

**PAULA VOGEL'S PARODIC RE(PRESENTATION) OF SHAKESPEARE'S  
OTHELLO THROUGH *DESDEMONA: A PLAY ABOUT A HANDKERCHIEF*****Muhammad Ayub Khan (Corresponding author)**[ayubuom333@gmail.com](mailto:ayubuom333@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

*The current study analyzes Paul Vogel's play, Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief as a parodic re(presentation) of Shakespeare's Othello. Vogel appropriates Shakespeare's Othello and presents it to American audience in a different temporal and spatial setting with a sense of critical distance. Vogel reverses the whole pragmatics of Shakespeare's play. The study uses different parodic tools such as kynicism, burlesque, humor and parody for probing Vogel's play to deconstruct the dominant ideology represented by Shakespeare's Othello. The concept of kynicism by Peter Sloterdijk developed in his Critique of Cynical Reason (1983) is used as a tool for the critique of patriarchal ideology of Shakespeare's Othello. Further, the study uses parody as a critical lens subverting the official ideology of Shakespeare's Othello through Paula Vogel's play. Linda Hutcheon's parody (1989) and Terry Eagleton's theory of Humor (1939) serve useful tools for examining Vogel's play as a critique of the Venetian high culture represented in Shakespeare's Othello. The study highlights how Paula Vogel transforms the tragic narrative of Othello into comic mood through these parodic techniques. Further, Vogel transforms Emilia and Desdemona from silenced voices into assertive and articulative beings through her play. In short, Vogel makes representation of a representation and exposes the politics of representation of Shakespeare's Othello through her play.*

**Key words:** *Kynicism; Burlesque; Humour; Parody*

**Introduction**

Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (1996) is an innovative re-writing of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Vogel's play was published in 1993. Vogel herself directed its earlier performance at Cornell University in 1977. The play has since gone through successive stage presentation by the Bay Street Theater Festival in Sag Harbor and the Circle Repertory Theater in New York City in 1993. Vogel wrote the play as a tribute to Wolfgang Bauer's *Shakespeare the Sadist*. Vogel's *Desdemona* is re(presentation) of Shakespeare canonical text in American context context of parody, feminist and postmodernist philosophical tradition. Its text and texture is subversive, bawdy and parodic.

Vogel's *Desdemona* makes a dialogical relation with Shakespeare's *Othello*. Vogel inscribes and destabilizes Shakespeare's *Othello*. Vogel appropriates the female characters, *Desdemona*, *Emilia* and *Bianca* from Shakespeare's play and re-frames them in terms of tone, texture and ideology. Vogel changes and challenges the tragic authority of Shakespeare's *Othello* and re-writes the play from a satirical mood. Camatai (2012) writes that Paula Vogel's re-writing of *Othello* may be interpreted as an act of "parodistic appropriation" (p. 53). Vogel's *Desdemona* represents the meeting point of innovation and critique, creation and re-creation. The play projects Shakespeare's *Othello* from the perspective of female characters: *Bianca*, *Emilia* and *Desdemona*. Further, *Desdemona* is transformed into a prostitute who frequents *Bianca*'s brothel in search of excitement and independence. Disillusioned from her marriage with *Othello*, "a porcelain white Venetian", *Desdemona* conspires with *Emilia* to escape from her restrictive life (p.171). Vogel's audacious, liberated and defiant version of *Desdemona* stands in sharp contrast with Shakespeare's conventional representation of *Desdemona*

This study explores Vogel's *Desdemona* from the theoretical lens of Kynicism, burlesque and parody to explain this transformation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The reversal of tone from tragic to comic, from formal language to colloquial speech and the reversal of Shakespeare's female characters are strategies used by Vogel to question the official ideology and canonical status of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Linda Hutcheon (1989) writes that "parody works to foreground the politics of representation" (p.90). Looked from Hutcheon's perspective, Vogel's play highlights the politics of representation of Shakespeare's *Othello* and makes representation of representation.

### Research Question

How does Paula Vogel's play, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* re(presents) Shakespeare's *Othello*?

### Theoretical Framework

The study uses the concepts of kynicism, burlesque, parody, and humor as theoretical lens for the interpretation of Paula Vogel's play, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*. The main theorists utilized for this study are Peter Sloterdijk, Linda Hutcheon, Simon Dentith and Terry Eagleton. Hutcheon defines postmodern parody as "a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representation of history" (p.91). She writes that parody is, "repetition with critical distance" (p.185). Parody, as opposed to simple imitation or mockery, recognizes the authority of classical texts while changing their meanings to reveal cultural norms and official ideologies. Further, this study also utilizes Professor Simon Dentith concept of burlesque (2000). Dentith writes that the basic joke in burlesque "depends upon the comic interchange between high and low" (p. 151). Furthermore Dentith writes that "parody involves the imitation and transformation of another's words" (p.03). He further asserts that, "parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (p.09). Similarly, Peter Sloterdijk (1983) writes that kynicism "in substance, corresponds to resistance and repression, or more precisely, self-embodiment in resistance and self-splitting in repression" (p.218). Like Hutcheon's parody, kynicism also serves as a form of resistance as well as a self-reflexive critique. In addition, Eagleton's humour supplements this theoretical model. Eagleton (1939) writes that "like art, humour can estrange and relativise the norms by which we live, but it can also enforce them" (p.137).

### Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and interpretive in its nature. The study uses Vogel's play, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* as primary source for textual analysis. Close reading is utilized as a tool for textual analysis of Vogel's play as parodic-rewriting of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The critical studies on Vogel's play serve as secondary sources for elaborating the argument.

### Literature Review

There exists critical literature on Vogel's play from the postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Anna Stegh Camati (2012) considers Vogel's play as a deconstruction of Shakespeare's *Othello*, revealing the action from the point of view of female characters (p. 53). Camati writes that Vogel's play subverts the tragic world of Shakespeare's *Othello* into comical one. Camati writes that Vogel's dramatic works "questions and resists a particular dramatic text, and more importantly, the text guiding assumptions" about family, gender and sexual identity (p.10). Similarly, Sharon Friedman (1999) makes a feminist reading of Vogel's play. Friedman probes how Vogel re-orientes *Desdemona* from Shakespeare's *Othello* as a bold woman (p.20). His study suggests how Vogel's reinterpretation changes the focus from male-dominated tragedy of Shakespeare's *Othello* to female experiences. His study concludes that Paula Vogel's play gives power and voice to women subjugated in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Likewise, Jennifer

Flaherty (2014) analyzes the resistance of Desdemona to the patriarchal worldview of Shakespeare's *Othello* in Vogel's play (p.35). Flaherty writes that "instead of creating noble Desdemona who resists her destiny, Vogel choses to show a setting where such a character would be impossible" (p.35).

Similarly, Milena Kalicanin (2019) interprets Vogel's play from feminist perspective. Kalicanin contrasts modern realities with Elizabethan context to show the evolving position of women. He writes that Shakespeare's represents "Renaissance stereotypes of women" and Vogel's adaptation marks the beginning of the twentieth century female stereotyping (p.177). Kalicanin writes that Desdemona is a symbol of virginity and purity in Shakespeare's *Othello*. However, Vogel's Desdemona can sleep with all men except Cassio who unfortunately is the object of her husband's jealousy (p.182). She speaks openly her sexual experiments and "jokes openly about her sexual experiments while in a convent, and is open about her sexuality" (p.183).

D.G.J. Veldhuijzen (2016) examines Vogel's play as a feminist appropriation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. He interprets Desdemona's sexuality in Vogel's play as "an act of resistance" (p.10). In similar tone Elizabeth Gruber (2023) writes that Desdemona redresses the marginalization of female characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. However, Gruber writes that Vogel's play also offers a sharp critique of women's collusion in patriarchal system. Vogel's adaptation is feminist protest. The study further highlights how Vogel's play examines patriarchy by showing women as both victims and active participants of these systems. In his view, Desdemona sexuality challenges the traditional notion of female purity.

Following the feminist critique, Corina Lungu (2010) writes that "Vogel play is an attempt to deconstruct the traditional narratives, de-center male protagonist and make the female characters the subjects" (p.43). She further writes that Vogel transformed the content as well as the pattern of Renaissance tragedy "to question conventional discourse and offer her audience with a commentary on the effect of silence in the modern world" (p.43). Vogel's play, *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* represents the three female characters with distinct social backgrounds and perspectives. Lungu writes that "Desdemona is seemingly to be a spoilt and promiscuous young lady who would choose to cheat on her husband than be faithful" (p.47). The other character is Emilia whose stealing of Othello's handkerchief from Desdemona enables Iago's plan. Bianca is an illiterate prostitute seen by Desdemona as a free woman for her economic independence

Rasha Abdulmunem Azez (2020) examines Vogel's play is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Azez considers the characters of Vogel's play as "adapters" (p.476). He writes that Vogel starts her play in an innovative way from the adopted character of Desdemona from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Vogel begins her play from the point when Emilia steals the dropped handkerchief in order to please her husband, Iago. Another scene of adaptation is Lodovico returns to Cyprus. Vogel exploits the same visit for her plot of Desdemona and Emilia to flee from Cyprus.

Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi and Hanan Al-Jezawi (2016) see Vogel's play as a feminist and postcolonial innovation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. They write that Vogel's play does not change the plot structure of Shakespeare's play but gives voice to female characters. They write that for feminist authors like Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter, "writing back" is an important component of women's resistance against the patriarchal society (p.43). Vogel depicts homosexual Desdemona having lesbian relation with Bianca

This study builds on the existing literature, particularly on the critique of Anna Stegh Camati. Camati uses the tools of Intermediality, Intertextuality and Feminist Criticism for his study. The present study critiques the dominant ideology of Shakespeare's *Othello* from the

perspective of a different theoretical lens. This model comprises cynicism, burlesque, parody and humor as tools for subverting the official narrative of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

### Analysis

Paula Vogel questions the official ideology of Shakespeare's *Othello* through her play, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*. This study uses cynicism as a tool to probe Vogel's play for deconstructing Shakespeare's *Othello*. Peter Sloterdijk (1983) defines cynicism as "a tool of resistance and repression" (p.218). He writes that cynicism is "self-embodiment in resistance and self-splitting in repression" (p.218). Vogel's play parodically appropriates Shakespeare's *Othello* and subverts the high culture of Venetian state represented in it. Vogel's play transforms the tragic structure of Shakespeare's *Othello* into humorous mode and its formal structure into satirical and colloquial style. This study focuses on how Paula Vogel subverts the official ideologies Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Shakespeare's *Othello* represents the patriarchal vision of the Venetian state of early modern period. Shakespeare projects the high culture and aristocratic politics of the Venetian society. The dominant narrative represented in Shakespeare's *Othello* is official and white male-centric. Women on stage were represented by male actors during the early modern period. Their voice is not only silenced on stage but also through scripts. Shakespeare's *Othello* represents men of Venetian high culture but keeps women of high Venetian culture in absence. Desdemona's mother is absent from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Her absence highlights the exclusionary nature of Shakespeare's narrative. Desdemona herself is used as plot device by Shakespeare to highlight the consequences of deviance and resistance to the patriarchal high culture of Venetian state. Furthermore, all the male characters in Shakespeare's *Othello* treat women as their properties as evident from Brabantio's remarks about Desdemona; "She is abused, stol'n from me and corrupted" (p.12). Niroula (2026) describes this phenomenon as "manterruption," wherein male figures assert control over female narratives, reflecting systemic gender inequalities (p.52). In addition, husbands in Shakespeare's *Othello* claim power to kill wives representing the extreme form of patriarchal structure. The white Iago and the Black Othello working as mirror images silence the voices and narratives of Emilia and Desdemona. This domestic tyranny over wives is visible from Othello's remarks as "Twas I that kill'd her" (p.95). Furthermore, Othello justifies the murder of Desdemona as moral hygiene for Venetian society as "yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (p.91). Women are either killed or absented in the patriarchal structure of the play. Niroula writes that "patriarchy manifests in both overt and covert ways, often normalizing exploitation and silencing women's voices" (p.54). Women in Shakespeare's *Othello* can neither speak for themselves nor can blame their husbands.

Vogel questions the male-centric vision of the Venetian state represented by Shakespeare's *Othello*. Desdemona's decision to marry "a man of a different colour" was based on her fantasy to escape this patriarchal world of Venice (p.171). She considers Othello as a chivalric hero of romance who will free her from the narrow world of Venetian high culture. Her critique of the white Venetian patriarchal culture is visible from her description of Othello who under an "exotic façade was a porcelain white Venetian" (p.171). Furthermore, she is critical of the institution of marriage serving as the tool for the perpetuation of patriarchy. Vogel attacks the institution of marriage and its inherent lies through her projection of Bianca as "a free woman" (p.171). There is a sense of comradeship between Desdemona and Bianca against patriarchal structure as "she and I share something common in our blood" (p.171).

Vogel uses the strategy of elimination of male characters from her play to subvert the male-centric world of Shakespeare's *Othello*. She appropriates all the female characters of Shakespeare's *Othello* and re-writes the narrative from the perspective of these female characters. The change of perspective and focalization of female characters shifts the vision from male-centric to women-centric. The absence of male characters in Vogel's plot-structure

represents these female characters free from patriarchal structure. Vogel gives narrative space and setting to these female characters to express their suppressed desires in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Looked from psychoanalytic perspective, the suppressed energy of these female characters sublimates in Vogel's play. Veldhuijzen (2016) writes that "Vogel transforms Desdemona into a character with her own desires" (p.10). Unlike Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona in Vogel's play gives free reign to her sexual energy. Shakespeare's *Othello* represents the value of white purity and virginity of the Venetian high culture through Desdemona. However, Vogel disrupts this patriarchal value through the reversal strategy and through the voice of Desdemona. By transforming Desdemona into a prostitute, Paula Vogel's play challenges the conventional views of purity and chastity of Venetian high culture. Desdemona criticizes this narrative of purity through her interaction with Bianca as "She's coming to pay me for the last Tuesday's customers who paid on credit" (p.06). Further she says, "And to arrange for next Tuesday" (p.06).

Peter Sloterdijk's concept of kynicism is applicable to Desdemona's resistance of patriarchal narrative of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Sloterdijk speaks of the two facets of kynicism as "self-embodiment in resistance and self-splitting in repression" (p.218). This narrative of repression and resistance of Desdemona connects Shakespeare's *Othello* and Vogel's Desdemona in a dialogical way. Shakespeare's *Othello* projects the "self-splitting in repression" image of Desdemona (p.218). Desdemona splits herself, as she says, "Nobody; I myself. Farewell" showing resistance to patriarchal structure (p.95). Here the body of Desdemona is a repressed entity. Desdemona's stoical acceptance of her fate and the repression of her agency in the murder scene are symbolic of self-splitting in resistance. Hazlitt (1908) writes that "she is the innocent victim" (p.46). On the other hand, Vogel represents the "self-embodiment in resistance" image of Desdemona. Vogel questions the double standard of patriarchy of Shakespeare's *Othello* through Desdemona. *Othello* is not above suspicion in Shakespeare's text. Iago's whole plane of revenge is based on "wife for wife". Iago suspects *Othello* of having sex with Emilia. Paradoxically, this "wife for wife" revenge is fulfilled in Vogel's play. Vogel presents Desdemona as a prostitute who has shadowy remembrance of her sexual experience with Iago as "there was one man who...didn't last very long" (p.190). Further, Vogel's Desdemona implicates *Othello* while talking to Emilia on the question of fidelity and adultery as "What does honesty have to do with adultery? Every honest man I know is an adulterer..." (p.13). Vogel mocks the contradictions within male-dominated morality by enclosing adultery in honesty. Vogel exposes this paradox in patriarchal structure that men can commit adultery and still they can maintain their social persona of honesty.

Sloterdijk's kynicism is evident from Desdemona's politics of sex in Vogel's play. Desdemona's playing a prostitute in Vogel's play represents "self-embodiment in resistance" of Sloterdijk's view of kynicism (p.218). Vogel reverses the sexual modesty of Shakespeare's Desdemona into sexual audacity and expression. Vogel appropriates the sexual modesty and fidelity and associates it with Emilia. Further, Desdemona appropriates the views of Emilia in Shakespeare's *Othello* to question the narrative of sexual fidelity of the patriarchal world of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Sloterdijk writes that "Sexual experiences play a key role in kynicism" (p.106). The sexual experiences of Desdemona are used by Vogel to attack the value-system of the patriarchal order of the Venetian high culture and society. Desdemona tells her sexual experiences to Emilia how men of different physiognomy and background "spill their seed into me, Emilia – seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe" (p.171).

In addition, Vogel's critique of the official ideology of Venetian patriarchy in Shakespeare's *Othello* is visible from the exclusion and absence of Shakespeare's male characters in *Desdemona: A Play about Handkerchief*. As a resistance strategy, Vogel silences the

patriarchal vision of Shakespeare Othello by offering narrative space to Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. The title of Shakespeare's tragedy is replaced by Desdemona. Othello is a powerful symbol of patriarchal structure in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Gruber (2023) writes that Shakespeare's Othello is "a near schizophrenic hero" (p.3). His schizophrenic behavior is the outcome of the internalization of the value system of patriarchal order of the Venetian high culture. Desdemona's marriage with Othello was based on her resistance to the values of patriarchal order of the Venetian high culture. Desdemona tells Emilia that "if I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice" (p.171). However, Othello has internalized the value-system of Venetian high culture. He expects fidelity and sexual purity from Desdemona as evident from Emilia's comments about their nuptial bridal sheets as "half the garrison came to see" them waving in the morning breeze (p.160). Desdemona tells Emilia that Othello proved "a porcelain white Venetian" under an exotic persona (p.171). Further, his killing Desdemona exposes the domestic violence associated with patriarchy evident from his remark, "Twas I that kill'd her" (p.95). Paula Vogel dismantles this symbol of patriarchy into complete non-entity through her play. Vogel's play excludes him from the narrative space of the play and implicates through the voice of these female characters.

Paula Vogel burlesques the sanctity of Othello's handkerchief in Shakespeare's play. Linda Hutcheon defines burlesques as "a source of mockery through exaggerated imitation or parody" (p.40). Similarly, Simon Dentith writes that "the basic joke here depends upon the comic interchange between high and low" (p. 151). Shakespeare represents Othello's handkerchief in a mythical and magical way. Shakespeare presents the 'Handkerchief' as a sanctimonious object. Its magical dimension is visible from Othello's description of it "there's magic in the web of it" (p.60). The handkerchief is also connected to the patriarchal structure as "Twould make her amiable" (p.59). Besides, the handkerchief stands as an ancestral token (family tradition) of Othello projecting the continuity of patriarchal patterns in the play. The handkerchief is connected to the grand narrative of patriarchy in Shakespeare's Othello. Its embroidery is symbolic of the web of patriarchal narrative of the play as "To lose't or give't away were such perdition / As nothing else could match" (p. 157). The web of state and family is intertwined with this handkerchief and its loss burns the whole structure of family, state and the narrative of Shakespeare's Othello. Freidman (1999), highlighting its patriarchal and mythical dimension, writes that whoever "possesses the handkerchief possesses the woman" (p.136). The loss of handkerchief enhances Othello's suspicion and leads to his epileptic and schizophrenic fits culminating on Desdemona's murder and Othello's suicide.

Contrary to the magical and mystical projection of Othello's handkerchief, Vogel's play represents the handkerchief in a mocking way. Using the technique of burlesque, Vogel transforms this magical symbol of Shakespeare's *Othello* into an ordinary piece of cloth. Additionally, Emilia remarks that Othello's Handkerchief is "Like anybody's handkerchief" (p.1). Emilia strips off the magical and mythical colourings from Othello's handkerchief. Further, she devalues the embroidery on Othello/Desdemona's handkerchief, "I never could be after embrioderin' a piece of linen with fancy work to wipe up the nose" (p.01). Emilia further satirizes Desdemona's concern for the handkerchief as "After you blow your nose in it, an' it's all heavy and wet, who's going to open the damn thing" (p.159). Vogel's play mocks the sanctity of the handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Furthermore, the female characters in Vogel's play do not pay any attention to the handkerchief, treating it as a trivial object. Desdemona herself in Vogel's play mocks Othello's gifting of handkerchief as an inferior object as, "The only gift he's given me was a meager handkerchief" (p.159). In a nutshell, Vogel's re-writing treats the handkerchief emptied out of its symbolism and magical dimension.

In addition, Vogel burlesques Othello's handkerchief through the mock-heroic of Bianca and Desdemona. Following the tradition of the mock-heroic of Alexander Pope in his poem, *Rape of the Lock*, Vogel satirizes Othello's handkerchief as the object of the comic battle of Bianca and Desdemona. Bianca considers the handkerchief to be a token of prospective marriage and love from Cassio. Emilia astonishes to see her stolen handkerchief in Bianca's bodice. Further, Emilia confesses to Desdemona that she stole the handkerchief for "it was to be a joke" (p.192). Humour results from this ironic situation. The magical sanctity of Othello's handkerchief in Shakespeare's Othello is ridiculed by Vogel throughout her play. Vogel resolves the enigma of Desdemona's handkerchief through the mock-heroic strategy and turns this symbol of patriarchy in Shakespeare's play into an object of mockery.

Vogel burlesques the motifs of purity projected by Shakespeare's *Othello* through Desdemona. Vogel's representation of Desdemona as a prostitute serves a useful strategy to satirize the whole notion of purity and chastity of the early modern age. The figure of white/Christian woman as the symbol of purity and chastity in English literature traces back to medieval English romances. During the medieval age, the European/ white/christian women were projected as symbols of purity, chastity and fidelity in continental romance tradition. Furthermore, these white/Christian women were represented under constant threat from Saracens and infidels in these continental romance tradition. The medieval code of chivalry was based on this idea of purity, chastity and virginity of the white Christian woman. The code of medieval chivalry and its romance tradition is the forerunner of the value-system of the early modern patriarchy. Shakespeare's Othello inherits this romance tradition of the medieval period. Vogel's play dismantles this whole edifice of the early modern age through the projection of white/ Christian Desdemona as a prostitute. This whole idea of Desdemona's purity – by extension the white Christian women of European high culture – is dismantled through the blood of hen on the bridal sheets of Desdemona and Othello.

Vogel critiques the patriarchal value of virginity and purity of the high culture of Venice through the blood ritual of Desdemona's bridal sheets. Virginity test of women at their nuptials was a medieval patriarchal tradition necessary for the consummation of marriage. The bridal sheets were displayed to the public for proving the virginity of the newly-wed woman. Vogel satirizes the whole idea of virginity based on this ritual by showing the intrinsic hypocrisy in it through the bridal sheets of Desdemona. Emilia exposes the reality of Desdemona's seeming virginity and her wedding bridal sheets. Emilia uses the services of Bianca to put the blood of an old hen on the bridal sheets of Desdemona for proving her virginity to the Venetian public. Vogel's Desdemona calls this patriarchal tradition a "barbaric custom" (p.160). Further, Vogel dismantles the purity and sexual fidelity of Desdemona through her meeting with Bianca. Speaking to Emilia, Desdemona says that "She's coming to pay me for last Tuesday's customers who paid on credit" (p.163).

Paula Vogel's play, *Desdemona: A play about a handkerchief* deconstructs the official ideology of Shakespeare's *Othello* through humour. Eagleton writes that "humour can be a question of defence or affirmation, subversion or celebration, solidarity or critique" (p.42). Humour has multiplicity of functions. Vogel uses humour as a tool of subversion and critique in her play. Vogel transforms the tragic structure of Shakespeare's *Othello* into comedy. The structure of comedy and its associative humour is the strategy used by Vogel to critique the dominant motif of Shakespeare's Othello. Reversal is an important strategy used by Vogel to subvert the official ideology and rigid hierarchy of Shakespeare's play.

Paula Vogel subverts the tragic tone of Shakespeare's *Othello* into satirical and comical one. Shakespeare's play projects the imminent threat of war from the Ottomans for the Venetian state, fights at nights, killings and suicide of Othello producing a tragic atmosphere. However, Vogel transforms the text and texture of Shakespeare's Othello. The transformation of tragedy

into comedy is an important dimension of Vogel's play. The important tool used by Vogel is the use of language. The language of Vogel's play is colloquial and informal. Desdemona uses the language of advertisement used in brothel as, "Wednesday Night Specials, half price for anything uniform!" (p.06). Further, she uses humorous and satirical language for the magical and mythical handkerchief of Othello as "Crappy little snot rag!" (p.02). Furthermore, the characters in Vogel's play singing "In the darkness we hear Emilia singing a hymn: La-la-la-la—Jesus; .... La-la-la-la—word" (p.10). All these instances show that Vogel transforms the tragic mood into humorous one as a subversive strategy.

Vogel transforms Othello's handkerchief into an object of mockery through the use of parody. Lyeotard (1984) defines "paralogy as a move played in the pragmatics of knowledge" (p. 61). However, Vogel dismantles the sanctity of Handkerchief and presents it as an object of mockery. Consequently, the handkerchief becomes a source of humor in Paula Vogel's play. Harry Levin (1987) writes about humor that "Inherent in its pleasurable nature is a tendency to ward off serious treatment" (p.175). Paula Vogel in her play subverts all the seriousness related with handkerchief into comic mood. There is no tragic significance of it in Vogel's play. Emilia treats it just "a piece of linen with fancy work" (p.01). Desdemona herself treats it in a mocking way "Where is the crappy little snot rag!" (p.02). Furthermore, Desdemona calls it "a meager handkerchief" (p.11). These characters do not consider it a sacred and magical object as Othello deems it in Shakespeare's play. This bathetic projection of Othello's handkerchief is used as a strategy to critique the poetry and mythology and patriarchy associated with it.

Vogel parodically reverses the roles of Emilia and Desdemona in her play. Simon Dentith (2000) writes that "parody involves the imitation and transformation of another's words" (p.03). He further writes that "parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (p.09). Shakespeare projects Desdemona as model of the archetypal white Christian purity in his play. She can't imagine adultery as evident from her discussion with Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (p.84). Emilia is the contrastive image of Desdemona in Shakespeare's Othello. Her inclination for sexual transgression is visible from her reply to Desdemona. Emilia responds to Desdemona's astonishing question "the World is huge thing, / It is a great for a small vice" (p.172). Emilia's thoughtful remarks "in Troth, I think, I should" highlights the contrastive image of Desdemona's purity (p.172). Vogel reverses Emilia and Desdemona in the sexual equation and transfers the discourse of Emilia in this scene to Desdemona. Desdemona in Vogel's play imitates Emilia speech in Shakespeare's play as "Women are clad in purdah, we decent, respectable matrons, from the cradle to the alter to the shroud" (p.14). Desdemona's adultery is the strategy used by Vogel to project the feminist resistance to the narrative of patriarchy. Vogel appropriates Desdemona's moral stance on sexual fidelity and purity and ascribes it to Emilia. This moral vision of Emilia on sexual fidelity is visible from her reply to Desdemona, "I'd never cheat—never—not for all the world I wouldn't" (p.13). Vogel parodies the purity of Shakespeare's Desdemona through her image of a prostitute and transfer of her sexual fidelity to Emilia through reversal of their roles. Desdemona appropriates from Shakespeare's Emilia "The world's a huge thing for so small a vice" (p. 170). Desdemona speaks of "worlds that we married women never get to see" (p.170) refers to the confinement of women in Venetian high culture. Desdemona implicates Muslim notion of "purdah" to highlight the tyranny of the patriarchal value system of the Venetian state in early modern age.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* destabilizes the dominant ideology of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Shakespeare's *Othello* represents the repressive patriarchal structure of silencing female voices through their deaths. However,

Vogel gives voice, agency and narrative space to these female characters of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather than passive victims, these characters become assertive, disclosing the hypocritical structure of patriarchal authority and the structural marginalization of women across sexual and social lines. Further, Paula Vogel frequently employs humor and comic techniques to destabilize the impact of the tragic subject matter. These comic tools serve as an interpretative strategy, allowing readers to see how loyalty, honor and morality are social and historical constructs. Kynicism and burlesque are used as interpretative tools dismantling the patriarchal narrative of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The study suggests that Vogel's play is the representation of representation of Shakespeare's *Othello* from a postmodernist and feminist American perspective.

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