Othello is Shakespeare tragedy about Othello who is general in the Venetian military. The play revolves around Othello and his wife Desdemona and Iago. The plot of the story unfolds when Othello appoints Cassio and not Iago as his deputy. Iago becomes jealous and starts to plan on how to revenge on Othello. He implicates Desdemona of having an affair with Cassio who is white like her. Othello loves and is devoted to his wife and is therefore so infuriated by the betrayal that he murders her. Later on, when he finds out that the accusation was false, he commits suicide.

Othello has become one of Shakespeare’s most controversial plays due to what is seen as racist innuendos that are used on the main character, Othello, throughout the play. Othello is described as a Moor which originally carried an interpretation to describe dark skinned people of Arab descent. Historically, Moors originally came from north Africa. They became Muslims in the eighth century. Moors were considered a lower caste race and were treated as slaves and often viewed suspiciously as the cause of society problems. The depiction of the Othello character as a revered and respected warrior in Venice demonstrated the increasing tolerance in Venice in the late 1500’s. In the earliest plays, Othello was depicted as an Arab, but this perception has changed over the recent times, supported by Shakespeare’s own painting of Othello as a Christian.

Some of the racial slurs used to describe him also point toward Othello being of black African descent. The features described in a rather derogatory manner which would be considered offensive today, “What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe/If he can carry ‘t thus!” (I.i.65-66). Many critics of Othello have debated as to whether race was an issue in the early depictions of other non- white races. Although Othello’s skin colour and racial features are discussed throughout the text, the early people would not have drawn the racial binaries as we do presently. Because of this, Othello has continued to be used to explore and discuss race in the context of history. Still the racial undertones are painful in today’s terms. Iago says to Brabantio when talking about the relationship Othello has with his daughter, “An old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe” (I.i.87-88). With this saying, Iago and Roderigo hint that Othello and Desdemona’s future children will be half-breeds who will become the ridicule of society and bring shame upon Brabantio. You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary/Horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans” (I.i.110-12).

In the early Shakespearian period, Othello was often performed by blacked up white actors who wore a black sheep wool. This representation of Othello as black African changed by 19th century, when racial divide became real and heated. Instead, white actors played the part but as lighter skinned North African Arabs who were more acceptable at this time. Still, by the early 19th century, a truly black Othello was not acceptable in England and America. There was only one exception during this time of Ira Aldridge, who was the only black actor portraying Othello in the 19th century. Generally, the role was always taken up by white actors. This changed from 1930 when Paul Robeson, a black actor played the role in London and New York in 1943.

The way gender roles are played out portrays the way women were viewed during that time. Brabantio who is Desdemona’s father describes his daughter as ‘a maiden never bold’, this is despite the fact that she eloped with a black Moor, probably unheard of in those days, thus her actions can only be described as defiantly strong and empowered. Yet, it was a patriarchal society that could not have recognized the strong women in the play including Emilia’s who is Iogo clever wife. Thus, Othello was never interpreted as potentially carrying a feminist theme until much more recently. In the early performances, the audience’s response to Desdemona was sympathetic. This altered in the late twentieth century, when critics of feminism highglighted Desdemona’s independence when she chose Othello, and Emilia’s gifts, and explored the ways their roles were held back by the male characters.

Haply, for I am black. And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have, or for I am declin’d

Into the vale of years (yet that’s not much)

She’s gone. I am abus’d: and my relief

Must be to loathe her (III.iii.264-69)

Othello last act of violence towards his wife Desdemona is despicable and cowardly, it also portrays the complex nature of his insecurities which stem from the racial differences with his wife. He believes that she is having an affair with Cassia who is white like her.