

# “Banish Her, But Kill Her Not.” A Lesson to Shakespeare’s General Othello from the Bodhisattva King Chulla Paduma

E. A. Gamini Fonseka, PhD

Professor, Department of English & Linguistics, University of Ruhua, Sri Lanka  
[drgamini@gmail.com](mailto:drgamini@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Although the Moor of Venice in Giraldi Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatommithi* who serves as the Brigade Commander of the Venetian Army in Cyprus (Giraldi, 1565) undergoes a status transformation as the General of the overall Venetian Army Othello in Shakespeare’s intertextual exercise *Othello* (Shakespeare, 1622), his character and his destiny do not change. As in the sordid and melodramatic original tale of sexual jealousy, suspicious of his wife’s fidelity, he resorts to killing her for the sake of honour, and later commits suicide on realisation of his victim’s innocence. In terms of designation and authority, far superior to Shakespeare’s General Othello is the Bodhisattva King Chulla Paduma in “Jataka Story 193” in the *Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births* (circa 200 BC), which is annually dramatized in Sri Lanka during Buddhist festivals. Even though he had as a prince first-hand experience of his wife’s attempt to kill him for the sake of her paramour, the king, when he encounters them years after his survival, does not order to kill them but drives them out of his kingdom on dictating to them the provisions in the existing penal code relevant to the crimes of adultery, conspiracy, and murder. Although documented in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Cowell, 1895), King Chulla Paduma’s strategy still sounds modern, human, decent, and ethically and intellectually advanced, while the primitive and unethical behaviour of Shakespeare’s Othello that emerged in 1603 during the European Renaissance (Muir, 1968), has caused much concern among critics and scholars of dramaturgy as well as those of other various disciplines. On assessing the moral and didactic foundations of the two stories as plots for two theatrical exercises in two distinctive cultural settings, the paper attempts to carry out a comparative study of the cultural influences that may have urged to determine the actions and behaviours of the two protagonists.

**Keywords:** Shakespearean drama, Jataka stories, culture, values, power, sexual jealousy, equanimity

## INTRODUCTION

### Objectives, Research Problem and Significance

Othello, the protagonist in Shakespeare’s *Othello* rather than acting as a serious hero working towards a meaningful cause, blindly allows the villain Iago to demonstrate his negative energy through a series of tricks wickedly but creatively played upon him, bringing about a disaster upon his life as well as that of his innocent sweetheart Desdemona. “This is the way to trick gullible fools.” Iago laughs while Othello writhes in an epileptic fit, unable to stomach his allegations against Desdemona. The modifications Shakespeare effects to the source text “The Moor of Venice” in *Gli Hecatommithi* by Giraldi Cinthio improve the quality of the dramaturgical mode of his production of *Othello* (Muir, 1968) but does not change the primitive behaviour of his hero who arbitrarily kills his wife on the basis of suspicion nurtured by a villainous subordinate’s playacting (Lamb 1890). In both versions the innocent woman, whose name undergoes only a syllabic change while Desdemona becomes Desdemona, meaninglessly gets killed as a victim of treason. To the Moor and Othello both, the lesson of graciousness conveyed by King Chulla Paduma in Jataka Story No. 193 “Culla-Paduma-Jataka” is vital. Even with live evidence of his wife’s infidelity, the king spares her life as well as her paramour’s and drives them out

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of his kingdom in terms of punishing them for their treachery. In theatre, revenge is very often a predictable climax in most plots that pivot on treason either concretising in a great disaster or failing as an unhatched plot. In that sense “Culla-Paduma-Jātaka” is more complex than both “The Moor of Venice” and *Othello*. While the average spectator expects King Chulla Paduma to pass a death sentence on his ex-wife and her paramour who try to kill him he spares their lives and allows them to go free. Taking King Chulla Paduma’s superiority over Othello into account, this paper attempts to investigate how literature takes different shapes due to cultural elements that inspire either negative or positive thinking and promote literature on the basis of the moral virtues they are capable of generating and propagating.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As the study involves two different pieces of literature that belong to two different cultures, the methodology focuses on a critical comparison with attention to the values that are dominant in the respective cultures. In that respect, the paper makes separate comparisons of 1) the characterisations of Othello and Chulla Paduma, 2) the characters of their wives, 3) their relationships with their wives, 4) the causes of their anger, 5) the methods they follow in satisfying their anger, and (6) the implications of their respective behaviours. To avoid confusion, hence the Moor of Venice and Othello are both considered a single person, and only Othello will be referred to in the upcoming discussions; and at the same time the character of the Bodhisattva King Chulla Paduma will be referred to by his name Chulla Paduma.

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

In the context of the behaviours of the two heroes, this paper attempts to investigate whether their behaviours are influenced by their respective cultures. In the process of making a comparison of their characters, it also surveys how critics have looked at the play *Othello*, what circumstances may have caused the authors - Giraldi and Shakespeare - to adopt such a theme of blatant folly, what message they may have attempted to convey through their works, and whether they have made any contribution to the sustainability of morality in their respective societies.

#### **Characterisations of Othello and Chulla Paduma**

Shakespeare provides sufficient evidence to realise that Othello had a rigorous past as a slave before he became the General of the Venetian Army. Compared to his background, the circumstances are extremely different with Chulla Paduma born to King Brahmadata’s chief queen as her eldest son. As personalities of power they do not differ much. Othello rises as a “brave” soldier, “loyal to the state”, whose “conduct in bloody wars” is decisive for the sustenance of Venice. According to the narrator of the Jataka story, Chulla Paduma (reputed as Prince Lotus for his handsome personality) grows up as a formidable-looking young prince whose father even becomes afraid of his appearance as a potential threat to his kingdom, but along with his six brothers quits the kingdom at his father’s command, though they had no particular place to go.

#### ***Relationships with their Wives***

While analysing their relationships with their wives, it is understood that Othello’s wife Desdemona, the virtuous and marvellously beautiful daughter of the wealthiest Venetian senator Brabantio, risks her family ties as well as her cultural identity by marrying him. In the predominantly Christian society of Venice, her marriage to a Moor will deprive her of her social and cultural prestige, and moreover she will be ostracised for it by her family clan. In that sense, by marrying Chulla Paduma, the eldest son of Brahmadata the most powerful king of India, his wife, the daughter of a royal family, does not have anything to forego. Rather she enjoys prestige in society.

#### ***Gestures of Love they Make***

Nevertheless, in order to keep their wives’ fidelity, the gestures of love the two men make contrast with each other very much. Of course, they both love their women. Yet, Chulla Paduma’s sacrifices are far superior to those

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of Othello. Other than being soft-spoken, and “captivating Desdemona with tales of his wanderings and battles, Othello, the old Negro,” (Pushkin 1826) does not have much to do in his association with her. But Chulla Paduma is completely focused on the protection and well-being of his wife. During the journey through the forest, he makes several sacrifices: 1) controls his hunger to save his wife from being killed for food while his brothers kill their wives one by one; 2) saves her life by preserving and returning the portions of flesh he receives from his brothers; 3) gives his own blood to his wife to quench her thirst; and 4) looks after her lovingly when they have come to a safe zone provided with food and water. What they enjoy from their wives in return also relatively differ. Desdemona voluntarily leaves her comfortable life in Venice and joins Othello in the battlefield in Cyprus, but Chulla Paduma’s wife joins him in his aimless journey under compulsion as a total dependant.

### ***Ways they Get Offended***

What appear as the offences the two wives commit against their husbands, effect another contrast within the two respective storylines. In order to suspect Desdemona’s fidelity, what Othello takes into account looks obviously childish: 1) insinuated by Iago as well as pleaded by Cassio, she repeatedly begs Othello to reinstate Cassio in his post as lieutenant that he loses for disturbing Othello during his honeymoon through his aggressive behaviour in a fight with one Roderigo orchestrated by Iago who cunningly gets him drunk; 2) she fails to produce the handkerchief Othello had given her as a token of love, when he asks for it, in suspicion that she had presented it to Cassio in a similar vein. These two acts she commits, together with Iago’s false remarks, pretensions, and simulations implicating her and Cassio in a clandestine relationship, become the reason for Othello’s decision to kill her.

In contrast, Chulla Paduma has first-hand evidence of his wife’s infidelity.

“Husband, not the hill-spirit, but you are my chief of gods! Then in your honour first of all I will offer wild flowers, and walk reverently round you, keeping you on the right, and salute you: and after that I will make my offering to the mountain spirit.” So saying, she placed him facing a precipice, and pretended that she was fain to salute him in reverent fashion. Thus getting behind him, she smote him on the back, and hurled him down the precipice. (Cowell, 1895).

As narrated here, he feels his wife’s own hands working on his destruction. Like Othello trusts the villainous Iago, Chulla Paduma trusts his villainous wife. Nevertheless, much later after his survival, when he meets her together with her paramour, he recognises them as perpetrators of a serious crime but does not put them to death. No doubt, the actions the two protagonists take respectively in terms of executing justice manifest their cultural upbringing.

### **Two Contrast Patterns of Penalty for Adultery**

In Act V Scene ii that takes place in a bedchamber in the castle of Cyprus, Othello stifles Desdemona to death, under the myth that he would thereby save her soul from adultery. Having sensed his intention to kill her, Desdemona, unable to convince him of her integrity, begs him, “O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!” Feeling that she would no more succeed in her solicitation, she pleads with him, “Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!” When she is convinced that she cannot stop him at all, she entreats that she be allowed just “half an hour” to “say one prayer”. So headstrong, Othello kills her without leaving room for her to defend herself. Othello blatantly violates her trust in him on the one hand and becomes guilty under the prevailing law on the other.

In Jataka Story 193, Chulla Paduma’s retaliation for his ex-wife’s treachery is depicted in the following terms:

But although the Bodhisatta could not swallow his anger, and ordained this punishment for them, he did not do accordingly; but he smothered his wrath, and had the basket fixed upon her head so fast that she could not take it off; the villain he had placed in the same, and they were driven out of his kingdom. (Cowell, 1895)

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Chulla Paduma puts into action what Desdemona begs of Othello. While Othello “smothers” Desdemona Chulla Paduma smothers “his wrath”. He simply banishes the woman and her paramour, although it would be easy for him to clear his conscience in case he gets them beheaded by a royal decree. The two men, Othello who is just carried away by what he hears and sees in Desdemona’s absence and Chulla Paduma who experiences a murder attempt at the hands of his wife, act so differently because of the values they are used to upholding in their respective cultures. The destinies of the two women are determined by what the two men adhere to in their respective cultures in dealing with acts of adultery.

### **Influence of Culture in the Execution of Justice**

Coming from a culture influenced by various elements of the three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - that worship the same god in different fashions, Othello does not hesitate to kill Desdemona in terms of punishing her for adultery, despite the fact that he has no first-hand evidence of a sexual relationship between Desdemona and Cassio. Based on his behaviour in other scenes before he gets poisoned by Iago, Alexander Pushkin (1826) argues that “Othello is not jealous by nature – on the contrary, he is trusting.” (Zakharo) If he is not jealous what motivates him to kill Desdemona? The most obvious factor of his action is the traditional belief system of the culture in which he has been brought up. The *Old Testament* explicitly prescribes death penalty for those who commit adultery in the following terms:

“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” [Leviticus 20:10](#)

The same is repeated with a slight variation in another place as follows:

“If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.” Deuteronomy 22:22

From both these quotes from the *Old Testament*, it is surmised that killing a woman guilty of adultery was a common practice in the Hebrew culture that used to influence the Christendom in a large way during the mediaeval times. A more colourful version of the same law is found in the Quran as follows:

The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not pity withhold you in their case, in a punishment prescribed by Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness their punishment. (This punishment is for unmarried persons guilty of the above crime but if married persons commit it, the punishment is to stone them to death, according to Allah’s Law). 24.2 Sura An-Nur (The Light)

Here the actual punishment styles that vary on the basis of the marital status of the culprits are also described. Accordingly, it is clear that, as an individual harmonized to both Islam and Christianity, Othello finds solace in the killing of Desdemona as long as he does not perceive her innocence. Therefore a bigger share of his crime as a murderer is attributable to the value system he has lived in exposure to, that approves of it as a solution prescribed by god.

As in several instances, Chulla Paduma distinguishes from Othello, in the way in which he deals with his ex-wife and her paramour who offend him openly and whom he encounters later in a situation where he is able to avenge the betrayal they committed. Yet he does not cause them any harm. Basically, he demonstrates his magnanimity, equanimity, and spirituality by allowing them to go on in their lives, knowing their guilt and the punishment they deserve by law. He acts as any polite man in a secular society.

The basis of King Chulla Paduma’s behaviour is defined in the context of Buddhism that does not enforce any law against any crime but explains the consequences of the sins people tend to commit. Being the king, he is

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generally supposed to enforce and implement the laws of his kingdom, but as their crime was against him personally, he does not deal with the perpetrators like common citizens, because that would turn out to be an act of revenge. Therefore he assesses the feelings that dominate his mood and controls them for the sake of mental sanity.

“But in as much as the noble disciple is not led by desire, anger, ignorance, and fear, he commits no evil.”  
(*Singalovada Sutta*)

In the Buddhist code of ethics prescribed for the laity “adultery” which is termed as “sexual misconduct” is dealt with as follows:

Monks and nuns are expected to be chaste, while the laity is, above all, enjoined to avoid sex with another’s partner—marriage or a formalized union being the proper context for sexual relations between two people. With married couples, sexual misconduct is more largely construed beyond sex and out of wedlock to include such misbehaviors as intercourse with or through an improper part of the body, at an improper place or time, or with an instrument. Overall, the primary focus of the third rule is twofold: to avoid causing harm to others through one’s sexual and deceitful behavior, and to constrain one’s own sexual desire. The rule is contextualized by the larger Buddhist goal of minimizing all craving—that is, desire motivated by greed and selfishness, and the karmic acts that follow. The goal of freedom from craving, resulting in selflessness and compassion, operates in the sexual and interpersonal realm as in all other realms of life. (Schmid)

Thus Chulla Paduma does not resort to revenge, conscious of its futility. Being a powerful king of the time, he does not take advantage of his authority either.

But, even though Othello has no authority under the Venetian law to kill somebody, however much he is offended, he kills Desdemona. He sounds assuming an unnecessary social responsibility for Desdemona’s character.

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. (V.ii.4-6)

What has Othello got to do with Desdemona and the “men” he refers to here, if he has banished her at her request? In fact here the tradition of honour killing in his culture becomes prominent. Othello is in a futile effort to justify his self-importance, appearing to be a saviour of the menfolk. The interpretation given by Johnson (1765) to line V.ii.65 (502,8) “A murder, which I thought a sacrifice” further unveils the cultural motive behind the killing.

*Thou hast hardened my heart, and makest me kill thee with the rage of a murderer, when I thought to have sacrificed thee to justice with the calmness of a priest striking a victim. It must not be omitted, that one of the elder quartos reads, thou dost stone thy heart; which I suspect to be genuine. The meaning then will be, thou forcest me to dismiss thee from the world in the state of the murdered without preparation for death, when I intended that thy punishment should have been a sacrifice atoning for thy crime. (Johnson 1765)*

What is special here is that Othello wants to murder her rather than make a sacrifice of her for the crime he supposes that she has committed. This suggests his intention of killing her for his personal honour, although he is supposed to observe the religious custom of making sacrifices out of convicts of adultery for the respective god he worships. Othello demonstrates how personal concerns transcend cultural practices because of self-importance and egocentrism.

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### **Critiques of the Two Protagonists**

It is true that Othello inspired many famous Moorish characters such as Orosmane in Voltaire’s *Zaire* (1732) and Gannibal in Pushkin’s *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* (1827-29) in literature round the world, but they were all suffering from a psychological disease named after Othello defined as follows:

Othello Syndrome is a type of delusional jealousy, marked by suspecting a faithful partner of infidelity, with accompanying jealousy, attempts at monitoring and control, and sometimes violence. (PLOS Blog Network)

The comment made by Thomas Rymer reduces the tragedy to a farce under a pseudo-didactic observation that reads as follows:

First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors. Secondly, This may be a warning to all good Wives, that they look well to their Linnen. Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be Mathematical. (Rymer 1693)

“I know not what to say of the Moor; he used to be all love towards me; but within these few days he has become another man; and much I fear that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents, and that the Italian ladies may learn from me not to wed a man whose nature and habitude of life estrange from us.” (Cintio, 1565)

Rymer’s criticism can be very much influenced by the concern of Desdemona in Cintio’s “The Moor of Venice” that she expresses in the following terms:

In the same vein, Kenneth Muir’s (1968) introduction reports: that Johnson found the last scene unendurable; that Bradley thought the play evoked feelings of depression; and that Granville-Barker declared that it was a tragedy without meaning. In her critique of the play, Shahriar (2013) does not redeem Othello of the possible allegation against him as a murderer. She directly charges him of his irresponsible behaviour in his association with his subordinates:

But why did he let his temperament and ideals remain completely misfit? Why did he get his intellect confused and dulled? His pride, his self-centredness, his impulsiveness and his hot-headedness were the defects of his personality, which plunged him into the tremendous follies of his later action. Othello falls because he was deficient in prudence and discernment, because he was too open and credulous, and thus he fell prey to evil machinations. (Ambreen Shahriar 2013)

What is obvious in all these comments is that it is culture that dominates in the actions of Othello in the process of murdering Desdemona whose character is immaculate as a married woman. She begs him of mercy several times. Yet he is deaf to her pleadings. She speaks in such a way that any rational man can come to his senses thereby. Yet he rejects her words. As T.S. Eliot (1927) suggests he is guilty of “self-dramatization” and deliberate “attempts to evade reality”. In his behaviour there is no room for the element of compromise that is flatly denied in cultures influenced by all Abrahamic religions. God needs live proof of his followers’ faith. (See Genesis 22)

### **CONCLUSION**

Due to the lack of narratives that emphasize a form of higher order thinking, even geniuses of phenomenal stature such as William Shakespeare, have resorted to enlivening and promoting culturally and ethically controversial characters such as Othello, who blindly execute primitive practices of parochialism. Based on the comparisons of Othello and Chulla Paduma with respect to 1) their use of power as accorded by their social and official status;

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2) their strategies of critical thinking applied in diagnosing and determining the nature of their wives’ fidelity or infidelity; and 3) their sense of execution of justice in reaction to the psychological damages caused to them by their wives; this paper determines that it is the values in their respective cultures that control them rather than their personal characteristics. If not for the aesthetic and stylistic transformations Othello underwent in the care of Shakespeare, he would have been discarded a long time ago under the numerous radical changes societies have undergone in morals and values in the modern world. In that sense cultural and intellectual deserts that have appeared due to lack of intervention from the spiritual side of art and aesthetics can benefit from literary sources such as the Jataka stories that are not yet globally recognised in the mainstream study of literature and folklore. There are hundreds of fables, parables, and morals in the body of Buddhist literature that are far superior in both poetics and noetics to what we currently use in formal academic pursuits as they promote a secular form of thinking much higher than what is in practice. Our secularity can be fully enjoyed through the incorporation of such material in our advanced pursuits of literature and culture.

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