How can theoretical models of sacrifice from ancient cultures be linked to domestic violence in *Othello*?[1] This paper explicates sex, scapegoating and sacrificial ritual, involving domestic violence within the context of patriarchal practices in *Othello*. My theoretical framework for discussing sacrifice emphasizes the work of Rene Girard, particularly his anatomy of the logic of sacrificial substitution in *Violence and the Sacred* (1979). Girard argues that acts of sacrifice involve the use of a surrogate victim toward whom a community can divert its hostility. At the core of the sacred is the violence that simultaneously sacrifices and destroys this victim, leaving the community solidified and purified. According to Girard, "the purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric."[2] In my reading of *Othello*, I argue that Othello, unified with Desdemona, his double, offending the patriarchal Venetian community, contaminates and threatens the Venetian society. Desdemona, functioning as sacrificial surrogate, thus becomes his displaced scapegoat, taking upon her body the aggression that might have been diverted onto other targets in the community. The destruction of these characters represents a removal of a perceived contaminant in order to preserve communal solidarity and patriarchal continuity.

The starting point for Girard's theory is "mimetic desire." Girard proposes that much of human behavior is based on imitation, or mimesis. Girard describes a situation where two individuals desire the same object; as they both attempt to obtain this object, their behavior becomes conflicted, since there is only one object, but two people.[3] Girard continues the contagious nature of desire. In the world of internal mediation, where people's desires are based on those of the people around them, it is possible for a subject to choose a mediator without that person's

[1] All quotations of Shakespeare in this paper will be from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
[2] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1979)4-8.
[3] Jeramy Townsley, "Rene Girard's Theory of Violence, Religion and the scapegoat"(2003) http://www.jeramyt.org./papers/girard.html.

knowledge. If that mediator is not capable of choosing his own desires, he may copy the desires of his subject without knowing that what he is copying is in fact a reflection of himself. To some degree, the rivals become doubles. This rivalry can become intensely passionate and can lead to hatred and discord. In Girard's schema, mimetic desire inevitably leads to conflict—"mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict;"[4] conflict invariably leads to violence. "Violence is generated by this process; or rather, violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means."[5] The violence breeds more violence as members of the community seek revenge. In this way, the chain of reciprocal violence is forged.

Through the figure of the scapegoat, the ancient object of contempt, Shakespeare communicates to his audience the tensions apparent in the assertion of power. *Othello* reveals the world of the impotent and the strong, and the paradox of their interdependence. He does not resolve their conflicts, but exposes the effects of the brutal execution of advantageous community. The scapegoat reaffirms the reality of social marginalization. Shakespeare investigates the "outsider" persecuted by the community to maintain social order, and maneuvered to reinforce individual ambition. Such scapegoat, self-deceived, prey of the plotter, and the dupe, individually, unveil a phenomenon of this complicated social facet, whose premise originates from community's need to victimize. Girard, recognizing the facility with which the scapegoat defines "persecution," has explored its significance to our comprehension of concept of "society". From these investigations, the mimetic, adjunct to the powerful, satisfies the latter's need for exoneration.

Girard's theories of the breakdown of difference are useful for describing the fate of the stranger in Shakespeare's *Othello*. As Richard Kearney states, "the figure

[4] Girard 146.
[5] Girard 9.

of the 'stranger'—ranging from the ancient notion of the 'foreigner' (*xenos*) to the contemporary category of the alien invader—frequently operates."[6] His plays often depict this breakdown of differences in class, gender, social status, social roles, and ideological positions. To cite just two examples, when Othello persecutes Desdemona, Othello becomes not stranger, but victim. We must be reminded, however, that Othello is himself a victim of oppression caught up in a chain of reciprocal violence. The inversion of roles that occurs for Othello and Desdemona exemplifies the breakdown of difference—Othello assumes Desdemona's role of Venetian; Desdemona becomes his double.

Girard's "violence" is useful for understanding Venetian community's propensity to vent their anger on scapegoats. Girard describes a community's response to this "overwhelming catastrophe": "its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can easily be disposed of."[7] Girard writes that:

> in the following murder, the victim is held responsible for crisis; the victim polarizes the growing mimetic conflicts that tear the community apart; the victim breaks the vicious cycle of violence and becomes the single pole for what then becomes a unifying, mimetic ritual.[8]

Within the communities Girard describes, the guilt bred by rampart reciprocal violence is debilitating and must be excluded through sacrifice, an act of violence that is community-sanctioned and that reenacts the original act of violence. The

[6] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003)3.
[7] Girard 80.
[8] Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Stanford University Press, 1987)78-79.

scapegoat (sacrificial victim) functions to carry away the sins of the community and to suffer exile or death without the fear of retaliation. Because the scapegoat is in some way outside of the community (i.e., different from) and possesses no strong bonds with members of the community, his/her death is not avenged; there is, simply, no one to avenge it.

Shakespeare's *Othello* focuses on communities entangled in mimetic desire. They desire what the dominant culture possesses—dominant position, power, privilege, wealth, and even "beauty," manifested in Desdemona. The frustration concretized in Iago that results from striving for these unattainable desires manifests itself in violence. His inability to "have" material wealth, privilege, position, beauty, etc., creates in him a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy. This painful self-loathing causes him to lash out at Othello.

Scapegoating

The choosing of the scapegoat is arbitrary. Their similar cultural traits are an outsider, but on the border of the community, not fully alien to the community, like Othello. This victim belongs to the community, but has traits that separate him/her from the community, in the case of Desdemona marrying to Othello. Examples of scapegoat are listed in Girard's *Scapegoat* (1986):

> First there are violent crimes which choose as object those People whom it is most criminal to attack, either in the absolute sense or in reference to the individual committing the act: a king, a father, the symbol of supreme authority, and in biblical and modern societies the weakest and most defenseless, especially young children. Then there are sexual crimes: rape, incest, bestiality. The ones most frequently invoked transgress the taboos that are considered the strictest

> in the society in question. Finally there are religious crimes, such as profanation of the host. Here, too, it is the strictest taboos that are transgressed.[9]

They can be summarized as: children, old people, these with physical abnormalities, women, members of ethnic or racial minorities, the poor, and "those whose position mark them as exceptional"[10] Othello, the Moor," a general of Venice, is an eloquent and physically powerful figure, respected by all those around him. Othello has been chosen as the scapegoat, simply out of the nature of his difference and vulnerability.

Iago's racist language suggests black skin as a connection to the devil/conjurer They are: Iago says, "the devil will make a grandsire of you"(I.i.91); the very sexual act between Othello and Desdemona becomes an unusual beast: "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (I.i.17-18). Iago fantasizes "ram" and "ewe" transforming into the subjects of a violent copulation and the begetters of the evil because Brabanzio would father "nephews neigh to you," and have "coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans" (I.i.113-114). Iago's sheep analogically parallels with the sheep's position in the Bible as a symbol of sacrifice. Othello and Desdemona are to be sacrificed for the Venetian society due to their defying the social convention inter-racial marriage. Their secret marriage, not Brabanzio's personal problem, involves the community of Venice as a whole: their marriage would produce Venice populations of Othello. The whole Venetian group think the alien as the Other, practicing witchcraft to win over Brabanzio's gentle and obedient daughter, who was originally "a maid so tender, fair, and happy" (I.ii.67) and " a maiden never bold/Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion/Blushed at itself" (I.i.165).

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[9] Rene Girad. *The Scapegoat*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1986) 15.

[10] Wallace, Mark I., and Theophus H. Smith. Eds. *Curing Violence* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1994) 253.

The traits of scapegoat exemplified in Desdemona are her innocence and purity, devoid her of incomprehension of evil. Othello compares her to "a pearl" (V.ii.347). The pearl, Desdemona's beauty and virtue, is praised by different characters and beyond speech. Her father, Brabanzio says: "A maiden never bold:/Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion/Blushed at itself" (I.iii.94-96). Cassio to Iago: "She's a most exquisite lady" (II.i.18); "She is most fresh and delicate creature" (II.i.20); "She is indeed perfection" (II.i.28). This beauty discards the noble of Venice, what her maid Emilia states : "Hath she forsook so many noble matches,/Her father and her country and her friends," (IV.ii.127-127) and runs to the "sooty" Othello.

For love, Desdemona is away from her father and her kinsmen, staying alone in the inn of Sagittary. Later, even on a journey to Cyprus, separating from her husband, she goes in a different ship. In line with Othello, Desdemona is marginalized as a wandering stranger.

Patriarchal Venice

In Renaissance patriarchal society, women have to follow the wills from fathers or husbands. Family is a place where patriarchal authority is performed, and that authority belongs to father. Russ McDonald writes:

> Authority in the early modern family rested finally with the father. Wives had authority over children and servants, but the principle that the women was "the weaker vessel" and consequently dependent on the superior judgment and ability of her husband- a doctrine derived from St. Paul and his interpreters- gave the father uncontested rule over his wife and all members of

the household.[11]

Father possesses authority over his wife and all members of the household. Diane Elizabeth Dreher discusses the relationship between fathers and daughters. In addition, Shakespeare's fathers and daughters are caught in a generational struggle between two conflicting paradigms: "the fathers uphold traditional hierarchical order and patriarchal authority, while their daughters affirm the new progressive bonds of individual trust and cooperation."[12] Two conflicting elements exist: traditional hierarchical order and patriarchal authority follow the fathers; individual trust and cooperation connect with the daughters. For Shakespeare's daughters, it seems that the way to reach adulthood is to break the traditional order and patriarchal authority held by fathers and affirm the new progressive bonds of individual trust and cooperation. Even in Renaissance patriarchal England, Shakespeare's heroines are brave to declare their independence and will.

In act I, scene i, Desdemona's elopement provides Iago the best chance to avenge on Othello. Iago purposely intends that the marriage might bring catastrophe to Venice, causing panic and fear of innocent members of the community. By imagery of an alien, Iago incites Brabanzio's hostility towards Othello. When Brabanzio believes Othello must have enchanted Desdemona to elope with him, Desdemona herself enters to defend her marriage and to announce to her father that her allegiance is now to her husband. Brabanzio is frustrated. After that, she has run from her father to "the sooty bosom" (I.ii.71), her husband.

"Barbary," the name, means "foreigner." Desdemona marries a foreigner, whom some call a barbarian. Iago describes the marriage as that between "an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian"(I.iii.355–356). Desdemona's disloyalty to her father is viewed as threatening to patriarchal society of Venice. As the figure of

[11]McDonald, Russ. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* (New York: Bedford Books, 1996)256.
[12]Dreher, Diane Elizabeth. *Domination and Defiance* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1986) 5.

substituted authority over Desdemona is a racial Other, Desdemona's marriage inevitable raises the problem of "miscegenation": "an old black ram/Is tupping your ewe"; "the devil will make a grandsire of you" (I.i.88-89; 91).

Othello directly represents some form of disciplinary punishment inflicted upon a criminalized class of social marginal: strangers, prostitutes, sodomites, impoverished women accused of witchcraft, wives executed for petty treason, and vagabonds; by standards of criminality, these punished individuals constitute victimized scapegoats rather than genuine malefactors. As Michel Foucault has acutely observed, disciplinary punishments perform cultural functions supplementary to their judicial functions; the spectacle of criminal punishment functions to exhibit and reinforce existent hierarchies and norms of behavior through the exemplary application of pain to a criminal's body.[13] Desdemona's collusion with Othello as a criminal's body, roots in this ideology, which posits the necessity and efficacy of the entire panoply of public disciplinary punishments—not only to punish the criminal but more importantly to instill civil behavior and inculcate gender, class, and status norms amongst the good citizens witnessing these public admonitory shows. Therefore, Desdemona, as a criminalized female, functions as a kind of scapegoat or pharmakon, whose role, in effect, is to have the 'moral degeneration' of an entire social system displaced onto her. With state persecution (Othello's hands), the cultural, economic, political, and legal circumstances are reaffirmed with official dogma submissively.

But how does the precious pearl of Venetian community—Desdemona meet and love Othello? Othello himself is a persuasive "storyteller" who can silence Brabanzio's reproach on his "nature," "years," "country," and "credit" (I.iii.96-97). It is Brabanzio that makes Othello's initial approach Desdemona possible. Othello presents himself as an honored guest who deserves repeated invitations: "her father love me, oft invited me,/Still question me the story of my life/From year to year,

[13] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975)53-72.

the battles, sieges, fortunes/That I have passed" (I.iii.128-131). Othello wins Desdemona's love by using his adventurous life story. While doing housework, Desdemona is engaged in his stories, his account of his past is characterized by its fictional and manipulative attributes:

> 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; (I.iii.131-141)

Othello's internalization of the tale of a wanderer with fantastic depictions of the "unvarnished tale"(I.iii.90) in travel and war—the "cannibals," "[A]nthropophagi," "men whose heads/Do grows beneath their shoulders." (I.iii.142-144,144-145), and of implausible, grotesque creatures, along with "the battles, sieges, and fortunes," seems to have planted in Desdemona's mind a yearning for escape from domestic space.

Othello describes their courtship as growing from her passion to listening to his heroic and bloody stories of battle, hardly appropriate topics for a high-born lady. It is to be noted that the tale of anthropophagi and headless creatures has grasped Desdemona's attention: "These things to hear/Would Desdemona seriously incline" (I.iii.144-145). Desdemona "with a greedy ear/Devoured up his discourse" (I.iii.148-149). Othello's narration is a very effective rhetorical romanticizing his life as:

> 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.(I.iii.150-158)

Desdemona, leaving her household chores in haste to hang attentively on Othello's tales, is without doubt possessed by his tale. Her inexperience and her quick imagination lends it an added propriety; then her compassionate disposition is interested by all disastrous chances, hair-breadth escapes, and moving accidents by flood and field.

Othello's telling his tales of suffering and adventure wins Desdemona's heart. The confession and the excuse for her love is spoken by Othello: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/And I loved her that she did pity them---" (I.iii.167-168). Speaking sufferings of Othello's youth makes Desdemona's eyes with tears. Such validation of Othello's passivity has penetrated into Desdemona's psyche--Desdemona internalizes herself as Othello. Thus, story and Othello are unified as one: hero is Othello; Othello is hero. Desdemona's tears enact herself as Othello, and his identification. After hearing his tale, Desdemona says: "twas strange, 'twas passing strange"; She gives me for my pains a world of sighs. She swears: "'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," and she thank'd me,and bade me: " if I had a friend that loved her,/ I should but teach him how to tell my story./And that would woo her" (I.iii.160-161,164-166). Desdemona takes care of "the house affairs" in her motherless household. Othello's narrative in which the probable and the improbable are mixed has incited Desdemona's imagination outside her domestic space. The world Othello creates for Desdemona is freedom in which she can internalize herself as the vagrant, moving around in exotic lands. She is to escape from her father's confinement into Othello's world (I.iii.144-149).

Desdemona's "tears" are simply sentimental reactions to Othello's miserable past. Desdemona loves the "dangers" Othello has passed, not Othello; for Desdemona, the best of Othello is in the story. Thus falling in love with Othello, everything about Othello becomes her mimetic desire, in which Desdemona enacts Othello's displaced double, whilst Othello legalizes himself as part of the Venetian society through his marriage to Desdemona.

Desdemona herself acknowledges openly the tempestuous nature of her elopement: "That I {did}love the Moor to live with him,/My downright violence, and storm of fortune,/May trumpet to the world" (I.iii.248-250). Further to Desdemona's secret marriage to the Moor, someone outside her ethnic and racial group, her implicitly breakdown with patriarchal prerogative defies her father. With the most perfect artlessness, she has something of the instinctive, unconscious address of her sex. Thomas Rymer finds the pairing of a Venetian Senator's daughter with "a Blackmoor Captain" absurd and unnatural.[14] Patricia Parker traces the complex interacting of race and gender and argues that Desdemona the white Venetian daughter becomes the "sexually tainted" woman traditionally condemned as "black."[15]

Othello gets credence from the Venetian society with the possession of Desdemona. Othello is likely to have wished that the marriage would dispel the Venetians' presumable concerns about his doubtful alien identity, transforming him from "an extravagant and wheeling stranger" to a man of domestic duty. Ironically, Othello does not become a static Venetian citizen through Desdemona; instead, Desdemona becomes a wandering stranger, a "disengaged self," like Othello.

Desdemona is attracted by the experiences Othello undergoes as a wandering stranger and that she wishes to be a man like Othello in his tale. Othello, as an

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[14] Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (London: Ashgate Publishing, Limited , 1963)146.

[15] Patricia Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, *Othello* and Bringing to Light," in *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994)93.

agent, liberates her from her father. Desdemona resists to a fixed abode in Venice and practically assimilates to the vagrant spirit of Othello. Desdemona's displacement, her elopement not a "settled" house but to the temporary and public one names the Sagitta"(I.iii.115), symbolizes instability for the newly-wed couple. Their marriage provides them not a moment of settlement but tarrying them in the inn as if strangers. The whole process of Desdemona's elopement to the Sagittary in parallel with her liberation from her filial obligation ending as Othello's life pattern of "battle, sieges," and "redemption" (I.iii.129,137), and thus that Othello's "unhoused free condition" (I.ii.26) becomes hers. Now she is seen as a "warrior" in Othello's eyes (II.i.179). She even replaces Othello's generalship in Iago's mind: "our general's wife is now the general" (II.iii.314-15). Desdemona assimilates herself to Othello's alienness as the oneness—the old stranger Othello and the new stranger Desdemona.

Desdemona, as a woman hungry for passion, battle, and war, her position is a misfit to traditional society. Consequently, Desdemona and Othello's attraction is a result of their similar status as true outsiders, she as a liberated woman, and he as a refined and powerful Moor in a racist country. Her belief in their marriage and equality is something she stakes her life on, and unfortunately she misjudges her husband. When faced with the prospect of managing love and marriage, Othello's inexperience undermines his confidence. Iago finds it easy to drive Othello to jealousy and think that Desdemona loves another man because he already feels that her love for him is too good to be true.

Desdemona, a contested "property" between father (Brabanzio) and husband (Othello), has betrayed her father, at least Brabanzio seeing her actions as such. His warning to Othello that she may well betray him, "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.ii.294), is perhaps a planting of the seed that precedes Iago's own manipulations. The handkerchief, a talismanic object with almost supernatural effect on Othello, is piece of property itself, as well as a symbol of Desdemona's value as (virginal) property for Othello. It is a kind of micro-symbol of the

marriage sheets, as well: the virginal blood they are meant to publicly display will, however, bear the stain of her death instead. A proper woman would never marry without her father's permission, as Desdemona clearly does. When producing the affair between Desdemona and Cassio, Iago verifies the probable by reminding Othello that Desdemona did deceive her father. Demonizing the "downright" marriage ritual, the stability of possession of Desdemona is likely usurped. Desdemona's domestic transgression is conflated with her sexual initiative, "the downright violence " that led her to elope either Othello, also places her in a dominant position in her relationship with him, and becomes the "captain's captain"(II.i.74) and Iago says: "our general's wife is now the general" (II.iii.314-15). Desdemona becomes Othello's double/his fictional "Other"--Desdemona in Venice. Celia R. Daileader equates the marriage between Desdemona and Othello as "white + black=black."[16]

In act II, scene iii, Iago suggests that Cassio appeal to Desdemona, because she commands Othello and "[our general's wife] is now the general" (II.iii.314-15). Kindhearted Desdemona will help Cassio if Cassio entreats her, and that she will persuade Othello to give Cassio back his lieutenantship. Here Desdemona enacts Othello's double because of that "he[Othello] hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces" (II.iii.323-25). Thus Desdemona is Othello, and Othello is Desdemona. Therefore Othello would be tamed by Desdemona and performed her will as her spokesman. Desdemona pleads for Cassio again and enrages Othello. White handkerchief is the focus of suspicion. As he accuses her, demanding "The handkerchief" with increasing vehemence, he finds out that Desdemona does not have the white handkerchief. Othello is provoked to warn Desdemona hidden misfortune approaching. Desdemona reaffirms her loyalty and love for Othello, who accuses Desdemona of her adultery, saddening Desdemona extremely.

[16] Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)46.

Old enough to be Desdemona's father, and long absence from home for battles, how long can Desdemona's hero(Othello)-worshipping last? Again, Othello is said as followed: "[H]is soul is so enfettered to her love/That she may make, unmake, do what she list/Even as her appetite shall play the god/With his weak function" (II.iii.345-48). This refers specifically to Desdemona's presumed sexual prowess and Othello's potential impotence. By himself, Othello muses that his wife no longer loves him, probably because he is too old for her, because he is black, and because he doesn't have the manners of a courtier. "She's gone," he laments (III.iii.271).

Sacrificial Ritual

Violence serves as a tool of intervention in case of patriarchal instability, that instability is reflected in the transgressive behavior of a daughter. Although women may have been the most visible victims, as historians and literary scholars have claimed, the *domestic violence*[17] authorized by the discourse of sacrifice characterizes patriarchal control. As dramatized in this play *Othello*, this sacrificial violence, deployed as a prop for patriarchal stability, spreads throughout the entire domestic sphere.

Sacrifice is defined as the ritual killing of a human or animal, a compensatory act designed to purge a community of contaminated individuals and thus create solidarity in this play, in the service of preserving patriarchal order. This purgation involved in sacrifice takes place in elimination of behavior viewed as transgression and therefore threatening to the community. As stated earlier, Daileader equates "WHITE WOMAN+MOOR ='WHORE'…(all whores being black at night)—that is central plot of *Othello* and perhaps the key to its fascination for the culture."[18]

[17] Domestic violence is defined as any behavior that involves infliction of harm by one person against another with whom there is a domestic or familial relationship.

[18] Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from*

The fear of Desdemona's sexual autonomy consequently exposes fear of miscegenation. And miscegenation as daughter's transgression might contaminate the community if it is allowed to exist.

Othello, first performed in 1604, has been called by A.C. Bradley, "the most painfully exciting and the most terrible" of all Shakespeare's tragedies.[19] Othello's violence against Desdemona thus becomes a visible means of producing and reinforcing his patriarchal power, of subduing her "appetite." However, Othello reverts to a harsh system of discipline when he assumes the role of patriarch, who holds the power of life and death over his wife. Othello then asks her to lend him her handkerchief. When Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief he wants to see, Othello explains the handkerchief's history. An Egyptian sorceress gave it to his mother and told her that it would make her desirable and keep Othello's father loyal, but if she lost it or gave it away, Othello's father would leave her. Othello's mother gave him the magic handkerchief on her deathbed, instructing him to give it to the woman he desired to marry because the effect of handkerchief is "such perdition/As nothing else could match" (III.iv.68-69). During the process of scapegoating mechanism, the witch trials are necessary. The methods allegedly used by the "witches" and the beliefs of harm from magic by the villagers, are effective. The handkerchief, the piece of white cloth, which would guarantee a man's fidelity to his wife, is created by a "hallowed" worms and dyed with liquid drained from the hearts of maidens, a description that evokes the image of sacrificed virgins (III.iv.70-74). The complexities and contradictions of Othello's patriarchal position intensify his desire to assume mastery over Desdemona's sexuality. Desdemona is unsettled by the story and says that she has the handkerchief, but not with her. Othello does not believe her. Iago manipulates the handkerchief so that Othello comes to see it as a symbol of Desdemona

Shakespeare to Spike Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)46.

[19] A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear Macbeth* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1960)176.

herself—her faith and chastity. The handkerchief becomes the signifier for the signified (Desdemona's chastity). Here, Othello asks Desdemona again without it and really believes that she gives it to Cassio and has the adultery.

Othello's killing of Desdemona is presented as a sacrificial rite to purge the community of infidelity:"she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6). He is purging adultery embodied in Desdemona from Venetian society: "It is the cause" speech (V.ii.1-22). Othello in the scene of Desdemona's bedchamber, is from the masochist to the sadist. The adultery between Desdemona and Cassio turns his desire for Desdemona into the humiliation of being cuckolded. Othello plants all the sins on his double/the other–Desdemona—exemplifying Girard's masochism of god-like desire. The desire, combining the deprival of one's high-status to victim, associates a tragic hero, whose aristocratic nobles turned into a scapegoat—in the process of being slaughtered, ritualized as the salvation of the community.

The situation puts Othello in the role of priest, like priests at a sacrifice. The function of a priest at a sacrifice is to serve as an intermediary between the sacred and the profane. Another party to the sacrifice is the scapegoat, the person or persons for whom the sacrifice is being offered. In the case of Othello, both functions are merged. Othello says:"that whiter skin of hers than snow, /And smooth as monumental alabaster" and "this sorrow's heavenly"(V.ii.21). As a wife and lover, Desdemona selflessly devotes herself to Othello—betraying her own father, abandoning her community, completely isolating herself for Othello. Such sacrifice is like Jesus Christ insisting on his belief in religious doctrines, and that Desdemona in *Othello*, isolates herself as an outsider, the other, and eventually, a chosen scapegoat, waiting for being brutally slaughtered and ritualized as goddesses to achieve the salvation or atonement of the community.

The actual sacrifice of the scapegoat or the expulsion of the scapegoat from the community starts to proceed. Othello as both the priest and the delegation, is performing the trial of Desdemona. With a sense of religious propriety, Othello proceeds to sacrifice his wife and to the killing. As he prepares to smother

Desdemona, stretching out on the bed asleep before him, Othello justifies his action, like a lawyer stating his case. He shows brief moments of indecision and laments his loss of her. After kissing Desdemona, he says to himself, “I must weep, /But they are cruel tears. This sorrow’s heavenly, /It strikes where it doth love” (V.ii.20-22). The tension between pity and cruelty is dramatically exposed here, reflecting the remorse displayed by executors in traditional sacrificial rituals when they mediate killing the placid victim lying before them. The violence has to be disclaimed any guilt of murder. This ritualistic killing links the act to the ritual of marriage and especially the ceremonial consummation during the wedding night. By her chamberbed, the bed is stained out of an affair between Desdemona and Cassio, as well as sacred, an altar to sacrifice Desdemona the lamb to ease the fury of God because “she’ll betray more men”.

Othello inquires Desdemona whether she already says her prayers, in the sense of purifying her soul before sending her to death. “Have you pray’d to-night, Desdemona?” Othello asks (V.ii.26) After she answers positively, he insists that she completely cleanse her conscience: ”[I]f you bethink yourself of any crime/Unreconcil’d as yet to heaven and grace,/Solicit for it straight”(V.ii.26-28). He tells his terrified wife that he would not kill her “unprepared spirit. No, [heaven] forfend I would not kill thy soul” (V.ii.31-32).

When Desdemona says she does nothing wrong, Othello responds, "O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart, /And makes me call what I intend to do/ A murder, which I thought a sacrifice." (V.ii.68-70) She is a victim consecrated from the first--"an offering without blemish," alone worthy of the grand final sacrifice; all harmony, all grace, all purity, all tenderness, all truth! But, alas! to see her fluttering like a cherub in the talons of a fiend!--to see her--O poor Desdemona! Despite Othello’s status as the stone-hearted priest, he later exhibits the same kind of sensitivity to the victim and sense of culpability typically manifested by participants after a sacrificial rite. The purifications which the priest has to undergo after the sacrifice resembles moreover the expiation of a criminal. This schema

describes Othello's position at the end of the play. A mythology develops that imposes double mediation for the scapegoat. On the one hand, the scapegoat is said to have been the cause of all of the community's problem; on the other hand, he/she is to have been godlike/goddesslike in power, since the sacrifice of the scapegoat brings salvation to the community. On the altar, Desdemona's dying gesture signifies an act of martyrdom, noting that her self-sacrifice acts as on behalf of either a religious cause or as a consequence of devotion to some object—to shield Othello. A sacrifice can be viewed as a socially sanctioned form of murder, a killing conducted for the good of the community. Rene Girard recognizes this close relationship between sacrifice and forms of criminal violence such as murder; "if sacrifice resembles criminal violence we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice—as Greek tragedy clearly reveals…sacrifice and murder would not lend themselves to this game of reciprocal substitution if they were not in some way related."[20] Sacrifice also may be viewed as a means of circumventing revenge. The threat of miscegenation has been removed by this purification.

Therefore, after the truth of Iago's villainy comes out, Emilia mocks Othello: "O murderous coxcomb! what should such a fool/Do with so good a woman?" Othello realizes that fate is capricious: "Who can control his fate? tis not so now…./ Here is my journey's end"(V.ii.371-75). And Desdemona's cold body represents herself as crucified She Christ statute: "This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,/And fiends will snatch at it./ Cold, cold, my girl"(V.ii.371-75).

While Othello thinks he is performing a ritualistic purgation of infidelity, he in fact ends up cleansing Venice of his own monstrous miscegenation. Emilia rails against his villainy and he is held in custody like a criminal. Othello himself exhibits a profound sense of shame, like a "rash and most unfortunate men" (V.ii.283) and associating himself with the enemy Turks. Othello characterizes his

[20] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1979)1.

actions as misguided deeds and exhorted them from the unadulterated villainy of Iago. He thinks himself "an honorable murderer" (V.ii.294) and describes his actions as that of "one that lov'd not wisely but too well."(V.ii.344) According to Girard, vengeful impulses often are vented onto a surrogate victim in a controlled ritual of sacrifice rather than a chaotic and continuing chain of revenge. "The sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check," Girard claims.[21]

Controversially, a mixture of self-preservation and self-hatred ambivalently co-exists in his closing monologue. In his final gesture-kissing Desdemona as he dies of his self-inflicted punishment—Othello reaches for redemption, seeking to "die upon a kiss," restoring him to humanity and consequently a position of dignity. In the final monologue, Desdemona is consecrated as a precious treasure. he delivers before he kills himself, Othello compares her to "a pearl" cast away by the "base [Indian]" (V.ii.347). The line perhaps an allusion to the "pearl of great price" in the New Testament parable: "…The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls:/Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (Mathew 13:45-48). This allusion equates Othello's murder with rejection of a spiritual treasure, thus associating Desdemona with Christ, who also cast away unjustly. These references are reinforced by the allusions to Christ and his sacrifice that have been accumulating around Desdemona throughout the final act. Within this process, the victim that was murdered is now deified because this victim was sacrificed, she becomes the salvation of the community, since sacrificing the victim becomes the method of ending the violence,

In *Othello*, the sacrificial impulse is released as a means of sacramentalizing the killing of Desdemona and Othello's self-suicide. This sacrifice also functions as a vessel for venting revenge, a means for projecting the internal violent impulses of

[21] Girard, 18.

Othello, whilst at the same time, the sacrificial victim is simultaneously vanquished and elevated. The deaths of Desdemona and Othello dramatize the inner discords within the patriarchal system not only for women but also for men. Othello's death, in a self-willed obliteration of self in response to social disapproval of their deeds. The domestication of sacrifice in the service of preserving a sense of civility thus is revealed as a ruse designed to hide the exercise of such potentiality life-threatening power.

Conclusion

Girard's theories on violence and how cultural crisis can be averted at the expense of a victim through the scapegoat mechanism are crucial to apprehending Shakespeare's *Othello*. Sacrifice being viewed as circumventing revenge, functions to remove the threat of miscegenation by this killing. A surrogate victim in a controlled ritual of sacrifice is approved as "[T]he sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check," Girard claims.[22] The deaths of Desdemona and Othello dramatize the inner conflicts within the patriarchal system not only for women but also for men. Othello's self-willed death serves in response to social disapproval of their deeds. Girard's theories have implications for interpreting how the sacrifice of Desdemona is connected to the sexual sacrifice of Othello, how the presence of scapegoats in *Othello* is generally an indicator of community crisis, especially the sacrifice of Desdemona, implicating for the future political power of women in Venetian society, and how the executions of Othello in society to quell the rising violence.

[22] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press,1979)1, 18.

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