

Kannagi and Desdemona - A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Kannagi, the epic heroine of Silappathikaram in Tamil Literature and Desdemona the heroine of Othello, one of the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare, are compared here with the internal evidences about their characterization.

Key Words: Desdemona, Love-marriage, Platonic love, Anklet, Handkerchief, Revenge, Pathetic end.

Introduction

Silappathikaram^(2,4-7) is a long epic story in which 'Kannagi' the protagonist represents the Tamil people of 2nd century. She lives among a Tamil community, especially in southern India where three kings ('Chera', 'Chola', and 'Pandiya') ruled. It is the long poem, written with songs and dances blended with prose. We find in this epic prose, music and drama. It is called in Tamil as 'Iyal' (prose), 'Isai' (music) and 'NaDagam' (drama). It is written in poetic form interspersed with prose and Lyrics. The major characters are not kings or nobles; they belong to the merchant class in the trade city of Poombukar. Hence, it is called a 'people's Epic'.

The epic '**Silappathikaram**' resembles one of the major tragedies of Shakespeare-Othello. The un-heroic hero **Kovalan**, leaning towards fun and frolic, is lost in sensual pleasure with '**Madhavi**' - a shadowy character. She plays the role of the villain.

Desdemona is the heroine of Othello^(1,3). The story was written roughly before 1604 by Shakespeare. Desdemona was born to Duke Brabantio in Venice. In the tragedy '**Othello**', a valiant warrior and leader Othello is misled by the poison of jealousy injected into his mind by **Iago**, an un-paralleled villain in any literature. The hero is dragged into hell with a thread of envy tied in the nose, like a donkey.

Comparison of Kannagi and Desdemona

KANNAGI	DESDEMONA
She was born to a rich Merchant	She was born to a Duke
She was twelve years old.	She was sixteen
Brought up in a protected and traditional family.	Brought up in a Duke's protected family.
She was exquisitely beautiful.	She was extraordinarily beautiful.
Arranged marriage.	Love marriage (romantic love).
She married a handsome rich husband.	She married a black moor aged about 42 years.
Equal in status, caste and creed.	Loved his bravery and battle-field adventures.
Dutiful, devoted, and submissive.	Dutiful, devoted, and submissive
She was smart and wise.	She was extra ordinarily innocent.
She parts with her fortunes to please her husband	She ignores her father's fortune and goes with her husband
She fights for justice defying the powerful king, when her husband is killed unjustly.	She does not fight with her husband to prove her innocence, when she was accused of infidelity.
She avenges her husband's death and dies a heroic death.	She peacefully dies a tragic death.
'Kannagi': a champion stands for justice.	She stands for innocence and for obedience.
She becomes a heroine and is welcomed as a guest by the women in heaven.	A pathetic figure provoking pity draws our tears.
Kannagi is a spirited, fiery character.	A gentle, sweet character with no fire.
Love, happy married life, separation through husband' infidelity, melancholy, loss of husband, taking revenge on the king who punished her husband, and dying willingly.	Full of romantic love, ready to elope, happy to be wife of her hero husband, a victim of jealousy-inspired murder, loving, blaming herself, and dying a tragic death.

Kannagi, the protagonist character in the epic Silappathikaram, and Desdemona, the heroine of Othello, one of the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare, are compared here with internal evidences.

Is Silappathikaram an Epic?

‘**Silappathikaram**’ is an epic written by the Jain-poet Ilango Adigal - the younger brother of the king, Chera Senkuttuvan 1800 years ago -2nd century.

It can be translated ‘**an epic of the ‘ankle bracelet’ or the epic of the anklet**’.

‘Epic’

Let’s cite a Greek classification. ‘An epic is a long heroic story - an individual who represents a people and in some cases founds a community, especially a nation.’

Epic heroes often have encyclopedic adventures including military adventures, experiencing all parts of the land, all levels society, and each aspect of the culture. The researchers find Silappathikaram as a connecting point for **Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism**.

Kannagi, the heroine has many encyclopedic adventures moving from the Chola kingdom - Poombukar-merchants-city, to Madurai- the great city of the Pandiya kingdom and the Western Ghats - Kerala- (Marayoor) of the ‘Chera’ kingdom. She travels over all parts of the land, meets people from all levels of society, experiences each aspect of the culture. So, she is called an epic heroine.

An Immortal Character

Kannagi is an immortal character in Silappathikaram. As Ilango Adigal states through an envoy: “It is time that even the gods adore her who adores no god but her husband. A jewel among the women of the earth, Kannagi-’ she became a goddess and a guest of the women of heaven”.

Kannagi is worshipped as a goddess of chastity ‘the Patthini Deivam’ and ‘Karpukku Arasi’ (the queen of chastity) called by the Tamil speaking people. There are temples in Kerala built to commemorate her story.



The statue of Kannagi on the Marina Beach in Chennai.

The Global Symbol of Justice

A statue stands in the Marina Beach in Chennai - the capital of Tamilnadu, on the sea-shore of Bay of Bengal. It stands as the ‘**Global Symbol of Justice**’, holding an anklet in her hand, seeking justice in the court of the Pandiya king who erred in his judgment which caused her beloved husband Kovalan’s death. We find the fury of Kannagi - a ‘**righteous anger**’ fighting alone for justice.

A Brief Story of Silappathikaram

The story is brewed in love, jealousy, infidelity of the husband, a crack in love, misjudgment, melancholy, and the tragic end.

Kannagi, the heroine of this epic Silappathikaram was the daughter of a wealthy ‘Vanigan’, merchant of pearls and diamonds in ‘Poombukar’ a harbour city in Tamilnadu. She was brought up in a rich traditional family with all protections. She was extraordinarily beautiful. She weds ‘Kovalan’- the son of a rich merchant ‘Masaathuvaan’- It was an arranged marriage celebrated in a pompous way. The ideal couple leads a happy wedded life with all comforts. It doesn’t last long.

Extra-marital Life of Kovalan

Madhavi - an intruder (a dancer and seductress) meets Kovalan in a festival. Kovalan falls in love with Madhavi. Her arresting beauty and scintillating dance and captivating singing have attracted the attention of Kovalan. His unquenched thirst of aesthetic sense was well fed by Madhavi. He forgets his wedded wife Kannagi. He becomes an estranged husband. He departs from Kannagi not because Kannagi was less beautiful than Madhavi, but

because, he finds extra sensual pleasures with Madhavi, with which Kannagi could not feed the aesthetic senses of Kovalan. He was lost in the extra-marital-adulterous life with Madhavi. He loses all the fortunes and jewels of Kannagi for the petty pleasures. Kannagi becomes a grass-widow.

Separation from Madhavi

Once Kovalan developed a squabble *over* a song sung by Madhavi. The song was misunderstood by Kovalan. He suspects the fidelity of Madhavi and comes back home to have a reunion with his lawful and devoted wife Kannagi. He realizes that all the fortunes were lost for his sensual pleasures. Forgiving his past life, Kannagi readily gives away one pair of silver anklets, the only remaining jewel to sell and start a business again. The remorseful Kovalan decides to start a business in Madurai. Kannagi with her innate submissiveness and charity, accompanies her husband to Madurai without any fuss like the chaste women of that period. Life with their husbands whether they were good or bad, was heaven for them. Kannagi hopes to start a new life and a new trade thereafter in Madurai.

Kannagi's 'Karpu'

In that period, the dutiful wives observed three duties which were a meek obedience, tolerance of the misbehavior of their husbands and without any fuss receiving them with warm welcome when they come back as repenting husbands. These disciplines were called 'Perunkarpu' (the biggest chastity) of wives. As Kannagi observed those disciplines she was called 'a Patthini Deivam' (the goddess of chastity) or Karpukkarasi (the queen of chastity). The extra-marital life of the husbands was accepted by the society of that period. 'Karpu' did not mean only the sexual term what we mean now; it also meant the moral character of a woman.

On the Way to Madurai

Kannagi walks along the stony and thorny paths along which she had never treaded on her tender feet. Her feet never stepped on the land out of her house in Puhar, as 'Kavanthi Adigal'- a guide and helper remarks about her tender feet and advises Kovalan to avoid such paths.

The relevant lines report:

The beautiful feet of Kannagi was never known by earth) or In other words Kannagi never came out of her house as she was brought up in a traditional way by her rich father.

In Madurai, the Killing of Kovalan

Crossing the rich forests and the Vaigai river, Kovalan and Kannagi reach Madurai. In Madurai, Kovalan meets a goldsmith and hands over the anklet for selling. The culprit goldsmith had already robbed one of the anklets of the queen Koperundevi, wife of the king. To hide his theft, he makes use of this opportunity, rushes to the palace and tells a fabricated story that he has retrieved the robbed anklet and kept the thief in his custody. The king Pandian Nedunchezhiyan passes an order without any proper enquiry to kill the thief and recover the lost anklet of the queen. The innocent Kovalan is unfortunately killed by the lies of the goldsmith and the hurried judgement passed by the king.

In the Court of Pandiyar Nedunchezhiyan

This scene is parallel to the 'bed chamber scene in Othello.

The horrible and horrendous news of her beloved husband's killing comes as a terrible shock to Kannagi. She rushes to the palace with the other anklet she had kept with her. She storms into the court of the king Pandian Nedunchezhiyan and points out the king's misjudgment which caused the killing of her husband's death. To prove her argument she throws down the anklet she was holding in her hand. The anklet is broken and an embedded emerald piece strikes the lips of the king. The king realizes that the anklet of the queen was filled with pearls not the emerald stone of Kanangi's. He feels ashamed of his wrong judgment believing the words of the culprit- goldsmith.

The king Pandian Nedunchezhiyan was well-known for the fairest justice, and feels at this moment that his scepter (symbol for fairest judgement.) was bent by his hasty and faulty judgement.

He admits to himself, "I'm the thief, Kovalan is not the thief".

He falls down with a broken heart and dies. As soon as the king dies, his queen Koperundevi faints, falls down on his body and dies on the spot.

The king and the queen die together to straighten out the bent scepter which was the symbol of the fairest justice of the Tamil kings.

The Fury of Kannagi

The infuriated Kannagi fights alone with the powerful king in the court and succeeds, by proving her husband Kovalan was free from guilt. She does not plead, but she demands justice. She appears just like a wounded wild tiger. She wrenches her left breast off and flings it against the wall. The tears flood in her eyes and the blood from her body floods the spot she stands at. The fiery look of her eyes becomes a flaming fire. She burns the whole city of Madurai where her innocent husband was killed.

Having witnessed the fury of Kannagi and the destruction, the goddess of Madurai, Meenakshi descends and intercedes with Kannagi, appeases her and pacifies her anger; the fire with her is abated; she stops any further damage of the city.

Boarded in ‘Pushpagavimanam’

The grieved Kannagi ascends the nearby hills of Western Ghats ‘Marayoor’ and stops there. Due to the excessive bloodshed from her amputated breast, Kannagi becomes exhausted with unbearable pain and becomes tired physically and mentally, falls down and dies. Then her spirit boards ‘a pushpagavimanam’ – (a mystical flying chariot) in which the spirit of Kovalan comes; she joins Kovalan and enters into heaven. Kannagi never worshipped any God but her husband. The people, who witnessed this miracle, have elevated Kannagi to the level of goddess of chastity (- a ‘**PatthiniDeivam**’).

Born in Chola kingdom-Poompugar, Kannagi moves to Pandian kingdom and dies in Chera kingdom. Her journey covers the three parts of Tamil territory. The researchers also find Silappathikaram as a connecting point for **Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism**.

Kannagi Epitomizes Chastity and Justice

Her story is brewed in love, betrayal, melancholy, and revenge. Kannagi is unquestionably a conformist to chaste living. Her encyclopedic experiences elevate her as **an epic heroine** who met all levels of society, each aspect of culture.

The epic silappathikaram has “grim force and splendor unparalleled elsewhere in Indian literature - it is imbued with both the ferocity of the early Tamils and their stern respect for justice” - **Prof. L. Bashyam**

Desdemona



A Brief Story of 'Othello'

The story was written roughly before 1604 by Shakespeare. Desdemona was born to a Duke-Brabantio in Venice. She was brought up in a traditional way with good education. She enjoyed the fullest freedom. She has grown up with exquisite culture.

A Romantic Love

Several suitors of her own clime and complexion were shunned by the fair and gentle Desdemona. She regarded the mind more than the features of men. She had chosen a moor, a black warrior Othello who had profound experiences in the battle field. The gallant general Othello was frequently invited by her father to listen to the heroic deeds of the battles. Desdemona leaving her household chores, used to sit before Othello to hang breathless on Othello's tales with a greedy ear. She was captivated and entertained by Othello's wondrous narratives. Her compassionate disposition was interested in- all the disastrous chances, hair breadth-escapes, and moving accidents by flood and field, of which he has to tell, and her exceeding gentleness and timidity, and her domestic turn of mind, render her more easily captivated by the military renown, the valour, and lofty bearing of the noble moor. She fell in love and marries secretly and elopes with Othello.

Summoned before the Solemn Council of the Senate

Her father, Brabantio did not accept their love and marriage. He accused the moor Othello, saying he had by spells and witchcraft seduced the affection of his daughter Desdemona to marry him. He was called upon before the solemn council of the senate. Othello's artless eloquence, recounting the whole story of wooing was quite impressive. The

Duke who sat as the chief judge believed Othello's honest words of a man in love, the only witchcraft which he had used, his ability to tell a grand tale to win a lady's ear.

Appearing in the court, Desdemona confirmed the statement of Othello.

"That I did love the 'moor', to live with him

My downright violence and storm of fortunes may trumpet to the world"

... "My heart's subdued even to the very quality of my lord..."I saw Othello's visage in his mind

And to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." (Act I scene iii)

She accepted a duty to her father for life and education; asked leave of him to profess a yet higher duty to her lord and husband, just as her mother had shown in preferring him (Brabantio) above her father. Then leaving Venice, Othello moved to Cypress on duty.

Jealousy

As a general, Othello promotes a young soldier Cassio to be the lieutenant who once served as a go-between in the courtship of Othello. This promotion gave great offence to Iago, a soldier who was aspiring for the promotion. He also had a suspicion Othello had a liking for Emilia who was to marry Iago. With these provocations Iago conceived a horrid scheme of revenge. Iago was artful and had studied human nature deeply. He sowed a poison seed of jealousy in the mind of Othello. He hinted to Othello, the young and handsome Cassio was having an affair with his beloved wife Desdemona. The horrible lie was flamed into raging fire by adding more fuel in the form of suggestions and cooked up details of misconduct on the part of Desdemona and Cassio. The sting of revenge was laid strongly in Othello's heart and it had made Othello a beast.

A Disastrous Night

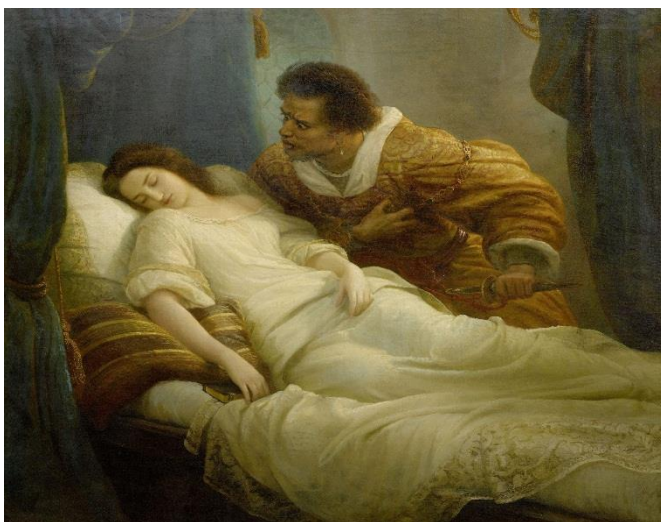
To mark the dispersion of the enemy's fleet on their arrival at Cyprus Othello declared a holiday. Everybody enjoyed themselves feasting and making merry. Wine flowed in abundance. Cassio was instructed to keep the soldiers from excesses in drinking. Unfortunately, Cassio was subjected by Iago to swallowing glass after glass poured by Iago. Cassio was found to be excessive in drinking. Cassio's tongue ran over in praise of

Desdemona. To make it worse, Cassio wounds one Montano, a worthy officer in a scuffle in the drunken mood. The result was that Cassio was punished by Othello, taking away his place of Lieutenant from him. Iago succeeded in his secret plan to trap Cassio in that disastrous night.

The Handkerchief - the First Gift to Desdemona

Desdemona innocently mediates for Cassio with her husband Othello. To widen the crack of suspicion, Iago makes use of the handkerchief which was the first gift given by Othello. The kerchief was lost by Desdemona once. Iago, picking it up, drops it in the path of Cassio. Cassio keeps it with him. Iago instigates Othello that the possession of the handkerchief by Cassio was the token of love given by Desdemona. Othello strongly believed the illicit intimacy after many subtle suggestions by Iago. Without any inquiry Othello passed sentence for the death of Cassio. As Lord Byron says, 'Anger is a short madness'. The untrue suspicion had driven Othello insane. He burst into anger, fell down and wept. On the recovery of his fits he decided to kill the innocent Desdemona. He stormed into the chamber of Desdemona and openly accused Desdemona about the infidelity, hurling the word 'cuckold', and he left. The innocent Desdemona was stupefied with wonder at her husband's untrue suspicion of her. To prove her exemplary innocence she asked the meaning of the word 'cuckold' from her maid Emilia. Before her reply, she affirmed to herself that there was no such disloyal wife on this world. With the fatigue of the heavily troubled spirit Desdemona fell into slumber.

Othello - an Uxoricide



Othello entered the bed chamber, full of the black purpose to put his lady to death. He thought he would not shed her blood, nor scar that white skin of hers, whiter than Alabaster. He desired to suck the honey from the fairest flower without plucking. While Desdemona was fast asleep, he kissed her for the last time (as he said) and that kiss was so sweet. He kissed again and

wept with cruel tears. Desdemona was awakened and saw him gnaw his under lip, roll his eyes, and she knew he was always dangerous when he looked so. Covering her up in the bed clothes Othello stifles the guiltless Desdemona till she dies. Othello becomes an uxoricide (a man who murders his wife).

Realized His Misjudgment

At that instant of time, when Cassio was wounded and bleeding. Iago had sent a fellow to kill Cassio. Othello discovered the truth from a letter from the pocket of Iago. This discovery was as a horrible blow to Othello, who now realized that his wife was ever faithful to him. With extreme anguish, Othello, falling upon his sword, throwing himself upon the body of his dear fatally injured lady, died with a heavy heart.

Similarities between Kannagi and Desdemona

Kannagi and Desdemona both are dutiful, dedicated, faithful, and domesticated wives. They lived and died for their husbands/at the hand of their husbands respectively.

‘Duped’ of Kannagi-’ and the handkerchief of Othello are the major instruments for the deaths of the protagonists.



The ‘anklet’ of Kannagi causes the deaths of Kovalan, the king Pandian Nedunchezhiyan and his queen Koperundevi. The powerful king, Pandian Nedunchezhiyan, was duped by the words of a culprit. He passes the death sentence upon Kovalan without proper enquiry.

Similarly, the handkerchief given to Desdemona as the first gift by Othello found at the hand of Cassio deepens the crack of suspicion in Othello and causes the death of Desdemona without proper enquiry and Othello’s death as a consequence. The valiant warrior Othello was simply duped by the words of the villain Iago. Without finding fault with the



king and the gullible Othello, we have to accept that the evil in the goldsmith and in Iago caused the tragic deaths of all four characters.

Dissimilarities

Kannagi becomes an epic heroine. Desdemona stands for romantic love and for loyalty to her husband and reminds as a pathetic house wife - a gentle, innocent woman without blemish created by Shakespeare.

Desdemona's love marriage differs from Kannagi's arranged marriage. But both of their married lives ended in failure, extremely pathetic. But one cannot forget they did have a short time of married bliss.

In her family life Kannagi is portrayed as a submissive house wife. After the death of her husband Kovalan she becomes a vengeful woman with a terrible anger.

The fury and the vengeful anger of Kannagi are never found in Desdemona. She remains devoted and dutiful, passive and submissive house wife until she breaths her last. Anger and vengeance were never felt by the fair Desdemona. She dies without any resistance as a helpless and hapless woman. She forgives her husband who turned to be a wife-killer and blames only her fate. She bids farewell with the words,

“Nobody, myself, farewell commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell” (V.ii.133-134). Shakespeare has depicted Desdemona as a self-effacing, and faithful wife.

Paradoxical

Against the acceptance of her father Brabantio who had brought her up with good education and the fullest freedom. (...free and bounteous her mind') Desdemona '*so opposed to marriage that she shunned the wealthy curled darlings of Venice*' and having chosen her husband 'the moor-Othello. We find her independence and freedom to take a bold decision and the sense of duty in her words:

'My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty,

To you I'm bound for life and education
 My life and education both do learn me
 How to respect you,
 You are lord of all my duty
 I am hither to your daughter
 But here is my husband
 And so much duty as my mother show'd
 To you, preferring you before her father
 So much I challenge that I may profess
 Due to the Moor my lord' (Act.1.iii.184-185)
 ...'that I did love the Moor, to live with him
 My downright violence and storm of fortune,
 May trumpet to the world...' (Act.1.iii.247-249)
 ...'my hearts subdued even to the very quality of my lord.
 I saw Othello's visage in his mind
 And to his honors and his valiant parts
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate? (Act.1.iii.278-282)
 So that,' dear lords,
 If I be left behind,
 A moth of peace, and he go to the war
 The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support by
 His dear absence, Let me go with him'.

The same strong lady at times turns into a submissive character, with supple knees, most notably in her willingness to credit blame to herself for her own murder. The play then depicts Desdemona contradictorily as a self-effacing, faithful wife, as well as a bold, independent personality. This contradiction may be intentional, meant to portray the way Desdemona herself feels after defending her choice of marriage to her father. (Act, 1.iii.)

A. C. Bradley's⁽¹⁾ Comment

"The sexual jealousy brings a sense of shame and humiliation. Othello becomes insane and he is driven to murder his own beloved wife. Such jealousy as Othello's

comments on human nature turning in to chaos....the blow to Desdemona and the bed-chamber scene where she is treated as the inmate of a brothel, a scene far more painful than the murder scene, is another cause of the special effect of tragedy (Othello)” A. C. Bradley⁽¹⁾ (London: Macmillan and .co.1919)

Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech, no, not even in silent feeling. The suffering of innocent Desdemona is an intolerable spectacle. Her helplessness makes the sight of her suffering far more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute.

...We watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress, we are never wholly uninfluenced by the feeling that Othello is a man contending with another man; but Desdemona’s suffering like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being it adores. Othello strikes Desdemona, (Act.iv.i.251) where he affects to treat her as an inmate of a house of ill-fame. (iv.ii.)

‘We find **‘madness of revenge’** in Othello’s mind.

We find **‘indignation for revenge’** is found with Kannagi when she bursts into the court of Pandia king holding an anklet in her hand. With the fury of Kannagi - ‘a righteous anger’, Kannagi tore off her left breast and flung it against a wall. She burnt the great city - Madurai where her husband was killed without any guilt. We witness an angry, fierce and vengeful woman who becomes destructive.

The same Kannagi was portrayed earlier so submissive and passive even though her husband deserts her and was having an extra-marital life with Madhavi – a mistress. Being a grass-widow, Kannagi’s life was very miserable. Without any grudge, she gave away all her jewells and her happiness for the happiness of her estranged husband. She was infinitely patient, sweet and loving. She always spoke kindly to her husband, never once nagging or contradicting him even in the depth of her loneliness and despair. When her husband comes back as a prodigal son, Kannagi readily accepts him, forgiving and forgetting all past misbehavior. She accompanies her husband to Madurai to start anew life and a trade. The people in that period accepted the extra-marital life of their husbands. Kannagi was one

among the people to adopt the selfless service to her husband. So, she was called as 'Karpukku Arasi' (the queen of chastity)

Conclusion

A comparison of Desdemona and Kannagi may include the following aspects.

*Desdemona's **romantic love** which was based on many factors, was not merely based on the features of a man. Her secret love and marriage against the will of her father, a powerful Duke - Brabantio of Venice, having rejected several suitors of her own clime and complexion in Venice in a romantic union. It is highly romantic.

Prof. Dowden has observed that, "In the love of each there was a romantic element and the romance is not the highest form of the service which imagination renders to love. For mere romance disguises certain facts, or sees them as it were through a luminous mist"

***An exemplary character of Innocence** – Desdemona: She doesn't know the meaning of the word 'cuckold' used by her husband Othello in his fury. She asks Emilia, her maid, "That there be a woman do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?" "I don't believe such a woman even exists"

***The fierce sense of revenge** - the righteous anger' found in Kannagi is not found in Desdemona.

*Forgiveness

When Emilia asks her who the offender was for her suffering, the gentle Desdemona replies, "Nobody, 'myself, farewell/commend me to my kind lord farewell," (Act V.scene.ii.133-134).

Prof. Bradley⁽¹⁾ speaks of Desdemona's choice of Othello as rising "too far above our common level, and he adds, 'There is perhaps certain excuse for our failure to rise to Shakespeare's meaning, and to realize how extraordinary and splendid a thing it was in a gentle Venetian girl to love Othello, and assail fortune with such a downright violence and storm as is expected only in a hero."

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