

DESDEMONA: POLITICS OF SILENCE

Priya Sandhu

Research Scholar

Panjab University, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

Various traditions identify and confirm “silence” to be an appropriate condition for the female segment of humanity. It is maintained that this silence is an adage of a woman’s natural state. Silence has been scripted in women within dominating social structures, as the modes of speaking and behaving. Silence, in both the literal meaning of the word, and in its extended significance of not being heard, or not being free to speak authentically has also been the mark of woman as victim, especially in a culture which does not accept her as the equal. Such culture insists upon recognizing her inherent differences, and treats her as an object, as other, as absence and emptiness.

Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*, attempts to delve into the subjectivity of Desdemona, and offers the Shakespearean characters the possibility of bridging gender differences. *Desdemona* draws from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to rethink about identity of its silenced subjects. By reversing the manly ethos and bringing the role of women to the front, this play succeeds in readjusting the Shakespearean story to render a feminist, cosmopolitan and democratic definition of the female self. In Morrison’s work the role of the main characters Othello and Desdemona is reversed and presents an ethnic and feminist vision of the tragedy that aims to fill the gaps that the story left open in the original play.

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Since the Restoration period, William Shakespeare’s plays have continually been adapted to specific cultures, ideologies and new times. *Othello*, one of the most frequently adapted and appropriated plays, has been reconstructed in the form of criticism, rewritings, parodies, prequels, sequels, translations, film and stage adaptations. Since the 1970s, feminist writers and scholars have looked at Shakespeare’s *Othello* and focused especially on the female characters Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. *Desdemona* by Toni Morrison’s is often categorized by the critics as “feminist theatrical appropriation” (Ayanna Thompson 495). In *Desdemona* (2012) Toni Morrison has created a safe space in which the dead can finally speak those things that could not be spoken when they were alive. And finally, women inside Shakespeare’s play and those in shadows ultimately find their voices.

Various traditions identify and confirm “silence” to be an appropriate condition for the female segment of humanity. It is maintained that this silence is an adage of a woman’s natural state. Silence has been scripted in women within dominating social structures, as the modes of speaking and behaving. Nancy Henley while examining the forms of sexist language classifies it in three categories:

language that ignores women, language that defines women narrowly, and language that depreciates women (qtd. in Weatherall 13). Silence, in both the literal meaning of the word, and in its extended significance of not being heard, or not being free to speak authentically has also been the mark of woman as victim, especially in a culture which does not accept her as the equal. Such culture insists upon recognizing her inherent differences, and treats her as an object, as other, as absence and emptiness.

Desdemona draws from Shakespeare's *Othello* to rethink about identity of its silenced subjects. By reversing the manly ethos and bringing the role of women to the front, this play succeeds in readjusting the Shakespearean story to render a feminist, cosmopolitan and democratic definition of the female self. Morrison here attempts to delve into the subjectivity of Desdemona, and offers the Shakespearean characters the possibility of bridging gender differences. In Morrison's work the role of the main characters Othello and Desdemona is reversed and presents an ethnic and feminist vision of the tragedy that aims to fill the gaps that the story left open in the original play. Here, Morrison imagines the title character unfurling her thoughts and secrets to the African maid who raised her on African songs and stories, and focused on themes of gender issues, racism and oppression. Taking an open feminist posture, Desdemona also makes amends with her husband Othello aiming to come full circle and to finally display the egalitarian ending that the Shakespearean tragedy lacked. In Morrison's world women decide, act and choose. Desdemona is here far away from the coy Shakespearean construction and takes the lead of her self-definition.

In *Desdemona*, the female characters outnumber the men. Here, Desdemona channels the other characters, such as Othello, and gives them a voice. She serves as a medium for the other characters, and they talk through her. The only other person on stage is another female character, namely Barbary. Male characters are not physically present. This focus on women can be seen as representing a general principle of feminism as portrayed in the play.

The sharp juxtaposition of Morrison's title *Desdemona* with Shakespeare's *Othello* is no sooner announced than it is further sharpened by Desdemona's immediate rejection of her name in the opening speech, "My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery ... I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose" (Morrison 13). In Shakespeare's play, Desdemona was silenced by a physical but bloodless assault directed at her throat and mouth, the source of vocalization. The work of this performance is to redefine her given name and hence the structure and meaning of her character. By restoring Desdemona's voice, Morrison gives her the opportunity to tell a different story, "I exist in places where I can speak, at last, words that in earth life were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience"(Morrison 13). In *Othello*, the deferred declaration of disobedience is associated with Emilia, who with increasing urgency insists on speaking. Emilia's outspoken defiance of her husband fills the vacuum left by Desdemona's refusal to fully confront Othello. In Morrison's play, Desdemona sets out to question "obedience" from the very beginning. Given this agenda, *Desdemona* embarks on a stunning revision of the precedent set by Shakespeare.

Morrison also moves away from the traditional Desdemona. In the first scene, Desdemona criticizes the traditional view of her character as a victim when she says: “I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose” (Morrison 13). She explains that Desdemona means “misery,” “ill fated,” and “doomed” (13). The fact that she refuses this meaning illustrates Desdemona’s strength. She turns her back on the patriarchal system that would establish her doomed future because she “would be subject to the whims of [her] elders and the control of men” (Morrison 13). Desdemona is thus presented as a strong character. She carries on and challenges the traditional view directly when she asks the audience if they imagined her “as a wisp of a girl” and as “a foolish naïf who surrendered to her husband’s brutality” (Morrison 16). She tells the audience that they could not have been more wrong. In this scene, Desdemona confronts the traditional view of her character as submissive. She is aware that she is seen as the victim and as a weak character. In traditional criticism Desdemona is, for example, in some productions portrayed as weak in the last scene of *Othello*. She asks Othello for but half an hour. Here, Desdemona is often played as the victim and as a “bruised dove” instead of being played as more resistant to Othello (Pechter 123). Morrison’s Desdemona goes against this view of her character as weak and as the victim. Desdemona continues her monologue and remarks that her “life was shaped by [her] own choices” (Morrison 16). Desdemona claims her own agency and the confrontation with the audience, and with the traditional view of her character, shows her strength.

The principal means by which Desdemona gains access to a new mode of expression is through a sequence of increasingly intense woman-to-woman conversations that Morrison stages. The first of these encounters, which establishes a model for the ones to follow, involves two characters who are mentioned only in passing and make no appearance in Shakespeare’s drama. We are thus hearing their voices for the first time. Morrison visualizes an uncomfortable meeting between Desdemona’s and Othello’s mothers. In their brief moment, the two women reach a modest accommodation by contemplating the “way of cleansing” (Morrison 27) recommended by Soun, whom we later learn is “a root woman” who “adopted me [Othello] as her son” (Morrison 31). This “cleansing” holds a tentative promise of consolation: “We build an altar to the spirits who are waiting to console us” (Morrison 27). This moment initiates the theme of transformation. The shift in focus from the graves of Othello and Desdemona to the building of an altar in their memory suggests that the outcome of their story is not fixed but mutable. In addition, this meeting of the mothers symbolically indicates that cultural mixing is not a problem but a positive resource when it enables the flexibility to occupy multiple vantage points and to attain a more far-reaching, broader world view.

In *Desdemona*, Madame Brabantio and Soun (that is, the mothers of Desdemona and Othello), get a voice and engage in a healing debate with the purpose of bridging difference with regards to class and race. Through a related female kinship that unites both women’s suffering for their offspring, Morrison opts for exoneration as a means for the construction and full understanding of a multiethnic social reality. Soun’s claim that “we have much to share” is summarized in a covenant of forgiveness that pulls together two women of different class and race, white and black, in a touching move that

reveals a transnational and transcultural feminist union. Sharing each other's pain is the way in which both women gain subjectivity and have their say pretending to foster the eventual redemption of all the characters and envisioning women as the synergistic force to overcome difference.

One other silent woman in Shakespeare's play enters into a new dimensionality i.e. Emilia. In her a portrait of silence that is complicit with mass murder is created. The exchange between Desdemona and Emilia is more sustained and more argumentative, beginning with the sarcasm of Emilia's greeting, "Well, well. If it isn't the martyr of Venice" (Morrison 42). Emilia rebuffs Desdemona's assumption that they have a friendship of equals by insisting on her difference as "a servant" and as an orphan: "It's not the same. An orphan knows how quickly love can be withdrawn" (Morrison 44). The conversation intimates the self-examination that Desdemona must undergo in order to arrive at a position where she is capable of remaking her sense of herself. The striking tonal shift in Emilia's concluding image of the lizard that sheds "her dull outer skin" to reveal "her jeweled self" signals the hope for a new self-image and self-awareness. The shedding of the old comes from within: "No one helped her; she did it by herself" (Morrison 44). As Emilia puts it in her final metaphoric sentence, "That little lizard changed my life". This visionary model belongs not only to Emilia but also implicitly serves as inspiration for Desdemona.

The third encounter, which is also the longest and most elaborate, immediately follows in the next section when Desdemona talks with Barbary, who explicitly, identifies herself as black-skinned. In the primeval text, Barbary meant Africa and equated barbarism, savagery and silence, Morrison not only gives her a voice but also the opportunity to tell her story, inserting herself into history and voicing Africa for the first time in a Shakespearean story. When Desdemona and Barbary reunite onstage the African maid refuses to be called Barbary and bespeaks her autonomy by voicing her mind:

"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. Barbary? Barbary equals the sly, vicious enemy who must be put down at any price; held down at any cost for the conquerors' pleasure. Barbary is the name of those without whom you could neither live nor prosper." (Morrison 45)

The moment is heightened to the level of climactic impact because Barbary, who never actually appears in Shakespeare's play, is granted the power of speech and is elevated to a major onstage role. The part is further enhanced by having it performed by Rokia Traoré, the Malian singer who collaborated with Morrison in creating the production. The African woman missing from Shakespeare at last takes the stage. Unlike Desdemona, Barbary has been renamed, so that her original African name, Sa'ran, marks her non-Shakespearean reality. The meaning of her alternate name is "joy", which contrasts sharply with the continuation of misery signified by the name Desdemona. Joy opens up the possibility of a shift in a new direction. Again, the encounter begins with Barbary/Sa'ran contradicts Desdemona's enthusiastic claim of their shared experience, "We shared nothing" and strongly

registering the difference in their status, “I was your slave” (Morrison 45). Sa’ran’s assertiveness brings us back; with a new perspective, to Desdemona’s reminiscences at the beginning, “My solace in those early days lay with my nurse, Barbary . . . She tended me as though she were my birth mother” (Morrison 18). Sa’ran demonstrates the other, negative, side of this “solace.”

Sa’ran’s acquisition of autonomy is performed when she sings a new version of the willow tree that in Shakespeare led to the foreboding of tragedy, while in Morrison epitomizes the resurrection of black subjectivity. Henceforth, at the end of the play Sa’ran has reestablished her denied identity and Desdemona and Othello make amends in a wondrous scene in which an empowered woman compels him by admitting: “I was the empire you had already conquered. Alone together we could have been invincible” (Morrison, 54). In an extremely symbolic stance, Morrison ends the play with Sa’ran voice, providing a restoration of roles, for in Shakespeare the concluding lines of a play were spoken by a character whose rank could match the hierarchy of the audience.

Sa’ran sings the alternative version of the Willow song and remarks that she “will never die again”. Desdemona comments that they “will never die again,” which shows Sa’ran and Desdemona’s bond and mutual understanding ((Morrison 49). This scene demonstrates that Desdemona and Sa’ran are able to transcend their differences and it, therefore, also shows the feminist principle of solidarity.

The politics of forgiveness infuse the play and reinforce the way in which Morrison sews back the pieces of the crippled plot that Shakespeare left outside the story and off stage. Desdemona was Shakespeare’s ideal creation, a vision of perfection, a woman offering love and forgiveness in the face of hatred, mistrust, and murderous lies. For Toni Morrison, the ideal woman is not silent. Finally, she speaks and as she speaks, she reveals secrets, hopes, dreams, and also her own imperfections. Shakespeare’s Desdemona is divine perfection, but Toni Morrison allows her to be human, to make mistakes, and finally, with eternity stretching before her, to learn, and then to understand. So in Desdemona, we begin to glimpse some of the mysteries of Shakespeare’s Othello with new insight in the light of deepened histories.

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