

Feminism and Feminisms

An Analysis of Paula Vogel and Toni Morrison's Feminist Play Appropriations of *Othello*

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1. Introduction

Since the Restoration period, William Shakespeare's plays have continually been adapted (Sanders 58). His texts are adjusted to specific cultures, ideologies and to 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, graphic novels, fan fiction" and so forth (Camati 53). Since the 1970s, feminist writers and scholars have looked at Shakespeare's *Othello* (Carney "Morrison and Talking Back to Shakespeare" par. 3). They focused especially on the female characters in *Othello*, that is to say on Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, since these characters were neglected by traditional Shakespearean criticism (Camati 53).

The interest of feminist writers and scholars in Shakespeare's *Othello* might be explained by the presence of feminist elements in the play. Emilia, for example, states that women are equal to men since they "have sense like them" (Shakespeare 4.3.88-89). She questions the gender dichotomy by reducing men and women to bodies with the same experiences and senses (Gay 5). Desdemona also speaks her mind when she, in the beginning of the play, chooses Othello instead of her father. She says:

But here's my husband,
 And so much duty as my mother showed
 To you, preferring you before her father,
 So much I challenge that I may profess
 Due to the Moor my lord. (Shakespeare 1.3.184-188)

Desdemona makes her own decision and takes away her father's right to decide who she marries. However, there are also aspects in the play that seem to affirm the patriarchal system. The handkerchief is in harmony with this system since "whoever possesses the handkerchief possesses the woman" (Friedman, "Revisioning" 136). The possession of the handkerchief

can be seen as a metaphor for the view of women as objects. Furthermore, the word whore is used fourteen times, which is more than in any other Shakespearean play (Stanton 94). These aspects can make it interesting for feminist writers and scholars to reread and rewrite *Othello*. The rewritten plays are often categorised as feminist play adaptations or appropriations. Two well-known appropriations are Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*.

Numerous critics analysed these plays using general feminist principles, i.e. general principles that feminists agree on, such as a focus on women and a critique of the patriarchal system. However, this general notion of feminism does not do justice to the multitude of feminist theories. Critics have not looked at these differing feminist theories that are portrayed by Vogel and Morrison's plays. This thesis shall present an analysis of these plays through which it will become clear that Vogel's play is in harmony with postmodern and lesbian feminist theories and that Morrison's play is in agreement with transnational and black feminism. Moreover, this analysis of distinctive feminist principles shows that the plays are in conflict with each other. Vogel's appropriation, and thus postmodern and lesbian feminism, emphasises the differences between women and the difficulty of forming a sisterhood. On the contrary, Morrison's *Desdemona*, and transnational and black feminism, focuses on the potential for sisterhood to transcend the differences between women. This play also empowers men, which is in line with the black feminist principle to empower oppressed men and women, while Vogel's play does not give a voice to the male characters. In sum, this thesis shall argue that if a general notion of feminism is used, as is seen in scholarly works, the conflicting feminist principles of these plays are overlooked.

Firstly, the concepts of adaptation and appropriation will be explained and the pluralistic nature of feminism will be shown. Secondly, the similarities between the plays that are in agreement with general principles of feminism will be discussed. This will make clear

that, when a general definition of feminism is used, these plays can be seen as similar feminist appropriations. Thirdly, in order to show that critics use a general notion of feminism, several studies on Paula Vogel's play will be discussed. Through the analysis of Vogel's play, it becomes evident that the play portrays specific principles of postmodern and lesbian feminisms, i.e. distinctive feminist theories. Fourthly, research on Toni Morrison's play will be presented, which shows that these critics similarly use a general definition of feminism. Morrison's play will also be analysed, which demonstrates that this play is in harmony with transnational and black feminisms. The contrasting analyses of the plays will show that they are feminist play appropriations with conflicting underlying feminisms. This will demonstrate that the different feminisms that are visible in Vogel and Morrison's plays should be carefully portrayed in order to get a fuller understanding of the play appropriations.

1.1 Adaptation and Appropriation

First, the terms adaptation and appropriation need to be defined to show that Vogel's and Morrison's plays are play appropriations as is argued by critics, such as Anna Stegh Camati who sees Vogel's play as a "parodistic appropriation of Shakespeare's *Othello*" (59) and Ayanna Thompson who calls Morrison's *Desdemona* a "feminist theatrical appropriation" (495). Julie Sanders offers a useful distinction in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*. She explains that "an adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original" (26). For example, even though *Othello* needs to be reshaped and rewritten to create a cinematic version, it is still clearly *Othello*. Appropriation "frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 26). It is "involved in a process of reading between the lines, offering analogues or supplements to what is available in a source text, and drawing attention to its gaps and absences" (60). This definition clarifies that Paula Vogel and Toni Morrison's plays are

appropriations because they both move away from the source text and bring *Othello* into a new domain, offer supplements and focus on the gaps with regards to the female characters in the play.

1.2 Feminism and Feminisms

Before Vogel and Morrison's plays can be analysed, the term feminism has to be further outlined. In this chapter, a brief sketch will be given of the differences between feminisms, which will show that feminism is a pluralistic concept. One disagreement that can be seen within feminism revolves around the wave metaphor. Feminists created this metaphor in order to give a historical overview of the different feminist movements (van der Tuin 23). The first wave of feminism peaked around 1900 and concerned itself with achieving basic political rights for women. The second wave took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Second wave feminists thought that achieving equal rights would not be enough to reach a non-patriarchal society and they wanted equality in general, e.g. with regards to education. The second wave was later criticised because second wave feminists ignored differences such as race, class, religion and ethnicity (Haslanger, Tuana and O'Connor, "Feminist Beliefs and Feminist Movements" par. 3). Some see this criticism as forming a third wave, and yet other feminists abandon the wave metaphor altogether. These critics are against using the metaphor because, among other things, it disregards the ongoing feminist movements between the 1920s and 1960s (Haslanger, Tuana and O'Connor, "Feminist Beliefs and Feminist Movements" par. 4). Moreover, the peaks in the metaphor seem to represent the heydays of white, Western women and downplays the more marginalised movements, such as black or lesbian feminisms (Springer 1061). Through this brief sketch of feminism, it becomes evident that it is difficult to form a general history of feminism because of the many conflicts between feminists.

Feminists also disagree about the ways in which women are being oppressed and which injustices and oppressions they should focus on (Haslanger, Tuana and O'Connor "Normative and Descriptive Components" par. 1). Liberal feminists argue that freedom is a fundamental value and that this must be ensured for all individuals, including women. They argue that women do not have this freedom because not all women can choose how they live their lives (Baehr "Procedural Accounts of Personal Autonomy" par. 7). Ann Cudds, for example, argues that violence and the threat of violence, such as sexual assault, reduces women's activity because they stay indoors to avoid harm. Therefore, she concludes that violence disempowers women (Cudds 91-96). However, radical feminists criticise liberal feminism because radical feminists think that, even if women were to have freedom, they would not be treated in the same way as men. Radical feminists want to invert the patriarchal system and place women at the centre (Zalewski 12-13). On the contrary, postmodern feminists analyse power relationships. They argue that power lies with those who control the truth and they want to understand why certain beliefs are seen as the truth (Zalewski 26). Sandra Lee Bartky, for example, examines feminine beauty expressed by fashion magazines and cosmetic ads. She argues that these ads show that "a woman's face must be made up [...]. Soap and water, a shave, and routine attention to hygiene may be enough for *him*; for *her* they are not" [original emphasis] (Bartky 100). Bartky's study shows the focus of postmodern feminism on beliefs that are considered to be the truth. This sketch of distinctive feminist theories demonstrates the many disagreements between feminists.

In light of these disagreements, Susan James argues that there are "many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program" (par. 1). James emphasises the many disagreements between feminist theories. However, the different feminisms share the understanding that women are subjected to injustices, because they are

women, and that this should be stopped (Haslanger, Tuana and O'Connor "Feminism as Anti-Sexism" par. 3). Such a general notion of feminism contains general principles that feminist agree on, for example a focus on women and inequality, and a critique of the patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the different feminisms disagree about the specific principles within this general notion of feminism. These conflicts make it clear that feminism should be seen as an umbrella term that contains many different feminist perspectives.

2. General Feminism: Vogel and Morrison's *Desdemona*

Critics often categorise Vogel and Morrison's plays as feminist play appropriations. For example, Sujata Iyengar labels Vogel's play as a "feminist appropriation" (508) and Ayanna Thompson calls Morrison's *Desdemona* a "feminist theatrical appropriation" (495). In scholarly works, a general definition of feminism is used to label these plays. A general definition holds the view that women are subjected to injustices and that this should be stopped, but it does not contain specific principles, such as the types of injustices a feminist theory should focus on. It includes the general principles that feminists agree on, such as looking at the inequality between men and women, a focus on women, and a critique of the patriarchal society. Jennifer Flaherty demonstrates the use of general principles when she examines feminism in Vogel's plays. She says that it "turns a critical eye on subjects such as female agency and autonomy, male and female sexual objectification, and patriarchal oppression" (par. 4). Flaherty thus sums up some general principles of feminism. This chapter will show that there are similarities between Vogel and Morrison's plays, which are in agreement with general principles of feminism.

Firstly, the plays both focus on the female characters in *Othello*. This is evident in the titles of the plays because Vogel's play is called *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* and Toni Morrison's play is titled *Desdemona*. Moreover, in Vogel's play there are only female characters, namely Emilia, Bianca and Desdemona. In Morrison's play the female characters outnumber the men. Furthermore, in the latter play only female characters are on stage. Desdemona channels the other characters, such as Othello, and gives them a voice. She serves as a medium for the other characters and they can 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 and this principle is portrayed by both plays.

Secondly, Vogel and Morrison both use Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect "to turn obvious and normative events into something unusual, extraordinary and startling" (Pellegrini 477). This alienation effect is used in Vogel and Morrison's plays as a feminist tool to criticise the traditional view of Desdemona. Traditionally, Desdemona was seen as the victim and as passive, submissive, chaste and pure (Pechter 124; Thompson 494). The character of Desdemona in Vogel and Morrison's plays is the opposite of the traditional Desdemona. Vogel turns Desdemona into a character with her own desires. Desdemona has especially the desire to "escape and see other worlds" (Vogel 242). This is the reason why she married Othello; however, he turned out to be "a porcelain white Venetian" (242). Desdemona could not escape the limited Venetian society. In another attempt to escape, she works for Bianca as a prostitute about which Desdemona remarks: "seed from a thousand lands [...] oh, how I travel!" (243). By turning Desdemona into a prostitute, Vogel's play challenges the traditional view of Desdemona as chaste and pure. These examples also show that Desdemona uses her sexuality in an attempt to liberate herself from her narrow world and this can be seen as "an act of resistance" (Flaherty par. 8). This resistance is also present in Shakespeare's *Othello*. For example, when Othello strikes Desdemona she objects that she has "not deserved this" (Shakespeare 4.1.128). However, in the traditional view of Desdemona, she is not a resistant, strong character. Vogel's play emphasises this resistant Desdemona instead of the traditional submissive and pure character.

Morrison also moves away from the traditional Desdemona. In the first scene, Desdemona criticises 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” (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” and “one prayer” (Shakespeare 5.2.82, 84). 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” (16). Desdemona claims her own agency and the confrontation with the audience, and with the traditional view of her character, shows her strength. These examples illustrate that in Vogel and Morrison’s plays Desdemona is demonstrated as a strong character, which differs from how she is traditionally portrayed, namely as a victim and as submissive, pure and passive. They use Brecht’s alienation effect to show a different Desdemona and to question the traditional view. Vogel and Morrison’s plays both turn women into active, resistant subjects, which can be seen as a general principle of feminism.

Thirdly, in Vogel and Morrison’s plays the characters of Emilia and Desdemona criticise the patriarchal system. Vogel’s Emilia remarks that she would “like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates” (Vogel 240). In Morrison’s play, Emilia says something similar, namely that “women try to survive, since we cannot flourish” (242). These comments both demonstrate that the patriarchal system limits women. These limitations are emphasised through the character of Desdemona. In Vogel’s play Desdemona says that “women are clad in purdah. We decent, respectable matrons from the cradle to the

alter to the shroud ... bridled with linen, blinded with lace ... These very walls are purdah” (Vogel 242). Desdemona’s remark shows the narrow world and the limited lives of women, for example, because they have to follow a fixed path. This is in line with Emilia’s remarks in both plays that women cannot rise and flourish in the world. Moreover, Vogel’s Desdemona calls the handkerchief “the crappy little snot rag,” which undermines the value that it is given in *Othello* (237). Othello sees this handkerchief as proof of her infidelity and it can, therefore, be seen as a metaphor for the view of women as objects. As was mentioned earlier, the person that “possesses the handkerchief, possesses the woman” (Friedman, “Revisioning” 136). Othello illustrates this view when, before he smothers her, he says to Desdemona that he saw the “handkerchief in [Cassio’s] hand” and he does not believe Desdemona when she tells him she is innocent (Shakespeare 5.2.63). Desdemona’s remark in Vogel’s play challenges this view because she devalues the handkerchief when she calls it a snot rag. Morrison’s Desdemona also criticises the patriarchal system when she looks back on the Venetian society and remarks that “men made the rules, women followed them” (13). This also shows the dominance of men over women, since women do not create the rules. These examples illustrate that Vogel and Morrison’s plays both criticise, through the characters of Emilia and Desdemona, the oppressive patriarchal system, which is a general feminist principle.

In sum, Vogel and Morrison’s plays contain similar elements. They both focus on women, show a strong, resistant Desdemona, and argue against the patriarchal system. These can be seen as general principles of feminism. The use of a general notion of feminism seems to suggest that these plays are similar feminist appropriations of *Othello*. However, as the next chapters will show, these plays portray distinctive feminisms. This focus on different feminist principles can better elucidate the conflicts between Vogel and Morrison’s plays and can, therefore, give a richer understanding of them as different feminist play appropriations.

3. Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars and adaptors, such as Paula Vogel, have looked at the female characters in *Othello* (Camati 53). When *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* premiered in 1993, Vogel gave a letter to the audience in which she tells that even though she admired Shakespeare, she began to question if Desdemona is a “fully dimensional heroine” or if she is “an abstraction played by gawky male adolescents” (Friedman, “The Feminist” 118). Vogel decided to appropriate *Othello* and to focus on Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. The play takes place during the action of *Othello* and is staged in a backroom of Desdemona's house. It ends before the last scene of *Othello* begins.

In this chapter, it will first be shown how critics portray this play as a feminist play appropriation. Subsequently, Vogel's play will be analysed to show that it is in agreement with the outcome of two shifts in feminist theories, which occurred because of the critique of postmodern and lesbian feminisms. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the homogenous view on womanhood, characteristic of second wave feminism, moved towards a more critical perspective that focuses on the differences between women. Consequently, the second wave promotion of sisterhood changed towards a critical view on female solidarity. This analysis will thus show that Vogel's play portrays distinctive feminist principles of postmodern and lesbian feminisms.

3.1 *Literary Criticism on Vogel's Play*

Because critics often use a general definition of feminism, they conclude that Vogel's play is a feminist play appropriation based on these general principles. Moreover, in some scholarly works the specific feminist elements in Vogel's play are not analysed. Jennifer Flaherty, for example, observes that the play is critical of patriarchal oppression, the lack of female agency, and female sexual objectification. Therefore, she concludes that it is a feminist play (par. 4,

19). This general view on feminism is shared by many other critics, such as Marianne Novy. Novy does not examine distinctive feminist approaches, but remarks that Vogel's play "shares concerns with feminists who focus on structures of oppression" (67). Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier write that Vogel "articulates a particular brand of feminism," but they do not explain which brand (233). They observe general elements of feminism, such as a focus on women and the difficulties of female solidarity, without examining the feminist theories to which these elements can be linked (Fischlin and Fortier 233-34). Ryan Claycomb also disregards distinctive feminisms. He argues that Vogel's play is a feminist appropriation because it portrays women as active subjects (92). In short, these critics examine general feminist elements, such as a focus on female agency and the critique of the patriarchal system, but they do not look at specific feminist elements and theories.

Other critics examine more specific feminist elements of Vogel's play. Nevertheless, they also use a general definition of feminism and do not connect the elements to the relevant feminisms. Sharon Friedman, for example, argues that in Vogel's play an important shift can be seen from "positive images of women to analysing and disrupting the ideological codes" ("Revisioning" 132). However, Friedman does not look at specific feminist principles that advocate this analysis and disruption. This shift, as will become clear, portrays the postmodern and lesbian feminist critique of the notion of womanhood. The same can be seen in Anna Stegh Camati's article in which she argues that the play draws on feminist approaches of the 1990s "to re-examine male anxieties over female sexuality" (52). However, she does not discuss these specific feminist approaches. These critics look at more specific elements in Vogel's play, such as a shift towards a critical view of women and male anxiety over female sexuality; however, similar to Flaherty, Novy, and Claycomb, Friedman and Camati do not examine whether or not these elements are in agreement with specific feminisms. Even though Vogel's play does contain these general feminist elements, there are

specific feminist principles present in this play that portray two shifts that occurred as a result of postmodern and lesbian feminisms.

3.2 First Shift: from Womanhood towards Women

Vogel's play demonstrates the outcome of a shift that occurred in feminist theories from a homogenous perspective on women, and a focus on the differences between men and women, towards an emphasis on the differences between women. In the 1970s, second wave feminists criticised the universal notion of men as an equivalent for all humans and started to emphasise womanhood as a category. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many feminists started to question this category of woman and womanhood that viewed women as a homogenous group (Griffin 81). For example, Julia Kristeva remarks that "a woman cannot be" (qtd. in Alcoff 418). Through this quote, Kristeva emphasises that there is not one woman, but that there are many differences between women. Influenced by Kristeva, postmodern feminists, such as Judith Butler, started to analyse the many different experiences and perspectives of women and criticised the category of womanhood as a "false ontology" (Butler 529). Lesbian feminists also started to question this homogenous notion of womanhood. For example, Kath Weston's remark that "woman is dead" shows that she also argues against the notion of womanhood (1). In sum, postmodern and lesbian feminists, in contrast with their predecessors, criticised the homogenous notion of woman and called for an emphasis on the differences between women.

Vogel's play shows the outcome of this shift, namely a critical perspective on womanhood and a focus on the differences between women. The play emphasises these differences through class, dialect and desires. For example, Emilia is from a lower class and, therefore, has a different life than Desdemona. She remembers that: "When m'lady was a toddling about the palace, and all of us servants would be follerin' after, stooping to pick up

all the pretty toys you'd be scatterin'" (Vogel 237). Emilia's tasks show the different lives of Emilia and Desdemona and the difference in class. Moreover, this quote demonstrates the use of dialect in the play. Emilia talks with a broad Irish brogue dialect, Desdemona with an upper class dialect, and Bianca with a stage-Cockney dialect. The difference in dialects and their difference in class are illustrated when Desdemona tells Emilia that she "may live to be [her] *fille de chambre* yet" (240). Emilia does not know what a *fille de chambre* is and calls it '*fee der shimber*' and Bianca says: "wot do ye call it [...] '*fee dar shimber*'" (244). These examples show the differences between the female characters with regards to class and dialect. Another difference that weakens the homogenous notion of womanhood, is the fact that the women all desire different things. Ironically, they want that which the others possess. Desdemona wants to be "a free woman" like Bianca, Bianca wants to have a husband like Emilia and Desdemona, and Emilia wants Desdemona's wealth and status (242). As a result of these differences, the women have, and want, different lives and experiences, which undermines the homogenous notion of womanhood.

Vogel's play does not only focus on the differences between women to criticise the homogenous notion of womanhood. It also shows the similarities between men and women. This is related to Emilia's statement in *Othello*. She says: "Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them" (Shakespeare 4.3.88-89). Emilia argues in this speech against the prescribed gender roles of men and women. She states that men and women are in essence the same: a body with five senses (Gay 5). Emilia continues and asks the following: "and have not we [women] affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?" (Shakespeare 4.3.95-96). Emilia questions the gender dichotomy, saying that women also have sexual desires and imperfections like men. Vogel's play shows this similarity as expressed by Emilia, and by doing so it also questions the binary categories of men and women. This becomes especially evident when the women in the play objectify men. In Shakespeare's

Othello, Desdemona is objectified in the first scene when Iago calls out to Brabantio:

“Awake! What ho, Brabantio! Thieves! Thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! / Thieves! Thieves!” (Shakespeare 1.1.77-79). The fact that Iago mentions thieves and bags shows that Desdemona is considered to be the property of Brabantio. She is an object that can be stolen. On the contrary, in Vogel’s play Desdemona finds a hoof-pick and makes jokes with Emilia about it representing a male sexual organ. Especially Iago is objectified in this scene when Desdemona asks Emilia if her “husband Iago [has] a hoof-pick to match” (Vogel 238). This shows that the objectification of women, and more specifically Iago’s objectification of Desdemona, is reversed in Vogel’s play towards an objectification of men, especially of Iago.

Another similarity between men and women that challenges the binary categories, is that the women in the play use each other in a similar way as the men use them. The men abuse their power, for example through sex. Iago uses Emilia for sex as she recounts in scene twenty-seven: “he’d take his fill of me [...] I could have been the bed itself” (Vogel 252). In Vogel’s play, the women also abuse their power. Desdemona, for example, manipulates Emilia into making empty promises to “keep her in line” (246). Emilia does not like Bianca and when she says that “the mistress of this house is not at home, nor will be to the likes of you,” she lets Bianca believe that Desdemona does not want to see her (244). These examples show that the women, like men, abuse their power and manipulate each other.

In short, Vogel’s play demonstrates the differences between women with regards to class, dialect and desire. Furthermore, the play shows the similarities between men and women, such as the objectification of the other sex and the abuse of power. Through this focus on the differences and similarities, the play questions the homogenous notion of womanhood. It is, therefore, in line with the postmodern and lesbian feminist principles that emphasise the differences between women and question the category of womanhood.

3.3 *Second Shift: From Promoting Sisterhood to Critique*

As a result of the focus on the differences between women, another shift occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this period, lesbian and postmodern feminists criticised the promotion of sisterhood (Allen 99). The term sisterhood was used in the 1970s to emphasise that women should work together to achieve freedom as a group. Liberal and radical feminists of the second wave used the slogan: “Sisterhood is powerful” (Klein and Hawthorne 57). This slogan implies that women can form a sisterhood because they are all oppressed and, therefore, share common experiences. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this view was criticised since it focused on white, heterosexual women and excluded many different perspectives, such as differences in class, sexual orientation and race (Allen 99-100). Hence, this critique of sisterhood is related to the questioning of women as a homogenous group. Postmodern and lesbian feminists thus started to criticise the promotion of sisterhood and they started to emphasise the difficulty of female solidarity.

The difficulty of forming a sisterhood is demonstrated in Vogel’s play. This struggle becomes clear through the absence of a genuine sisterhood between Desdemona and Emilia. When Emilia has stolen the handkerchief and Desdemona is looking for it, Emilia “*watches amused and disgusted at the mess her lady is making*” [original emphasis] (Vogel 236). This false solidarity is also evident when Desdemona asks Emilia if she has heard anything about Othello’s suspicions. Emilia tells her that she has not, but then “*drops a secret smile in the wash bucket*” [original emphasis] (240). Desdemona betrays Emilia as well when she demonstrates Iago’s size on the hoof-pick to Bianca (247). Bianca and Desdemona also illustrate the difficulty of forming a sisterhood. Bianca thinks that Desdemona has a relationship with Cassio and Bianca immediately attacks her (251). After this scene, Emilia tells Desdemona that “there’s no such thing as friendship with ladies” (251). These examples

show that the women in Vogel's play cannot form a sisterhood. This difficulty can be explained by the differences between the women in their desires and class.

However, the differences between the female characters are not the sole reason for the failure of forming a sisterhood. Vogel's play suggests that male dominance and the fact that women submit themselves to this dominance also make it difficult to form a bond. The play emphasises the limitations of women and the power of male dominance. This focus is in agreement with postmodern and lesbian feminist principles. Postmodern and lesbian feminists stress that men are united in their shared dominance and that they are focused on each other. To maintain their dominance, they cannot allow female solidarity (Hartmann 192). This shared male dominance is demonstrated in Vogel's play through Emilia's remark that "women don't figure into [men's] heads ... and that's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes. Only each other" (Vogel 252). These lines demonstrate that men "overlook the feminine sphere in favor of the masculine" (Flaherty par. 15). Men are thus focused on each other and cannot allow female solidarity as it can be a threat to their power.

Moreover, men dominate the sex/gender system which is, according to the influential lesbian feminist Gayle Rubin, "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality" (159). Men decide the gender roles and maintain the male/female dichotomy. The male dominance regulates how women behave and what bonds they can and cannot form. This view on male dominance and the sex/gender system, which undermines female solidarity and maintains gender roles, is demonstrated in Vogel's play through the fact that men are present even though they are not on stage. When Desdemona walks off the stage to meet Othello, the audience hears "the distinct sound of a very loud slap" (Vogel 239). Furthermore, Bianca demonstrates the role of women, to which she submits herself, that is maintained by the sex/gender system when she says: "All women want t'get a smug, it's wot we're made for ain't it? We may pretend different, but inside ev'ry born one o' us want smugs

an' babies, smugs wot are man enow t' keep us in our place" (Vogel 250). Desdemona puts it differently and says: "Women are clad in purdah, we decent, respectable matrons from the cradle to the alter to the shroud ... bridled with linen, blinded with lace ... These very walls are purdah" (242). Bianca and Desdemona's remarks show that women have to follow a fixed path that is controlled by men. These examples show that, as a consequence of the sex/gender system, women are controlled and limited. Emilia, therefore, remarks that "as long as there be men with one member but two minds, there's no such thin' as friendship between women" (245). Emilia's statement seems to suggest that men, in order to uphold this system, control the minds of women and men cannot allow women to form alliances since such a female alliance can be a threat to the sex/gender system. These remarks demonstrate that Vogel's play portrays principles of postmodern and lesbian feminisms because the play shows the power of male dominance and the influence of the sex/gender system on women and on female solidarity.

These examples have shown that Vogel's play shows the difficulty of forming a sisterhood. This is in harmony with the postmodern and lesbian feminist critique of female solidarity. The play is also in line with related arguments within these feminisms about shared male dominance and the workings of the sex/gender system which controls and limits the lives of women and makes it difficult to form a sisterhood.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, it has become clear that, with regards to Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*, the discussed critics used a general definition of feminism, e.g. placing women at the centre and criticising the patriarchal society. It was also revealed that some critics did not look at specific feminist elements and theories while others did not connect these elements to different feminisms. The analysis of Vogel's play shows that this play is in agreement with feminist

principles, which move beyond general principles because they are specific arguments formed within distinctive feminisms. Vogel's play demonstrates the outcome of two shifts that occurred as a result of postmodern and lesbian feminism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The focus on women as a homogenous group shifted in this period towards a focus on the differences between women. Consequently, a second shift occurred from promoting sisterhood towards questioning the possibility of female solidarity. Vogel's play portrays the outcome of these shifts and it can, therefore, be concluded that the play is in line with postmodern and lesbian feminist principles. As will be discussed next, these feminist principles clash with the underlying principles of Morrison's play.

4. Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*

In 2011, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* premiered in Vienna. The play focuses, similar to Vogel's play, on the female characters in *Othello*. Morrison noticed that productions often cut or shortened the unpinning scene. This is the scene that contains the Willow song and Emilia's feminist speech. It is believed that the Willow song does not move the story forward and that Emilia's speech contradicts the view of women as submissive and pure (Carney "Giving Voice to Mothers and Maids" par. 1). Morrison created *Desdemona* to give the women more attention. She also introduces the absent women of *Othello*, such as the character of Barbary and the mothers of Othello and Desdemona.

Morrison's *Desdemona* is a sequel and takes place in the afterlife, after the ending of *Othello*. Desdemona channels other characters, such as Emilia and Othello, and has conversations with them. She is the medium through which these characters speak. Desdemona's monologues and the dialogues with other characters are alternated with songs from the Malian musician Rokia Traoré. Traoré comments through her songs on the happenings in the play. She also plays Barbary, the other character that is physically present on stage.

In this chapter, the literary criticism on Toni Morrison's play will be demonstrated and the play itself will be examined. This analysis will show that Morrison's *Desdemona* portrays the transnational and black feminist principle of intersectionality and the principle of global sisterhood. The play is also in line with the black feminist emphasis on empowerment for both men and women. This chapter will make clear that the literary critics do not examine specific feminisms and that Morrison's play does portray distinctive feminist principles, which are in conflict with the feminist principles present in Vogel's play.

4.1 *Literary Criticism on Morrison's Play*

Many critics of Morrison's *Desdemona* do not reflect on the possibility of distinctive feminist theories. Ayanna Thompson, for example, calls this play a "feminist theatrical appropriation" without exemplifying this statement (495). Others, similar to the critics of Vogel's play, refer to general aspects of feminism and do not link feminist elements to distinctive feminisms. For example, Abja Rasheed argues that Morrison's *Desdemona* is a feminist appropriation of *Othello* because the play renounces patriarchy and it concerns itself "with the sad plight of women in the society" (114). Moreover, he remarks that the play centres on women rather than on male characters (Rasheed 115). This critique of the patriarchal society and the focus on women can be seen as general principles of feminism. Lenore Kitts also points out that Morrison's play focuses on women (258). Jo Eldridge Carney follows the same line of arguing in remarking that Vogel's play centres around the female characters, but she adds that *Desdemona* demonstrates "the possibility of a community that transcends gender, cultural, and racial differences" ("Desdemona, Othello, and the Possibility of Wisdom par. 13). However, Carney does not incorporate feminist principles that underlie this focus on solidarity and the feminist view that combines gender, race, class, and ethnic differences. These examples show that these critics use general feminist principles, such as a focus on women, and that they do not connect the feminist elements in Morrison's *Desdemona* to distinctive feminisms. In the analysis it will become evident that this play portrays specific feminist principles of transnational and black feminisms.

4.2 *Intersectionality and Transnational Sisterhood*

In the 1980s and 1990s, many black feminists, as well as lesbians and postmodernists, this was demonstrated in chapter two, started to question the category of woman and asked: "Exactly which women do you mean?" (Collins, *on Intellectual* 14). The black feminists

started to emphasise the differences between women and remarked that gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity are intertwined. This is the principle of intersectionality which calls for an analysis of and a focus on these differences (Dicker and Piepmeier 9). For example, the black feminist Carolyn Martin Shaw argues that “gender is constructed in the matrix of race, class, and sexuality” (117). Patricia Hill Collins also observes that “race and class intersect in structuring gender” (*Black Feminist* 5). This focus on intersectionality mainly emphasises the differences and inequalities between women (Roth 20). Black feminists thus concentrate on analysing the differences between women with regards to race, ethnicity, and class.

Transnational feminists argue that the differences between women do not prevent a transnational sisterhood. The transnational and black feminist bell hooks, which is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, argues that women should focus on how they are globally linked (*Feminism* 46). Zillah Einstein remarks that this transnational feminism is a theory “that recognizes individual diversity [...] and [it] rejects false/gender borders and the notion of the ‘other’” (qtd. in hooks, *Feminism* 47). This makes it clear that transnational feminism promotes solidarity and acknowledges the differences between women.

Many black feminists also advocate a transnational view on sisterhood and call for a renewal of solidarity. For example, the influential black feminist Audre Lorde argues that the differences in race, ethnicity and class do not prevent the feeling of solidarity. In her eyes it is the fact that these differences are ignored that make these differences seem non-existent or “insurmountable barriers” (Lorde 115). Lorde remarks that white feminists ignore these differences and define womanhood in their own words in which they disregard women of colour (117). Lorde concludes that when white feminists acknowledge these differences, sisterhood is possible.

However, bell hooks replies that this refusal to recognise differences within white feminist movements is not the only problem. Black women are not willing to express

solidarity with white feminists because they are taught to see white women as the enemy and as threats (hooks, *Talking Back* 179). She calls, following Lorde, for a renewal of sisterhood that does acknowledge these differences, but can also transcend them to achieve solidarity. These transnational and black feminist principles of sisterhood and the related black feminist principle of intersectionality, i.e. the focus on differences such as race, class, and gender, are present in Morrison's play.

The first element that shows the possibility of global solidarity is the fact that Toni Morrison and the Malian musician Rokia Traoré created this play together. Morrison wrote the text and Traoré made all but one of the songs. Morrison wrote an alternative version of the Willow song. The point of this collaboration was to find a shared space and to let two distinct female voices speak ("Desdemona Takes the Microphone"). Traoré comments through her songs on the happenings in the play. For example, she refers to an African story when she mentions a *dongori*. This is a woven cloth of thorns that functions as a bridal veil as well as a funeral shroud. Traoré sings that women, in particular Desdemona, will from now on claim a different future (Morrison 28-29). She also merges an African story about a man who lost his temper with Othello's story. She addresses Othello and sings that "a great man / does not give in to anger. / Contain your rage" (24). This shows that Traoré combines different elements of Western and African stories, which represents her transnational view as well as her collaboration with Morrison. The focus on global solidarity is also evident in one of her last songs. She declares the following:

If [peace is] 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. (Morrison 56)

In this song Traoré expresses a form of solidarity that transcends race and ethnicity. In sum, this collaboration between Morrison and Traoré and Traoré's songs demonstrate the transnational and black feminist principle of transcending differences and working towards a global sisterhood.

The transnational and black feminist principle of sisterhood and the focus on the differences between women is also demonstrated through the characters in the play. For example, when the mothers of Desdemona and Othello first meet, they are grieving and do not seem to bond. The mother of Othello asks: "Are we enemies then?" to which Desdemona's mother answers: "Of course" (Morrison 26). Nevertheless, in the end they accept each other and mourn together by building an altar "for the spirits who are waiting to console [them]" (27). Even though Desdemona's mother is Venetian and Othello's mother comes from a "desert land" (27), these women can overcome their differences in race and ethnicity. This scene shows the acknowledgement of the differences between women that is, according to transnational and black feminists, needed to form a sisterhood.

Additionally, Emilia and Desdemona can form a sisterhood. At first, Emilia is distressed because Desdemona treated her like a servant. In Shakespeare's *Othello* Desdemona gives her instructions, such as "lay be these –" and "prithee, hie thee: he'll come anon" (Shakespeare, 4.3.45,47). Emilia does not answer Desdemona in *Othello*, but in Morrison's play Emilia's perspective is given. She first pretends to be Desdemona and says: "Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia" (Morrison 43). She continues and states: "that is not how you treat a friend; that's how you treat a servant" (43). This shows the difference in class between Emilia and Desdemona that prevents them from forming a sisterhood. However, in the afterlife Desdemona acknowledges her mistake and she admits that "instead of judging, [she] should have been understanding" (44). The characters in the play can thus learn from

each other and, through this knowledge, they can form new bonds and overcome these class differences. This bond between Emilia and Desdemona can be contrasted with the failure of forming a sisterhood in Vogel's play. Emilia and Desdemona do not form a genuine sisterhood in Vogel's play. At the end, they are honest to each other as in Morrison's play. Desdemona tells Emilia that she does not plan to take Emilia with her when she leaves Othello and in return Emilia admits to the theft of the handkerchief. However, when Desdemona says "surely, [Othello] will not ... harm a sleeping woman" at the end of the play, it becomes clear that Emilia and Desdemona do not form a genuine sisterhood, but trust men instead (Vogel 253). Contrary to Vogel's play, the honesty between Emilia and Desdemona allows them to form a genuine sisterhood in Morrison's play.

Furthermore, Desdemona and Barbary can also form a bond and in their dialogue the inequalities based on race, gender, and class become apparent. Desdemona mentions in *Othello* that her "mother had a maid called Barbary" (Shakespeare 4.3.25). Morrison uses this line to explain Desdemona's attraction to Othello. In Morrison's play, Barbary was the nursemaid of Desdemona and, as in *Othello*, she died singing the Willow song. In the afterlife, she and Desdemona meet again. Barbary tells Desdemona that she never really knew her. Desdemona did not know her real name, which is Sa'ran and that Desdemona does not understand that Sa'ran "was her slave" (Morrison 45). Sa'ran emphasises these differences again when she adds: "I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned" (45). This shows that, as bell hooks remarked, Sa'ran is not willing to form a bond with a white woman in the beginning of the scene. However, Desdemona objects that they are both women and that her "prison was unlike [Sa'ran's] but it was prison still" (48). The understanding that they are both affected by the oppressive system enables Desdemona and Sa'ran to form a bond. Sa'ran answers that Desdemona has indeed "never hurt or abused" her (48). This shows that Sa'ran acknowledges the fact that Desdemona is not her enemy. At the end of their conversation,

Sa'ran sings the alternative version of the Willow song and remarks that she "will never die again" (Morrison 49). Desdemona comments that they "will never die again," which shows Sa'ran and Desdemona's bond and mutual understanding (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.

It is shown that Morrison's play moves beyond borders and shows the transnational bond between women. This is demonstrated through the collaboration between Morrison and Traoré. Furthermore, the female characters in the play acknowledge their differences and can form a sisterhood as a result. Therefore, it can be concluded that Morrison's play portrays the transnational and black feminist principle of sisterhood and intersectionality. This can be contrasted with the postmodern and lesbian feminist critique of sisterhood that is present in Vogel's play. In Vogel's play, there was also a focus on the differences between women, but this was to emphasise the difficulty of forming a sisterhood. In contrast, Morrison's play demonstrates that by acknowledging these differences, a sisterhood can be formed.

4.3 General Empowerment

Morrison's play does not concentrate solely on women. This is in line with the humanist principle that underlies black feminism. Black feminists embrace the struggle for empowering oppressed people. Alice Walker introduces the term womanist to emphasise this principle. She explains that a womanist is someone who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins also argues that black feminism is a struggle to empower oppressed people (*Black Feminist* 42-43).

The focus on oppressed people, both men and women, is illustrated in Morrison's *Desdemona* through the fact that Othello gets a voice. Desdemona gives Othello the possibility to speak by channelling him and Othello is able to tell his story through her.

Othello talks, among other things, about his childhood and he reveals that he has been a child soldier (Morrison 31). This story can explain certain reactions of Othello. For example, when Othello is convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and he wants revenge, he cries out: "Oh, blood! Blood! Blood!" (Shakespeare 3.4.446). This remark can be clarified by his childhood story because as a child soldier, he would have become used to violence. Desdemona thus empowers Othello to give an explanation of his reactions and deeds and to reflect on the past.

Moreover, the empowerment of men and women is also shown through the conversation between Desdemona and Othello. Despite their differences, they come close to a mutual understanding and to forming a bond. Othello asks Desdemona at the end of their last scene together: "And now? Together? Alone? Is it too late?" to which she answers: "'Late' has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility of wisdom" (Morrison 55). This example shows the possibility of a mutual understanding and of forming a bond between men and women. In contrast, in Vogel's play Othello is not empowered. He is mentioned when Desdemona walks towards him offstage and the audience hears "the distinct sound of a very loud slap" (Vogel 239). His actions also become clear when, for example, Emilia tells that Othello "gathered up the sheets from [Desdemona's] bed" (253). However, Vogel's play does not empower men, because Othello does not get a voice, nor do the other male characters. This clashes with Morrison's *Desdemona* because this last scene between Desdemona and Othello, and the other scenes in which Desdemona gives Othello a voice, demonstrates the empowerment of men and women, which is in agreement with the core humanist principle of black feminism.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter showed that the discussed critics used a general definition of feminism, e.g. a focus on women. This made it clear that these critics did not use specific feminist principles

when examining Morrison's *Desdemona*. However, the analysis of this play showed that it portrays principles of specific feminisms. The play is in agreement with the transnational and black feminist principle of global sisterhood, the black feminist focus on intersectionality and the black feminist principle of general empowerment for both men and women. These principles clash with the postmodern and lesbian principles of Vogel's play. Vogel focuses on the differences between women to show the difficulty of forming a sisterhood. Morrison also acknowledges the differences, but her characters are able to transcend these differences and can form a sisterhood. Moreover, Vogel does not empower the male characters of *Othello*. In Vogel's play *Othello* is present, for example when he slaps Desdemona, but he is not allowed to speak. Morrison, however, gives a voice to Othello through Desdemona. The analyses of these plays demonstrate that they are based on conflicting underlying principles. Vogel's play is in agreement with principles that criticise sisterhood and do not empower men while Morrison's play portrays principles that promote global sisterhood and the empowerment of both men and women.

5. Conclusion

Feminism can be seen as an umbrella term that covers many different feminisms. A general definition of feminism states that women are oppressed, because of the fact that they are women, and that this should be stopped. This general feminist theory contains principles that feminists agree on, such as a focus on the inequality between men and woman and giving a critique of the patriarchal system. It has become clear that Vogel and Morrison's plays are in harmony with these general feminist principles. The critics of these plays use general principles to analyse the plays and it seemed as if these plays can be labelled as similar feminist play appropriations.

However, there are also many specific feminist principles within differing feminist theories. The analyses of Vogel and Morrison's plays showed that the specific feminist principles underlying the plays are in conflict with each other. Vogel's play is in agreement with the outcome of two important turning points within postmodern and lesbian feminist theories: from a focus on women as a homogenous group towards an emphasis on the differences between women and, as a consequence, from promoting sisterhood towards a more critical view on female solidarity. Contrary, Morrison's *Desdemona* portrays the transnational and black feminist view that promotes global sisterhood and is in harmony with the black feminist focus on differences, such as race, class, and gender, and to the core principle of black feminism, namely the empowerment of oppressed men and women.

In conclusion, labelling these plays as feminist play appropriations is not doing justice to the multitude of feminist theories. Vogel's play portrays principles that criticise sisterhood while Morrison's play is in agreement with feminist principles that promote global sisterhood. Moreover, Vogel does not give a voice to the male characters of *Othello* while Morrison's play is in line with the black feminist principle of general empowerment and *Othello* gets a voice. These distinctive conflicting feminisms are overlooked when a general definition of

feminism is used. It is, therefore, not accurate to label Vogel and Morrison's plays as feminist play appropriations without looking at the differences and conflicts. These categories should be more specific, for example a postmodern, lesbian feminist play appropriation and a transnational, black feminist play appropriation. This would emphasise the fact that feminism is a pluralistic concept that contains numerous theories and it would thus bring the conflicts between feminist plays into focus. More attention to these conflicting feminist principles will give a richer understanding of the plays since it will clarify the differences, founded on distinctive feminist perspectives, between Vogel and Morrison's plays.

A limitation of this study is that it only looked at two plays. Further research might explore whether this general notion of feminism is used with regards to other feminist play appropriations, or other feminist texts, and whether or not these plays portray specific feminist principles. A greater focus on distinctive feminisms could produce a fuller understanding of the similarities and differences between feminist theories and texts.

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