

Three Women Voices: A Feminist Reading of Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*

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Abstract

The postmodern trend of de-canonicalization has argued in favour of re-looking at works that comprise major literary canons for such works usually perpetuate, or rather naturalize the norms, ideologies and belief systems of the dominant class. Re-assessing the characters, the story, the narrative structure, and the contextual setup of the canonical work gives space to destabilize the existing power structure. It is then no surprise that Shakespeare's works too, have seen a plethora of retellings and re-imaginings, most of which re-look at the classic plays from the perspectives of the secondary characters. Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* is one such attempt that voices Vogel's disregard for what was considered 'proper' for a woman of Shakespeare's times. Desdemona's independence of spirit, resolve and general temperament contrasts sharply with her passive and silenced Shakespearean counterpart. This paper looks at how Vogel's play upends the gender boundaries and roles of the original through the characters of the passionate and impulsive Desdemona, the vacillating Emilia and the "new woman" Bianca, apart from examining their shifting loyalties and associations. The paper shows how by creating characters that defy the conventional categorizations of virgin and whore, by depicting the female body as the site of agency, and by transmuting Iago's fictionalized account of Desdemona into reality, the play disrupts and challenges patriarchal ideologies and accords agency to the women characters to choose and speak for themselves. At the same time, the paper also shows how genuine affinity and feelings of sisterhood or female autonomy are not achievable in the male-dominated world that the characters inhabit and herein lies the irony of the woman condition in the play. The paper finally, will also analyze the absence of the male characters on-stage who can nonetheless pose a threat to female autonomy.

Keywords: de-canonicalization, feminism, female identity, sisterhood, agency

William Shakespeare may have written his final words over four centuries ago but his works continue to resonate with readers, critics and academics alike. But it would be a gross error to say that Shakespeare's plays are being seen today in the same way they were viewed about four hundred years ago. The author of *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt said: "He [Shakespeare] was a great recycler of stories, and there's no reason why his stories shouldn't be recycled." (134) It is then no surprise that the literary world has seen a plethora of Shakespearean retellings. Furthermore, in the wake of postmodernism, there has been seen a tendency towards de-canonicalization. In other words, literary canons, i.e. works by such authors that "by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars and teachers, have come to be widely recognized as major" (Abrams 38) are increasingly

being seen as having resulted from the ideologies, political beliefs and value systems of a designated class that usually consists of European, white men. Consequently, such works eventually end up propagating patriarchal and imperialistic tendencies, racism etc. With the very concept of a literary Canon under the radar, it is no surprise that Shakespeare's canon has come to be seen as a manifestation of the existing power structures giving rise to the need to re-look at Shakespearean drama in modern context and interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism and patriarchy thereby destabilizing the existing power structures.

Paula Vogel, an American playwright, who has secured various fellowships and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, has often been described as a feminist writer. A three-actor play, Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* is a feminist re-imagining of the classical Shakespearean play *Othello* staged as a series of blackout scenes. The entire play is situated on a single day and in the final scene, we find Emilia brushing Desdemona's hair before she goes to her bedroom, obviously alluding directly to the readers' knowledge of Othello's abominable deed and the tragic fate of Desdemona. In fact, the play relies heavily on our familiarity with Shakespeare's *Othello* for such knowledge makes the chosen play more poignant and significant. In *Othello*, the female characters are introduced to the readers by their male counterparts so that we approach their characters with certain pre-conceived notions. Vogel, conversely, allows the female characters to introduce themselves. The play comes to a close slightly before the final, fateful scene but the readers who are already familiar with the classical antecedent know exactly what to expect.

In her delightfully modern tale, Vogel presents a re-oriented narrative which shifts the readers' focus from the one who is conventionally believed to be the tragic hero of the play (*Othello*) to the real tragic victim, Desdemona. The female world is brought to light through the characters of the passionate and impulsive Desdemona, the vacillating Emilia and the "new woman" Bianca. Desdemona both enjoys her conventional role while excoriating it (as is seen in her trying to lead a double life where she can both maintain the status of a Lady and enjoy the liberty that prostitution brings with it); Emilia seems to have accepted the restrictions of the society she lives in but tries to hold her own within its confines (as is seen in her inertia in the face of the sexual advances of her husband); and Bianca tries to build a space for the likes of herself in a world that is entirely alien (in that she hopes to marry Cassio and thus rise above her station in life). Nevertheless, all three women are active subjects in their own stead. Interestingly, they are also the only characters to appear on stage while the male characters, though often alluded to, remain off stage. What is thereby revealed to us, are the hidden lives of Desdemona and the other women in the play, giving a completely new paradigm to the tragedy.

The very first scene finds Desdemona frantically rummaging through things in the palace laundry room for the fateful handkerchief, a symbol of Othello and Desdemona's conjugal bond. That Vogel's Desdemona refers to the handkerchief as "the crappy little snot rag," (Vogel 237) is rather telling since it devalues the significance that is given to it by Shakespeare. "The possession of the handkerchief can be seen as a metaphor for the view of women as objects." (Veldhuijzen 4). The setting is worth noting: a laundry room is an area of the home which is traditionally related to the role of a woman but we find the characters readily defying their feminine roles in this very space with conversations centred on gender, identity and power. These conversations express how each of the women characters aches for

opportunities and choices apart from providing a very incisive criticism of the patriarchal system. Emilia, for instance, remarks that she would “like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates” (Vogel 240). Desdemona, similarly, says that “women are clad in purdah. We decent, respectable matrons from the cradle to the altar to the shroud … bridled with linen, blinded with lace … These very walls are purdah” (Vogel 242). Such comments show how the patriarchal system keeps tabs on women and dwarfs their growth as an individual.

Traditional criticism has seen Desdemona as a victim and as a chaste and pure woman who was unjustly murdered owing to certain misunderstandings. Despite her tragic fate, the tragedy is still known to be that of Othello, the eponymous character. For following the dictates of her heart, she is disowned by Brabantio; for following her sense of justice, she is brutally killed by her own husband whom she loves dearly. Her agency as a character was shackled in the original due to her willing acceptance of all the qualities that were considered typical to a woman. Vogel, conversely, chooses to portray her heroine as a bored aristocrat who acts as a proxy for Bianca, a prostitute, once every week so as to satiate her promiscuous urges. As Flaherty notes, “Relying on her audience’s expected familiarity with the plot and characters of Othello, Vogel alters key aspects of the text to call attention to the limitations and pressures that define the lives of women, not only in early modern literature and culture, but also in her own time.” (35)

Vogel brings Othello’s worst nightmare to life in the form of her conception of Desdemona. Disappointed with her married life, she seeks sexual pleasure outside her marriage. She sneaks out in the dead of the night experiencing the world through an entirely different perspective. Raucous and foul-mouthed, she is frequently unfaithful to Othello and is often titillated with phallic symbolism. Desdemona, in this play, exhibits a desire for sex and an obvious admiration of the male form. Like Pinter’s heroine in *The Homecoming*, Ruth, Desdemona attempts to liberate herself from the narrow confines of her world through prostitution. In fact, it becomes for her a means for resistance because in the circumstance that she is in, the only way for her to rebel is through her body:

They spill their seed into me, Emilia-seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind-oh, how I travel! (Vogel 242-3)

Ironically, Desdemona has slept with the entire encampment of Othello except Cassio, the man with whom her husband is led to believe she is betraying him, in a rather telling allusion to its classical antecedent. Nonetheless, Desdemona’s promiscuous way of life reverses the objectification that Shakespeare’s Desdemona was subjected to. At the same time, while men can be the subject of discussions and observations for the three characters, they can never be the object of their control, and herein lies the irony of the feminist stance adopted by Vogel.

Initially, Desdemona’s choice of a husband, who represents the ‘Other’ in the Venetian society, was an attempt on her part to escape all that the Venetian society stood for. This is what her thoughts were before marrying him: “If I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind-I can escape and see other worlds.” (Vogel 242) Very succinctly does Desdemona conclude about her experiences post-

marriage that “under that exotic facade was a porcelain Venetian.” (Vogel 242) Othello, who is able to enthrall everyone with his tales of bravery, appeals to Desdemona simply because he is shrouded in a cloak of the exotic and the arcane. However, as the sense of mystery fades, so do her feelings for Othello. She soon realizes that he is, in his heart of hearts, narrow minded and bigoted, no different from the men of her own country.

Emilia, another important character, stuck in a wretched marriage with Iago, emerges as a rather complex character. Iago is sexually impotent, and yet Emilia lives with him under the hope that she would one day become his wealthy widow. Bianca represents the “new woman” of literary works, because being a prostitute, she has the power to hold her own in a patriarchal world but she too, is covetous of becoming a wife and bearing children. However, Desdemona chooses to focus on the former and is enamoured with all that Bianca stands for.

The play also looks critically at the two extremes of angel and whore into which women are neatly categorized in *Othello*, representing either supreme virtue or supreme vice, either absolute harmlessness or absolute danger, either purity or depravity. Such a dichotomy is but different sides of the same coin in the hands of a society with a strong patriarchal bias where men experience a strong anxiety with regards female sexuality. But the women characters in this play, by defying any such rigid categorization put themselves forth as complex and wholesome human beings who would not be held down by such beliefs. The play often presents debates as to which roles would a woman find satisfactory and yet offers no conclusion about the same. This serves to show how there cannot ever be a socially defined role that every woman could be put into.

Radical feminists treated women as a “collective subject” (Nayar 101). Sisterhood became for them the mantra for a better tomorrow where all women were united in their struggle against patriarchal oppression. However, latter day feminists challenged this view because it overlooked many individual differences. Influenced by such thinkers as Julia Kristeva, many postmodern feminist thinkers have argued that women cannot be seen as a homogeneous category. This is because such an approach denies the diversity of women’s experiences. Judith Butler, for example, called the very category of womanhood as a “false ontology” keeping in mind the differences that exist between women owing to class, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, geography etc, each of which become analytical categories within feminist thinking (Nayar 97). Vogel’s play demonstrates the result of such a shift in thinking; it offers a critical standpoint on the notion of womanhood, one which focuses on differences in experiences rather than similarities. This is emphasized through differences in class, dialect and desires. Emilia, being a lady’s maid remembers how: “When m’lady was a toddling about the palace, and all of us servants would be follerin’ after, stooping to pick up all the pretty toys you’d be scatterin’” (Vogel 237). Bianca speaks in a broad cockney accent which immediately distinguishes her from the other two characters. Subsequently, we see how each of these women want something different: Desdemona wants to be on her own in the world, Bianca, wants to be a wife like Desdemona and Emilia, and bear children, while Emilia covets Desdemona’s status in life. Trapped in a patriarchal and classist set-up, the women in the play find it difficult to sustain their friendships and there is an absence of genuine sisterhood between them. Many a times in the play we find them turning on one another at the slightest opportunity. In fact, had the three women in the play shared feelings of affinity and friendship, the tragedy could have easily been averted (had

Emilia revealed to Desdemona about Othello's murderous intent or had Bianca chosen to trust her side of the story).

However, Vogel, very carefully steers clear of any reductive polemics of blame and culpability, and instead portrays the challenges to achieving genuine solidarity and sisterhood as well as individual autonomy. What unites Vogel's creation with the original is that both the dramatists assign the same fate to Desdemona. But unlike Shakespeare, who chose to focus on Othello's military exploits and the sentimentality of Othello's rage at his wife's supposed infidelity, Vogel focuses on the world of the women exposing the horrors that bubble beneath the surface of an apparently happy married life. That Desdemona, despite a change in her nature still meets the same end as her antecedent should not be seen as the move of a pessimist or a determinist. Desdemona's chastity and guiltlessness is crucial to the Shakespearean tragedy for it is the source of Othello's feelings of remorse. And while this play by portraying Desdemona as a licentious woman, challenges Desdemona's status as a "pure" woman, it is true to *Othello* in that Othello will kill Desdemona for that one crime she has not committed (sleeping with Cassio). The very fact that such an alteration in Desdemona's status cannot change her fate effectively casts a critical eye on subjects such as female autonomy and subjectivity which holds especially true in the light of the post-feminist view of the subject. Subjectivity in the post-feminist view is "transient, contingent and slippery" (Nayar 102) and thus, the fact that a character is ineffectual in his attempt to establish his own subjectivity is a comment on the society which thwarts such an attempt. Desdemona makes three such attempts: the first is her marriage to the seemingly exotic Othello, who eventually proves to be as parochial as the Venetian citizenry; the second is her adoption of prostitution as the means of rebelling against the intolerant society; and the third is to escape Othello's rage by planning to flee with Ludovico. All three attempts however prove abortive and Desdemona meets the same fatal end. Moreover, we, as readers, are in a way placed in Othello's shoes after being given what Shakespeare referred to as an "ocular proof" of Desdemona's promiscuous behaviour which considers our own complicity in the heinous crime against Desdemona.

As has been mentioned before, the male characters do not appear on stage throughout the course of the play but their presence looms large nonetheless. In the very first scene, as Desdemona is looking for the handkerchief, she throws a men's underwear over her shoulder indicating how even in that typically feminine setting, the male presence is unmissable. Furthermore, at many critical junctures in the play, the women themselves become stand-ins for the beliefs of the patriarchal society rather than supporting each other. For instance, Emilia is quick to judge Bianca for her lowly profession and articulates her disapproval rather clearly. Bianca, too, in believing that Desdemona has had an affair with Cassio, whom Bianca loves, articulates Othello's own fears about Desdemona's infidelity. Curiously, all disagreements between the women characters stem from their relationship with the male characters in the play or from definitions of propriety and order that are products of an androcentric society. Thus, Vogel's play does not present an idealistic world where characters like Desdemona can triumph and have nothing to fear. Autonomy and empowerment are but far-fetched dreams. Her feminist stance can best be understood by the following statement in which she defines her craft: "It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life".

(Holmberg) Thus, while Desdemona may not have been rescued, Vogel sets the stage for the likes of her to be rescued in the future.

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