

## **Women characters in Sifiso Nyathi's play *God of Women*, and William Shakespeare's *Othello*: A comparative exploration**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper compares the depictions of women characters in the plays God of Women written by Sifiso Nyathi (a famous Namibian playwright) and Othello by William Shakespeare, respectively. The two playwrights were purposely chosen on the basis that Nyathi (a Black playwright) writes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Namibia, a country in Southern Africa, while Shakespeare (a White playwright) wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in England, Europe. Despite the racial differences and epochs in which the playwrights have lived and written, the paper revealed that, generally, both Nyathi and Shakespeare use a gender-bias style of writing in depicting women characters in their plays. Nyathi's depictions portray women as sex objects for their husband's sexual pleasures in a polygamous marriage, and also as exchange material for wealth. Women also have been portrayed as destitutes who have to stay in subservient conditions at the mercy of their husbands despite the physical and emotional abuse they endure. Shakespeare also portrays women characters negatively as dependent on their fathers in Othello. He portrays women characters as sex goddesses who would compel men to murder their women out of immense worshipping-kind of love for them. Conversely, Nyathi and Shakespeare depict women as intelligent and rational thinkers, as we see Desdemona in Othello defending her position in her choice for Othello before her father. In God of Women the wives of Chief Lewanika embrace Malnonge in solidarity of the oppressed sisters when she collapses after Joyce reveals her secret that she had a son out of wedlock with Chief Lewanika. The analysis concluded that both Nyathi and Shakespeare largely portray women characters negatively in their works, albeit in different ways that are typical of the cultures and epochs in which the authors lived. The analysis also revealed that both Nyathi and Shakespeare make use of literary devices such as foregrounding, metaphors and similes to enliven their plays and to appeal for their audiences' entertainment.*

### **Introduction**

In fiction, comparative and contrasting studies are carried out on some themes that tend to be universal in different cultural settings, whereas others transcend over epochs. To the literary critic, the purpose of the enquiry is to determine how different authors, succeed in developing these themes in the context of dif-

ferent cultural settings and times. This paper is based on a comparative analysis of how Sifiso Nyathi (male, black Namibian playwright) and William Shakespeare (male, white European playwright) depict women characters in their plays *God of Women* and *Othello* respectively.

### **Women as easily engaging in sex or used as sex objects in *God of Women***

Women are sometimes portrayed as easy going regarding sex. The author has failed to hide the traditional patriarchal mentality of looking at women as easily engaging in sexual relations. An example is found in Act I Scene I when Chief Lewanika summons a seer to cleanse his clan of a curse that has been persistent. The voice of the ancestors accuses the people of Chief Lewanika of having “danced to the chorus of the owl behind the compound.”

This act of dancing behind the compound is interpreted as engaging in a secret sexual affair within the village or compound by members of the same community, even other people’s spouses engaging in adulterous or amorous affairs. The author uses this opening scene to infer that the culprit is a woman (Joyce, fourth wife of Chief Lewanika), who is found hugging John behind the compound by Neo, the chief’s best friend.

This act suggests that Joyce, a married woman, is a loose woman and engages in sexual relations with a young man, John. Nyathi (1995) made use of foregrounding in Act I Scene I through Neo, who on one of his visits, had suggested to his best friend, Chief Lewanika that the young woman the Chief had married was of loose morals. This foregrounding worked well as Joyce is later found by Neo hugging John behind the compound fulfilling his and the seer’s prophecy. Clearly, this points to Joyce as being responsible for the affliction that the clan is engrossed in. Nyathi, the author, accuses Joyce of the curse through the voice of the seer:

You shall all perish by lust  
Lust, oh seeds of the soil... Lust.  
Father shall eat with son. Eating with greed the abominable fruit  
Of the son. Oh Lust, where do you lead these souls?  
(Act I, Scene I)

What should be noted is that, though ‘father and son’ will share the same woman (“abominable fruit”), the one at the receiving end instead is the woman who slept with both (father and son), yet in reality the father (Chief Lewanika) was given the daughter (Joyce) as a wife by her parents to free them from hunger. Joyce had no choice but to obey the cultural practice of the Subiya who

practiced arranged marriages, though this should not be regarded as one since it involved Joyce being exchanged as a commodity.

One clear distinction to be observed here is that Joyce could be said to represent a loose woman or prostitute in the eye of the author because of her presumed adulterous affair. She should have kept her head level, and behaved as a married woman, especially out of respect for the royal house. But she continued to see her one time lover, John, behind the Chief's back, and as a result did not know which of the two, was the father of her unborn child.

The Chief, on the other hand, as leader, should take the blame in the first place because as a Chief and elderly person who everyone looks up to, should be exemplary and not engage in "indiscriminate" sexual relations for personal gain, whether for want of an heir to his throne or sexual gratification, especially with one who was fit to be his own grandchild (minor). The author, however, depicts the typical patriarchal society that only concerns itself with matters that benefit men over women. It may thus be construed that even if the women knew that they were used as objects, they had no right to refuse or resist. It was regarded to be understood as traditional obligation for the wife to avail herself for sex to her husband, even in situations where she did not wish to have sex for as long as the husband wanted to. The aspect of knowing that women were married for sexual entertainment by Chief Lewanika is expressed in Joyce when she is in conversation with Malnonge in Act I, Scene III:

Look, this man does not love me. He just wants a son out of me and thereafter he will treat me as he treats you. You know very well, Malnonge that love is not found in the market. (Nyathi 1995, p. 15)

The same line of argument as above would appear to show how women become powerless in matters of sex through the same discussion between Joyce and Malnonge in Act I Scene III. Malnonge confides in Joyce that she does not like the idea of having had sex with Chief Lewanika before he became chief during his youthful years. But Nyathi (1995) infers that Malnonge, as a girl like all the other girls who were coming of age, should accept sexual advances from male suitors. She therefore relates that though she did not wish to have sex with the young Lewanika, rather, she was made for it when she says, "I don't know whether I like this either, but I was meant for it. I feel so..." (Nyathi 1995, p. 14).

What is implied by the words of Malnonge above is that she did not wish to have sex with the young Lewanika and she detests the idea if it, but as a woman she had to avail her sexual readiness to a man to prove her womanhood. This is literally to say that women are seen as sex objects, and at the same time have no

say over their sexuality, let alone apply a mature decision in regard to sex. They have to simply comply, even in situations when they do not wish to have sex.

In this same play, another example of depicting women who appear preoccupied with sexual matters is evident in Chief Lewanika who, after his consultation with the seer, summons Malnonge, his most senior wife to call her counterparts to a meeting where he wants to share with them the revelation of the seer. Malnonge responds by saying, "I am not on duty today, my lord. Please consult your roster" (Act I Scene I). She continues: "I am sorry, my lord, I thought you wanted your daily food." It appears from Malnonge's reply to her husband that he should consult his "roster" that there was such a roster drawn indicating the days she should be on call for sex with her husband, also probably showing who had to prepare food.

However, the suggestion in Malnonge's answer in the preceding paragraph infers that whenever a woman is called by her husband, she is called for sexual intercourse "daily food" within the traditional setup. That is why Malnonge is heard responding that she is not on duty, to which the Chief reacts: "Don't reach your destination before you arrive at it, woman" (Nyathi 1995, p. 3). The author exonerates the men from the constant preoccupation with sexual matters and places it squarely on the women, as suggested by the Chief's response that she was too concerned about sex, yet there are other issues a husband can seek attention for in his wife.

The play seems to have more innuendos that suggest women cannot have a say in matters regarding sex. Chief Lewanika, after insulting and belittling his wives at the time he informs them of the seer's words, continues to instruct them to "update your huts for my visit" implying that all he wants his sexual gratification (Nyathi 1995, p. 5). The statement by Chief Lewanika suggests that though he is still pursuant of his mission of seeing the wives pregnant so that one of them produces an heir, he still wants "his traditional food" from his wives irrespective of whether they are prepared or hurt by his insults.

It may seem an exaggeration, but the author seems to involve women characters in matters of sex more than he does with the male characters in *God of Women*. In Act II Scene III, the author presents Nsala and Mallenge discussing sex. Mallenge confides in Nsala that she had sexual relations with a priest when she worked as maid at the chapel. Interestingly, she is put in a position of an innocent person where she could not exercise her conscience to decide not to be seduced into sex, especially as an unmarried woman, worse of all, to have sex with a priest (Father Thomas). Mallenge says, "He did it again and again" and "I too was becoming fond of it..." (Nyathi 1995, p. 25).

The author depicts women through Mallenge who, though knowing that having sex without being married is not acceptable, still indulges in sex. This is implied by Mallenge's words, "I was becoming fond of it," suggesting an innocent person beginning to gradually enjoy sex to which she was innocently seduced. However, the author suggests with this depiction that, as opposed to men who would in most instances be depicted discussing matters of politics, administration or business, women instead engage in petty discussions such as about sex, denoting the patriarchal notion of women's shortsightedness regarding worldly matters.

### **Women characters as exchange material for marriage**

Women are in some literature depicted as commodities that can be traded in exchange for material possession such as being married off by their parents or family as entrenched by the patriarchal society they live in. Peter (2010) states that arranged marriage is one of the social aspects that explains the status of women in literature.

In *God of Women*, the same scenario is evident where the author suggests that it is the norm or customary for patriarchal societies to sell off their daughters to wealthy husbands, especially in situations where the parents are poor. The author uses the voice of Joyce to show that women were sometimes considered as trade goods to redeem the family from poverty. Joyce tells John that she was married to Chief Lewanika by her parents, not because she loved him. She says: "What choice did I have when my people decided to exchange me for a handsome herd of cattle?" and "He has paid my family fifteen cattle in exchange for me... He saved them from hunger" (Nyathi 1995, p.11). Joyce suggests that she was a prize commodity sold to the Chief as suggested by the words "handsome herd of cattle", inferring a good price for sacrificing her youth and happiness.

The aspect of women being used by their parents and or family as exchange material for marriage is further depicted by Nyathi (1995). The author uses Chief Lewanika to suggest that indeed, during those times, women were acquired for marriage to redeem them and their families from a life of destitution. This is clearly suggested in the words of Chief Lewanika:

You all crept here as destitutes. I sliced my land for you. I traded you for half my stock. I fed you. None of you standing here can claim hunger (Nyathi 1995, p. 17).

This statement ties in appropriately with the preceding paragraph in which Joyce is exchanged for cattle which makes women vulnerable to a variety of abuses at the hands of their husbands.

## Women characters as submissive and voiceless in marriages

This practice of trading women has resulted in women becoming voiceless victims of abuse in marriages. It shows how women's status is lowered in society.

In *God of Women* (1995), Nyathi shows women in a patriarchal African community as submissive and voiceless in their marriages. To start with, women in the book have no say in the affairs of the household. The first wife, Malnonge, is not consulted for her permission to allow her husband take a second wife when Chief Lewanika realises that his wife cannot bear him a son. The Chief proceeds to marry a second wife who equally fails to bear him a son, then he takes a third wife, Nsala, who unfortunately fails to conceive. Finally, Chief Lewanika marries a fourth wife, young Joyce in whom he has the last hope. It is typical that he does not need a wife's (woman's) permission to enter into a polygamous marriage as demonstrated in his speech in Act I Scene I. In this act, Chief Lewanika introduces the reason he marries Joyce as fourth wife to his other three wives:

You must treat her as one of you. I know that this has upset some of you, but you know yourselves why it happened" (Nyathi 1995, p. 5)

The wives had no option but to accept the coming in of their counterparts as they did with Joyce, as it is the norm in a traditional African setup in polygamous marriages. This is reflective of the Subiya culture where a wife is expected to remain submissive and allow the husband, as head of household to have a final decision in household affairs. This is suggested that wives do not have the power to question decisions of the husband in serious matters that benefit him as reflected in Ipinge, Shitundeni and Masule (1999) in a report investigating initiation practices in the Kavango and Caprivi regions.

*God of Women* (1995) shows in different aspects how women are kept as submissive partners in domestic and matrimonial relations in African settings. Chief Lewanika further shows how men feel superior over their wives at the end of Act I Scene I while drinking beer with his best friend, Neo. Lewanika says:

We culture them . . .  
We give them a little civilization . . .  
We domesticate them . . .  
They are ours . . .

The above utterance suggests that women do not have equal status as men in the African setting. It further implies that women are like beings brought in from outside society where they have to be taught how to be submissive and loyal to the men's authority. The picture that forms in one's mind in regard to this utterance is that of the ancient civilization when humans started domesticating wild animals. How can one culture a people that live within society? The words "They

are ours" (Nyathi 1995, p. 9) which the author uses to characterise Lewanika, carry a powerful connotation that suggests that women do not have any sense of individual existence and as such are reared by men according to the men's culture (patriarchy), and thus depend on men in order to have meaning to their existence in society according to the dictates of men.

Women are further shown to be labourers who have no say in marriage as can be found in the speech in which Nsala who has hurt her thumb while preparing food for her husband, is asked by her counterpart, Mallenga, to rest and attend to her thumb. Nsala, for fear of punishment if the food she is preparing for the husband is not ready on time refuses to do so in fear, declaring:

What about the meal? He is about to come and I have to complete my duty on time" (Nyathi, 1995, p. 24).

This demonstrates the voicelessness of a wife, irrespective of how difficult the circumstances are that she may find herself in as a wife; her wifely tasks have to be completed without any excuse. One could therefore interpret this as bondage of wives or, marital slaves.

### **Women as destitute and as objects of punishment and insults**

The story in this play shows another theme of women's plight at the hands of the patriarchal society. Nyathi (1995) carefully depicts women as powerless in a sense that they entirely depend on men for survival through Joyce, the young and fourth wife to Chief Lewanika, who says that she was given a piece of land to till and produce food for herself and a hut as a home. This is found in her conversation with her childhood boyfriend, John, who had wanted to marry her: "He has given me a piece of land and a hut" (Nyathi 1995, p. 11) which could suggest that, had it not been for Chief Lewanika allocating land and shelter to her, she would probably have perished as result of hunger and poverty. So, in other words, she has to abide by the dictates of tradition and endure all the inhumane treatment she may be exposed to, and be a wife to the man she does not love. Nyathi (1995, p. 16) uses Neo, Chief Lewanika's best friend to show how women are subjected to brutal punishment, and no action is taken against such men. Neo, in pleading with Chief Lewanika not to exercise punishment on his wives shares a brutal picture of how his own mother died at the hands of her husband:

I heard and saw in my youth the frailty of her ribs crushed by the merciless fists of a father I have since denied fatherhood. Killed for not warming him water for a bath...

It appears that punishment was used as a means to run households. The author, whether intentionally or accidentally uses the character of Neo's mother as a

vehicle to show how heartless men can be that women's lives could be lost for petty issues such as failing to warm water for bathing.

Another aspect worth mentioning here is that of insults hurled by husbands at their wives. Chief Lewanika verbally abuses his wives to an extent that he does not choose where this takes place. In Act I Scene I he is heard trying to find out whether any of his wives had a son before he married them. Chief Lewanika asks the senior wife, Malnonge:

It does not ring in my memory that you were still untouched when I first met you. Did you have a son before?

Malnonge replies in anger as the interrogation takes place before the other wives:

Ah, father of my children, where is your respect? How dare you malign me before these young girls? (Nyathi 1995, p. 4)

Instead of apologising, the chief continues with his interrogation as though he has not done anything reproachable. He continues to insult the wives by addressing all:

You, Malnonge, your granary has been depleted. Mallenge, your traditional dish has lost its delicacy; and you, Nsala. All my hopes lay on you until you proved yourself barren beyond an ordinary desert. (Nyathi 1995, p. 5)

The language of abuse which Chief Lewanika uses on his wives in public shows the ways in which men can be disrespectful toward their wives. The wives remain silent as they have nowhere to report such abuse.

In this instance, beside insults levelled at the wives, there is also a very careful selection of words used by the author to show the gravity of the insults. Nyathi (1995, p. 5) uses metaphors to refer to the Chief's wives' state of barrenness and womanhood. Malnonge's womb is compared to an empty granary indicating that she is beyond child bearing stage. Mallenge's vagina is said to have lost flavour or taste (referring to sexual excitement / feeling when engaging in sex) in the utterance directed at her as, "Mallenge, your traditional dish has lost its delicacy"; while Nsala's barren womb is compared to a desert (a land mass that has very little or no vegetation at all).

### **Women as homemakers and domestic service providers**

Instead of being seen and treated as equals in relationships and marriages, women are sometimes seen as quasi – servants whose role is to keep the home and perform domestic chores for the husband and family. In *God of Woman*, such depictions of women as home makers and domestics are common. When visitors arrive at homes to visit as guests the wives are expected to prepare welcome food for the guests as a gesture of hospitality. The author shows this when



Neo comes to visit his friend, the Chief. The chief instead instructs the daughter to tell her mother, Malnonge to provide them with a calabash of alcohol as a gesture of welcome while he is still engaged with his other guest (Act I, Scene I).

Such services are provided by women irrespective of how busy they may be with other chores while the husband is unoccupied. It is the patriarchal culture that suggests that women are suited for such services while men engage in social and political issues (regarded as men's domain). In Act II Scene I, the above is illustrated when the troubled Chief Lewanika summons his senior wife, Malnonge, for his loneliness since parting with Neo following a quarrel. Malnonge suggests that they call a witchdoctor to come and scrutinise what was forthcoming. The chief instead angrily scoffs her off:

Since when has a woman thought on behalf of a man? (Nyathi 1995, p. 22)

In Act I Scene II, the author shows how men use women as service providers who are only needed for such services. After the Chief sends Malnonge to find out who among his other wives is pregnant, he tells her to prepare for his visit, which in actual sense refers to visiting for sexual intercourse as he says:

Make a meal for me and dust your blanket. (Nyathi 1995, p. 23)

This is said following his outbursts at her when she is giving suggestions about his troubled state. The author does not show that the man has asked for an apology for his unruly behavior towards his willing-to-help wife, or implies that men forget easily, before Chief Lewanika suggests his sexual visit to her. He instead shows that the man has power to do whatever he pleases when he wishes as a result of the traditional patriarchal mentality. The idea of using women as service providers and domestics for men is further evident in the utterance of one of the Chief's wives, Mallenge, who is advising Malnonge not to look at the Chief as the one who feeds them, but that they do it themselves from tilling the land to harvesting. Mallenge says:

Listen to me, mother of the children.

Lewanika does not till the field – you and your children do it.

He does not help with the harvesting, neither does he help with mending your granary when termites destroy it. (Nyathi 1995, p. 29)

In the above quote, it is spelled out that men marry women in order for them to labour and create wealth for their husbands through working for them.

### **Women as intelligent and perseverant**

As this study looks at the depiction of women in Nyathi's *God of Women* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, the researcher does not only focus on the negative portrayals, but also on the positive ones. In *God of Women*, the author creates

scenes in which women are positively portrayed. One such positive portrayal is where women are shown as being able to employ their mental faculties intelligently. In Act I Scene II, John and Joyce are engaged in conversation when John learns that Joyce is married to the Chief. She calms his temper by assuring him that she was forced to marry the Chief, but hopes to marry the one she loves in the future. She says:

Weep not John. The gods shall soothe our souls. We are both denied our aspired virtues. I am married to one who already has three wives. He has offered me a piece of land and a hut. He has paid my family fifteen cattle in exchange for me... He has saved them from hunger... But still, I don't love him.  
(Nyathi 1995, p. 11)

The type of language that Joyce uses in her speech to John shows a mature and intelligent person speaking. She does not simply accept fate that she marries the Chief and it is the end. She, however, still has hope of completing her life with happiness by hoping to marry John, irrespective of the material wealth and status she receives as wife of the Chief.

Joyce is heard again in the same talk showing still an intelligent and mature person who is perseverant to wait and marry John in the end. She seeks his reassurance by looking at how age can change people and whether he would still love her then. Joyce enquires from John:

When my mouth yields its teeth and my skin dries and wrinkles, will you drop your tear and then say you love me as you did at the scene of the serpent of venom? (Nyathi 1995, p. 11)

This speech with carefully chosen words such as "mouth yields its teeth" and "skin dries and wrinkles" shows a very wise person speaking after critically thinking over the issue such as the one for the young lovers, Joyce and John. She is shown looking at how people change when they grow old, and for her the question is whether John's love is undying and can wait. If his love for her is true, then both should persevere and wait until the right moment arrives before compromising the situation while she is still married to someone.

Joyce is again used in Act I Scene III to show women's mature intelligence when she is in conversation with Malnonge, the senior wife to Chief Lewanika. The conversation centres on how Malnonge slept with Lewanika before he became chief, and Joyce learns that she gave birth to a son. Because Malnonge was reluctant to reveal more information, Joyce at her young age advises Malnonge that it is pointless to keep protecting the Chief. She says:

Look, this man does not love me. He just wants a son out of me and thereafter he will treat me as he treats you. You know very well, Malnonge, that love is not found in the market (Nyathi 1995, p. 15)

Nyathi depicts Joyce as a wise and mature woman in an effort to portray women as equally intelligent when she probes to find out where Malnonge's son is. Joyce does the enquiry by allowing Malnonge to see Joyce as an equal and in a vulnerable state as the other wives once she gives birth.

In Act II Scene III we are now brought to the point where the author shows us that though men may regard women as weak brained or less intelligent, all the wives of Lewanika, who had enemy camps before coming together in solidarity, finally make peace. This happens after Malnonge faints upon learning that Joyce has revealed her secret to John. After reviving Malnonge, the other wives also learn that John is the Chief's son with Malnonge. Mallengel tells the colleagues:

We are all the same: women who have fallen prey to a cunning beast.  
(Nyathi 1995, p. 29)

Nsala adds,

We must join hands and make man out of his vanity." (p. 29)

What is depicted here with these words are women who seem to have grown up, matured and exhibiting some degree of intelligence after previously being depicted in fights against each other, and now as companions.

### ***Women characters engaging in petty rivalry fights***

This play has different depictions of women prevalent in the negative portrayal of women. Another depiction that the author uses in *God of Women* is to show how women engage in petty fights that could easily be avoided by a sane society.

The petty fights start with Mallengel and Malnonge, the two most senior wives of Chief Lewanika. Malnonge seems to have been provoked by Mallengel's gesture of giving food to Inonge, Malnonge's daughter (Nyathi 1995, p. 7). The actual issue that the author gives the reader is that of rivalry in marriage, disguised as food related.

The two women continue with their fight again in Act II Scene III when Malnonge asks Mallengel to hurry with the cooking as she also wants to use the fireplace. The two rival wives of Chief Lewanika exchange words until Nsala, the third wife and ally of Mallengel intervenes (Nyathi 1995, p. 27).

### **Depiction of women characters in *Othello* *Women depicted as dependent on fathers***

In his play *Othello*, Shakespeare depicts women as nonentities who still have to be under the control of their parents. This is irrespective of whether they are adults, as long as they still reside in their parents' homes. This is evident in the portrayal of Desdemona, daughter of senator Brabantio, who lives with her father. When Roderigo proposes to pursue marriage to Desdemona, her father is against allowing him to ever approach the senator's house to propose her. This is, in essence, an indication that fathers have a say in who is suitable in their eyes for the daughter's hand in marriage. Shakespeare shows this in the speech by Roderigo and Iago who come to inform the senator that his daughter has eloped with Othello. When he recognises Roderigo in the night outside his house, Brabantio says:

The worser welcome:

I have charg'd thee not to haunt about my  
doors:

in honest plainness thou hast heard me say  
my daughter is not for thee . . . (Shakespeare 1993, p. 944).

Another scenario that supports the claim that women are depicted as daughters who should seek approval before they can enter into marriage, especially that of their father if he has chosen a husband for her, is demonstrated by Brabantio's accusatory speech to Othello. Brabantio claims that, had it not been for Othello's use of magic on her, Desdemona would not have left her father's house to elope with him. Brabantio (1993, p. 946) declares:

O thou foul thief! Where hast thou  
stow'd my daughter?

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;

For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

If she claims of magic were not bound,

Where a maid so tender, fair and happy,

She opposite to marriage that she shunn'd

The wealthy darlings of our nation,

Would ever have, to incur a general mock,

Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom

Of such a thing as thou; to fear, not to delight.

What Shakespeare suggests here is that Desdemona is an innocent and happy beautiful obedient daughter who would not disrespect her father's authority and abandon the safety and luxury of her father's home to marry a man as despicable in Venetian society as Othello, over the wealthy members of the elite Venetian society who would meet the approval of the father. He alleges that daughters respect and await their father's decision and approval in marriage, but in Desdemona's case, a spell was cast on her. In his speech, Brabantio says that his house was a place of safety in which his daughter should have all she would need until the father gives her away in marriage.

### **Women depicted as having uncontrollable sexual appetite**

This is another form of depiction of women characters in *Othello*. It is predominantly perpetrated by a scheming male character, Iago, who seems to have a degrading attitude towards the women in the play. There are in fact only three women characters, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Desdemona, as previously mentioned in this study, is the daughter to Senator Brabantio and wife to the Venetian army commander, Othello, the Moor. Emilia is wife of Iago, and Bianca is Cassio's mistress.

Shakespeare uses the character of Iago to infer that women are promiscuous and have ravenous sexual desires. In Act II Scene I, Iago finds his wife Emilia, Desdemona and Cassio in conversation, and Cassio welcomes him on their sitting. Iago suggests that Emilia is a loose woman who could easily have an affair when he says to Cassio:

Sir, would she give you so much of her  
Lips  
As of her tongue she oft bestows on me,  
You'd have enough (Shakespeare 1993, p. 951)

This speech by Iago is quite out of context because Cassio only extended his good manners in welcoming him to the conversation, but he (Iago) instead responded by suggesting that there was some form of courtship between Cassio and Emilia. So, he says that if Emilia could give herself in love to Cassio the way she speaks a lot to her husband, Cassio would have failed to satisfy her lust as she speaks a lot (which is equated to the sexual intercourse she would have with Cassio).

Desdemona refutes Iago's allegation saying that Emilia does not speak too much as she is a quiet person, which Iago disputes. He says:

In faith, too much;

I find it still when I have list to sleep:  
Marry, before your ladyship, I grant,  
She puts her tongue a little in her heart,  
And chides with thinking (Shakespeare 1993, p. 951)

Iago tries to influence Desdemona into believing that although Emilia may be quiet, she has in her mind thoughts of sex – related issues. Iago goes on to accuse women of harbouring ill thoughts regarding sex, and that they are actually great pretenders who give a false picture about themselves although they are actually preoccupied with sex. Iago shows this when he responds to Emilia's comment on the accusations he levels against her:

Come on, come on; you are pictures  
out of doors,  
    Bells in your parlours, wild cats in your kitchens,  
    Saints in your njuries, devils being offended,  
    Players in your wifery, and housewives in  
    your beds (Shakespeare 1993, p. 951)

Iago goes on accusing women of doing opposite to themselves than what they present in public life. One could thus infer that author is using the character of Iago to belittle women and portray them as engrossed in sex, irrespective of their marital status.

### ***Women depicted as sex goddesses and having power to break men***

Women in *Othello* have been depicted as playing the role of sex goddesses with power to weaken even the strongest man. Particularly so in Desdemona's case, Othello, a valiant and very strong military commander, falls in love and elopes with Desdemona. But as the story unfolds, it is said that Othello becomes weak and lacks objective reasoning because of the love he has for his wife. Cassio leaves Desdemona's presence after coming to plead with her to request Othello to restore him to his position, whom Othello sees leave in Act III Scene III, and he interprets it to mean Cassio was avoiding to be noticed for having been in company with Desdemona. This stems from Iago's plot of lying to Othello that he suspected Cassio to have an affair with Desdemona. Desdemona pleads for Cassio to be heard by Othello, but he refuses, giving excuses of prearranged commitments:

    Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my  
    Soul  
    But I love thee! And when I love thee not,  
    Chaos is come again (Shakespeare 1993, p. 958)

The picture given of Othello by the author foreshadows how he becomes entangled in a web of jealous love for his wife, and the lies about her infidelity as conjured by Iago. He says that he loves her too much and at the same time does not trust her, referring to her as an "excellent wretch" who would bring confusion to his life if he were to stop loving her, thus indicating the influence of the power of love for her.

Iago goes on to put his evil scheme into practice indirectly suggesting to Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are in an illicit relationship that is why she is pleading for his restoration. Once Othello tries to defend his wife as not being capable of committing adultery, Iago reminds him that she once deceived her own father, so, what would stop her from doing the same to him, a black man, and go back to her own kind - white men? These words are an echo which Brabantio

used after Desdemona was asked to explain how she fell in love with Othello. After convincing those in attendance, Brabantio warns Othello that his daughter may not be as faithful as she seems to be (Shakespeare 1993, p. 949).

Because of the strong power of love Othello has for his wife, he fails to think rationally over what he hears from Iago. He instead is filled with hatred for her. Iago puts suspicion in Othello:

O! beware my lord, of jealousy;  
It is a green – ey'd monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss  
Who, certain of his fate, loves not is wronger;  
But, O! What damned minutes tells he o'er  
Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet soundly  
Loves! (Shakespeare 1993, p. 959)

As the conversation of spiting Desdemona continues, Othello responds to show that he is now pulled into the scheme of Iago without having applied rational thinking:

Why, why is this?  
Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy,  
To follow still the changes of the moon  
With fresh suspicions?  
No; to be once in doubt  
Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a goat  
When I shall turn the business of my soul  
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,  
Matching they inference. 'Tis not to make me  
Jealous  
To say that my wife is fair, feeds well, loves  
Company... (Shakespeare 1993, p. 959)

Shakespeare shows us a man whose sane mind is confused because of his love for his wife. Thoughts of a very beautiful and loving wife cheating on him weaken his objective thinking. Othello asks for his handkerchief from Desdemona in Act III Scene IV. This handkerchief with an Egyptian embroidery and is claimed to possess powers to subdue men and control or command them to do as the woman who possesses it would wish. The request for the handkerchief happens after Iago has his wife steal it and thereafter allege that Desdemona gave it to Cassio, her lover.

Double play of a woman's power is noticeable here. The first one is of the strong love that a man has for his wife to the point that he loses rational thinking and weakens mentally, like Othello softening before Desdemona. The second one we

are shown is the power of the handkerchief which Othello says comes from his grandmother; it possesses the power to break a man and even be able to have power over men. This infers that women are powerful and manipulative goddesses who can use love, beauty and sex to destroy men.

### **Women depicted as ignorant**

Shakespeare has depicted women as ignorant through the characterisation of Emilia, Iago's wife. Emilia knows very well that her husband has repeatedly asked her to get him the handkerchief which Othello gave to Desdemona. Besides, she knows how much Desdemona values the handkerchief, but out of loyalty to her husband who she knows is a schemer, or out of ignorance, she manages to get it for him. The aspect of Emilia knowing how the handkerchief was given to Desdemona and its symbolism is reflected in Act III Scene III when she comes across the dropped handkerchief:

I am glad I have found this napkin;  
This was her first remembrance from the Moor;  
My wayward husband hath a hundred times  
Woo'd me to steal it,  
What he will do with it heaven knows, not I;  
(Shakespeare 1993, p. 960)

From Emilia's speech, she knows the meaning and symbolism of the handkerchief Othello gave his wife. But Emilia acts ignorantly about the fact of the value of the cloth and gives it to her husband, who she refers to as "my wayward husband" saying only he knows what he would do with it. What is depicted here is a woman who, out of ignorance, fails to detect foul play from the repeated need to have the handkerchief. However, the author uses Emilia to achieve the idea of accusing Desdemona of being secretly in love with Cassio by getting the handkerchief to Iago.

Shakespeare continues to portray women as ignorant through Emilia. In Act IV Scene I, Emilia is approached by Othello to confirm whether Desdemona and Cassio have a secret love affair. In her response, Emilia denies knowledge of the illicit relationship. What is surprising is that Emilia fails to inform Desdemona of Othello's enquiries.

Even when Emilia detects Othello displaying violent acts temper in Act IV Scene III, she still does not inform Desdemona that her husband suspects her of adultery. She instead says there are women that are adulterous, and it is men who lead them into adultery because they have failed to satisfy their wives' needs as they are also human and have feelings as men do.



### **Women depicted as realistic and mature rational thinkers**

As Shakespeare brings out different depictions of women characters in his plays, this presentation shows women as realistic and mature thinkers. The author uses Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*. At the start of the play, Desdemona elopes with her lover, Othello, the Moor. When she is called to explain how a beautiful and loyal daughter would love a black man without sorcery, Desdemona tells those in attendance in a mature manner as opposed to what men and patriarchal society expected:

My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty:

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both learn me

How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my

Husband;

And so much duty as my mother show'd

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord (Shakespeare 1993, p. 948)

Desdemona shows that she is an independent thinker who has a mature mind and has carefully thought and decided to take her husband without her father's involvement in the choice as was culturally practiced in the patriarchal society of the English culture of those times. Listening to her speech all in attendance were convinced that she had applied her mind correctly without external influence, thus the author managed to portray women as capable persons who could think rationally.

Though Shakespeare tries to portray women as mature and rational through the speech of Desdemona before the elders, he fails to achieve the same portrayal with the depiction of Emilia when Iago insists she steals Desdemona's handkerchief which she received as a present and token of love for her from Othello, her husband. Emilia is seen as performing her duty to her husband when she picks the handkerchief after Desdemona drops it. She, however, applies a reasoned thinking when she enquires what Iago wants to use it for. She asks:

What will you do with't, that you have

been so earnest

To have me filch it? (Shakespeare 1993, p. 960)

Probing for an answer, Emilia continued:

If it be not for some purpose of

Import

Give't me; poor lady! She'll run mad

When she shall lack it (Shakespeare 1993, p. 960)

Shakespeare now brings out a rational minded Emilia to present women as thoughtful and caring for others as she says if Desdemona should miss the handkerchief, she will be very sad as it may put her husband's love for her at stake. She also requests the purpose Iago wants the handkerchief for, as she lately may have felt Iago wanted the cloth for devious intentions. She may have suspected probably because as his wife, she would be in a position to know of his treacherous intentions.

Emilia has taken a pivotal role in Shakespeare's depiction of women as strong rational persons. In Act IV Scene II, Shakespeare depicts Emilia in conversation with Othello, who is trying to solicit information from Emilia about Desdemona's adulterous relationship with Cassio. Emilia refutes the adulterous allegations and says to Othello:

I durst, my lord, to wager she is  
honest,  
Lay down my soul at stake; if you think other,  
Remove your thought; it doth abuse your  
bosom.  
If any wretch have put this in your head,  
Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!  
For, if she be not honest, chaste, and true,  
There's no man happy; the purest of their wives  
Is foul to slander (Shakespeare 1993, p. 967)

Shakespeare has put Emilia thus in the position supporting the theorists that believe women are equally capable of thinking intelligently over world affairs in contrast to what some patriarchal proponents say that women should be confined to domestic affairs only. She tells Othello that what he has been told by some people regarding Desdemona's infidelity is a fabrication and slander because Desdemona is a chaste and honest wife.

Shakespeare further shows the intellect of women again through Emilia when she is in conversation with Desdemona after Othello angrily enquires about the handkerchief which Desdemona fails to produce as requested. Because of the fury that Othello displays, she says that men use women for their material pursuits but after getting satisfied they lose their interest in them and show hostility instead. Emilia soothes the hurt Desdemona with the words,

Tis not a year or two shows us a man;  
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;  
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full  
They belch us (Shakespeare 1993, p. 963)

Emilia is trying to soothe Desdemona by generalizing that men are basically the same. They may seem sweet and caring, but soon after reaching the point of satiation, they tend to look down on their women. She thus likens women to being food which is eaten by a hungry stomach, referring to men. This is, in other words, to tell Desdemona that many women are experiencing the same and should see it as a pattern of women's life.

Emilia is again showing intelligence women possess as mature persons in Shakespeare's depiction of her in the conversation she has with Desdemona and Iago after Othello insults his wife calling her a whore (Act IV Scene II). She says Othello's mind has been poisoned by someone seeking his own promotion. This person has falsely accused Desdemona and Cassio of an adulterous affair. In an outburst of anger Emilia says:

Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her  
company?

What place? what time? what form? What likely  
hood?

The Moor's abused by some most villainous  
Knave,

Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow (Shakespeare 1993, p.  
969)

It is as though she speaks to expose Iago as the source of this insinuation or she indirectly seeks some reaction from Iago whom she may suspect to have lied to Othello about this illicit affair. With this, Shakespeare portrays women as mature by showing a well thought reasoning from a member of society regarded by patriarchal society as weak or "small brained".

## **Conclusion**

This paper revealed that both authors had bias in the portrayal of the female characters in their two plays. Nyathi (1995) predominantly used language which is crude and abusive in reference his depiction of Chief Lewanika, the main male character, who insulted and physically beat his wives into submission as a way of patriarchal control. This has been evidenced more in Act I Scenes I and II when Chief Lewanika enquired from his wives as to who among them had a child before they were married to him.

In his enquiries, Chief Lewanika used metaphors that carried strong connotations that could be understood as demeaning, not only to his wives, but to a sane society as well. The Chief continued to inform the wives why he married the fourth, insulting the three first wives as inferior whose fertility was beyond

repair. In some insults referring to the wives' fertility, the author equated them to 'a granary depleted' and 'barren beyond and ordinary desert' to show how low women can be brought down in (an African) patriarchal society.

This analysis has revealed that women are sometimes seen as sources of income generation or wealth, especially by poor families. In Nyathi (1995) the author shows how Joyce was exchanged for fifteen head of cattle by her family in order to save them from poverty. The also revealed in both Nyathi and Shakespeare that women can become property of their husbands who keep them in subservient conditions such as being powerless or voiceless in marriage irrespective of the harsh treatment they receive. The women are seen to stay albeit those conditions which may be both psychologically and physically degrading as in the wives of Chief Lewanika who stay and serve their husband despite the insults. It is also evident in Emilia who has been insulted in front of Cassio and Desdemona by her husband, Iago, yet she stays and continued to serve him.

In Shakespeare's Othello, negative portrayals of women characters have been evident, the study revealed. It is however, with the use of Villain Iago that much of the negative portrayal of women characters is more felt in Othello. Though both authors portray women characters negatively, the analysis revealed that there were instances where both had a positive portrayal of the women characters. Conversely, Nyathi and Shakespeare have portrayed the women as strong, intelligent and mature when they were exposed to extreme hate and suffering at the hands of their male counterparts. The women were seen coming together comforting each other in solidarity.

To conclude, Nyathi and Shakespeare, irrespective of the epochs they live in and culture they belong to, demonstrate the presence of the patriarchal induced inclination to depict women characters negatively in their works; this is despite the minor portrayal of women characters as strong and mature by both playwrights. The discussion shows a prejudiced portrayal of women characters in both plays *God of Women* and *Othello*.

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