike his previous weeping when he was convinced of Desdemona’s adultery. This weeping cures him of his bestiality and restores him to his human self very much like the Arabian trees heal the wounds through their medicinal gums.

Besides this when interpreted in the light of the doctrine of correspondence, this suggests the participation of vegetative world in Othello’s sorrow which means that despite his violation of his ‘degree’ and his damnation thereafter, he is once again a part and parcel of the ‘divine order of the created universe’, because another link in the chain is participating in his sorrow. Unlike Macbeth the vegetative order, instead of avenging on Othello, is participating in his sorrows.

of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum;
(V.ii, 349-352)

He initially helds his fate responsible for his fall; he thinks himself fortune’s victim:

I have seen the day,
That with this little arm and this good sword,
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop: but O vain boast,
Who can control his fate? ‘tis not so now.
(V.ii, 262-66)

His decision to execute justice upon himself: “But why should honour outlive honesty? / Let it go all” is suggestive of his repentance. Hence, instead of forgiveness, he seeks punishment thus:

Whip me, you devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight,
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
(V.ii, 278-81)

Critics, like Ribner, interpret these words in terms of despair, again a sin in Elizabethan terms. According to Ribner, “There is a tragic irony in Othello’s belief, for Desdemona, the audience knows, stands for mercy and forgiveness. Othello, like Angelo in Measure for Measure, is most ignorant of what he’s most assured, for by his penance and expiation he may win salvation after all.”

As a matter of fact, his decision to end his journey is a emotional one, since he is not willing enough to live without Desdemona. Instead of despair, his decision suggests the profundity of his love, which Othello expresses from time to time. In the words of Bernard, “He embraces his own damnation with ferocious intensity. His despair is not
the chill spiritual atrophy of Macbeth, not even despair at all in the usual sense. He does not simply lose hope for salvation; rather he wills his own damnation as the only punishment."^42

Othello is redeemed. He is saved from evil. This phrase "ensnar'd my soul and body" is, in wider perspectives, vast in its implications because it corresponds to man's unique position in the Chain of Being. Othello is armed with the knowledge of his self, which is, theologically at least, redemptive. Irrespective of the nature of his sin, he has acquired redemption. This realization suggests his interaction with a largely neutral world and his place in the chain. Ultimately he has learnt his own foolishness.
References:


2. Ibid.


12. S.L.Bethell, *op.cit.*p.69


17. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
33. Ibid. p. 125.
37. Ibid.
38. G.W. Knight, op.cit. p. 118.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Bernard Mc Elroy, op.cit.p.141.