**Explore Shakespeare’s presentation of female inferiority in *Othello*.**

William Shakespeare’s *Othello* centres around issues of female inferiority against the backdrop of patriarchal oppression. Although Shakespeare does not necessarily act as an advocate for the subservience of women, the theme is used to highlight the subservient position women had in comparison to men in a Jacobean society. Within Shakespeare’s society, women can be seen as submissive to men, and they lack the dominance, presence and prowess men possess, both physically and verbally. In *Othello*, Desdemona has potential to be independent, but this is frustrated by the superiority of male characters. There is also a sense that women are highly objectified, sexualised and disrespected by the dominating male characters. This plays a significant role in illustrating how women are inevitably confined to inferior social and domestic positions because of the prevalent patriarchal structure that exists within the text.

Female inferiority is a theme that makes the assumption that women are powerless. In the opening of *Othello,* female inferiority is immediately explored when Roderigo says “Your daughter, if you have not given her leave, I say again, hath made a gross revolt” to Brabantio in response to Othello and Desdemona’s secret marriage. The noun phrase “gross revolt” essentially empowers Desdemona in the sense that the controversy she has created is a self-determined decision, but also illustrates the disapproval a Jacobean society would have reacted with to a woman marrying without her father’s consent. The possessive pronoun “Your” and the dynamic verb “given”, however, fundamentally undermine Desdemona’s potentially empowering act because it displays the normalised objectification of women, as she is clearly expected to seek permission from a male superior, rather than making independent decisions, and she is vilified when she does so. This would be emphasised by Desdemona’s absence on stage in this scene, as her actions fire the topic for this male exchange.

Women appear to be denied an active voice within *Othello.* Brabantio expresses how Desdemona “is abus’d, stol’n from me, and corrupted”, despite Desdemona not actually being present on stage for the conversation. The lexical set of dynamic verbs in this hyperbolic verb phrase displays how Brabantio believes Desdemona must have been influenced recklessly to oppose him. Brabantio also objectifies Desdemona through his belief that she was “stol’n” from him, and illustrates how women’s opinions were viewed as irrelevant in a Jacobean society, as he draws conclusions about the secret marriage of Othello and Desdemona before hearing what Desdemona has to say in her defence. Furthermore, Iago’s final act of power reveals the low value of women’s opinions through him declaring that he will “never speak a word”. The adverbial modifier “never” demonstrates how Iago retains power even in silence; he has the choice of whether or not to “speak”, whereas Desdemona has no such luxury and instead is subjected to her ultimate silencing by death. Dramatic irony is created here because, as the audience are repeatedly made aware, if Desdemona and Emilia’s opinions had been heard and valued by the male characters, then the tragic ending would likely have been avoided. Women attempt to have an active voice to avoid subservience, but the ultimate inevitable silencing of women within the text illustrates how their inferior position does not allow their active participation in the male dominated context of the play.

Female inferiority is also explored through the objectification of women within *Othello.* Women are regularly objectified by men in *Othello*, particularly by Brabantio when he describes Othello as a “foul thief!” in response to the secret marriage. The derogatory tone of this pre-modified noun phrase illustrates how Desdemona is viewed as though she is one of Brabantio’s belongings because she is his daughter, which was a common idea within a Jacobean society. Use of the adjectival pre-modifier “foul” displays how disgusted Brabantio is with the idea of Desdemona making a choice independently. The objectification of women is developed further when Othello responds by stating that he “won his daughter”. Use of the stative verb “won” implies that women are fought over by men as though they are possessions, with women playing a passive role in the conflict created in the battle imagery. The personal pronoun “his” shows how even Othello believes that Desdemona was owned by Brabantio before he “won” her, thus emphasising the passive space she occupies both within and outside of marriage.

Shakespeare also highlights how women are physically inferior to men in *Othello* and are rarely in positions of power. This is evident in *Othello* when Desdemona pleads to Othello to “Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!”. This emphatic utterance connotes that Desdemona, while ultimately accepting of her death, is aware of, and fears, the physical supremacy Othello has over her, and emphasises the weakness by begging. The imperative tone, however, also shows how futile women’s attempts of asserting dominance and independence through spoken language are, as Othello ignores what Desdemona says. The use of antonyms in the adverbials of time “tomorrow” and “tonight” add a sense of pleading to her imperative tone, and show how she is aware that her definitive silencing is inevitable. This is also evident when Emilia tries to resist her inferior position by responding to Iago’s command to “get you home” with “I will not.” The use of monosyllabic lexis and the fast paced turn-taking reinforces how Emilia’s direct defiance of Iago challenges the predominant ideology of female inferiority. However, the adjacency pair also emphasises how ineffective it is for her to defy her position in Jacobean society, as Emilia is ultimately silenced through Iago’s murder of her. While she shows some potential power in her use of language, for example, through the negative modal verb phrase ‘will not’, it is her physical inferiority that leads to her ultimate downfall. Thus, the text uses the physical superiority of men to demonstrate how, despite attempts to challenge their social position, women are left powerless because of men’s physical assertion over them.

In conclusion, *Othello* shows how women are inferior to men in Jacobean society. There is an expectation for women to gain permission from a man before doing anything. Women acting independently is highly disapproved of, a prime example of this being Desdemona’s self-determined decision to marry Othello. The inevitable deaths of Desdemona and Emilia serve to reinforce patriarchal values which punish women who attempt to subvert societal expectations. Women within *Othello* are chastised for their transgressions; ultimately Desdemona and Emilia are used to illustrate the inferior position women were forced to assume with Shakespearean society.