

essay

A Note on Brabantio and Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*

by Rebecca Haque

DESDEMONA'S father Brabantio, is a powerful presence throughout the first Act of *Othello*, but he disappears altogether as soon as the action of the play moves from Venice to Cyprus. This, of course, is as it should be, since we are to understand that there has been no communication between father and daughter after Desdemona has sailed for Cyprus with her new husband. It is only at the very end of the tragedy, in Act V, scene ii, 11.204-206, that we hear that he has died of grief. The speaker of these lines is Gratiano, and it is interesting that in his choice of words - "I am glad thy Father is dead, / Thy match was mortal to him; and pure grief / Shore his old thread in twain" - he unconsciously provides a kind of choristic comment on Desdemona's behaviour. Gratiano's speech contains an implicit communal condemnation of Desdemona's marriage to a man of an alien race, and it also reinforces Brabantio's sense of being treacherously betrayed by his

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daughter.

In Act I, scene iii, Brabantio quits the stage, and I find his exit lines very disturbing indeed. This is what he offers Othello as his dubious parting/wedding gift: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father and may thee." (1.87-88) The lines are obviously strong in their censure of Desdemona, but what is really unsettling is their Iago-esque quality. Brabantio's words not only evoke disagreeable ideas of an almost pervasive licentiousness in the heart of this

Venetian society, they also raise questions about his own attitude towards Desdemona and towards women in general.

Coming from a father who is apparently devoted to his only child, the lines strike me as perverse and unduly provocative. It is easy to see that Brabantio is inwardly raging at Desdemona's defection, that he is piqued at her open defiance of the Duke of Venice. Brabantio had imperiously asked Desdemona to declare "Where most you owe obedience?" (1.178). Her

confident, assertive reply is worth quoting in full:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life, and education:
My life and education both do learn me.
How to respect you, you are the Lord of duty.
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty, as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father:

So much I challenge, that I may profess

Due to the Moor my Lord (1.1.179-188)

This speech juxtaposes two contradictory images of the daughter figure: one, the loving, respectful daughter who has internalised the precepts of governing patriarchal culture and has unconditionally accepted the sovereignty of the father before marriage and of the husband after marriage; two, the rebel-

ious, independent daughter who has not only completely disregarded parental authority by choosing her own mate, but has also transgressed the prevailing societal norms in mating with a black man.

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fiction

A Betrayal

By A S M Nurunnabi

RIENDSHIP between two friends in some cases takes on an uncommon depth of closeness. This happened in the case of the two friends Faruk and Sadeque, while they were studying at the university. Both of them had the same subject at the undergraduate level. They were both studious students, who even in their off-hours, spent their time at the university library, consulting necessary reference books. In the afternoon also, they often used to meet each other at a nearby park, discussing their subjects of study and comparing notes.

Of the two friends, Faruk was more hard-working and keen to do well in his final examination. Sadeque was equally serious in his studies but he had one advantage. Because of his previous education at a missionary college, he had a good grasp of the English language. As was expected, Faruk got a first class in his final examination. His friend Sadeque couldn't come up to that standard but he had no feeling of jealousy on that account.

After his graduation, Faruk applied for a government scholarship for higher studies abroad. Thereafter both the friends continued their post-graduate courses of study.

A few months later, Faruk received a letter from the authorities asking him to appear for interview for final selection in respect of the foreign scholar-



ship. This posed a problem for Faruk, for it was expected that he should appear for the interview wearing a lounge suit. Because Faruk had no such suit and there was not enough time for making a new one, Faruk was in a quandary. When Sadeque heard about it, he said, "Don't worry about that; I would manage that thing."

Among his classmates, there were two young fellows who were very smart. One of them well-known to some good tailors; the other classmate had equally good terms with some good shoe traders.

When told of Faruk's problem, they readily agreed to pitch in to solve Faruk's outfit problem.

Accordingly, a day before the scheduled date for interview, one of those friends took Faruk to a leading tailoring shop which he knew well and asked

Faruk to select any of the ready-made suits on display for delivery to customers. One of such suits fitted Faruk well and by arrangement with the owner of the tailoring shop promising to return the suit next day, it was obtained for Faruk. Similar arrangement was made by the other friend for getting a day's loan of a good pair of shoes for Faruk. A good tie and a shirt which didn't cost much were easily bought for Faruk.

With these items of clothing, Faruk and his friends assembled in a vacant class room of the university. Faruk was then asked to get ready for the interview wearing these dresses. Thus attired, Faruk proceeded on his way to face the interview board, while all his friends waited in the vacant class room for Faruk to return.

After a couple of hours, Faruk returned from the interview, unsure about its outcome. Then it was Faruk's turn to take off the borrowed suit and shoes. This done, his friends promptly went on their separate ways to return the borrowed articles of dress. Sadeque was happy that Faruk's outfit problem was thus solved with the cooperation of his two other friends.

Meanwhile, Faruk's post-graduate course was completed and in the final examination, he again secured a first class.

The important chapter of the story began from this stage. On account of his good academic record, Faruk was offered a post of lectureship by the university. Faruk accepted the offer.

Faruk, being a handsome fellow with such good academic record, had a num-

ber of admirers among his students. Among such admirers was a young girl at the undergraduate level, reading a different subject. The girl was smart enough to take the initiative and introduce herself to Faruk. From time to time, the girl made pretexts to talk to the young teacher. In this way, their acquaintance became deeper. At a later stage, they began exchanging letters and books. The girl, having her early education at a missionary institution, was proficient in the use of the English language and in her correspondence with the young teacher, this played a dominant role.

A blunder was committed by Faruk when his relations with the girl became intimate. His friendship with Sadeque was so deep-seated that he didn't hesitate to show the girl's letters to Sadeque.



who had similar educational background at a missionary college outside the country. As such, he tactfully made suggestions to Faruk, countering the girl's effusive English expressions. The girl had no idea that there was a man behind Faruk's communications to her and she didn't suspect that a third person was involved in it. This was accidentally exposed when a draft of the suggestions from Sadeque was found inside the pages of a book that Faruk gave to the girl for her reading.

The girl kept her suspicion to herself and remained silent. The final episode in the story came up very soon. At last, the result of the interview, at which Faruk appeared in borrowed clothes a year ago, for higher studies abroad came out, selecting Faruk for that scholarship.

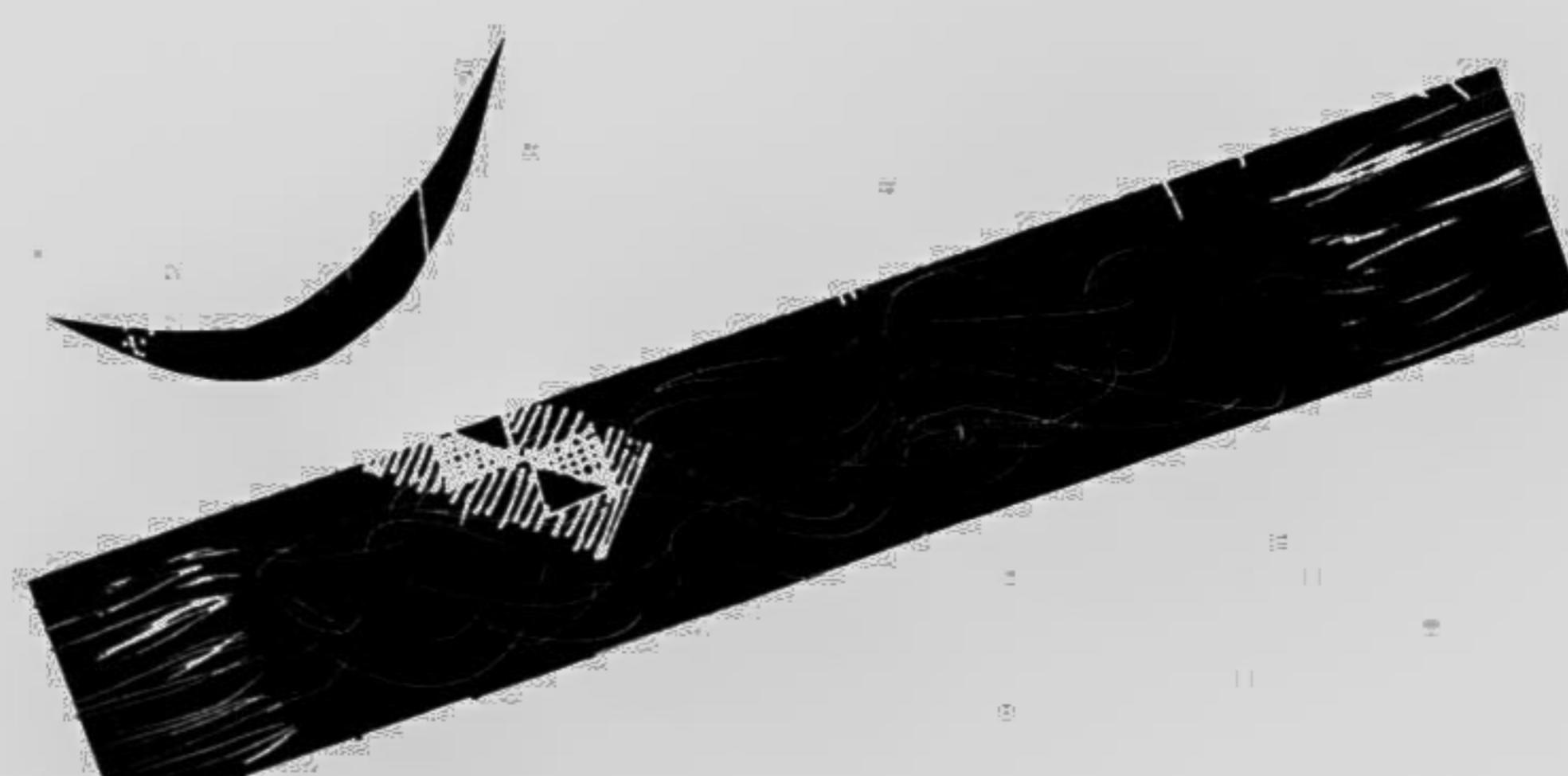
When the day came for Faruk to leave, his friends and the dismayed young girl came to the airport to see off Faruk. At the airport's concourse hall, Faruk introduced Sadeque to the girl, telling her that he was his most intimate friend. The girl then realised who the man behind the scene was. When Faruk proceeded towards the departure lounge and went out of sight, the girl turned on Sadeque with blazing eyes and said: "So you are the one to whom your friend betrayed my trust and confidence."

The Inseparables

by Akhtaruzzaman Elias

Concluding part

The mood of his boss was good enough when he was going to office. He stood in front of the car and said, "Asgur, Ehsanul Haq of 'McDonald's & Robinson' phoned me. He is coming this afternoon. Be there." With a mild sound the car was heading for Agrabad. It would have been better for Asgur if he had got a lift. Talking to labourers he would go himself for cement. His father made awkward haggling with vendors. And finally it was of no good because he bought spurious cement with a taka or two less per bag. And Asgur was too hungry. It was difficult to understand those people. When they were in a good mood, they offered a lot to eat. But he had taken nothing since the previous afternoon except a little whisky and a few slices of oranges. The previous night his mother had requested him so much to eat rice and fish. His mother was growing sick day by day, she might have a disease inside. If he had got the job in 'McDonald's & Robinson', he would not have got to stay there eating and without eating. That company had furnished flats in Kulshi. He would have everything he needed. Even a fair wife with boy-cut hair, slim and on a diet, who would talk in an artificial accent. But the problem was with his parents. So many times he told his father, 'At least put on something nice. It's not you who buy them. I'm supplying them regularly.' No, he would not change his clerk-like mentality. And it was beyond his capacity to improve the taste of his



mother. Those people were incorrigible. But Asgur had to lead his life as he liked. "OK, do as you like. I'll give you money regularly." They had no objection to take his money. Whatever he took there they never asked where he had got and how. Then why should they not live after his choice? Suddenly he got so much angry that his left hand rose to slap Asgur. Did he become crazy? He lowered his left hand with the right one. The fist of his left hand grew red at the pressure of the other one.

In the afternoon Asgur came well-dressed; he had to impress Ehsanul Haq. But everything would depend on Sarwar Kabir. Abdul was going out with Asgur when Asgur entered. For Asgur, it was the time of going out. And it could not be kept outside more than two

hours; their boss liked to see it wag the tail in the veranda.

"Abdul, give it to me" said Asgur.

"Why?"

"Oh, give it. I'll teach it a new game."

"But it's time to go out. Boss will play with it when he comes back from office."

"I'll bring it back before he comes."

Abdul hesitated, now beside the piles of the bricks behind those houses it will clear its bowels. "Play with it rather in the morning."

"Listen to me. I'll do everything."

Asgur also wanted to get relieved of duty for a little. He surrendered the chain to Asgur and said, "Hold it tight. This dog wants only to run."

As soon as Asgur stepped outside, it really wanted to run. When they reached the piles of bricks its speed just doubled.

There was more and more pressure on the chain. And Asgur also held it tight. "Where will you go, my son? Even your father can't break this chain." Who was its father? He had to ask Sarwar Kabir. There was not a single thing the man did not know. He advised the engineers on the ratio of cement and sand, he taught the doctors when to use antibiotics. When an old professor came once to see him he talked to him almost one hour on the modern system of roll call in class. He showed the sweepers how to sweep. His knowledge about the appropriate pronunciation of Arabic was enough to stun an efficient Alem. He was better than any lecher in chatting up girls. He knew better than the dog itself what it felt like eating and when. Did Asgur know the important infor-

mation that it was the descendant of the wolf? But Sarwar Kabir knew that. He had given him many lessons with that. Where did the man learn so much? From the Civil Service Academy in Lahore or from his long experience in the Administration? Before he got the answer, there came a sudden pressure on the chain. Asgur was about to fall. He managed, however. Now he could understand that the bowels of Asgur were not getting clear. Sarwar Kabir was right in saying that one would not feel easy until one's bowels got clear. As he lived with an elite it was better for him to follow his style. He took out a cigarette from the packet he had stolen from the table of Sarwar Kabir and lit it. He could feel the pressure on the chain even when he finished the

cigarette. When he got afraid that its excitement might increase that moment, there was another pressure on the chain. That time it was not a short pull, it was rather long. No, he would take no risk. Asgur tied that end of the chain with the fist of his right hand. It was a sort of bond. Now he was quite safe. Now if that son of bitch wanted to run, it had to take him with. Assured, he lit the second cigarette and after a few puffs, the chain in his hand became loose and quiet. With another few puffs of happiness he felt that Asgur was clearing its bowels with comfort and contentment. That contentment spread to his body through the metal of the chain. When Sarwar Kabir would come back from office he would see his favourite pet look so bright. He could not but observe the spin of the nimble-footed Alsation. It was now a must to prepare a few sentences to tell Sarwar Kabir on his efforts and initiatives on the matter. He could do that even later. Now he had to finish the third cigarette as the regular dose.

As soon as he lit it the chain trembled in his hand and he heard a melodious sound. Almost immediately Asgur came before him and wagged mildly its tail with an unexpected agility. No doubt in its stomach was blowing a pure breeze of late winter. For that breeze it started to walk so nimbly that Asgur had almost to run. He had to rush there; Sarwar Kabir was coming back home.

Translated by Swapna Barman