

**RESEARCH PAPER****Iago as a Machiavellian Villain in *Othello*****¹Muneeba Sharafat and ²Dr. Atteq-ur-Rahman**

1. PhD Scholar, Department of English, Islamia College Peshawar, KP, Pakistan

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islamia College Peshawar, KP, Pakistan

Corresponding Author

muneebasharafat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Iago as a Machiavellian villain and his pursuit of Machiavellian principles to achieve his evil goals in *Othello*. *Othello* is a simple love story that transforms into a tragedy due to an evil character, Iago. Niccolo Machiavelli *The Prince* provides the guidelines for proving Iago as a Machiavellian villain. Machiavelli's major principle is "the end justifies the means," and the goals are connected with the welfare of society. The undermined study is qualitative, and the textual analysis of the play is done with the help of close reading techniques. Iago's brutality and ruthlessness lead him and other characters towards death. The research concludes that Iago proves to be a false "Machiavellian villain." This study recommends that teachings of Machiavelli should be strictly ignored at domestic, national, and international level for the prevalence of peace and harmony.

KEYWORDSMachiavellian Villain, Virtù, *Othello*, *The Prince*, Power**Introduction**

William Shakespeare is a classical and historical playwright who does not need an introduction. *Othello* is one of the best tragedies written by Shakespeare, in which he has depicted domestic, societal, racial, and gender conflicts in a unified way. *Othello* seems to be a story of love and jealousy, which unfolds among the lovebirds, Othello and Desdemona. However, *Othello* is a complex plot driven by the craftiness of Iago. Iago is an interesting character as he is not only the actor but the director who directs other characters in the form of a confidante, servant, friend, and husband. He is an inborn character who creates a situation where he becomes a rescuer. At times, he makes a web of happy events, but destroys it in his cunning way. His duality is the driving force of the plot of the play.

Iago is the evil of all the characters presented in the tragedies of Shakespeare because he has successfully followed the ruthless principles of Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli was an Italian philosopher and statesman who wrote his master piece *The Prince* in 1513. He wrote this book amidst the political instability in Florence and addressed it to the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de' Medici. After 500 years, this book is still applicable in world politics as it gives a pragmatic solution to rulers or rulers to be. According to his philosophy, to become a successful and powerful leader, a ruler needs to use phenomenal methods that demand "act like a beast." (1981, p. 69) A beast doesn't care about the feelings and emotions of any other being and uses every evil to survive in the jungle. Iago follows Machiavellian principles of manipulation to survive in the play.

Literature Review

William Shakespeare is a prominent playwright, and his plays have already been explored from different perspectives. There is a huge literature produced on Shakespearean plays. *Othello* is not an exception. Haris et al., (2025) explores the text of *Othello* using George Yancy's and Dadabhoy's concept of racial theory. They explore, "how blackness of Othello is used to articulate white man's supremacy and how whiteness needed blackness to be superior

race”(p. 2039). Fatima (2020) critically analyzed the characters of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago and traced the real and darker side of love in the play. A study was conducted by Yasmin and Akhtar (2022) on *Othello* to analyze the linguistic features of the play. They have employed Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Their findings suggest the evil hidden ideologies in the discourse of Iago. Gul *et.al* (2024) have conducted a comparative study of *Othello* and *King Lear* to analyze Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*. They have highlighted the cunningness and manipulative nature of both the characters and unveiled their evilness in their study. Haque (2022) conducted a study in which he claimed that Iago is the killer of Othello. He proved it successfully: “If Iago did not turn Othello jealous and crazy, he would never murder his wife Desdemona and commit suicide.” (p.16) According to this study, Iago is the murderer who drove Othello into madness, and he kills himself. Toker and Karakuzu (2011) has applied Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism on the play of Othello and proves that it depicts the master- slave dialectic relationship. They argue, “However, in the play Othello Shakespeare breaks away from these beliefs and introduces an African man who disregards such stereotypical views and thus shocking his audience with this deviation from the norm. He presents a reality that African men are indeed polite, educated, loyal and faithful husbands. Shakespeare even makes Othello more prejudiced against his own culture than against another race.”(p.109)

Neimneh and Sawa (2015) conducted a psychoanalytic reading of *Othello* by applying Freud’s Castration anxiety and Lacan’s Mirror stage. They argued that when Othello lost his wife and military position it, “he is castrated and no longer attached to his wife and his post, he self-destructively commits suicide.” (p. 25) Ielisieieva (2017) analyzed Othello’s speech and conducted the pragmatic analysis of it depicting the transformation in his discourse. She focused on the change in his syntax and vocabulary; earlier, his language was quite sophisticated, and after his doubts on Desdemona, his language appears to be loaded with jealousy. Another study was conducted by Kristiana (2022), who did the psychoanalysis of Desdemona in *Othello*. Her findings reveal that Desdemona is a free, independent, and steadfast woman who can make decisions for herself. Fainuddin (2015) has analysed *Othello* and applied Sigmund Freud’s tripartite structure of personality theory on the protagonist, Othello. The critic has explored Othello’s Id, ego, and super ego and concluded that when he kills Desdemona, Iago, and finally himself, his Id, ego, and super ego are vividly seen respectively.

On the other hand, Guo (2024) has applied Terry Eagleton’s theory of tragic effects on *Othello* and concludes that the different tragic effects produced implicitly connect the main character and audience and achieves the status of pity and fear. While Kousar (2023) deconstructed Othello with the help of Saussure’s theory of structuralism focusing on the social construct of racism and gender which is obvious in the form of Othello and Desdemona. She argues, “The victory of the social structures over the individuals is celebrated by destroying the deviant characters by their own hands. This play proves Shakespeare, the author of the play under analysis, a structuralist who is committed to make the structural chauvinism explicit through his tragedy Othello” (p.46-47). Illiff (2013) has explored the text of *Othello* with the canon of Jungian psychology and argues that Jung believed in the influence of external forces on any human being. The critic says, “To explain this problem, he posited that we all have the capability for evil within ourselves, and it is only by recognizing this capability that we can escape and see through the sometimes evil influences around us”(p.1) She affirms that Othello could not realize his negative and evil potentials that’s why his early life and life hereafter is doomed. Rehman et al., (2016) argues that women in the play are marginalized as they are “objectified, commodified, self-objectified and dehumanized.” as a result they suffer from mental disorders called depression. Similar study is conducted by Kabir and Israt (2022) and they pose that men in the play control the fate of women as a patriarchal set up that’s why women are marginalized, victimized, suppressed, and dominated. It is clear from the discussion that *Othello* has been widely explored from different perspectives. Much research has been conducted on *Othello*, but in this huge pool of literature, there seems to be a void. Iago isn’t analyzed, and his craftiness is the driving force of my research. This study is intended to study the character of Iago from the perspective of Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

In this study, the researcher will explore the Machiavellian principles, discussed in *The Prince*, in the character of Iago and will conclude whether Iago is a Machiavellian villain or not. Machiavellian rules are the practical rules followed in the pursuit of power and these principles are clearly followed by the kings, queens and princes of the Elizabethan period. Henceforth, the choice of *The Prince* will do justice in analyzing *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*.

Material and Methods

Machiavelli introduced pragmatic techniques for a ruler in his book *The Prince*. He introduced those evil tactics to win the favour of the De' Medici family, but failed. However, his book has become a Magna Carta for the rest of the world, and great leaders use it as a guide in the pursuit of power, money, and politics. According to him, a ruler should ignore every moral value to attain his position as a political ruler: "If you always want to play the good man in a world where most people are not good, you will end up badly. Hence, if a ruler wants to survive, he'll have to learn to stop being good, at least when the occasion demands." (1981, p. 60) He believes that if a ruler considers his good representation in public then obviously he will end up in "disaster." (p. 61) For Machiavelli, virtue and morality hold no significance; he gives no weight age to religion in his guidelines. Therefore, "if a prince wants to maintain his rule, he must be prepared not to be virtuous." (p. 65) Henceforth, a ruler needs to cheat, lie, disguise, deceive, manipulate, and kill as per the need of the occasion. Machiavelli calls these pragmatic attributes as "virtu." This virtu is different from religious/Christian virtue. Christian virtue contains all the positive attributes of morality, and Machiavellian virtu is devoid of any morality. He states that virtuousness can only be used as a disguise for succeeding in evilness. He strongly warns to be a beast whether in or out, but should be vigilant to cover his evilness in the time of crisis. He warns,

"A ruler has to be able to act the beast, he should take on the traits of the fox and the lion...you have to know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another. People are so gullible and so caught up with immediate concerns that a con man will always find someone ready to be conned." (Machiavelli, 1981, p. 69-70)

Machiavelli's *The Prince* is loaded with arsenal, and his whole work is focused on the contextual use of reason, power, and deception. This book was written before Shakespeare, and it reached England after the death of Shakespeare, though this question is still unanswered, but his character Iago seems to practice Machiavellian principles in full spirit. (Forrester, 1995, p. 3) A Machiavellian ruler is a perfect liar, deceiver, manipulator, thief, hypocrite, trickster, and murderer, who can easily fit in any situation. Above all, for a Machiavellian ruler, "the end justifies the means" is phenomenal. A ruler keeps his destination, "the end," in mind, and to reach that destination, he can use any means to be there. Henceforth, Machiavelli's principles seem to be demonic and satanic. Machiavellian guidelines provide a suitable theoretical model for tracing the villainous traits of Iago and present him as a Machiavellian villain. The undermined study is qualitative and the play, *Othello* is analyzed focusing more Iago's actions, thoughts, and language. Henceforth, close reading techniques and textual analysis will be implemented in order to trace the evil traits of Iago. Therefore, Iago's thoughts, conversations, and actions will be closely analyzed to find any traces of Machiavellian principles. As, Machiavelli's principles are pragmatic and away from morality which makes them satanic and evil. Those who seek guidance from *The Prince* become worldly wise and callous to the outside world. Machiavellian principles are widely used in the arena of politics. Machiavellian ruler focuses on the end and ruthlessly crushes whatever comes on his way to gain power. Iago's evil pursuits are traced and analyzed in order to prove him a ruthless follower of Machiavellian villain.

Results and Discussion

Iago appears devilish from the opening scene of the play. He expresses his hatred for the Moor, Othello. Roderigo asks him, "thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate."

(Shakespeare, 1907, p.37) Iago replies angrily, "Despise me, if I do not." (p.37) Iago is burning in the fire of considering himself superior to a Florentine, Michael Cassio, as Othello has chosen him to be his Lieutenant. Iago does not consider him apt for this position:

A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife ;
That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster; unless the bookish theoric,
Wherein the toged consuls can propose
As masterly as he: mere prattle, without practice,
Is all his soldiership. (Act-1 Scene-I p.38)

It is obvious that Iago is feeling resentful over Othello's decision, but he does not confront his master and follows Machiavellian rule to become a hypocrite. Iago tries to become a great liar and hypocrite. He pretends that he is with Othello, but he has plans to depose him. As he says, "I follow him to serve my turn upon him... I follow but myself; I am not what I am." (p.39) He follows true Machiavellian principles to plot against Othello. He devises propaganda against him by provoking Desdemona's suitor, Roderigo, and her father, Brabantio. He plans to target Othello as he hates him, "Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains." (p. 42) He repeatedly affirms his hatred of Roderigo for Othello, "I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason." (p. 59) He strictly follows Machiavelli's propaganda tool and convinces Roderigo and himself about the drudgery done by Othello. Machiavelli says, "a ruler must be able to exploit both the man and the beast in himself to the full." (1981, p.69)

He makes a false accusation about Othello and madly follows it as he has become blind in taking vengeance on him. It is evident from the play:

I hate the Moor;
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He has done my office: I know not if't be true;
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. (p. 59)

He claims a pseudo accusation against Othello just to satisfy his jealousy. Though he should feel embarrassed by such a statement about his wife but he thinks of turning it against Othello. His Machiavellian pursuits are at their peak as he plans to make a pseudo accusation against Desdemona and make Othello believe him. He intends to destroy Othello and does not spare his marriage. He affirms aside, "I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do; I will gyve thee in thine own courtship." (p. 66) His cunning nature is evident from his dialogues and actions, which he expresses to Roderigo and aside to the audience.

His manipulative nature gets lucid when he asks Roderigo to provoke Cassio while he is drunk. Iago tries to manipulate and transform others' thoughts as Machiavelli advocates, "people are by nature changeable. It is easy to persuade them about some particular matter, but it is hard to hold them to that persuasion. Hence, it is necessary to provide that when they no longer believe, they can be forced to believe." (1981, p.23) Iago makes Cassio drink more and more, though he rejects and finally fuddles. Cassio pursues Roderigo as per Iago's plan. Cassio is not aware of Iago's devastating plans. He ruins Cassio's reputation and becomes successful in presenting Cassio as bad and himself as good in the presence of General Othello. Othello admits, "I know, Iago, Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter, Making it light to Cassio—Cassio, I love thee; But never more be officer of mine." (p. 78) Cassio cannot bear his degradation and demotion, "reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation." (p. 78) Iago destroys Cassio, but he thinks that Iago is an honest man, which is one of the prominent Machiavellian traits. Machiavelli rejects morality from politics and believes that a Machiavellian should appear virtuous while maintaining secretly his cunning and

deceptive nature. Iago blindly follows Machiavelli's pragmatic rule that a Machiavellian must be "a great pretender and dissembler." (2009, p.63) Being a Machiavellian, Iago orders Roderigo to sell his assets and have cash in hand, as Desdemona's emotional and temporal love will soon be over, and she will come back to Roderigo. He pretends to be the confidant of Roderigo, but he manipulates him and takes money from him. Roderigo later tells Iago that he is left with nothing.

Iago is determined to ruin Othello's marital life. Othello is enamoured of Iago's "honesty" and exclaims, "thoughts'rt full of love and honesty." (p. 90) In return, he poisons Othello's love for Desdemona by having extra-marital affairs with Cassio. He makes Othello keep an eye on his wife,

I speak not yet of proof.
Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;
Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure:
I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abus'd ; (p. 93)

Iago makes Othello believe that Desdemona overthrew her father for the Moor. Therefore, she can quit Othello for someone else, too. Iago is the master manipulator and a staunch Machiavellian trickster. He successfully tricks Roderigo, Barbantio, Cassio, and finally his General. Iago is not a common man; rather, he has the Machiavellian traits that are deeply rooted in his psyche. He strategically gets hold of Desdemona's marriage "napkin" and leaves it in Cassio's lodgings to assure Othello of his wife's dishonesty. Othello is caught in Iago's master plot and asks him to "give me a living reason she's disloyal." (p.99) Machiavelli's mantra, "the end justifies the means," drives the plot of *Othello*. Iago seeks to take the position from Cassio, as he deserves it more than the Florentine. Othello finally accepts Iago, "Now art thou my lieutenant." (p.101) He wins by breaking Othello's marriage and spoiling his peace of mind. Othello goes mad as he cannot afford his wife's dishonesty. He exclaims, "I will chop her into messes! cuckold me!" (p. 115) Iago, being a liar and trickster, wins Othello's trust, and he listens to his methods of killing Desdemona.

Othello: Get me some poison, Iago; this night:-I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again:-this night, Iago.

Iago: Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated. (p.119)

Iago uses Roderigo to kill Cassio, but Iago kills Roderigo. The Machiavellian villain does not spare anyone to achieve the end. He manipulates every single person who is connected to Othello and Desdemona. His deceptive nature is unveiled at the end of the play, but he does not repent or spare his wife, and kills her. One of the traits of a Machiavellian villain is not to feel guilty. He tries to kill Cassio and is responsible for killing Roderigo, Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello. He is not ashamed of his wrongdoings as he is determined by his actions and the evil motives that he has made up in his mind. Iago says, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know; From this time forth I never will speak word." (p.147)

Conclusion

It is obvious from the discussion that Iago depicts the perfect traits of a ruthless Machiavellian villain. He is a liar, deceiver, manipulator, trickster, hypocrite, greedy, revengeful, and propagandist. He manipulates the truth to attain his satanic goals. He shows all the attributes of a Machiavellian villain and gives a deaf ear to people's feelings, emotions, and relations. Iago's tragedy lies in his misuse of Machiavellian principles as they are meant to be used in the world of politics. He uses it in the domestic affairs. He is the meanest Machiavellian villain depicted so far in the plays of Shakespeare, but he fails to win the race because his motives were pseudo-accusations. He used those cunning rules in a domestic

sphere which were meant to be used by a prince or ruler. He fabricated a false web in his mind and lived in it without realizing the loss he was offering to his master, his friends, and his wife. Had his accusations been true and real, then he would have deposed Othello. As his accusations were wrong and baseless, he failed to become a perfect Machiavellian villain. In the history of evil villains, he will forever be despised for his corruption.

Recommendations

This study shows that Machiavellian principles appear lustrous, but it ultimately leads to social chaos as it rejects morality and religion. Machiavellian rules can only bring devastation but cannot promise peace and satisfaction. For maintaining domestic or global peace, Machiavellian guidelines are not fruitful as they are far away from the notion of morality. It is evident that Machiavellian philosophy works temporarily and does not have ever lasting effect resulting in barbarism and savagery. This study recommends that Machiavellian rules should be ignored in political and domestic sphere or else tragic ending would be waiting for its users.

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