

## OTHELLO'S VERBAL DEFENCE: DISTORTING REALITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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### Abstract

The study describes Othello's verbal defences by means of Perry London's Verbal Defences theory as reflected in William Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. The study was a content analysis whose primary data were words, phrases, sentences and dialogues in the play. The secondary data were articles discussing the *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Data were analyzed through determining Othello's arguments on ego verbal defence mechanisms using Perry London's Verbal Defences theory. This study revealed that three elements of verbal defences, namely, emotional insulation, intellectualization, and rationalization are experienced by Othello. They operate unconsciously and these mechanisms neutralize the upsetting impact of threatening ideas by distorting reality. In distorting reality, ego takes some extreme ways. One of those ways is "talking away" the anxiety stimuli as well as by the other means of obscuring and retreating from reality.

**Keywords:** play, Shakespeare, Othello, verbal defence.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In general, defence mechanisms serve the useful purpose of defending the ego against the pain of anxiety. Although they are normal and universally used, when carried to an extreme they lead to compulsive, repetitive, and even neurotic behaviour (Feist, 1985:32). Defence mechanisms work unconsciously and they distort reality. In distorting reality, ego takes some extreme ways. One of those ways is "talking away" the anxiety stimuli as well as by the other means of obscuring and retreating from reality (London, 1975:387). This is what this study calls the verbal defences. There are verbal defences such as *emotional insulation, isolation, rationalization, and intellectualization*.

The phenomenon of human being, psychological conflict of an individual, is something we can see in a literary work. It is because literature is a work that closely relates to human being. The author of the literary works, sometimes, creates not only an

imaginative story but also a real condition of the individual's life. A literary work can be a mirror of this life. It reflects situation, condition and happenings of this life. It tells what an individual does with his or her characteristics and his or her personality to face his or her life. One of these phenomena of a human's psychological conflict is ego verbal defence mechanisms. These are the defence mechanisms of ego to neutralize the upsetting impact of threatening ideas by making use of verbal and intellectual skills to aid the defensive manoeuvres. These phenomena attract Shakespeare's attention to adopt them into one of his play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Like in his other plays, Shakespeare wrote *Othello, the Moor of Venice* with his creativity, natural genius and unconscious intelligence. Addison (in Abrams, 1953:187) states, "Natural geniuses, a class comprising Homer, Pindar, the Old Testament poets, and Shakespeare, are the prodigies of mankind, who by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times, and the wonder of posterity".

This play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* gets many responses from some critics such like Tucker Brooke, A.C. Bradley, 1904; George Brandes, 1898; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1883; Victor Hugo, 1864; Jacques Denton Snider, 1887; Bernhard Ten Brink, 1892-95; Guilian Crommelin Verpiancnk, 1844-47; Hermann Ulrici, 1839; Charles Lamb, 1834; Anna Brownell Jameson, 1832; Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1824; Franz Horn, 1823; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1822; Francois Pierre Guillaume Guizot, 1821-52; Samuel Johnson, 1868; Thomas Rymer, 1693.

Moreover, like what Macaulay states, "Othello is perhaps the greatest work in the world" (Macaulay, 1824). There are also some studies concerning with research of *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. I found some previous researcher of William Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. In 2004, at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Atsna Agustiani Studied *A Comparison Analysis on Shakespeare's Othello in the Original Script and the Movie Version*. In 1997, at Diponegoro University, Tri Setyo Dyah Rini studied "*Othello*" *Karya William Shakespeare and "Hecatommthi" Karya Giraldo Cinthio: Sebuah Proses Kreatif William Shakespeare*. In 1996, at Gajah Mada University, Henny Roesellaningtias studied *Shakespeare's Othello as Viewed from the Tragic Rhythm*.

It is a very interesting works for there are many psychological conflicts in it. They are love, prejudice, envy, jealousy and ego verbal defence mechanisms. In this research, the researcher chooses the ego verbal defence mechanisms because they are the conflict which the main character, Othello, experiences them. This play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, also offers a beautiful natural story which catches the readers' curiosity to read until the end of the play. Those are the reasons why the researcher prefers to choose this play to other plays of Shakespeare.

## 2. METHODS

This study uses a psychological approach. The term "psychology" comes from two Greek words: "psyche," which means soul, mind, or spirit; and "logos," meaning study or

discuss (London, 1975:3). Psychology, then, means study of the mind or it can be defined as the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes (Crider, 1983:4).

As the "executive" of the personality, the ego cooperates both with the id and superego (Wren, 1996). In attempting to achieve this goal, the ego develops several defense mechanisms (Crider, 1983:392). When ego is worried of losing somebody who means a lot, afraid of being guilty, angry but cannot show its anger, worried to accept realities, or any situation which makes the ego under pressure, the ego takes some extreme ways to reduce those frights and worries. O'Connor ([www.undoingdepression.com](http://www.undoingdepression.com)) states that mechanisms of defense operate to protect an individual from uncomfortable or unacceptable self-awareness. In analyzing the play, the researcher uses Perry London's theory of ego verbal defence mechanisms. It is one of the theories of ego defence mechanisms which emphasizes on the efforts of ego to aid repression by "talking away" the anxiety stimuli as well as by the other means of obscuring and retreating from reality (London, 1975:382).

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There are also some points that need to be involved as follows: (1) the object of the study is William Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, (2) the study will use library research, whose data are taken from primary and secondary resources: (a) the primary data source is the play *Othello, the Moor of Venice* written by William Shakespeare. The primary data are words, phrases, sentences and dialogues in the play and (b) secondary data sources are some materials related to the data required, such as the related theories and articles or books which discuss the play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, (3) the technique used for collecting data is library research by collecting and selecting both the primary data and the secondary data. The researcher will require some steps: (a) reading the play repeatedly to get deep understanding (b) reading some related books to find out the theory, data and information required (c) making notes of important parts in both primary and secondary data sources and (d) classifying the data into some categories, (4) data analyzing technique: (a) determining Othello's arguments which deal with ego verbal defence mechanisms and (b) analyzing Othello's arguments which deal with ego verbal defence mechanisms by using Perry London's Verbal Defences theory.

### 3. RESULTS

Othello, one major character in the play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, experiences some happenings that make him anxious. As a dignified figure, Othello needs to repress his feeling to hide his anxiety. Attempting to fulfil the need, Othello's defensive manoeuvres aid repression by "talking away" the anxiety stimuli as well as by other means of obscuring and retreating from reality. Othello's defensive manoeuvres aid repression by "talking away" the anxiety stimuli as well as by other means of obscuring and retreating from reality

in order to face the happenings that make him anxious. Dealing with this, I try to apply three elements of the Verbal Defence Mechanisms toward the major character, Othello, there are: emotional insulation, intellectualization, and rationalization.

### 3.1. Emotional Insulation

It is the process by which a person reduces his emotional involvement in painful situations; in other words, he cuts off his feelings, and keeps a "cool" pose all the time.

Othello does this action in order to show that he is fine though he gets many things that make him anxious. First, it happens when his marriage to Desdemona becomes a very big problem. Iago tells him that Desdemona's father will divorce them and he has power to do that because his position in the state. But Othello tries to cool it down by showing to Iago how he also has important service to the state.

"Let him do his spite:  
My services which I have done the signiory  
Shall out-tongue his complaints" (I. ii)

Second, it happens when Brabantio, Desdemona's father, tries to block his way when he is going to the Sagittary. Brabantio comes with a very big anger to Othello, but Othello tries to cool it down by a kind of negotiating conversation to Brabantio in order to direct him to see that Othello now has a very important business to the state.

"Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.--  
Good signior, you shall more command with years  
Than with your weapons" (I. ii).

"Hold your hands,  
Both you of my inclining and the rest:  
Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it  
Without a prompter.--Where will you that I go  
To answer this your charge?" (I. ii).

At this moment, Brabantio wants Othello to be in prison until the law will give decision to him, but Othello directs the negotiating conversation well.

"What if I do obey?  
How may the duke be therewith satisfied,  
Whose messengers are here about my side,  
Upon some present business of the state,  
To bring me to him?" (I. ii).

Third, it happens when the state asks him to speak about his marriage to Desdemona, Othello always answer them in a “cool” pose. Othello tries to convince the state in a cool and calm speech that his marriage to Desdemona is purely because both Othello and Desdemona want this marriage.

“Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,  
My very noble and approv'd good masters,--  
That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,  
It is most true; true, I have married her:  
The very head and front of my offending  
Hath this extent, no more. Rude am I in my speech,  
And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace;  
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,  
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd  
Their dearest action in the tented field;  
And little of this great world can I speak,  
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle;  
And therefore little shall I grace my cause  
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,  
I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver  
Of my whole course of love: what drugs, what charms,  
What conjuration, and what mighty magic,--  
For such proceeding I am charged withal,--  
I won his daughter” (I. iii).

Though Brabantio always attacks him with statements declaring that Desdemona is so still, quiet, and never be bold, Othello keeps his manner to be in a cool and calm pose. He, then, beseeches the state to send Desdemona to the Sagittary to confess about the marriage between Othello and Desdemona by herself meanwhile Othello, again, tries to convince the state that he is blameless by delivering the story how Desdemona can be in love with him and how he can be in love with Desdemona.

“Her father lov'd me; oft invited me;  
Still question'd me the story of my life,  
From year to year,--the battles, sieges, fortunes,  
That I have pass'd.  
I ran it through, even from my boyish days  
To the very moment that he bade me tell it:  
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field;  
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach;

Of being taken by the insolent foe,  
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,  
And portance in my travels' history:  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
It was my hint to speak,--such was the process;  
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear  
Would Desdemona seriously incline:  
But still the house affairs would draw her thence;  
Which ever as she could with haste despatch,  
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse; which I observing,  
Took once a pliant hour; and found good means  
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
Whereof by parcels she had something heard,  
But not intentively; I did consent;  
And often did beguile her of her tears,  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:  
She swore,--in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:  
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd  
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me;  
And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,  
I should but teach him how to tell my story,  
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:  
She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd;  
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.  
This only is the witchcraft I have us'd:--  
Here comes the lady; let her witness it" (I. iii).

Facing Brabantio and the state, Othello keeps being in a cool and calm pose.

Fourth, it happens when Brabantio gives him the fact that Desdemona's lie to her father to marry Othello in secret will not close the possibility that Desdemona, maybe, someday will lie to Othello too.

“My life upon her faith!” (I. iii).

Fifth, when Iago tries to show him that Desdemona is dishonest to him, Othello also react it in a “cool” pose.

“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 resolv'd: exchange me for a goat  
When I shall turn the business of my soul  
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,  
Matching thy inference. 'Tis not to make me jealous,  
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  
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt;  
For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago;  
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;  
And on the proof, there is no more but this,--  
Away at once with love or jealousy!” (III. iii).

Sixth, it happens when Iago tells Othello that Othello is moved for Iago's story about Desdemona.

“No, not much mov'd.  
I do not think but Desdemona's honest” (III. iii).

Othello always try to show that he is fine in facing some happenings that make him anxious though; finally, Iago succeeds to shake his calmness.

### 3.2. Intellectualization

In intellectualization, a person cools off an anxious situation by “talking it up” in abstract generalities which make it distant and impersonal. The person who experiences it tend to speak in very complicated sentences, he controls anxiety by dressing up their thoughts and speech in complicated, circuitous ways.

Iago succeeds to shake Othello's calmness. Sometimes he speaks something as a distant and impersonal thing, sometimes he speaks in a complicated, circuitous way. First, it happens when Othello is anxious and doubtful whether Desdemona truly has affair with Cassio. Othello uses “he” and “Othello” instead of “I” to describe how sorry he is to know the news because the news makes him anxious.

“He that is robb'd, not wanting what is stol'n,  
Let him not know't and he's not robb'd at all” (III. iii).

“O, now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell,  
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,  
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!  
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats  
The immortal Jove's dread clamors counterfeit,  
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!” (III. iii).

Second, it happens when he meets Desdemona. He talks about Desdemona's hand and relates it to Desdemona's behaviour. Othello, then, talk about the handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona. He said that the handkerchief has magic in it. It is quite confusing to see how Othello comes to Desdemona only to talk about hand and the magic in the handkerchief.

“This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart:--  
Hot, hot, and moist: this hand of yours requires  
A sequester from liberty, fasting, and prayer,  
Much castigation, exercise devout;  
For here's a young and sweating devil here  
That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,  
A frank one” (III. iii).

“That is a fault.  
That handkerchief  
Did an Egyptian to my mother give;  
She was a charmer, and could almost read  
The thoughts of people: she told her, while she kept it,  
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father  
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it  
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye  
Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt  
After new fancies: she, dying, gave it me;  
And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,

To give it her. I did so: and take heed on't;  
Make it a darling like your precious eye;  
To lose't or give't away were such perdition  
As nothing else could match" (III. iii).

"Tis true: there's magic in the web of it:  
A sibyl, that had number'd in the world  
The sun to course two hundred compasses,  
In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;  
The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk;  
And it was dy'd in mummy which the skillful  
Conserv'd of maiden's hearts" (III. iii).

Third, it happens when Iago tells Othello that Cassio says something about the affair with Desdemona. It makes Othello anxious and he begins to speak in a complicated way.

"Lie with her! lie on her!--We say lie on her when they  
belie her.--Lie with her! that's fulsome.--Handkerchief-  
-confessions--handkerchief!--To confess, and be hanged  
for his labour,--first, to be hanged, and then to confess.--I  
tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing  
passion without some instruction. It is not words that shake me  
thus:--pish!--noses, ears, and lips.--Is't possible?--Confess,--  
handkerchief!--O devil!--" (IV. i).

Fourth, it happens when he saw his handkerchief on Bianca's hand and Iago tells him that Desdemona gives the handkerchief to Cassio and how Cassio appreciates the handkerchief by giving it to his whore, Bianca.

"I would have him nine years a-killing.--A fine woman! a fair  
woman! a sweet woman!" (IV. i).

Fifth, it happens when Lodovico comes. Lodovico and Desdemona talk about Cassio. Othello replies their conversation in a circuitous way.

"Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord  
An unkind breach: but you shall make all well."  
"Are you sure of that?"  
"My lord?"  
"[Reads.] "This fail you not to do, as you will,--""  
"He did not call; he's busy in the paper.

Is there division 'twixt my lord and Cassio?"  
"A most unhappy one: I would do much  
To atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio."  
"Fire and brimstone!"  
"My lord?"  
"Are you wise?"  
"What, is he angry?"  
"May be the letter mov'd him;  
For, as I think, they do command him home,  
Deputing Cassio in his government."  
"Trust me, I am glad on't."  
"Indeed!"  
"My lord?"

Iago is successful to bring Othello into a strong jealousy that, finally, Othello wants the murder of Cassio and he intends to kill Desdemona. Cassio, then, is wounded by Iago and Othello kills Desdemona.

Sixth, it happens when Emilia comes to Othello, he says something impersonal about the murder of Desdemona and how he wants the murder of Cassio.

"It is the very error of the moon.  
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont  
And makes men mad" (V. ii).  
"Then murder's out of tune,  
And sweet revenge grows harsh" (V. ii).  
"Why, how should she be murdered?" (V. ii).

### 3.3. Rationalization

It is the invention of fictitious but acceptable reasons for an irrational, immoral, or inept behaviour and attitudes. In other words, a person makes excuses for himself.

Othello is very sorry that he kills Desdemona. Othello is eaten up by jealousy that Iago grows it into his mind. Othello makes his first rationalization when he says that he is not easily jealous though he is already jealous only after 166 lines of the conversation between him and Iago.

"Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know't.--  
No more of that.--I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
And say besides,--that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him--thus." (V. ii).

Second, it happens when Othello makes an excuse for himself to kill Desdemona. He denies that he kills Desdemona because he is jealous. He makes rationalization that he kills Desdemona to save men in the world from Desdemona's crime to be an uncontrollable woman.

"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V. ii).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In this play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, Shakespeare creates Othello as a dignified person. Because of his position as a dignified person, Othello always try to be in a "cool" pose whatever the happenings that make him anxious. Othello proves it in some occurrences such as when Iago says that Brabantio may divorce him from Desdemona, when Brabantio blocks his way to the Sagittary, when the state asks him to speak about his marriage to Desdemona, when Brabantio says that Desdemona, maybe, someday lies to Othello, when Iago at the first, tries to grow seeds of jealousy into Othello's mind and when Iago tells Othello that Othello is moved for what Iago tells about Desdemona.

However, when Iago succeeds to shake his calmness to make him in a strong jealousy, Othello is moved. He wants the murder of Cassio and he intends to kill Desdemona because of his jealousy but he denies that he kills his wife because of jealousy. That is why Othello makes rationalization that he kills his wife because he is afraid that his wife will betray more men and he also make rationalization that he is actually not easily jealous; it is just because Iago gives him lies.

It is true, Othello is jealous because Iago grows the seeds of jealousy into Othello's mind, but it is not true when Othello says that he is not easily jealous because he is already jealous after 166 lines of conversation between him and Iago. Othello also speaks in a

complicated, circuitous way when he is anxious and doubtful whether Desdemona truly has affair with Cassio.

Othello uses "he" and "Othello" instead of "I" to describe how sorry he is to know the news because the news makes him anxious, when he talks to Desdemona about Desdemona's hand and the magic in the handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona, when Iago tells Othello that Cassio says something about the affair with Desdemona, when he saw his handkerchief on Bianca's hand and Iago tells him that Desdemona gives the handkerchief to Cassio and how Cassio appreciates the handkerchief by giving it to his whore, Bianca, when Lodovico and Desdemona talk about Cassio, and when Othello tries to hide the fact that is him, who wants the murder of Cassio and intends to kill Desdemona, that is why he talks to Emilia about it as an impersonal matter, he talks about the error of the moon that makes men mad and asks who kills Desdemona before, finally, he confess that he kills Desdemona and consents Cassio's death taken by Iago.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, we can conclude two things: (1) this play represents a man that tries to fulfil his need for social grace by using Verbal Defense Mechanisms. This man repress his anxiety in facing happenings that make him anxious by being in a "cool" pose all the time until one day his ancient shakes his calmness and sends him into a strong jealousy. This man begins to speak things as if they are distant and impersonal. He also speaks in a complicated, circuitous way. Overcoming his jealousy, he kills his wife. When his wife's maid come talking about murder, he replies it with talking about murder too as an impersonal thing. He kills his wife but he is afraid that people later will say that is wrong, so he kills his wife with a rationalization that his wife must die or she will betray more men and he is also afraid of embarrassment if he is jealous to his lieutenant, he makes rationalization that he is not easily jealous but trapped by lies; though actually he is already jealous after a short conversation between him and his ancient and (2) the dominant issue in Othello's verbal defence mechanisms are emotional insulation and intellectualization, both of these verbal defence mechanisms happen six times. Meanwhile rationalization happens twice. From the fact of the dominant issue, it can be concluded that Othello is often to be calm and speak in a circuitous way in facing anxiety. Othello rarely makes rationalization in facing anxiety.

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