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“Finally she speaks”: Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*



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Abstract

Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012) lends a critical twist to William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) by reimagining the source text through monologues, dialogues, and songs of the silenced characters in *Othello*: Desdemona, her ‘missing’ mother M. Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary, Emilia and Othello speak boldly to reveal their untold stories. In *Desdemona*, Morrison challenges Shakespeare’s text in two ways: Firstly, the experimental form of the play suggests a departure from the traditional play since *Desdemona* is a collaborative project involving Toni Morrison as the playwright, Malian singer Rokia Traoré as the musician and Peter Sellars as the director. This collaboration offers the possibility of re-visioning *Othello* on a more democratic ground and interpreting *Desdemona* as an ‘appropriation’, which Julie Sanders (2006) defines as “a decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product or domain” (p. 6). The second critical interpretation lies in Morrison’s taking on *Othello* using the lenses of the dead women: The reader and/or the audience witness Desdemona’s story through fragments from her girlhood and afterlife and now, she encounters Barbary, Othello and Emilia in the world of the dead. This feminist re-vision is enriched by Morrison’s restoration of a voice to Barbary who raised Desdemona with African stories and songs. In addition, reimagining the Barbary-Desdemona encounter to discuss the scars of colonialism creates a postcolonial feminist space through which Morrison ‘talks back’ to Shakespeare. This article discusses the postcolonial and feminist dimensions embodied in *Desdemona* and explores the possibility of reading this contemporary project as ‘an appropriation’ rather than ‘an adaptation’ within the framework of adaptation studies.

Keywords

Toni Morrison · *Desdemona* · William Shakespeare · *Othello* · appropriation

Author Note

The title is borrowed from Peter Sellars’s “Foreword” in *Desdemona* (2012, p. 9).



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“We will be judged by how well we love.”

Desdemona, Toni Morrison

Introduction

In his Foreword to Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012), Peter Sellars declares that William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) is “so intricate and ultimately disturbing” (p. 7) as it evokes the themes of “innuendo, misinformation, secrets, lies, self-deception, cruelty, and strangely luminous redemption” (p. 7). This might be the reason for Sellars, why he considers the afterlives of *Othello* as “a kind of puppet show of a brilliant but dangerously mad black man” (p. 7) and throughout its performance history, ‘the Moor’ has been “framed by a devil on his left (Iago) and on angel on his right (Desdemona)” (p. 7). Following these remarks, it could be assumed that grappling with conventional interpretations of such a historically and critically bound text like *Othello* and opening a new space for it in the realm of literary and cultural studies require a rigorous reworking, particularly when the heterosexual and racist ideology that accompanies *Othello* is apparent. This is what Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* has achieved so far since the play intervenes in the cultural memory of *Othello* and suggests an alternative perspective as an artistic collaborative project of Toni Morrison as the writer, Peter Sellars as the director and Rokia Traoré as the musician. This hybrid narrative openly appropriates its early modern source text since the contemporary reimagination, as Julie Sanders (2006) puts it, implies “the notion of a hostile take over” instead of “perpetuat[ing] the existence of a canon” (pp. 8–9) not only because it reimagines the girlhood and afterlife of ‘angelized’ Desdemona and thus functions as both a prequel and sequel to the Renaissance play but also through casting a critical eye on *Othello*, it enables us to ‘hear’ Desdemona and other silenced characters in the text. By reimagining ‘the other side of the story’¹ through the voices of Desdemona, her ‘missing’ mother M. Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary and Emilia, and even Othello speaking for himself, Toni Morrison adds a feminist twist to her revision. Restoring a voice to Barbary who raised Desdemona with African stories and songs in her reimagined childhood constitutes a significant part of this article because the Barbary-Desdemona encounter also opens a postcolonial dimension in the appropriation through which Toni Morrison talks back to Shakespeare. To this end, this article explores the feminist and postcolonial approaches *Desdemona* embodies and searches for the possibilities of analysing the narrative as ‘an appropriation’ rather than ‘an adaptation’ in the framework of adaptation and appropriation studies.

The Afterlives of *Othello* and Toni Morrison

In *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (1991), Peter Erickson acknowledges that the endeavour to rewrite the Renaissance and talking back to Shakespeare after the 1980s² have been major strands in literature and there might be the possibility of articulating more than one Renaissance, apart from the one dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe (p. 124). In this respect, the Renaissance, etymologically connoting re-birth, might refer to other meanings when devoid of its conventional timeline and historical bounds. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison redefines the word ‘renaissance’ to point out the role of contemporary black women writers talking back to the literary canon as she states: “It’s a real renaissance. You know, we have spoken of renaissance before. But this one is ours, not somebody else’s” (Erickson, 1991, p. 124). Drawing on Morrison’s remarks, it might be suggested that feminist reworkings of canonical texts can be considered as the renaissance period of women’s writing because they paved

¹Molly Hite’s *The Other Side of the Story* (1989) is an influential book about women writers’ rewriting practises. Hite suggests that rewriting classic texts from a feminist standpoint enables women to make a critique of the Western masculinist literary tradition.

²Challenging the gendered restrictions of the narrative tradition was on the agenda of women writers, especially after the 1980s, and the movement was called ‘opening up the canon’.



the way for the rebirth of women’s creative and collective writing practises during the 1980s and beyond. According to this analogy, it is hardly undeniable that Shakespeare plays a functional role in terms of the central position he occupies in the literary canon. In Martin Esslin’s words, Shakespeare’s plays “provide a multi-focal viewpoint. You can look at the play as it was written. You can treat it as a historical document. You can consider what it means to you as an expression of continuing human emotions and you can look at it as a myth through his ability to be modified” (as cited in Elsom, 1989, p. 26). Maryam Beyad and Ali Salami (2016) remark that “[r]eading and rereading his plays are like the rotations of the prisms, a work we handmade as little children with cardboard and broken glass, every rotation giving a new spectrum. So is the case with Shakespeare” (p. 1). In this respect, the infinite interpretation possibilities of his plays make Shakespeare a common ground for contemporary women writers like Toni Morrison to restore space and voice to the silenced others.

Anon, an important point to bear in mind regarding reworkings of canonical texts by women writers might help to situate *Desdemona* among the critical rewritings of *Othello*. As Peter Erickson (1991) writes, two distinct modes based on the ‘aim’ of the narrative become evident in the rewriting practises, the first of which is “a conciliatory mode that urges moderation and balance” (p. 167). The conciliation with the writer of the source text, here the case is Shakespeare, secures Shakespeare’s position as the cultural capital of the Western canon. To quote Erickson once again (1991), the tendency is “to mitigate the conflict” (p. 167) and reassures the value of Shakespeare in a positive way without casting a critical eye. The second mode of narrative is ‘oppositional’ and sceptical about seeing Shakespeare as “the dominant artistic force” (p. 167). Following this distinction on the modes of rewriting Shakespeare, *Desdemona* stands as an oppositional rewriting because it, in the first place, through restoring space to the silenced characters in the play—even the title *Desdemona* suggests it—questions the role of Shakespeare’s reception as the defining figure of the Western canon. However, such an oppositional standpoint does not mean an overall rejection of ‘the Bard’; rather, it might be perceived as the possibility of generating a new perspective using his works. Since the oppositional approach broadens the possibilities for hearing different voices, rewriting Shakespeare through casting a critical eye on him becomes possible by embodying this standpoint. This view on the oppositional approach, in this respect, does not hold the purpose of rejecting or overthrowing Shakespeare; instead, the reworkings like *Desdemona* search for the possibilities of ‘reconciliation’ on the common ground of a usable past.

As for the case of *Othello* specifically, the Shakespearean tragedy has frequently been of use in contemporary women’s rewriting practises during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ann Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* adds a feminist twist to the source text since the protagonist of the 1988 play, Constance Ledbelly, magically meets Desdemona and Juliet, and this encounter leads her on a journey of self-discovery. Paula Vogel’s 1994 play *Desdemona: A Play About Handkerchief* takes on the story of *Othello* through the lenses of three women characters, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Questioning the gender roles attributed to these women, Vogel portrays an assertive Desdemona whose infidelity creates tension in the narrative; nevertheless, she cannot escape her tragic death. Both MacDonald and Vogel respond to Shakespeare from the standpoints of feminism and critique the patriarchal code embedded in the play. Some subsequent afterlives added a postcolonial stance to the source text: Caleen Sinette Jennings’s two-play *Playing Juliet, Casting Othello* (1999) lends Shakespeare’s text a postcolonial perspective since it dwells on the history of the casting practises of Shakespearean performances by New Vistas Company famous for their multiracial community, thus retaining a racial tension. *Harlem Duet*, the 1997 play by Canadian playwright Djanet Sears, alludes to Shakespeare’s *Othello* as it tells the story of an infidel husband named Othello and his wife Billie. A non-chronological prequel and sequel to Shakespeare’s play moving across time and space, the play reimagines what if Othello lived today. English playwright Lolita

Chakrabarti’s play *Red Velvet*, which made its debut in the same year, 2012, with Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*, recites the biography of African American 19th century actor Ira Aldrige who takes on the role of Othello.³

One of the reasons for this growing interest in rewriting *Othello* might resonate with the purpose of questioning female agency because *Othello* is populated with female characters acting predominantly in the narrative. Desdemona as the daughter of the elite senator Brabantio, Emilia as the wife of Othello’s third-in-command Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s lady-in-wait and Bianca as a Venetian courtesan in relation to Cassio represent three distinct classes. Despite belonging to different social ranks, all women are unjustly accused of sexual misconduct and portrayed as defenceless against the accusations. As Lisa Jardine (1996) writes of the women in the play, “they yield the identical slur, the identical charge of sexual promiscuity – the most readily available form of assault on a woman’s reputation.” (p. 24). On the other hand, although Desdemona has generally been imaged passively, as the victim of Othello’s jealousy and brutal utterances in various critical analyses, she, at the same time, received attention for offering the possibility of analysing the character as the embodiment of female assertiveness in the Early Modern world. In this regard, Desdemona oscillates between being “both empowered and empowering” (Thompson, 2016, p. 494). To be more precise, as Marianne Novy (1981) suggests, Shakespeare’s ideal woman in his works presents an “ambiguous picture in which [the heroine] emphasises[s] patriarchy and ... female activity” (p. 21). Some tragic characters like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona are the domains of female agency, but they also show a willingness to subordinate themselves, thus they can “harmoniously combine strength and flexibility, individualism and compromise” (p. 21). To elaborate on Desdemona’s female agency in the context of ambiguity, it might be highlighted that she boldly chooses to marry Othello and defends her decision before the Venetian authorities, though she justifies it by saying she is following her mother’s example in marrying her father. She is determined to fulfil her promise to advocate for Cassio, but she lies about the handkerchief. On her deathbed, she defends herself fiercely, but her actions have placed her in a vulnerable position and in the end, Othello murders her. This combination of traits allows critics to both praise and criticize Desdemona, contrasting sharply with Othello’s simplistic view of her, and the ambiguity ultimately leads her to the tragic outcome (Novy, 1981). It is my contention that Toni Morrison’s taking on Desdemona shows relevance with this ambiguity because the appropriated text does not justify Desdemona as a victim; instead, Desdemona is under the critical lenses regarding her relationship with Emily, Othello and Barbary. However, at the very beginning of the play, she claims her own agency, saying “My name is Desdemona ... I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose” (Morrison, 2012, p. 13).

Jo Eldridge Carney (2014) suggests that in the framework of appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* deserves particular attention because it “offers a more complex and expansive narrative, situating Desdemona within her own historical context and within the homosocial community of women that Shakespeare’s play invokes” (p. 4). Undoubtedly, one of the principal reasons for Toni Morrison’s interest in *Othello* was the writer’s African American identity, which constitutes the core of her oeuvre. Toni Morrison’s body of work meticulously explores complex themes such as identity, race, gender, history, memory and trauma within the framework of the African American experience. The recipient of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in fiction and the Nobel Prize in 1993 with her novel *Beloved*, Morrison delves into the haunting legacy of slavery functioning as the core theme in her writings. Wajiran and Apriyani (2024) point out that Morrison’s novels provide deep insight into the “complex intersections of race, gender, and

³Ayanna Thompson (2016) highlights the increasing tendency of women writers to reimagine *Othello*. She therefore suggests revisiting the relationship between different temporal contexts, rather than analysing the play solely from the perspective of the present in relation to the early modern past, as Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* does. Thompson asks, what “if Morrison had created intertextual dialogues with not only Shakespeare, but also Vogels, Sears, Jennings, and Chakrabarti?” (p. 505) envisioning that such a present intertextuality would enable us “more radical futures of our readings of *Othello*, our treatments of appropriations and re-vision, and perhaps even our own futurities regardless of Shakespeare” (p. 505).

identity, especially in the context of African-American history and culture” (p. 1). By restoring voices to the marginalized characters confronting the legacies of oppression in her novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987), Morrison ostensibly illustrates “how the interlocking forces of racism and sexism shape their identities and social roles” (p. 1). In this context of intersectionality⁴, her playtext *Desdemona* is no exception since the strong presence of Barbary as an African American woman is a significant addition to the contemporary reimagining. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Barbary is a ghostly presence singing ‘The Willow Song’, which helps to lay bare the sorrow of Desdemona. In other words, she is a footnote to Desdemona’s victimization. Yet in Morrison’s version, the role of Barbary is expanded to highlight the intersectional framework; that is, she represents the experience of Black women as ‘the other’, undergoing both racial and patriarchal oppression. Ania Loomba (1989) highlights the interconnectedness of the formation of ‘the other’ for women and black people, remarking “each hierarchal structure of domination is analogous and linked with the other” (pp. 1–2). The analogy Loomba discusses has long been ignored by mainstream feminism, which has failed to address the struggles of Black women while centring its arguments on the oppression of white women. In this regard, when the critique of intersectionality is considered alongside Morrison’s *Desdemona*, the play offers insight into the postcolonial feminist dimension by weaving together the ‘unheard’ histories of women of colour particularly. In Sellar’s words, *Desdemona* “evokes and honors the missing histories of generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfilments and disappointments have gone unrecorded, but are still very much with us” (2012, p. 7). Moreover, these unheard stories function as counter narratives and are of crucial importance for Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory⁵ avows that “the view from the bottom may offer insights into why individuals accept their subordinate status in society despite the illogic and inconsistency of the dominant ideology” and thus, it might “provide the basis and catalyst for transformative social change” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 90). To achieve such transformation, counter narratives play a pivotal role, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) openly states, “tell[ing] stories and counter narratives ... hold the possibilities of broadening rather than constraining the terrain of social discourse” (p. 1346). Aja Y. Martinez (2014) also emphasizes the significant role of counter narratives in Critical Race Theory as she states that their function is to “expose, analyse, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege” (p. 38). Counter narratives, she extends, might “help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 38). To this end, choosing *Othello* to create a counter narrative like *Desdemona* is a transformative and political action because as Ania Loomba (1989) writes, “Renaissance patriarchy, like any other, is not a monolith but a shifting alignment of various power structures which are also in conflict with one another. Women, black people and other oppressed subjects are both constituted by and subversive of this authority” (p. 2). In this case, Shakespeare, whom the Western literary canon regards as an authority, provides an extremely suitable ground for challenging the authority and working on intersectionality and Critical Race Theory.

Additionally, although Toni Morrison disagrees that her writing bears the marks of the Western literary tradition, her engagement with Shakespeare is apparent in some of her works. As Chris Roark (2020) argues, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove’s characterization shows significant parallels with Ophelia, and Morrison uses *Hamlet* “as a foil in order to critique Western tragedy” (p. 1). According to Malin LaVon

⁴The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar of Critical Race Theory, in 1989. She used the term “to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences (1995, p. 358). Crenshaw divides ‘intersectionality’ into three categories, the first of which is ‘structural intersectionality’ addressing domestic violence, rape and remedial reform of Black women. The second category is ‘political intersectionality’, which examines how anti-racist and feminist politics, in a paradoxical way, reinforced the marginalization of women of colour. The third category concerns the role of intersectionality in the scope of identity politics.

⁵In her Introduction to *Critical Race Theory* (1991), Kimberlé Crenshaw defines Critical Race Theory, which originated in the legal field, as “a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally in American society as a whole” (p. xiv).



Walther, *Tar Baby* (1981) is a revisionary writing of *The Tempest* (1611), through which Morrison juxtaposes the ignorant attitudes of Valerian and Prospero (as cited in Carney, 1994). Fukushima Noboru (2023), in “The Transformation in Representation of Shakespeare’s King Lear in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”, speaks of the intertextual relations between the texts. Beyond her novels, Morrison’s essays, speeches and lectures have significantly left a mark on literary criticism and cultural studies.

Desdemona: The Question of Adaptation and/or Appropriation

It was May 2011 when *Desdemona* premiered at the Vienna⁶ Akzent Theatre, and the audience took their part to see both a concert and theatrical performance including the script of Toni Morrison, actors exchanging monologues and dialogues that have alternated with the songs of Malian singer Rokia Troeré and stage directions of director Peter Sellars (Carney, 2014, p. 1). The production history of *Desdemona* is worthy of mention since the project was mounted on an argument between Toni Morrison and Peter Sellars on *Othello*. More than two decades ago, a heated disagreement unfolded between them when Sellars argued that *Othello* was “a thin play ... poorly crafted, devoid of meaning and had surpassed its relevance” (2012, p. 2). Morrison vehemently disagreed, and consequently the dispute evolved into a creative challenge: Sellars would stage a high-tech adaptation of *Othello*, and Morrison would find a way to respond to Shakespeare critically in a relevant way. In 2009, Sellars realised his part with a four-hour production of *Othello*, choosing a setting full of TV monitors, and imagined much of the action taking place in bed. Sellars’s part met with mixed reviews in Europe and criticism in New York. (Sciliano, 2011). In 2011, it was Morrison’s turn to fulfil her end of the bargain with *Desdemona*. To echo Carney (1994), Morrison endowed *Desdemona* with more “textual depth” (p. 2) that she had long deserved, which previous productions had ignored, and Shakespeare “had not allowed *Desdemona* to tell her full story” (p. 2).

This creative argument between Sellars and Morrison may well be used as a reference point to explore the notions of ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’: Sellars’s faithful approach close to the original codes of *Othello* might function as an example to discuss what ‘an adaptation’ means, whereas Morrison’s reimagining *Othello* with a critical distance might be counted as a cogent example of ‘an appropriation’ since it holds transformative purposes. In their Introduction to *Shakespeare and Adaptation* (2022), Diana E. Henderson and Stephen O’Neill describe the adaptational process drawing on adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch’s botanical imagery that makes a parallel between biology and adaptation: Leitch views adaptation as “a plant in its capacity to replicate, to change and even to blur origin and offshoots” (p. 3). As a tree “develop[ing] a dense, weblike canopy of branches, roots and trunks, intermeshing and supporting each other” (p. 3), the term ‘adaptation’ then, might be reconsidered not as a governing discourse but as an inclusive and transformative environment in which diverse approaches situate themselves in harmony.

Nevertheless, making strict divisions between these concepts is still a contentious business since they intersect with each other.⁷ Lack of fixation in the theoretical realm eventually makes ‘adaptation’ an umbrella term to cover the scope of the array of terms. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (2012) suggest considering adaptation and appropriation as “siblings” “if not identical twins” (p. 5). They convey that an appropriation is “the part of the process of adaptation” and the degree to what extent an adaptation could be called as ‘an appropriation’ depends on “the metabolic quality of adaptation as creative and metamorphic process” (pp. 5–6). For Linda Hutcheon, ‘appropriation’ harbours ‘ambiguity’ and it ‘depends on your

⁶*Desdemona* was performed in various settings: Europe and New York, and in 2012, it was staged for the Cultural Olympiad in the World Shakespeare Festival.

⁷There exist a variety of terms and vocabulary at play when it comes to adaptation and appropriation studies, which Julie Sanders (2006) calls “linguistic riff”: “variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation” (*Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 3).



perspective” and it can operate as a creative adaptation, that is “(re)interpretation and “(re) creation” (2006, p. 8). Julie Sanders (2006) approaches the concepts according to their relation to the literary tradition and she highlights whether a text is an adaptation or an appropriation, both reworkings have dependence on the literary canon: “They prove complicit in activating and reactivating the canonical status of certain texts and writers”; she writes; however, appropriations, continues Sanders, proves out to be political and they “may be seeking to challenge that very status” (2006, p. 22). Building on Sander’s remark, Toni Morrison’s reworking of *Othello* is an example of an appropriation because it adds a political dimension to the source text through problematizing the very central status of Shakespeare in the literary canon. In an interview on *Desdemona*, Morrison says: “The plays are not these closed boxes that belong to the historians and critics. They’re wide open, not just to reinterpretation by actors and actresses, but to reconceptualization” (as cited in Winn, 2011). As Morrison uses the word ‘reconceptualization’ while rewriting Shakespeare and since the concept is a subjective word open to infinite interpretations, Morrison reactivates the very canonical status of *Othello* because it reconceptualizes the playtext through threading intertextual lines to write beyond Shakespeare. Toni Morrison’s appropriation of *Desdemona* is “a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original”; and it disturbs “contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized culture” (Sanders, 2001, pp. 1–2). *Desdemona*, in this sense, transforms *Othello* in a significant way by moving our gaze from the long-emphasised conflict of Othello-Iago to the domestic conflict of Desdemona - Othello to hear the unheard voices in the source text.

Here, it is important to point out that thinking of the concept of ‘transformation’ along with appropriation may help to illuminate the scope of this discussion as Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams (2010) define ‘transformation’ as a specific form of appropriation. In their opinion, a transformation is

a reworking of a text, such as telling a story from a different perspective and engaging themes and issues that were left out of the previous version, using a familiar plot but varying the setting, situation, and/or characters; updating the source text to reflect a new social, political, and cultural context; or radically transforming a source by using parallel plot events and similar characters without being constrained by the earlier plot. (p. 4)

Mounting on this definition, the new perspective of *Desdemona* engages us with the characters and stories that have not been heard of before. In Sellar’s words, Desdemona’s characterization in Shakespeare’s *Othello* is “the ideal creation—like Dante’s Beatrice, a vision of perfection, a woman offering love and forgiveness in the face of hatred, mistrust and murderous lies. In Shakespeare’s late tragedies, the ideal woman—Desdemona, Virgilia, Cordelia was mostly silent” (2012, p. 9). According to Alan Sinfield (1992), Desdemona is devoid of a character of her own; she is a footnote in the story of Othello, Iago, and Venice. Othello asks, “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write 'whore' upon?” (4.2, p. 109).⁸ The writing belongs to Othello, Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke, and Lodovico—they consider Desdemona as “a blank page for the versions of her that they want. She is written into a script that is organized through the perceptions and needs of male dominance in heterosexuality and patriarchal relations” (Sinfield, 1992, p. 54). However, in Morrison’s text, Desdemona claims her own existence, and she finally speaks. The play starts with her blunt line:

⁸The references to *Othello* are given with page numbers throughout the article since the edition used does not include line numbers.

My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill-fated. It means doomed. ... Perhaps being born a girl gave [my parents] all they needed to know of what my life would be like. ... Men made rules, women followed them. ... [my parents] were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me. I am not the meaning of my name I did not choose. (p. 13)

The opening lines of the play hint from the very first moment that *Desdemona* is a ‘herstory’, a feminist appropriation of *Othello*, restoring voice to the silenced heroine.

“My Husband knew Iago was lying”: Feminist Discourse in *Desdemona*

The feminist appropriation manifests itself demonstrably with the population of female voices in *Desdemona* since this recognition “expand[s] and empower[s] female community” (Erickson, 2013, p. 5). Emilia, whose vocality is diminished despite her appearance in nearly every scene in *Othello*, emerges with depth and female agency. Morrison’s narrative suggests highlighting her relationship with Desdemona in ways that reveal the dynamics of power and class struggle. According to Ania Loomba (1989), Desdemona’s power in *Othello* “is the confidence of both race and class – of an upper-class Venetian beauty, secure in the attentions of men around her and in the advantages of her position” (p. 57). However, the Desdemona-Emilia encounter in Morrison’s play is marked by the sarcasm apparent in Emilia’s greeting Desdemona in the underworld: “Well, well. If it isn’t the martyr of Venice. Remember me? We died together” (Morrison, 2012, p. 42). However, Desdemona answers bitterly: “Emilia, you confound me. Didn’t you acquiesce to all of Iago’s demands, even the most viled, corrupt ones? ... Your deception, your dangerous, murderous silence led to my death and it led to yours” (2012, p. 42). Consequently, Desdemona knows that Emilia is the only person aware of the truth behind the lie of the handkerchief—capable of speaking up at any time during the play to prevent the injustice and violence that permeates *Othello*. When Desdemona reminds her that they were friends, the conversation shifts into a serious confession revealing Emilia’s true feelings about their relationship: “Unpin me Emilia.” “Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia.” “That is not how you treat a friend; that’s how you treat a servant. Someone beneath you, beneath your class which takes devotion for granted” (2012, p. 43). Thompson (2016) contends that this dialogue between Emilia and Desdemona exemplifies “class tensions to which Desdemona was oblivious while living” and functions as a catalyst for Desdemona to “move from judgment to understanding” (p. 500). Consequently, Emilia and Desdemona succeed in negotiating through constructive dialogue, which is a common feature of women’s revisionary appropriation. Negotiation occurs when Emilia confesses “Like you I believed marriage was my salvation” and recalls her childhood in pain, Desdemona apologizes and says: “Instead of judging, I shall be understanding” (p. 44). The mutual understanding at the end of the encounter thus ends up in reconciliation because of the honesty it harbours. Carney (1994) comments that “Morrison does not rush her characters to facile friendship; they ultimately achieve a measure of mutual understanding, but only after airing their grievances and sorrows. While these truthful encounters give voice to the women individually, they also strengthen female bonds” (p. 13). The scene ends with Emilia’s metaphoric example of a lizard: “One day I saw a tiny lizard dozing in sunlight. ... she shed her dull outer skin; struggled, then finally, crawled out of it, exposing that which had been underneath - her jeweled self. ... That lizard changed my life” (2012, p. 44). Erickson (2013) thinks that this concluding image of the lizard is provoking since it inspires “self-examination that Desdemona must undergo in order to arrive at a position where she is capable of remaking her sense of self” (p. 8). This self-awareness of individual power generated by female bonds also functions as a foil to the ‘brotherhood’ bond in *Othello*.

As noted previously, all characters are portrayed multi-dimensional and in depth in Morrison’s narrative, and *Othello* is no exception. In *Desdemona*, Shakespeare’s ‘Moor’ is restored with a backstory through which the audience/reader learn about his boyhood, and this period of *Othello*’s life was marked by the absence

of her mother and then he was raised by an African woman talented in music, reminding Barbary and their shared African origin in *Othello*. The motives of Othello’s faith in Iago’s accusations of Desdemona have long been discussed in the traditional criticism of the source text, and to Morrison, it stands as one of the gaps in *Othello*: “My husband knew Iago was lying, manipulating, sabotaging. So why did he act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood” (2012, p. 37) says Desdemona while narrating her encounter with Othello in the underworld. The issue of brotherhood is disclosed when Othello confesses the dark secret held between Iago and himself, the reason for their mutual dependence, their bond, i.e. a disturbing alleged attempt of a rape in a combat, well reveal that they have “an exchange of secrecy” (Morrison, 2012, p. 38). Such an exchange cloaked by violence is one of the possible reasons why Morrison eliminates Iago’s presence in her rewriting so that the others could find a space to reclaim their ‘own’ narratives (Carney, 1994, p. 16). In *Desdemona*, Iago appears only as a name reference; thus, Morrison divorces the play from its racist formula and reverses the manipulative power Iago displays over other characters. In an interview with Jerry Blatton, the writer speaks of her being “dismissive” of Iago:

I refused to do the play unless Peter permitted me to get rid of Iago altogether out because he’s everywhere, he’s talking constantly, He’s gobbling up the flame and no one can just live. ... It was so liberating in the writing to get rid of the character that was manipulating everybody to see what it would be like what would they say to one another if he wasn’t there and of course particularly they were all dead and there was nothing, there was everything to learn because it is eternal and there was nothing to lose. (Hay Festival, 2014)

The dismissal of Iago from the dramatic action opens up the possibility of a reflective yet constructive dialogue between Desdemona and Othello regarding their marriage, starting from their first encounter in Venice. In *Desdemona*, the audience/readers find out that by telling stories of adventure as well as stories of blood and horror, Othello catches the affections of Desdemona instantly similar to the plot structure of Shakespeare’s play; however, Morrison opts to elaborate on the cause of this instant chemistry since Othello complains Desdemona about being attracted to him because of his exotic image: “You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State” (Morrison, 2012, p. 50). Erickson (2013), however, finds Othello’s pattern of critique as self-pity and an indicator of his lack of self-awareness (p. 12), and Morrison seems to critique his elusive response: “You’re wrong!” exclaims Desdemona, “You believed a lie” (2012, p. 51). The encounter between Desdemona and Othello functions as a contrast to a romantic relationship; instead, it is ‘an act of reconciliation, a mutual understanding that should have taken place at the very beginning of their marriage. “We should have had such honest talk, not fantasy, the evening we wed” (2012, p. 54), regrets Othello and asks for her forgiveness. Desdemona expresses her inability to forgive him for the violence he committed against her and other women. Despite this, she conveys that she can still love him by saying “Honest love does not cringe at the first roll of thunder; nor does it flinch when faced with the lightning flash of human sin” (Morrison, 2012, p. 39) and in the end, she is “sick of killing as a solution” (p. 54). Ultimately, as Rapetti (2020) states, *Desdemona* suggests an “act of deep, focused listening through which a space of reconciliation is created” (p. 252) as an alternative to dramatic action of violence in *Othello*.

Setting and Time in *Desdemona*

Additionally, to question the patriarchal code embedded in the play, Morrison changes the entire setting and time of the source text. *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus where ‘the Moor’ serves as a governor, whereas *Desdemona* takes its setting as the underworld where Desdemona accompanies with ‘underwater women’ where she stands “in between, between being killed and being un-dead” (p. 14). Morrison speaks of



transposing the setting to the underworld as a conscious choice. That is, she was decisive in violating the constraints of place and time because the underworld and underwater are “a good place to begin to talk. You have timelessness, and you can learn” (Hay Festival, 2014). Anon, ‘water’ and ‘underworld’ are usually taken as a feminised element frequently used in revisionary practises of women writers’ appropriations. To illustrate, Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005) retelling of *The Odyssey* commences with Naiad’s advice to her daughter Penelope:

Water does not resist. Water flows...Water is not a solid wall...But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it...Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (p. 43)

To this end, taking ‘water’ as the reference point in *Desdemona* resonates well with the aim of rewriting canonical classics. Likewise, water going around any obstacles to circulate and finding the way to flow, *Desdemona* flows in the literary world, it invites the readers to a journey to an undiscovered realm which belongs to women, and it does so not only by focusing on Desdemona but also by restoring voice to the other silenced characters in the source text.

Morrison’s approach to ‘time’ in *Desdemona* also differs from that of Shakespeare. In the source text, we are introduced to a young Desdemona passively ready for a bond upon the request of his father who sees ‘his’ profit in the marriage. Yet contrary to the expectations of Brabantio, Desdemona falls in love with Othello. The tragedy spans only two days, it starts on Monday night around 2 a.m. when they elope and then after getting married, the play ends up with Othello murdering Desdemona on their marriage bed on Wednesday night. Considering the very short span in the source text, the victim of the barbarous act has no chance to speak and defend herself. Erickson (2013) contends that “the overall outcome of *Othello* is silencing Desdemona” (p. 3), which is apparent in Othello’s chosen method to silence the vocal power of the heroine through prolonging the dramatic action of her murder. When Desdemona pleads, “Kill me tomorrow” (5.2. p. 127), Othello responds: “There is no pause / It’s too late” (p. 127). “Not quite dead”, he murmurs after Desdemona dies, and when Emilia enters the scene seeing her lady dead, she cries: “O Lady, speak again, Sweet Desdemona, oh sweet Mistress, speak” (p. 129). Of that scene, Erickson comments that the vocal voice passes to Emilia; however, as a silenced character, she too dies without gaining her female agency, meaning the finality of female speech in Shakespeare’s text (2022, p. 3). Yet this finality is foiled by challenging the time constraint in *Othello*, since Desdemona and other silenced characters surpass the boundaries of time conveyed in Desdemona’s famous line in Morrison’s text: “‘Late’ has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility of wisdom” (p. 55). In this context, Desdemona’s wiped-out verbal authority in the source text, symbolically illustrated by her swift death, is contested by hearing her untold stories and repressed feelings surpassing time and space, and these stories are used to build a connection with other silenced characters.

“I will never die again.”: The Postcolonial Dimension in *Desdemona*

In Act IV, Scene III in *Othello*, Desdemona remembers her mother's maid Barbary right after Othello visits her bedroom and accuses her of betrayal. Disturbed by the accusation, Desdemona tells Emilia that she cannot take a song out of her mind, one that Barbary used to sing when she was a little girl:

My mother had a maid called Barbary.
She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad,
And did forsake her: she had a song of 'willow,'
An old thing t'was, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it. (pp. 116–117)

The evocative imagery of the ‘willow song’ in these lines offers Toni Morrison the interpretive gaps and silences to reimagine *Othello*, enabling her to “critique the narrative, restructuring its orders and priorities by focusing on specific issues of female identity and its oscillations” (DuPlessis, 1985, p. x). To challenge the suppressed female identity and agency in *Othello*, Morrison intentionally makes use of mother figures in *Desdemona*. The mention of the word “mother” is particularly significant because the Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were familiar with the absence of mothers in plays. In *Othello*, the line “My mother had a maid called Barbary” is only the second reference to Desdemona’s mother, “a tangential one” Peter Erickson calls such a presence, in the entire play.⁹ (2013, p. 5). In Morrison’s *Desdemona*, we ‘hear’ Desdemona’s mother during her encounter with Othello’s mother, Soun, in the underworld, introducing two mothers united in sorrow. M. Brabantio tells Soun, “I prayed to Mother Mary for help when your son slaughtered my daughter,” to which Soun replies, “A waste. I spoke to my gods for guidance when, in remorse, my son responded with suicide” (Morrison, 2012, pp. 27–28). However, M. Brabantio in *Desdemona* adheres to the Elizabethan code of wifely obedience, embodying the ideal of female submissiveness for her daughter: “My mother was a lady of virtue whose practice and observation of manners were flawless,” Desdemona maintains (p. 17). Ultimately, Desdemona finds comfort and safety in her relationship with her nurse, Barbary, as she narrates: “My solace in those early days lay with my nurse, Barbary. ... She was more alive than anyone I knew and more loving” (p. 18). By bringing Barbary to the forefront through monologues, dialogues, and songs, Morrison frees *Desdemona* from the constraints of the plot of the source text, allowing for a feminist and postcolonial reinterpretation.

Desdemona introduces Barbary with a long monologue by Desdemona. Barbary is depicted as the sole individual capable of nurturing Desdemona’s yearning for freedom:

Barbary alone conspired with me to let my imagination run free. She told me stories of other lives, other countries. Places where gods speak in thundering silence and mimic human faces and forms. Where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing, but wild, sacred, and instructive. Unlike the staid, unbending women of my country, she moved with the fluid grace I saw only in swans and the fronds of willow trees. To hear Barbary sing was to wonder at the mediocrity of flutes and pipes. (p. 18)

It is worth highlighting that singing holds significant importance in *Desdemona*. This element not only disrupts traditional dramatic conventions by transforming the play into a hybrid form akin to musical theatre—aligning with the concept of appropriation that challenges authority in both form and content—but also serves as a key action to reimagine Barbary through her singing. Rochelle Smith (1994) argues that female singing embodies a seductive power as she says, “Desdemona’s [willow] song does not simply function as a lyrical expression of her emotional state” (p. 313); but it provokes patriarchal anxiety when linked to seduction. Building on this perspective, Morrison and Traoré’s reimagining of the canonical text, incorporating songs and lyrics, subtly evokes Barbary’s African legacy on stage. This choice auspiciously

⁹The absence of maternal figures in Shakespeare’s works raises questions about the missing female agent, a topic famously explored in Coppélia Kahn’s 2011 article “The Absent Mother in King Lear.”

dismantles the female anxiety and tension fostered by Western patriarchal and colonial ideologies. The thematic weight Morrison attributes to singing in *Desdemona* seamlessly brings African context into the play, particularly apparent in Barbary’s assertive reclaim of her own agency. When they eventually meet, Desdemona excitedly expresses her affection: “Barbary! Barbary, come closer. How I have missed you. ... We shared so much” (2012, p. 45). Yet Barbary sharply rejects this sentiment, replying: “We shared nothing. I mean you don’t even know my name. Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage” (p. 45). When Desdemona recalls their bond, calling Barbary her “best friend,” Barbary responds coldly: “I was your slave ... So, you don’t know me. Have never known me” (pp. 45–46). Thompson (2016) argues that Desdemona’s claim ‘we shared so much’ “sound[s] like many contemporary white liberals” (p. 501). It might be argued that Desdemona, as a white woman, suffers under the patriarchal rule, but initially she is unaware how race further compounds oppression for Barbary. Their dialogue openly reveals the power imbalance between them since Desdemona benefits from privilege due to her whiteness, while Barbary faces the dual burden of marginalization as a Black woman. That is why Desdemona’s memory is deconstructed as Barbary refuses to participate in Desdemona’s narrative. Prioritizing her own voice and identity, Barbary continues to claim her African name, ‘Sa’ran’ that symbolizes her rejection of being tied to her colonial past. In Rapetti’s (2020) view, Desdemona and Barbary’s relationship is “far from authentically intersubjective and mutual” but “hugely asymmetric” because Barbary, “not only did she lend herself to the embodiment of a Black otherness Desdemona could fantasize on, but she also tended to her material needs” (p. 250). Therefore, Rapetti (2020) comments that their relationship “was based on a social construct of racial difference that was ideologically crafted and discursively articulated to maintain White privilege by generating inequality, domination and exclusion” (p. 250). In this regard, analysing *Desdemona* through the lens of intersectionality allows us to challenge the patriarchal and racial codes interwoven in historical discourses.

Despite this tension, Desdemona and Sa’ran ultimately rediscover their connection through mutual understanding: “You blame?” (p. 48) asks Desdemona Sa’ran, and her reply can be considered the aim of rewriting *Othello*: “I clarify!” (p. 48) responds Sa’ran. Their interconnectedness in terms of female experience in the patriarchal order is apparent in Desdemona’s forthcoming lines: “Sa’ran. We are women. I had no control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still” (p. 48). Particularly in the shared memory of the willow song, they once decide to sing together, but Sa’ran now suggests a new song with lyrics including: “What bliss to know I will never die again” (p. 49), and Desdemona echoes her: “We will never die again” (p. 49). Valentini (2024) underlines that by echoing each other, both Sa’ran and Desdemona “acknowledge the injustice they have had to endure” because they have been “both locked up in prisons which constrained them to social norms they did not choose; both were killed by the men they loved” (p. 223). Morrison knows that she cannot “change the past, but to transcend it in the afterlife: they will no longer just be victimized women. Mutual revelation, and then acceptance, is a prerogative of the female characters” (Valentini, 2024, p. 223). According to Rapetti (2020), Desdemona and Sa’ran’s resolution in the end is a “newly found proximity” which is “not forced, but a forged one ... it is grounded on mutual acknowledgement of the other’s suffering and sorrow” (p. 251). Ultimately, their reconciliation signifies mutual recognition, as their bond is redefined through empathy, moving beyond victimhood.

The appearance of Barbary in *Desdemona* adds depth to the discussion of the postcolonial and feminist approaches the play embodies. The term “Barbary,” commonly used to refer to the northern coast of Africa and a subject of interest in England during Shakespeare’s time, first appears in *Othello* as an insult by Iago, conveying Othello’s supposed animalistic and othered nature: “you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse” (1.1, p. 26), says Iago to Brabantio. Peter Sellars (2012) points out that the word ‘Barbary’ “triggers surprising associations” in the source text because “Barbary meant Africa” (p. 8). In the seventeenth

century London, continues Sellars, the Barbary pirates, were hijacking British vessels, enslaving the white crews and these stories were circulating in mercantile London (2012, p. 8). These exotic and adventurous stories of another world were undoubtedly appealing for the playwright “who called his theater ‘The Globe’” (p. 7), and references to Africa in *Othello* reflect the Western colonial dream.

In *Desdemona*, Toni Morrison transforms Barbary’s lack of presence into a creative narrative and intertwines postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Dismantling the unjust systems of the past while exposing the imperialist and patriarchal ideologies underpinning the Empire, the writer embroiders the narrative with the upbringing of Desdemona with Barbary—a white child whose consciousness and emotional state are deeply influenced by African songs and lullabies—and highlights her genuine bond with Barbary. As is generally known, non-white, specifically African women who are given references but never actually appear on the Shakespearean stage have increasingly been of scholarly discussion in the field. Barbary exemplifies these absent women. Morrison disrupts this absence and the supposed idea of exclusivity of the elite Venetian social order and makes a broader critique, extending to the Western world, which often turns a blind eye to global conflicts and systemic oppressions. Thompson (2016) reminds us that there exists “the ultimate utility of re-visioning *Othello* for progressive dialogues about African women” (p. 496) to overlap the postcolonial question and the feminist one. Both postcolonialism and feminism aim to revise and challenge the unfair modes of the past and disclose the imperialist and patriarchal notions of the Empire. Morrison challenges the constructed boundaries of privilege and complicity, calling attention to the interconnectedness of cultural histories and injustices.

Morrison ends *Desdemona* with a critical but reconciliatory mode echoing her postcolonial and feminist standpoint and moves our focus to the possibility of transformation. The focus is on hope for solidarity, as the lyrics of her last song suggest:

If it’s a question
of working together
on the task,
I would be happy to take part
Whether we are from the same place or not.
Whether we are from the same culture or not.
Should we celebrate this moment?
It would fill me with joy. (p. 56)

The lyrics evoke the feelings of the promise of change and pave the way for a possibility of reconnection and understanding. From a broader perspective, this possibility of reconnection with the literary past occurs only when writers engage themselves in a dialogue with the past and see the past as a usable source to heal the scars of colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* is a transformative reimagining of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, blending feminist and postcolonial perspectives to challenge the patriarchal and imperialist frameworks permeating throughout the Renaissance text. By restoring the voices of the silenced characters, particularly Desdemona and Sa’ran, Morrison creates a space for dialogue, reflection, and reconciliation. This re-vision disrupts the Western mode of historical and patriarchal superiority that manifests itself through oppression and silencing of diverse voices, while simultaneously celebrating the resilience, interconnectedness and solidarity of



marginalized voices. *Desdemona* also offers a vision where intersectional identities take the centre stage. Through the lens of intersectionality, *Desdemona* highlights the layered oppressions that women face—not only as victims of patriarchy but also within racial and class structures.

Morrison’s collaboration with Rokia Traoré and Peter Sellars exemplifies the possibilities of creative appropriation as a democratic process. Thompson (2016) argues that their collaboration “renders authorship a contested ground” that openly “decenters Shakespeare’s primacy as the ‘original’ author, rendering revisions as necessarily global and cross-cultural dialogues” (p. 498). Both drawing on Thompson’s argument and Julie Sanders’s (2006) remarks about the characteristics of an appropriation as she suggests that “a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to reinterpret a source text” (p. 2), I conclude that the hybrid and collaborative nature of *Desdemona*, in the first place, pushes the narrative into new and creative realms. This blending of theatrical, musical, and cultural elements allows Morrison to create a play that not only critiques but redefines its source text. It also incorporates African songs and perspectives to dismantle Eurocentric frameworks and reclaim cultural space for African identities. In this way, engaging itself with feminist and postcolonial standpoints, *Desdemona* reflects its political commitment because *Desdemona* is a deeply political and transformative project. As noted in the article, Morrison maintains that Shakespeare’s plays are subject to reinterpretation and reconceptualization, and *Desdemona* now functions as an influential example of this idea by offering a space for voices historically excluded from the narrative tradition. The concluding emphasis of the play on mutual understanding and collaboration reinforces its reception in the adaptation studies as an appropriation since it favours transformation through casting a critical eye and fosters hope for a more inclusive future.



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