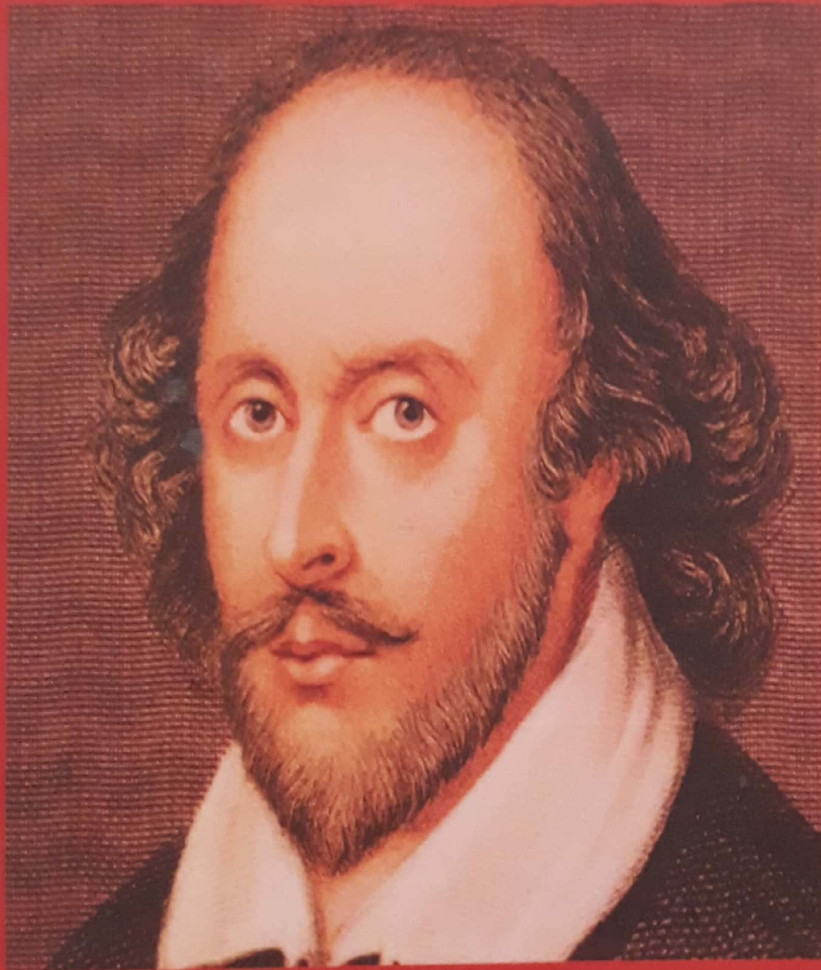


# SHAKESPEARE FOREVER

*T.M. UMA RANI  
GOMEZ SOPHIA  
U. ANAMICA*



**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**  
**Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women**  
**(Autonomous)**  
**Periyakulam, Tamilnadu, India**

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# THE PORTRAYAL OF IAGO AS SHAKUNI

A. JASEEMA BANU

There won't be tragedies but for the Shakunies. Shakunies fill the plot of tragedies whether they are handed down by the Shakespeare, Seneca or the Sangam writers. It is the villains who move the plot towards tragedy from beginning to end. They are the law-makers and the law-breakers. It is they who instigate the heroes and their opponents. Sometimes they play the dual role beguiling to be friends not allowing them to know 'I am not what I am', as it happens in the case of Iago. Invariably they emerge victorious at the end of the play making the play end with a sad note and successfully branding it a 'tragedy'. The tragedies are caused more by the villains than the flaw in the heroes.

The villains own their lineage right from the classical age. In India, Shakuni in the epic, "Mahabharata" – almost a Hindu Scripture – comparatively belongs to much earlier period than the villains of Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself, a rich borrower of the classical literature came only next to the University Wits much later than the European models like the Senecan tragedy. All these villains, belonging to different era share common features some times with a little variation in their motives. Iago for example is believed to entertain the 'motiveless malignity'.

In Seneca's play, 'Hippolytus' Theseus is the villain who takes revenge on his son for the rape of Phaedra, while in

'Agamemnon', the ghost of Thyestes urges Aegisthus towards revenge. The first English tragedy, 'Gorboduc' (1561), by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, is a chain of slaughter and revenge written in direct imitation of Seneca. Thomas Kyd's, 'The Spanish Tragedy' (1587-1589) is one of the earliest plays built around blood-revenge to be performed on the English stage. Hieronimo's desire for vengeance 'is in a very real sense a passion for justice'. According to Boyer, a Senecan Villain such as Medea cruelly desires revenge out of faithfulness and takes pleasure in the violent suffering of her victims. Medea proves her power as a female villain whose vengeance is deadly.

John Webster who wrote 'The white Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi' are considered to be the two best Jacobean plays and, in hindsight, they define Jacobean drama, with the complexity of their intrigues, their cruelty and violence, and the intelligence of their heroes, who are Iago - like villains. Four villains of Shakespeare - Aaron in 'Titus Andronicus', Richard III in 'Richard III', Iago in 'Othello' and Don John in 'Much Ado About Nothing', unlike Shakespeare's other villains, these four get enjoyment out of the criminal act itself. In 'The Duchess of Malfi', Bosola is a villain because of his selfish reasons. Unfortunately, the only way Bosola knows to exact revenge against the brothers and avenge the deaths of the Duchess, Antonio, and their children is to murder the two people who ordered their death. Late sixteenth century playwrights are university wits who also showed villains in their plays like 'Doctor Faustus' and 'The Jew of Malta'. In 'The Jew of Malta', a villainous Jew named Barabas who, having had his wealth



confiscated by the Christians who rule the island of Malta, takes his revenge on the Governor and his knights.

Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists knew little about the great Greek tragic writers (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), but they knew some classical theory from Aristotle's *Poetics*, and they were very familiar with the Roman tragic writer Seneca, on whom they drew for such sensational elements as bloodiness, revenge, ghosts, prophecies, and the supernatural. Seneca's plots were bloodthirsty, but he always kept the gore offstage and left bloody violence to be described by a messenger. Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists put it all right up there on stage – Queen Margaret, a villain stabbing a child to death in 'Henry VI Part Two'.

Macbeth is also considered by some critics as an absolute villain, with no mitigating quality. They dub him as a highly ambitious, selfish and remorseless character who shrinks from crimes at times only because of moral cowardice, and fear of retribution or punishment. Tragic disaster is brought on not only by flawed heroes like Titus Andronicus, Othello, Hamlet, and Lear, but also by villains like Aaron in 'Titus Andronicus', Iago in 'Othello', Claudius in 'Hamlet', or Goneril, Regan, and Edmund in 'King Lear'. Especially in Shakespeare's early and middle tragedies, deliberate villainy and human malice often work against the protagonist. Sometimes rather than being particularized in one villain, human malice is distributed among members of a group, such as the feuding factions in 'Romeo and Juliet'. Cassius in 'Julius Caesar' is often regarded as a master of villainy. Cassius is a villain, who manipulates Brutus by

sending fake letters from citizens expressing their fear of Caesar being crowned emperor in order to get Brutus to join his cause to assassinate Caesar. This is seen in the quote:

“Be you content: good Cinna, take this paper,  
And look you lay it in the praetor’s chair,  
Where Brutus may but find it; and throw this  
In at his window; set this up with wax  
Upon old Brutus’ statue” (1. 3. 574-578)

Iago represents in many ways the pinnacle of Shakespeare’s villains. He is starkly diabolical and, as such is successful at taking down Othello, one of the most virtuous and tragic figures Shakespeare creates perhaps alongside Richard III, Iago holds the title as one of Shakespeare’s best villains. While Richard III spills more blood for his desires, his motivation can be reduced to the simple drive for power, but this is not the case with Iago. Aaron in ‘Titus Andronicus’ and Shylock in ‘The Merchant of Venice’ embody and bring about the evil in each respective play; both are agents of death. However, Iago marks a change in this formula. While he does very clearly embody evil – perhaps more so than most other Shakespearean villains – Iago’s greatest feat is his ability to corrupt Othello into doing evil himself. Iago, the scoundrel, hates Othello so much that he tricks him into believing that his wife is having an affair with his Lieutenant. The sneaky devil plans a vendetta against him, driving Othello to kill his own wife. Noted as one of Shakespeare’s most sinister villains, Iago possesses carefully nurtured qualities of deception and manipulation.



Shakuni in 'Mahabharata' is a villain, who is believed to have veritably changed the landscape of the epic. The brother of Gandhari (wife of the blind king, Dhritarashtra), Shakuni is the maternal uncle of Duryodhana (the eldest son of Dhritarashtra and the leader of the Kauravas), and also the central negative character in the Mahabharata. Shakuni played a key part in inciting the pandavas to play the game of dice and made them lose their Kingdom and everything else to Kauravas. If Pandavas lost the game, it would inevitably lead to a war between Pandavas and Kauravas. His biggest enemy was Bheeshma Pitamah. Shakuni was angry because Bheeshma was made his sister Gandhari marry a blind Dhritarashtra. His main objective was to ruin the entire family clan of Bheeshma Pitamah. He mainly worked by inciting hatred between the Kauravas and Pandavas; his plans culminated in the biggest wars in India history.

Iago in 'Othello' bears close resemblance to Shakuni in 'Mahabharata'. As Shakuni worked tirelessly to inject poison in the minds of the Kauravas, against their cousins, the Pandavas. Iago finds delight in destroying the joy in other and goodness wherever he finds, but he is also cunning due to his ambitions and sense of revenge. This means that there are rational reasons, for taking revenge or being jealous on the one hand, and on the other his destructive villainy and evil is simply inborn and simply irresistible. Iago neither respects moral beauty as seen in Desdemona, nor the grand nobleness of the mighty – souled Othello. Likewise, During the war, Shakuni plotted with Duryodhana to kill Abhimanyu, the young and valiant son of



Arjuna and subhadra without mercy and kindness. As Shakuni is the main cause for the destruction of the entire kuruclan, the primary and predominant cause that brings about the tragic downfall of Othello is Iago's highly sophisticated art of dissembling, and his unbelievable understanding and ability for manipulating her mind and feelings of the every other character. Iago himself is quite clear on the subject:

..... "I hate the Moor:  
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets  
He has done my office: I know not if't be true,  
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do as if for surety." .....

(I, iii, 389 - 393)

From this we could say that Iago has no real motives-he is just plain evil. Likewise Shakuni also lacks any motive. As Mr. Hudson says, Iago is "Severely introversive", and is only satisfied by dipping what is good into his own vileness and bringing it forth reeking in the filth of his own evil nature. We could find the same kind of evil nature in Shakuni, the expert with his dice, also a master of illusion, got together with Duryodhana to hatch yet another, he then lost his own identity and gave up his crown. In the same way, Iago uses Desdemona's virtue and innocence to bring about her own ruin:

And by how much she strives to do him good,  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all.

(2.3.359- 363)

Finally, Yudhishthira was asked to wager Draupadi. Dussasana commenced stripping of all her clothing by the order of Duryodhana then she realized that she was saved by the Lord Krishna. When Draupadi came out of her stupor. She cursed that the entire kuru clan would be destroyed. This incident actually set the stage for the war of kurukshetra. The main reason for the war is Shakuni, as Iago, a green-eyed monster in 'Othello', who is the cause for the jealous of Othello who killed the faithful Desdemona. Iago is portrayed by Shakespeare as an extremely cunning, jealous, subtle, sadistic racist, motiveless and manipulative devil-like human being, who jumps at the opportunity to use anything to help him reach his goals, which into destroy Othello, his relationships, and the friends who surround him. Iago symbolizes evil in every way, though not the typical evil of brute anarchical strength, but the tactful evil psychologically destroy a person through preying on their weaknesses. Similarly, Shakuni is inherently vicious and evil enough to destroy the Pandavas.

As Shakespeare says, 'Hell is empty and all the devils are here', it is true that Iago has marvellous, and almost devilish ingenuity: yet chance or accident seems to have favoured him greatly. Iago dominates the actions as much as Shakuni does (but how differently!) in Mahabharata. Iago is a subtle, baffling personality like Shakuni. How Iago uses Roderigo as tool in furthering his plot in the same way, Shakuni uses Duryodhana as tool to do the same. The unbearable scene (disrobe Draupadi) is the cause not only to commence the war but also to deminish the whole family into nothing, as in the play Othello, Iago acts

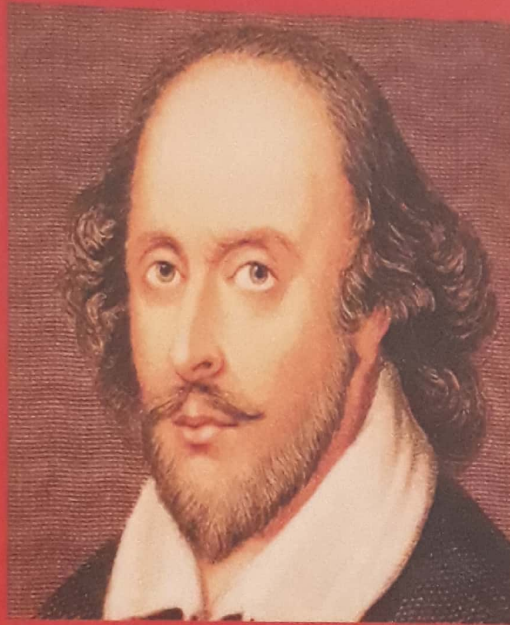


as a full - fledged devil, who is the reason to destroy all other  
including his wife's peace and happiness.

### Work Cited

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*To Leaf and Scan Shakespeare is a Real Feast!*



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