



Toxic Jealousy and the Collapse of Rationality in Shakespeare’s Othello: A Psychological Literary Criticism Study

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Abstract

This study analyzes toxic jealousy and its destructive impact on the collapse of rationality in William Shakespeare’s Othello. The objective of this study is to explain how jealousy gradually destroys Othello’s emotional stability, trust, and rational judgment throughout the play. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method using a psychological approach to literary criticism to examine psychological dimensions represented through literary characters and emotional experiences. The data were collected from dialogues, actions, and character expressions in the play, particularly those related to Othello’s emotional transformation. The findings revealed that Othello’s toxic jealousy did not emerge suddenly but developed through interconnected psychological factors involving emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation. These factors gradually intensified Othello’s insecurity and suspicion toward Desdemona, resulting in obsessive suspicion, distorted judgment, and the collapse of rationality. Consequently, Othello experienced psychological deterioration that ultimately led him toward tragic action and self-destruction. This study concludes that Shakespeare portrays jealousy as a destructive psychological force capable of influencing perception, behavior, and moral judgment. Furthermore, this study contributes to psychological literary studies by emphasizing toxic jealousy as a central factor influencing Othello’s psychological transformation and tragic downfall.

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Introduction

William Shakespeare is widely recognized as one of the greatest playwrights in English literature. Human emotions, moral conflicts, ambition, betrayal, and psychological struggles experienced by individuals in society are the main critical analysis of his literary works (Bloom, 2010). Among Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello* is considered one of the most influential plays because it presents the destructive impact of jealousy on human rationality and morality. *Othello* remains one of Shakespeare's most psychologically complex tragedies due to its exploration of emotional conflict and human vulnerability (Bloom, 2010). According to Aristotle (1898), tragedy presents serious actions leading protagonists toward suffering and downfall through tragic circumstances. By arousing pity and fear, tragedy serves to produce emotional catharsis.

Othello tells the story of Othello, a respected Moorish general in Venice, whose life is destroyed by manipulation, suspicion, and emotional instability. At the beginning of the play, Othello is portrayed as a noble, rational, and honorable man. However, after being manipulated by Iago, he gradually develops toxic jealousy toward his wife, Desdemona. His jealousy eventually controls his thoughts, emotions, and actions, leading him to irrational decisions and tragic consequences.

Literary works may be examined through various critical approaches to understand characters, conflicts, and psychological dimensions represented in texts. Among these approaches, psychological literary criticism focuses on analyzing emotions, motivations, mental states, and behavioral patterns reflected in literary characters. According to Tyson (2015), psychological criticism attempts to explain how psychological dimensions influence characters' actions, internal conflicts, and behavioral development within literary texts. Through this approach, literary characters may be understood as representations of complex human experiences and emotional struggles. Since *Othello* presents psychological conflict, emotional transformation, and behavioral change throughout the play, a psychological literary criticism approach becomes relevant for understanding how toxic jealousy gradually influenced Othello's emotional condition and contributed to the collapse of his rationality.

Understanding *Othello*'s tragic downfall requires attention to the causal relationship between psychological conditions and behavioral consequences. The concept of causality explains how particular factors may contribute to the emergence of subsequent outcomes through interconnected processes rather than isolated events (Pearl, 2009). In many literary works, characters' actions and decisions do not occur suddenly but are often influenced by various internal and external factors that gradually shape their responses and behaviors. Psychological conditions, emotional vulnerability, and social influences may function as causal elements that trigger changes in individual perception and judgment. Consequently, a character's emotional state may influence how situations are interpreted and how decisions are made. In tragic narratives, these causal relationships become important because the consequences of emotional and psychological disturbances frequently lead characters toward conflict, suffering, and self-destruction. In *Othello*, the protagonist's downfall cannot be understood as a single event occurring independently; rather, it emerges through a chain of interconnected factors involving emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation. These interacting factors gradually contributed to the development of destructive emotional responses, eventually influencing Othello's judgment and behavior throughout the play.

Among various emotional conditions that may function as causal factors in tragic narratives, jealousy has long been recognized as one of the most powerful and destructive human emotions.

Jealousy may influence individuals' perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral decisions, particularly when feelings of insecurity, fear, and suspicion become dominant. Rather than functioning as a temporary emotional reaction, jealousy may gradually develop into a more intense and unhealthy condition that affects cognitive processes and interpersonal relationships. In literary works, jealousy frequently operates as a central force that drives conflict and shapes characters' actions. Within Shakespeare's *Othello*, jealousy becomes a significant psychological element that influences the protagonist's emotional transformation and contributes to the tragic consequences throughout the play.

Jealousy reflects the psychological vulnerability of human beings, and has been associated with numerous destructive consequences that may affect both social relationships and emotional stability. It can lead to social isolation, diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and psychological distress, which may ultimately affect an individual's behavior and decision-making (Buss, 2000). Furthermore, jealousy may become a powerful emotional trigger leading to extreme and destructive actions toward intimate partners (Buss, 2006; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Toxic jealousy further may influence emotional stability, damage trust, and collapse rational thinking. Easton et al. (2007) argued that toxic jealousy may develop into irrational and destructive behavior characterized by obsessive suspicion and emotional instability. Such reactions frequently emerged when an individual suspected sexual infidelity or believed that the relationship had ended permanently, resulting in emotional instability and irrational behavior. In modern society, toxic jealousy remains relevant because it often appears in unhealthy relationships and emotional manipulation. Toxic jealousy can be understood through several psychological factors influencing his emotional and behavioral responses throughout the play. Jealousy has been associated with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that shape how individuals respond to perceived threats within interpersonal relationships (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Psychological studies also suggested that jealousy may emerge from insecurity, fear of loss, emotional dependence, and negative interpretations of relational situations, which gradually affect emotional stability and decision-making processes (Attridge, 2013).

Recent discussions on *Othello* have emphasized the destructive nature of jealousy and insecurity. *Othello*'s jealousy gradually transformed into obsessive suspicion and distorted interpretations resembling characteristics of pathological jealousy (Costa et al., 2015). Emotional states may also affect reasoning processes and weaken objective judgment, particularly when emotions become intense and difficult to regulate (Pham, 2007). Ahmed (2024) examined jealousy as a monstrous emotional force that gradually contributes to tragic consequences. As jealousy increasingly dominated *Othello*'s thoughts, his rational judgment gradually collapsed, leading him toward tragic actions based on false assumptions. Ultimately, the destruction caused by toxic jealousy not only resulted in the death of Desdemona but also culminated in *Othello*'s own self-destruction through guilt and suicide, reinforcing Shakespeare's portrayal of jealousy as a psychologically destructive force. Furthermore, Singh (2024) argued that insecurity and jealousy become dominant emotional triggers shaping conflict and behavioral transformation. These findings suggest that jealousy functions beyond emotional discomfort and may affect psychological conditions and interpersonal relationships.

Jealousy has been discussed as a destructive psychological emotion capable of damaging trust, emotional stability, and rational judgment. Previous studies on *Othello* generally focused on themes such as tragedy, racial discrimination, betrayal, and manipulation. However, studies specifically discussing toxic jealousy as a factor leading to the collapse of rationality remain limited. This study specifically emphasizes toxic jealousy as the primary factor contributing to the collapse of *Othello*'s rationality. Furthermore, it attempts to explain how jealousy gradually transforms *Othello* from a

rational and respected leader into a psychologically unstable individual who loses his moral judgment and self-control.

The issue of jealousy remains relevant in human life because excessive suspicion and emotional insecurity often influence human behavior and choice. Shakespeare's *Othello* continues to attract many literary scholars and readers today. The play not only presents a tragic story but also reflects psychological conflicts experienced by individuals in social relationships. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the destructive impact of toxic jealousy in collapsing Othello's rationality and to explain how jealousy contributes to his tragic downfall.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to analyze toxic jealousy and its impact on the collapse of rationality in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding and interpreting meanings, experiences, and social phenomena through textual and contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research aims to explore and interpret phenomena within their natural contexts by focusing on meanings and processes. Since this study examined psychological conditions and character behavior represented in literary texts, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate. In addition, this study adopted a psychological approach to literary criticism to examine psychological dimensions represented through literary characters, dialogues, actions, and emotional expressions. According to Barry (2017), psychological criticism attempts to understand literary characters and their actions through psychological perspectives and human mental processes. Therefore, this approach was considered relevant for examining Othello's emotional transformation and psychological deterioration throughout the play.

This study was also conducted through library research because the data were obtained from written sources rather than field observations. The primary source of data was William Shakespeare's *Othello*, particularly the edition by Turner (1989). The secondary sources consisted of books, scholarly articles, and previous studies related to jealousy, toxic jealousy, causality, psychological criticism, and Shakespearean studies published in academic journals and books.

The data were collected through documentation techniques involving close reading, note-taking, and textual identification. Dialogues, character expressions, and actions indicating emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, external manipulation, toxic jealousy, distorted judgment, collapse of rationality, tragic actions, and self-destruction were identified and classified according to the research framework.

For data analysis, this study applied textual analysis through several procedures: identifying relevant textual evidence, classifying the data based on the conceptual framework, interpreting the psychological meanings of selected dialogues and actions, and analyzing causal relationships among factors contributing to Othello's tragic downfall. The findings were interpreted through a psychological literary criticism framework emphasizing the relationship between literary texts and psychological dimensions of characters and behavior. Therefore, this approach was considered appropriate to explain how toxic jealousy gradually influenced Othello's emotional condition and rational judgment throughout the play.

Results and Discussions

1. Results

This study analyzed the development of toxic jealousy and its contribution to the collapse of rationality in Shakespeare’s Othello through a psychological approach to literary criticism. The analysis focused on identifying dialogues, actions, and character expressions indicating psychological conditions and emotional transformation throughout the play. From a psychological literary criticism perspective, the findings revealed that Othello’s toxic jealousy did not emerge suddenly but developed through interconnected psychological processes involving emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation. These causal factors gradually influenced Othello’s perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral decisions, ultimately leading him toward irrational actions and tragic consequences. The findings were classified according to the conceptual framework proposed in this study and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dialogues, Actions, and Expressions Indicating Psychological Factors and the Development of Toxic Jealousy in Othello

No	Category	Type	Evidence	Act/Scene	Indication
1	Emotional Vulnerability	Dialogue	“Haply, for I am black...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Insecurity, low self-esteem
		Dialogue	“Why did I marry?”	Act 3, Scene 3	Fear of loss, emotional uncertainty
		Dialogue	“She loved me for the dangers I had passed...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Emotional dependence
2	Psychological Instability	Dialogue	“Farewell the tranquil mind...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Loss of emotional stability
		Action	Othello falls into a trance and loses control	Act 4, Scene 1	Psychological pressure
		Expression	repeated emotional outbursts	Act 4	Unstable emotional responses
3	External Manipulation	Dialogue	“Ha! I like not that.”	Act 3, Scene 3	Iago plants suspicion
		Action	Iago manipulates the	Act 3, Scene 3	False evidence

			handkerchief as evidence		
		Dialogue	“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Psychological manipulation
4	Toxic Jealousy	Dialogue	“I’ll tear her all to pieces!”	Act 3, Scene 3	Obsessive emotional reaction
		Dialogue	“Arise, black vengeance...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Revenge and obsessive jealousy/ jealousy transforms into revenge
		Dialogue	“Damn her, lewd minx!”	Act 4, Scene 2	Hatred driven by jealousy
		Dialogue	“O, blood, blood, blood!”	Act 3, Scene 3	Violent obsession
		Dialogue	“Her name, that was as fresh...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Distorted perception of Desdemona
		Action	Othello strikes Desdemona publicly	Act 4, Scene 1	Loss of emotional control
		Expression	Othello becomes increasingly aggressive and suspicious	Act 4	Obsessive jealousy
		Action	Othello Questions Emilia repeatedly about Desdemona	Act 4	Compulsive suspicion
		Dialogue	“Lie with her? Lie on her?”	Act 4, Scene 1	Obsessive repetitive thinking
5	Distorted Judgment	Dialogue	“This honest creature doubtless...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Blind trust toward Iago

		Dialogue	“I think my wife be honest, and think she is not...”	Act 3, Scene 3	Conflicted perception and uncertainty
		Dialogue	“Lie with her? Lie on her?”	Act 4, Scene 1	Obsessive interpretation and cognitive confusion
		Action	accepts the handkerchief as proof of infidelity	Act 3	Misinterpretation of evidence
		Action	questions Desdemona with assumptions rather than facts	Act 4	Judgment based on suspicion
6	Collapse of Rationality	Dialogue	“Get me some poison, Iago.”	Act 4, Scene 1	Irrational decision-making
		Dialogue	“Ay, let her rot and perish...”	Act 4, Scene 1	Extreme emotional reasoning
		Dialogue	“Yet she must die...”	Act 5, Scene 2	Justification of destructive action
		Action	plans Desdemona’s death without verification	Act 4	Loss of objective reasoning
		Action	relies entirely on Iago’s assumptions	Act 4	Collapse of independent judgment
7	Tragic Action and Self-Destruction	Action	Othello murders Desdemona	Act 5	Tragic Action
		Action	Othello commits suicide after realizing the truth	Act 5	Guilt and self-destruction

2. Discussion

A. Psychological Factors Contributing to Toxic Jealousy

As presented in Table 1, from a psychological literary criticism perspective, Othello's toxic jealousy did not emerge suddenly but developed through interconnected psychological factors influencing his emotional condition throughout the play. The findings revealed that emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation functioned as significant causal elements contributing to the development of toxic jealousy. These findings support the concept of causality proposed by Pearl (2009), which explains that behavioral consequences frequently emerge through interconnected processes rather than isolated events. Through a psychological literary criticism lens, Othello's emotional transformation may be understood as a gradual process in which internal psychological conditions and external influences continuously shaped his perceptions and behavioral responses.

Emotional vulnerability appeared as one of the earliest conditions influencing Othello's emotional responses. Although Othello was portrayed as a respected military leader, several dialogues reflected underlying feelings of insecurity and emotional dependence. His statement, "Haply, for I am black..." (Act 3, Scene 3) indicated feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Othello began questioning his worth and personal identity, suggesting hidden emotional insecurity beneath his external confidence. Similarly, the dialogue "Why did I marry?" reflected anxiety and fear of losing Desdemona after suspicion had entered his mind. These findings are consistent with Attridge (2013), who argued that jealousy frequently emerges from insecurity, fear of loss, and emotional dependence within interpersonal relationships.

Psychological instability gradually intensified Othello's emotional condition. The expression "Farewell the tranquil mind..." demonstrated the beginning of emotional disturbance and the loss of inner stability. Furthermore, Othello's physical collapse and trance in Act 4 Scene 1 indicated that emotional pressure had begun affecting both psychological and behavioral responses. These findings suggest that emotional instability gradually weakened Othello's ability to regulate thoughts and emotions. This finding is consistent with Pham (2007), who argued that emotional states may influence reasoning processes and reduce individuals' capacity for objective judgment when emotions become highly intense. Similarly, Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) explained that jealousy involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that shape individuals' perceptions and responses toward relational situations. In Othello's case, emotional instability gradually altered his psychological balance and increased his susceptibility to irrational interpretation and behavioral responses.

External manipulation also functioned as a dominant causal factor in Othello's psychological transformation. Iago strategically manipulated Othello through indirect suggestions, selective information, and deceptive actions rather than direct accusations. Dialogues such as "Ha! I like not that" and the handkerchief incident represented manipulative strategies intended to strengthen suspicion and uncertainty. Instead of presenting factual evidence, Iago gradually encouraged Othello to interpret ordinary situations through assumptions and emotional reactions. This pattern reflects the causal process proposed by Pearl (2009), which suggests that consequences often emerge through interconnected factors rather than isolated events. In Othello's case, manipulation did not immediately produce destructive behavior but gradually altered his perception and emotional responses. Similarly, Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) argued that jealousy involves cognitive dimensions influencing how individuals interpret relational situations and perceived threats. Ahmed (2024) also emphasized that jealousy in Othello develops through emotional manipulation and deceptive influence. Furthermore,

Singh (2024) argued that insecurity and jealousy function as dominant emotional triggers capable of shaping behavioral transformation. These findings suggest that Iago's manipulation functioned not merely as an external influence but as a catalyst intensifying Othello's psychological vulnerability and facilitating the development of toxic jealousy.

B. Toxic Jealousy and the Collapse of Rationality

As presented in Table 1, from a psychological literary criticism perspective, Othello's toxic jealousy gradually developed beyond ordinary emotional reactions and transformed into a destructive psychological condition influencing perception, judgment, and decision-making processes. The findings revealed that toxic jealousy did not emerge as an isolated emotional episode but developed through interconnected psychological factors and emotional experiences. This pattern reflects Pearl's (2009) concept of causality, which explains that consequences frequently emerge through a chain of interconnected conditions rather than through independent causes. Through a psychological literary criticism lens, Othello's emotional transformation may be understood as a gradual psychological process in which emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation collectively intensified his emotional responses and facilitated the development of toxic jealousy.

Several dialogues demonstrated the progression of Othello's jealousy into a psychologically destructive condition. Expressions such as "I'll tear her all to pieces!", "Arise, black vengeance...", "O, blood, blood, blood!", and "Lie with her? Lie on her?" reflected obsessive suspicion, emotional outbursts, and repetitive thought patterns. Through psychological literary criticism, these expressions may be interpreted as representations of psychological disturbance and emotional deterioration influencing Othello's behavioral responses. These reactions suggested that Othello's emotional condition had exceeded ordinary jealousy and gradually evolved into an emotionally destructive condition characterized by excessive suspicion and cognitive disturbance. Othello's aggressive behavior toward Desdemona, including publicly striking her, further demonstrated how jealousy increasingly controlled emotional and behavioral responses. These findings are consistent with Buss (2000), who argued that jealousy may generate destructive psychological consequences affecting emotional stability, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Easton et al. (2007) suggested that destructive forms of jealousy may develop into obsessive suspicion and emotionally unstable behavior characterized by irrational interpretations and excessive reactions toward perceived threats.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that toxic jealousy gradually contributed to distorted judgment before eventually collapsing Othello's rationality. Dialogues such as "This honest creature doubtless sees and knows more..." and "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not..." indicated cognitive conflict and uncertainty. Rather than objectively evaluating evidence, Othello increasingly relied on assumptions and emotional interpretations. His unquestioning acceptance of the handkerchief as evidence further reflected distorted perception and misinterpretation of reality. Through a psychological literary criticism approach, these dialogues may be interpreted as evidence that emotional conditions increasingly controlled Othello's cognitive processes and judgment. These findings support Pfeiffer and Wong (1989), who argued that jealousy contains cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions influencing how individuals interpret relational situations and perceived threats. Similarly, Pham (2007) explained that intense emotional conditions may interfere with reasoning processes and reduce individuals' capacity for objective judgment.

The final stage of this transformation appeared through the collapse of rationality. Dialogues such as "Get me some poison, Iago," "Ay, let her rot and perish," and "Yet she must die..."

demonstrated that Othello had begun making decisions based primarily on emotional impulses rather than rational consideration. Rather than seeking clarification or verification, he accepted assumptions as truth and relied entirely on Iago's interpretation of events. Ahmed (2024) argued that jealousy in Othello gradually functions as a destructive emotional force contributing to psychological deterioration and tragic consequences. Furthermore, Singh (2024) emphasized that insecurity and jealousy may function as dominant emotional triggers shaping behavioral transformation. Therefore, from a psychological literary criticism perspective, Othello's collapse of rationality emerged not from a single emotional reaction but through cumulative psychological processes in which toxic jealousy progressively distorted perception, weakened judgment, and ultimately dominated decision-making.

C. Tragic Action and Self-Destruction

As presented in Table 1, from a psychological literary criticism perspective, the final consequence of Othello's psychological transformation appeared through tragic action and self-destruction. The findings revealed that Othello's destructive actions emerged not suddenly but through cumulative psychological processes involving emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, external manipulation, toxic jealousy, distorted judgment, and the collapse of rationality. Othello's decision to kill Desdemona represented the culmination of emotional and cognitive deterioration throughout the play. His dialogue "Yet she must die..." reflected the extent to which jealousy had altered his moral reasoning and justified destructive behavior. Through a psychological literary criticism lens, this dialogue may be interpreted as evidence that emotional domination had replaced objective judgment and rational decision-making. These findings support Buss (2006) and Daly and Wilson (1988), who argued that jealousy may function as a powerful emotional trigger contributing to extreme and destructive actions toward intimate partners. Similarly, Ahmed (2024) emphasized that jealousy in Othello gradually develops into a destructive emotional force leading toward tragic consequences.

Following Desdemona's death, Othello eventually realized the truth regarding Iago's deception and experienced overwhelming guilt and regret. His decision to commit suicide represented the final stage of self-destruction resulting from accumulated emotional and psychological deterioration. From a psychological literary criticism perspective, Othello's suicide may be interpreted as the complete collapse of emotional stability, identity, and moral awareness after recognizing the consequences of his irrational actions. This finding further supports Pearl's (2009) argument that consequences frequently emerge through interconnected processes rather than isolated events. Therefore, Othello's downfall did not result from a single impulsive act but from cumulative psychological factors progressively shaping his emotional and behavioral transformation.

Conclusion

This study examined the destructive impact of toxic jealousy on the collapse of rationality in Shakespeare's Othello through a descriptive qualitative method and a psychological approach to literary criticism. The findings revealed that Othello's toxic jealousy did not emerge suddenly but developed through interconnected psychological factors involving emotional vulnerability, psychological instability, and external manipulation. These factors gradually intensified emotional responses and contributed to obsessive suspicion, distorted judgment, and the collapse of rationality. Through a psychological literary criticism lens, Othello's emotional transformation may be understood as a gradual psychological process in which emotional conditions increasingly influenced perception, behavior, and decision-making.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that the collapse of rationality ultimately led Othello toward tragic action and self-destruction. Rather than relying on objective reasoning, Othello increasingly depended on emotional impulses and false assumptions, resulting in destructive consequences. This study suggests that jealousy functions not merely as a temporary emotional reaction but as a psychological force capable of influencing cognition, behavior, and moral judgment. In addition, this study contributes to literary studies, particularly psychological literary criticism, by emphasizing toxic jealousy as a central factor influencing Othello's psychological transformation and tragic downfall. The findings may also contribute to English literature teaching by providing broader perspectives for understanding psychological conflict, literary characters, and emotional representation in literary texts.

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