



## ***Othello* Ongoing: Feminist and Postcolonial Adaptations**

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### **Abstract**

As long as Shakespeare's great plays are there, there have been varied and ongoing adaptations of his works. This long history of appropriation of the Bard's works reflects different cultures and movements throughout time. This research aims to study two adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* in the twentieth century, trying to illustrate how Shakespeare's *Othello* has been adapted to suit the different audiences and their cultures in comparison to the original work. Both of *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* by Paula Vogel and *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears are considered postmodern and feminist adaptations that tackle the issues of gender, class and race from another perspective. This research aims at studying, analyzing and comparing the two adaptations with the original work by Shakespeare focusing on the different cultures, audiences and reception of the works. It also sheds the light on postcolonial and feminist perspectives in the adapted works in comparison to the original *Othello*. This comparative study concludes that these two adaptations are powerful enough not only to change the audience perception of the original work but also to transform their emotional response.

**Key words:** Appropriation; Drama; Feminist perspective; *Othello*'s adaptations; Postcolonial

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Shakespeare was one of the most influential adapters who used to adapt existing works and make them new. Though Shakespeare himself was a borrower, copying plots, characters and images, borrowing was a common practice among dramatists in the Renaissance; it was not an illegal act. He was a master in imitating classical works and re-visioning them. In fact, Shakespeare's works have been developed to suit the new cultures and to express different viewpoints. His original works have been adapted; his language has been changed and replaced; and sometimes the adaptation is very close to his language. Each new form expresses a new point of view to represent a feminist, materialist, postcolonial, or even a queer perspective.

### **LITERARY ANALYSIS/ POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES**

The theory of theatrical adaptation can be applied to Shakespeare's adaptations. According to Derrida (1988) "each time something returns, it will be as different as possible" (p.157). Critics think that Shakespeare's reworked plays are "alterations" or "imitations" rather than adaptations while contemporary critics like Michel Garnean called them "tradaptations" which implies a change from one language to another; translation.

This transformation invents characters and gives them new roles, at the same time it may marginalize the role of some major characters or give minor characters a dominant role. Ruby Cohn in her book *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* terms the word "offshoots" showing that these works are not necessarily improved in comparison to the original and there is no necessary relation of value between them. They are neither inferior nor better than the original work; each work has its own value.

Cohn differentiates between “adaptations” and “transformation”. While “adaptations” include cutting some scenes and speeches off, (a change) in language and different length of the scenes, “transformation” is a way of “invention”; they are written through new events and have different ends. Some “transformations” have not used any techniques of cutting off to the original work by Shakespeare. Besides, characters are introduced through new events. Such reproductions of the works create infinite possibilities to rewrite the original works by introducing them in new events and new contexts.

Another way to label Shakespeare’s works by Cohn is “appropriation” which is “a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to the contemporary sensibilities steeped in a political understanding of culture” (Qtd in Fischlin & Fortier, 2000, p.3). “Appropriation” can be done without changing the original itself. “Adaptation” comes from a Latin word which means to fit to new context. In other words, “recontextualization” that makes the original play stay in a non-stop process.

One of the most important factors that may affect the new forms of adaptations is culture. For Ronald Barthes “all cultural production, is an interweaving of already existing cultural material” (Ibid., p.4). He believes that “any text is an intertext, other texts are there present in it... the texts of the previous and the surrounding culture” (Ibid.). According to this, intertextuality indicates that all texts are reproduction: Everything we think or do, relies upon ideas, words and cultural norms that pre-exist. For Derrida, it is an inevitable condition of the texts in history. According to the reader-response theory, the meaning of texts from the past to the present changes according to the different conditions. According to Barthes, the death of the author widens the reader’s role and therefore it also gives adapters more freedom to read and rewrite an existing work.

Both of the cultural and political concerns are related to each other. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier suggest that adaptations are attempts to re-contextualize Shakespeare politically. Some of the adapters of Shakespeare’s works have done that to make use of his authority so they add value to their own works. Based on the death of author, Shakespeare as a major author whose works have been adapted and translated; rereading his works becomes essential to interpret them from other viewpoints.

Shakespeare’s English national identity was reflected in his works. His texts are evidence of empowerment of the ruling class who was always superior to the subordinate classes. He was a symbol of the English culture and its values. Other political positions create a new cultural space of the problems of marginalized groups to rewrite his works and to give value to the other culture or to give voice to the marginalized group. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s works as a representative of the

British imperial culture have been adapted to the colonial and neocolonial contexts by some writers.

Virginia Vaughan in *Othello: A Contextual History* studies contemporary texts by highlighting the way they have dealt with *Othello*. Her book examines how these texts deal with the conflict between the Turks and Venetians and the way Africans and Moors are represented. The book also studies the history of *Othello* in Europe and the United States from 1660 to 1980s. *Othello* was rewritten by Vogel as *Desdemona* from a new viewpoint that expresses gender politics. Unlike *Othello*, Vogel’s work rejects the role of the faithful wife or portraying her as a sympathetic victim under patriarchal society. Women in her version are not passive, weak characters; on the contrary, they are strong and free, able to control the whole action of the play.

*Othello* is one of the most frequently adapted works by Shakespeare because of its significance and the critics’ interest in it. A. C. Bradley (1905) in his book *Shakespearean Tragedy*, states that “Of all Shakespeare’s tragedies *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and terrible” (p.140). Dr. Johnson confessed that he could not bear to read or see the last act performed. In 1930, G. Wilson Knight declared that *Othello* affects us because of its “outstanding differences.” These views, in addition to many others give the play its value and continuity.

Kolin (2002) in his essay “Blackness Made Visible: A Survey of *Othello* in Criticism, on Stage, and on Screen” suggests that: “No other Shakespearean play seems to have invoked such pained and/or recriminatory audience/reader response as has *Othello* (Kolin, p.1). On the other hand, Edward Pechter, as one of *Othello*’s readers, thinks that *Othello*’s critics can always find evidence in the play itself to support any interpretation they suggest to prove its validity.

Based on Cohn definitions of the rewritings of Shakespeare’s work, I think that *Desdemona: A play About a Handkerchief* and *Harlem Duet* are rather “adaptations” or “appropriations.” In fact both plays do not change the action in the original play, but they rather try to give voice to the minor characters in Shakespeare’s work to show the same story from another totally different perspective through female characters. In fact, the two plays are appropriations to new postcolonial contexts, including North American and Canadian cultures at different periods of time than that of the original play.

For feminist writers, like Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter, “writing back” is a very essential part in women resistance of the patriarchal community. This community has its rules for women to let them know what they can or cannot do. Feminists find it unavoidable to resist oppression and injustice. They believe that ‘woman’ is constructed by her patriarchal community; Simone de Beauvoir thinks that a woman is not born a woman; she becomes so through the representations of women in Patriarchal writing as French feminists believe. In

response to this, French feminists led by Helene Cixous believe that women should write back what they call *écriture féminine* and this is what both Vogel and Sears have done. Based on this, *Othello* for feminists is a work that represents women from a Patriarchal view point, and works like *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and *Harlem Duet* are writings back to represent the women in Shakespeare from a feminist perspective.

*Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* by Paula Vogel was first published in 1994. Paula Vogel was an American lesbian Playwright who was born in 1951. She writes from a deep political sense and with different religious background. In her work, the whole cast is female characters; Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca who reveal their counter plot in the backroom of the palace while *Othello* is off stage. This suggests that Shakespeare's women are not innocent victims of masculine desires; they all take part in each other's destiny. Vogel's *Desdemona* ignores male's role and focuses on the marginalized group of the society of women. In fact, Many found the play as a "rollicking, bawdy, postmodern, feminist reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* with no male characters" (Peterson & Bennet, 1997, p.341). Tish Dace (1994) says that Desdemona "provides us with everything which Shakespeare denies us: full portraits of the three women... high spirits which do not willingly suffer their men's foolishness, no easy acquiescence to being victimized, even a lusty frank sexuality" (p.253). The play, in general, reflects female solidarity.

*Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* is one of the stunning feminist rewritings of *Othello* by the American feminist Paula Vogel. In fact, Vogel is famous for her shocking way of introducing violence, families, sex-trade, pornography, and other unconventional topics. Her writings are affected by different factors in her life like her mixed religious backgrounds and being lesbian and a feminist. Sarvan (1996) thinks that Vogel was able to express "not just how women are entrapped and oppressed, but the possibilities that figures like Desdemona or the oldest professionals have to contest, subvert and redefine the roles they have been assigned" (p.xi). Vogel states that she is against categorizing, and therefore she does not write for all women and lesbians.

*Desdemona*, which was first performed in 1987, is considered as a revision of *Othello*, but it does not take place on stage as the original work does; it is set in the back room where Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca tell the story from their own viewpoints as women characters. Savran (1996) suggests that Vogel did not present women as the victims portrayed in the original work, but rather she suggests that they are the "active makers and unmakers-of each others' destinies" (p.x).

*Othello*'s main figures are all males, while females are subdued and silenced. In response to this, Vogel deconstructs *Othello* by focusing only on women in her play. The play's cast has only three women; Desdemona,

Bianca and Emilia. Desdemona and Bianca have a homoerotic relationship that reflects female solidarity according to feminists. Emilia does not like her husband and she is devoted to Desdemona. Bianca is a hooker who feels her need for a female companion; she finds herself torn between her work in sex trade, which makes her feel free to act, and having a family.

Unlike *Othello*, *Desdemona* does not deal with the race issue, but rather focuses on female sexuality and class; though Emilia and Bianca are servants, they speak with their mistress as friends without preciosity, and they have long discussions. They seem to be rather friends than maid- mistress relation. Vogel portrays the eagerness of Desdemona to meet Bianca through waiting her all the time, which makes her disappointed to find out that it is *Othello* who knocks the door not Bianca. Focusing on female sexuality emphasizes that women's bodies are their own and they are the only things which they have control over. Women liberation and freedom are essential rules for feminists.

Though Vogel and Shakespeare have different ways of representing the play, both works have the same end regarding Desdemona. Vogel's play stops when Desdemona goes to bed, but it suggests that she knows that *Othello* is going to kill her. Like most works in the twentieth century, it is an open-ended play; it suggests an end but it leaves it to the audience's imagination to guess what may happen unlike the end of the original play. I think that at this point, the audience would stop thinking about Vogel's works, and they would start thinking of the story in the original work, trying to find the connection between the two works. Most of what the audience would think about at the end of Vogel's play will be driven from the original work of Shakespeare.

Emilia warns Desdemona about her relationship with Bianca and what may happen if *Othello* discovers that affair. She threatens Desdemona that *Othello* will cut her throat if he finds out the truth but Desdemona calms her down and tells her that nothing will happen. Emilia says "your husband will find out and when he does! (Makes the noise and gesture of throat cutting)" (Fischlin & Fortier, 2000, p.239). On the contrary to the original *Othello*, Desdemona does not like her husband and she acts in a deceiving manner.

Women in *Desdemona* are untraditional like they appear in *Othello*. They do not like their husbands and they love each other. Emilia confesses to Desdemona that she despises her husband and wishes that he died; every night; she says "I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow!" (Ibid., p.240) On the other hand, Emilia finds her greatest joy in staying close to Desdemona, and Desdemona feels happy to see Bianca more than to see her husband.

Unlike Shakespeare's play in which the handkerchief that *Othello* gives to Desdemona is valuable, in Vogel's work Desdemona mocks *Othello* for giving her a

handkerchief. She describes it saying: "The only gift he's given me was a meager handkerchief with piddling strawberries stitched on it" (Ibid., p.224). She also mocks the way he gets mad because she loses it. In fact, Desdemona is a playful woman who receives letters from old lovers. She regrets that she did not marry Ambassador Ludovico and sees him worthier to marry a lady of good blood, as she describes herself. For her honesty has nothing to do with adultery and she may leave Othello anytime.

I think that Vogel intends to represent only female characters in her play. In fact, Shakespeare's *Othello* represented male and female characters (in *Othello*, but) in the theatrical performance, all actors were men; even female characters were represented by men disguised as women. This was a tradition at that time. In response to this, I think that Vogel intends to rewrite the play and to deconstruct that hierarchy not only by giving voice to the marginalized women and de-centering men, but also by eliminating men from the stage and giving voice only to her women characters. In her play, men are not marginalized, they are not there.

(In her play,) Vogel portrays a new Desdemona, who has many sexual affairs even as a homosexual with Bianca. Vogel, as a feminist, expresses her views toward women sexual liberation and self-discovery. According to feminists, this is not cheating, and Desdemona is not a chaste woman and therefore Othello's jealousy is based on facts not illusions as in the original play. I think that in this way the audience would not blame Othello the same way they do in the original work, for killing an unfaithful wife, who is careless and who does not have any kind of feeling guilt. At the same time, in the original play Desdemona is a sympathetic weak character, who does not resist Othello when he kills her; Unlike *Othello*, I find that Vogel's adaptation is a portrayal of a strong woman, with whom the audience would have less sympathy when they imagine her death. As readers, we may have thoughts that Vogel's Desdemona may not accept death peacefully; she would resist Othello to the end and would try to save her life.

Since the adaptations could change the audience emotional response, we can see that William Shakespeare employed Aristotle's formula to form the tragic hero, Othello, who deserves to be punished for killing his wife. Aristotle points out a set of conditions that he believes all tragic heroes should fulfill. In *Aristotle's Poetics* (1957), "the hero must be good but not perfect, he must be like us in order to gain our sympathy and release our tragic feeling" (p.481). This hero has a higher social status; however, he has the characteristics of other humans; he makes a mistake or a "flaw" which causes his fall "hamartia". Later, he realizes his mistake, a "recognition" which leads to the complete destruction of the hero where death or emotional destruction takes place. As a result, his downfall brings us to purgation of emotions which

is called in Aristotle's definition of tragedy "catharsis". Consequently, this brings to the main aim of tragedy which is arousing pity and fear in the audience.

Othello's weeping and lamenting is not a satisfying end in Aristotle's tragedy. A perfect Aristotelian tragedy contains *katharsis*, or a purgation that makes the audience feel elated and justified. In *Othello*, where the main characters end up dead, it is not expected that the spectators will feel happy about the ending of the play, however, they feel a kind of justification and satisfaction in the punishment. The concept means cleansing, "medical purgation", or "religious purification". Moreover, these interpretations assume that the fear and pity aroused by tragedy are purged throughout the play, resulting in the state of *katharsis*.

Aristotle states in *The Poetics* (1957), "The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation" (p.40). Therefore, for the spectator to feel the satisfaction of a good *katharsis*, the drama has to arouse feelings of pity and fear in the audience and then extinguish those feelings through a satisfying ending. In *Othello*, Shakespeare certainly moves the audience to feel pity for Othello, for Desdemona, and Cassio, and experience their worst fears when Othello kills his innocent wife out of jealousy and anger. Once more the audience pities Othello when he recognizes later that his wife is innocent and stabs himself in remorse. However, after reading Vogel's play the audience response to the original play is doubly affected by the death of Othello since his wife is no more the weak and the faithful woman. In contrary, she is the seductive woman who deserves to be punished. Therefore, the spectator would sympathize more with Othello who could be himself the victim of a cheating wife.

I find this work as a reconstruction of the story of Othello from the viewpoint of three women who are passive in Shakespeare's work. It is a great way of showing us the story from an angle that would never come to our minds if Vogel did not write this work. What we see in *Othello* is no longer real; it is just another viewpoint that we know through Othello, Iago and the other prominent characters who tell their story. What I see more exciting when I read Vogel's work is the end, where Desdemona tells Emilia that she will sleep because she thinks that Othello would not kill a sleeping woman. In this way, Desdemona is more deceiving and she knows that Othello is a good man who does not kill a sleeping woman.

What I find interesting when I read Vogel's Desdemona is the feeling that it is a completion of the original work; it is a kind of filling in the gaps without any change in the original work's plot. Some of the incidents that a reader finds difficult to understand in Shakespeare's work are explained in a convincing way. For example, one cannot conceive Othello's jealousy toward a faithful wife like Desdemona until Vogel traces the missing part of the story

which can be explained by showing that Desdemona is an unfaithful, playful, deceiving woman. By reading Vogel's play, I feel that my grief and sorrow for Desdemona's murder takes another form and it makes me think of other things I have never thought about before. This reveals what is unfamiliar and astonishing in the way Vogel rewrites and reconstructs previous written works that readers used to take their meanings for granted. In fact, re-visioning and rewriting are part of Vogel's identity as a feminist.

Vogel's Desdemona is totally different from Shakespeare's. The original character is a good, faithful and obedient woman; her role in the play is always related to men's authority as a daughter or as a wife. She plays her domestic expected role as a female. On the other hand, I think that the new Desdemona is similar to the New Woman in feminism; it is a term used by the British-American writer Henry James to refer to women who have control over their own lives. She is not devoted to her domestic life, she does not like her husband, she is not a faithful wife and her role is not related to any man. I suggest that Vogel's Desdemona represents the New Woman.

Another astonishing Feminist adaptation of *Othello* is *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears, influenced by black women playwrights; it was first published in 1997. Sears's work is a prequel to Shakespeare's *Othello* and a sequel to *Africa Solo* (1990) which was the first play written by a Canadian- African woman. Sears herself is considered a hybrid character; Guyanese and Jamaican, who was born in Britain and moved to live in Canada but still attached to her African roots. Having different period of time, polyphony, flash backs and many other features make this play a postmodern one. Consequently, her work *Harlem Duet* is a border- crossing setting in the United States that excludes white characters. In fact, not only Vogel subverts the traditional hierarchy in Shakespeare's *Othello*, but also Sears re-visions the play by removing whiteness from the centre and replacing it with black people like herself. Instead of giving whiteness a minor role, Sears chooses to ignore them completely from the stage.

In Sears's adaptation, *Othello* is represented as a ghost whom she wants to exorcise through her work; she calls it "a rhapsodic blue tragedy" for its representations of race and sex, and how they affected Africans lives (Fischlin & Fortier, 2000, p.285). Billie is *Othello*'s first wife before Desdemona, and she tells the story. Desdemona is presented as Mona in the play. The action takes place in three periods; between 1860 and 1928 referred to in flash backs, and in contemporary Harlem in 1990 at the corner of Malcolm X boulevards and Martin Luther King. Unlike the original *Othello* who is alienated in his community for being black, Sears's *Othello* lives in a black community and he is not represented as the Other.

What is interesting in Sears's adaptation is that she reversed the magical representations. In Shakespeare's

version, Desdemona's father thinks that *Othello* bewitches his daughter to make her fall in love with him. On contrary, Sears represents magic through the character of Billie who uses a magical poison in *Othello*'s handkerchief to cause *Othello*'s curse later; all those who touch it become cursed with misfortune including *Othello*, Mona, Iago and Cassio and it leads to their death at the end. Thus, I think that Sears intended to let Billie, as a black woman, control the whole action of the play in an attempt to subvert the whole hierarchy in the original play.

In their introduction to *Harlem Duet*, Fischlin and Fortier think that Sears, unlike Shakespeare, represents a non- Shakespearean culture in which she changes many scenes and refers to Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Anita Hill and Martin Luther King in an attempt to show a totally different culture. They think that the play "constructs itself as a nexus for different forms of black voice" (p.287). In fact, *Othello* in her play is never the Other as in Shakespeare's. On the other hand, according to Fischlin and Fortier *Harlem Duet* was performed in Canada in relation to the "emergent black theatrical aesthetic" which makes that play a challenge to the Eurocentric practices and consequently a challenge to Shakespeare's *Othello* which is considered by many as a Eurocentric work (Ibid.). Alison Sealy- Smith, who played Billie role in the play likes the idea that the performance is by black actors instead of white ones, retelling a canonical play by Shakespeare from their standpoint to reflect their African American culture. Sears states in an interview with her that:

Before *Harlem Duet*, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of ... African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it's called Canadian Stage, and it represents Canada, and I'm thinking, I'm Canadian, so it must represent me. (Knowles, 1998, p.30)

In such a way, they used one of the most powerful representations of the white culture; Shakespeare's *Othello*, to show their own culture as black from Billie's perspective.

I suppose that Sears intended also to revision the play through a black woman not only to challenge the Eurocentric culture, but also to challenge the black man who also subjugated the black woman, in an attempt to give a rebirth to her. In her play, racial and sexual issues related to the black experience are highlighted whether it is cross-racial or same- race relation. Billie describes the cross- racial part when she says that "The skin holds everything in. It's the largest organ in the human body" (Fichlin, p.296). On the other hand, when Billie describes *Othello*'s relation with Mona, she also mocks his attitude that makes him feel proud to have a white wife as she says:

Here, before me-his woman- all blonde hair and blonde legs. Her weight against his chest. His arms around her shoulders, his thumbs resting on the gold of her hair. He's proud. You can see

he's proud. He isn't just any Negro. He's special. That's why she's with him. (Fischlin & Fortier, 2000, p.296)

Billie's voice reflects the way "black masculinity is defined in apparent relation to white culture" (Ibid., p.287). Othello is trying to identify himself in white culture through his relationship with Mona, which is very clear in the way he has strong sexual desire toward her. What I see different at the end of *Othello* and its appropriation is that in the original work Othello's death is a kind of tragic downfall caused by extreme jealousy which is his flaw, While in Sears' work I think that his downfall is the result of his eagerness to engage into the white culture and ignoring his own culture and history.

Ghazoul in *The Arabization of Othello* describes Othello as the Self whose image is distorted by the Other. This idea invokes a great desire to rewrite and see the story through other lens. According to the reception theory, *Othello* deals with the question of the Other who tries to represent and define the Self. I think that both Vogel and Sears give new rich readings from a feminist view point. Sears, in a way to make Othello relieved from being the other, presents him as "black man played by a black actor, and living in a black community" (Ibid., p.286). In that way, Fischlin thinks that in Sears's work Othello is not excluded from his community; he is no longer the Other. Unlike the traditional character of Othello who was played by a white actor, Sears's Othello is played by a black actor and a black community. The only white character who does not appear at all on stage is Mona, whose arm is the only thing the audience can see.

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## CONCLUSION

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Finally, we can safely say that *Othello*'s significance is related to what Ronald Barthes called plurality of meaning; in other words, being open to different interpretations and readings. In contradict to many teachers who find Shakespeare as a long-dead white English writer who represents an Eurocentric perspective, I believe that Shakespeare's works are universal for the plurality of their meanings and the different possible interpretations. Vogel and Sears have their own readings of the *Othello*; they fill in the gaps and show unexpected readings from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. Shakespeare's *Othello* will stay ongoing ever after because its value has been expanding by each adaptation of it; each revision of this work takes us back to the

original work and makes us think through new lens that makes it new again and again.

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