

Iago: “Motiveless Malignity”

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There is some soul of goodness in things evil, would men observingly distill it out. - Henry V: William Shakespeare

I. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps there is no subject more exciting than sexual Jealousy rising to the pitch of passion; and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion. William Shakespeare knew it as being a master of reading and presenting human natures. So, he projects a character absolutely evil unified with supreme intellectual power. Driven by an overpowering lust for evil rivaled only by Satan, Iago is titled as worst Shakespearian Villain hands-down. Even Othello, the Moor describes him as one:

“who knows all qualities with a learned spirit of human dealings
In all qualities with a learned spirit of human dealings”.

In all Venice, there are only three men who are capable of converting conventions viz. Othello, Roderigo, Cassio - but all three are manipulated and used like puppets by Iago -the Villain of Villains. Behind the hideous villainy Iago has only psychological motives to go by. Samuel Coleridge him: “a malignant Villain with a psyche of motiveless motive-haunting”. He is a twin-brother of Satan embodying all satanic traits and hell-bent upon destroying the life-principle. Iago Confesses:

In following him I follow but myself
Heaven is my Judge, not I for love and duty
But seeming so, for my peculiar end,
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, it's not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve,
For does to peck at: I am not what I am. (I- II 57 -64).

Though spoken fifteen times by others and half a dozen by Iago himself “honesty” is the word that has all the irony about it. It shows how in flying colours Iago has projected his image before all the characters of the play. Iago presents a different self to the world than his true self. His other half Emilia even believes him head-over-shoulders. A self-seeker, who lives only for himself, he admires those who work excessively for self-interest and condemns all those who prefer unselfishness, honesty ‘or’ goodness of any kind. He frankly tells Roderigo: “In following him (Othello) I follow but myself”. Iago is shrewd Judge of men and possesses extensive knowledge of human nature and behavior. He can easily foresee how a particular character will behave and react in a given situation. For example his assault on Othello is on his blind-side – sexual jealousy to which, now much advanced in years, he has never been exposed.

He uses Desdemona Virtue and Innocence to bring about her own ruin:

And by how much she strives to do him good
She shall undo her credit with the Moor-
So will I turn her virtue into pitch
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

(Act –II, Scene –III, 353-37)

The insight into weakness of all other characters helps him to bring his devilish plan to finale. Only in one case he blunders. He fails to assess the nature of his own wife Emilia. It is she who does all the harm to Iago in the end. Shakespeare presents evil with such mastery in Iago that even a comparison with Satan of Milton’s Paradise lost seems almost absurd. Iago far exceeds Milton’s arch-fiend’s malignity. But what is important is that only few have been able to understand Shakespeare’s conception of the reason for creating Iago. Some believe that Iago is an ordinary villain who has been slighted and thus avenges himself. There are some who believe that Iago hates good simply because it doesn’t do any good to him. But if we uproot more truths about the man, it seems sound that Shakespeare creates him as an embodiment of revenge, Jealousy, ambition, which engulfs the world in every field and at every point of time. Though the fact is that Iago lacks military expertise but still he has regrets of avoidance of his seniority. Cassio’s his counterpart is most glaring and something closer to military genius. Even Desdemona salutes Cassio’s braveness. The sadistic nature of Iago’s goes out to avenge both – the employer and the employed. He says:

I’ll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,
Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb
For I fear Cassio with my night cap too
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me

(Act II, Scene –II, 304-307)

Iago himself is unable to answer all the questions regarding his evil traits. When Othello in Act-V asks him: “Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” We might answer this ‘why’ though Iago remains speechless. Since he seeks relief for his agony of insult, he turns hypocritical all the time. As a cold man, he is tempted to let loose evil forces within him. This destroys not only the happiness of those around him, but also destroys him. His seeking of pleasure is not arbitrary, he has the ability to resolutely push it away from him. It makes him great, almost sublime in intellect as well as in will. N.Coghill believes:

Psychologically, Iago is a slighted man, powerfully possessed by hatred against a master who (as he thinks) has kept him down, and by envy for a man he despises who has been promoted over him. All this comes out in first fifty lines of the

play. Such a man will naturally have a fantasy life in which he can hate those enemies like the Moor. He may revenge himself upon them the more. The fantasy that comes most easily to him is that of crude copulation; it is his theme-song. In the opening scene his language to Brabantio is all stallion, and now his first thought is to abuse Othello's ear: 'that he is too familiar with his wife'. His next idea is to direct his revenge on Desdemona herself, 'not out of absolute lust', as he says: "but in order to spite Othello, whom (of course) he now fancies to have 'leapt into his seat' and debauched Emilia". He may not exactly 'believe' in the imputed guilt, but he pretends to because it gives relish to his performance.

The plumbing up the will is what heightens his sense of power and superiority. This is his unconscious attempt to carry out many cruel acts which evidently do not erupt from ill-will, and which baffle and horrify us. It is the same emotion which makes the man bully his wife 'or' his child, of whom he is fond. It is the same emotion which makes a boy torment another boy. This is pleasure though the pain of the tormented. There is no love for evil not for evil's sake, but because the pain gives a sense of power over the victim. This is the prime emotion of Iago. A.C. Bradley believes:

When Coleridge speaks of 'the motive haunting of motiveless malignity' ... he means really that Iago's malignity does not spring from the causes to which Iago himself refers it, nor from any 'motive' in the sense of an idea present to consciousness.

Shakespeare knew the combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is not merely startling – it is frightful. He also knew that, as it may be, it exists in the world as a reality. If Shakespeare had to maintain a moral balance in this play, and keep the sanity of his dramatic purpose he had to destroy this alliance of evil and supreme intellect. This happens in real life too, though like Iago's prosperity such an alliance prospers for considerably long periods and causes enormous anguish.

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