

PAULA VOGEL'S *DESDEMONA* (A PLAY ABOUT A *HANDKERCHIEF*): A FEMINIST READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*²

The exploration of female characters in *Othello* (Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca) represents a valid basis for feminist Shakespeare criticism. Lisa Jardine (1996) focuses on the significance of the historical and cultural background for the interpretation of the position and role of women in the Renaissance by emphasizing that obedience, passivity and silence represent their main features. Feminist critics such as Dympna Callaghan (1996) and Karen Newman (1987) base their analyses on the relationship between race and gender and its implications for the interpretation of female identity. In the paper, these feminist approaches are compared and contrasted to Paula Vogel's feminist rendering of *Othello*. In her play, as Andrea Puskas (2010) claims, female identity is depicted as a construct made up of social status, class and language. The paper illustrates Vogel's willing disregard of the Renaissance stereotypes of woman and probes into the author's reasons for ascribing generally male qualities to female characters. Desdemona's exaggerated libido, Emilia's prudishness and Bianca's thriftiness, presented as traits of the new woman, are thus discussed and questioned in detail.

Key words: female identity, race, class, language, social status.

Introduction

This paper is focused on the exploration of female characters in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* and Paula Vogel's *Desdemona (A Play about the Handkerchief)* from the feminist perspective. In order to compare and contrast the position and role of women in the Elizabethan England and present day, it is inevitable to refer to Shakespeare's play for the depiction of the prevalent Renaissance stereotypes of woman and then to use his valuable insights as a starting point in the research of contemporary female stereotypes as rendered in Vogel's 20th century version of *Othello*.

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In her study of women and authority in Shakespeare's plays, Juliet Dusinberre claims that Shakespeare's plays offer "consistent probing of the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed them independence from men either physically or spiritually" (1996: 92). In the same vein, Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* explores the theme of the isolation of women by reinventing the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Vogel relies on the audience's knowledge of the plot and characters in *Othello* and intentionally changes the key aspects of Shakespeare's text in order to "call attention to the limitations and pressures that define the lives of women, not only in early modern literature and culture, but also in her own time" (FLAHERTY 2014: 35).

Shakespeare's Female Characters in *Othello*

The female characters in *Othello* are introduced through the agency of their patriarchal authorities early in the play. Namely, before Shakespeare gives them the stage, they are constantly present in the conversations between the male characters, be it their husbands, fathers, relatives, servants, male acquaintances, etc. For instance, the dominant theme of racial prejudice against Othello is vividly conveyed in the play through Iago's disgust for his marriage with a white woman ("an old black ram is tupping your white ewe", 1.1. 87-88; "your daughter covered with a Barbary horse", 1.1. 110; "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs", 1.1. 114-115). Even Desdemona's father Brabantio cannot accept the possibility of his daughter's genuine emotion for the Moor and rejects their supposed union as an example of a mere "witchcraft" (1.3. 403) because it is inconceivable for him that his own flesh and blood would eventually "fall in love with what she feared to look upon" (1.3. 439). Thus the Venetian hypocrisy towards the racial outsider is directly exposed in the first scenes of the play – Othello's military service is quite welcome to the state of Venice, but he is not a welcome son-in-law for a Venetian senator. In that he resembles Shylock, another Shakespeare's alien in Venice due to his religious incompatibility with the Venetian Christians.

Shakespeare marvelously portrays Othello's gradual acceptance of the Venetians' image of himself and goes even a step further by linking Othello's own projection of the imposed connection between his blackness and Desdemona's supposed wickedness ("her name...is now black as mine own face", 3.3. 389-391). These examples of male understanding of the position and role of women in the state of Venice insightfully point to a sad fact of the lack of genuine love at the core of the patriarchal society. In this community, there are two types of socially accepted roles for women: the first is exemplified through

Emilia, who directly claims that her loveless marriage was a duty performed in order to attain certain social position, and the second is exemplified through the prostitution of Bianca, whose example shows that love is a commodity to be purchased just like any other product on the Venetian market.

Obviously, these examples demonstrate that Othello and Desdemona do not belong to this patriarchal paradigm since their love for each other is genuine and uncorrupted by external material influences. In that sense, they can be perceived as Althusser's bad subjects (2001: 129), that is, the ones who have not internalized the dominant ideology. They have discovered profound, unconditional love; Othello seems to Desdemona as if he was coming from a completely different world than Venice and, unlike the Venetians who perceive in him a good fighter, she actually sees the beauty of his soul. Othello's outmost cry of happiness and personal fulfillment provoked by unconditional love towards Desdemona is presented through the most remarkable lines in the play: "If it were now to die/ 'twere now to be most happy; for I fear my soul has her content so absolute/ that not another comfort like to this/ exceeds in unknown fate" (2.1. 380-383).

The preoccupation with race on the part of the Venetians has been a great inspiration to numerous literary critics. Feminist critics such as Dymphna Callaghan and Karen Newman explore the concept of Othello's race as an epitome of the Other in the state of Venice in order to portray and understand better the stereotypical roles ascribed to women in the Renaissance period. The role of "blackness" according to Callaghan was to intensify the gap between the socially accepted whiteness, whose primal emanation was female beauty (1996: 198), and the exotic Other, not acceptable by societal norms. She validly asserts that "race – black and white – thus become cosmeticized, but in the case of whiteness, also feminized" (CALLAGHAN 1996: 198). The marriage of Othello and Desdemona, the union of the opposites, thus symbolically questions and criticizes racial hierarchy and patriarchal conventions, but at the same time reinforces the impact of damaging patriarchal structures since this marital union inevitably proves to be socially unattainable by the end of the play.

This ambivalence is also very important for Newman's interpretation of the play. In order to depict the most prominent features of female identity in the Renaissance, Newman argues that femininity should not be regarded as the concept which is opposed to "blackness" and monstrosity, but should be instead identified with the monstrous and bestial. She claims that "the preoccupation of the play's white male characters with black sexuality is of feared power and potency of a different and monstrous sexuality which threatens the white male sexual norm represented in the play most emphatically by Iago" (NEWMAN 1987: 155). Thus, the marriage of Desdemona and Othello represents a

sympathetic identification of femininity with the monstrous which is ultimately prone to the subversion of patriarchal conventions. Ironically, it is Othello himself who becomes an unwilling tool of punishment thus reinforcing cultural prejudice in his murder of Desdemona; he basically punishes her passionate, erotic desire which brings a change in the Elizabethan way of perceiving sex and race norms.

It is not surprising then that the Venetian patriarchal authorities make effort and eventually succeed to pull Othello back to the good subject position, as Althusser would put it (2001: 129), and constantly remind him that primarily he is a soldier, not a lover. Unlike Othello, Iago is not troubled with the pangs of conscience. His hatred towards Othello stems from his subconscious dissatisfaction with himself. Namely, he does not believe in love, but focuses all his energy on ambition and social success as his life motto says: “put money in thy purse” (1.3. 298). Although trapped in a loveless marriage, his wife Emilia is ready to do anything to win her husband’s love and cling to the respectable social reputation that the institution of marriage provides her with. Thus, she keeps silent about the handkerchief misunderstanding and does harm to Desdemona through her silence. Although Emilia represents a great social critic of destructive patriarchal authorities and openly claims that whatever she learned about being treacherous and frail, she learned it from men around her (“Tis not a year or two shows us a man/ They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/ they eat us hungerly, and when they are full/ they belch us”, 3.4. 105-107; “the ills we do, their ills instruct us so”, 3.4. 102), her repentance in the play comes too late, at least for Desdemona.

The germ of Othello’s double vision of Desdemona (her illogical placement into the categories of both the sacred bride and whore of Venice) is successfully planted by Iago’s sexual cynicism. The episode with the handkerchief makes this double vision seem real, so Othello loathingly rejects Desdemona.³

The theme of female whorishness that follows Desdemona’s public journey from a “fair warrior” (2.1. 180) to “excellent wretch” (3.3. 90), “strumpet” and “the cunning whore of Venice” (4.2. 88, 91) represents the main preoccupation of the male characters in the play. Iago, an epitome of fanatic, abstract, inhuman intelligence that condemns Desdemona’s sexuality, becomes extremely jealous. He gets intellectual reflections of a passion between Desdemona and Othello that is apparently inaccessible to him. For that reason,

³ The handkerchief episode in the play revolves around the symbolism of the handkerchief woven by a 200-year-old sibyl, or female prophet, using silk from sacred worms and dye extracted from the hearts of mummified virgins. Othello’s mother used it to keep his father faithful to her, so, to him, the handkerchief represents marital fidelity. The pattern of strawberries (dyed with virgins’ blood) on a white background strongly suggests the bloodstains left on the sheets on a virgin’s wedding night, so the handkerchief implicitly suggests a guarantee of virginity as well as fidelity.

he views Othello's and Desdemona's love externally, disapprovingly and bitterly. He thus becomes a fanatic to destroy the blissful reality and relationship that he can never share. In other words, he is determined to prove love a "whore" (3.3. 362). Ted Hughes rightfully asserts that Othello is powerless to resist the sheer pragmatic logicity of Iago's suggestions that represent a triumph of pure empirical reason, loveless intelligence, supreme alienation from the soul that has to be exposed, condemned, punished, corrected and eventually redeemed according to Shakespeare (1992: 228).⁴

However, after Othello's bestial smothering of Desdemona among her wedding sheets, he gets instantly enlightened, realizes his crime and kills himself. The wedding sheets thus symbolically point to the theme of the oppression of innocence in the act of smothering. Desdemona is literally suffocated beneath the demands put on her fidelity, she is deprived both of breath and words, "she must die else she'll betray more men" (5.2. 20).

The significance of historical and cultural background of the women's role in the Renaissance society is the domain that Lisa Jardine, a feminist historicist, focuses on in her study of *Othello*. The Renaissance stereotype of women included the features of being submissive, passive, obedient and silent. No matter how innocent Desdemona is, the public accusation of her as "a whore of Venice" damages her reputation immensely. Jardine claims that from that moment onward

...there is no casual innuendo, no lewd comment on Othello wife's behaviour or supposed sexual appetite. Desdemona's two remaining scenes focus on her now supposedly culpable sexuality, culminating in her suffocation on her bed, in a state of undress – a whore's death for all her innocence. (JARDINE 1996: 29)

Desdemona's death, according to Jardine, represents a punishment for her supposed adultery (JARDINE 1996: 29).

Finally, Harold Bloom's insights into the possible reasons of Desdemona's death point to the fact that it is not her adultery that triggers her husband's rage. In other words, Bloom claims that the reasons for Desdemona's death are to be ultimately found in personal uncertainties of Othello, not in Desdemona's alleged marital transgressions. Namely, he validly asserts that during the play Othello is "amazingly reluctant to make love to his wife" (1987: 457). Bloom also claims that Othello's greatest fear comes from his uncertainty, he literally does not know whether his wife is a virgin and is afraid to find out ("my relief must be to loathe her", 3.3. 460). When he vows not to shed her blood, he

⁴ From this perspective, Othello's race (possibility of becoming possessed by dark and irrational forces from outside the civilized contract) represents an epitome of his identification with Persephone, the Queen of Hell; a magnificent, primal darkness while it is benign since it refers to an undifferentiated aspect of the magnificent primal power of the Goddess's total love before it is split and proclaimed infernal (HUGHES 1992: 228-232).

means only that he will smother her to death, but the potent irony is there as well: neither he nor Cassio nor anyone else has ever ended her virginity. Othello's claim for the "ocular proof" (3.3. 363) of virginity thus represents a blend of masculine posturing and barely concealed fear of impotence.

Revision of Female Stereotypes in Vogel's *Desdemona*
A Play about a Handkerchief

Paula Vogel, a winner of various fellowships and academic awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, has frequently been described as a feminist author. Her feminism, though, is based on a series of contradictions, usually perceived as originating in the mixed religious background (her father was a Jew, her mother a Roman Catholic), her coming out as a lesbian and the experience of the death of her homosexual brother from AIDS. Probably under the influence of several personal tragedies, Vogel's way of resistance to women's discrimination is completely different from the majority of feminists – she avoids portraying women as victims of male power or saints, she even avoids presenting women as a universal category and focuses instead on diverse elements that constitute female identity such as language, social status and class.

Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief takes place on Cyprus. However, instead of concentrating on the military pomp and glory of Othello's venture there, Vogel places her Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca in a dirty laundry room in Othello's castle and describes their personal relations. The whole play is based on Desdemona's last day on Cyprus and the final scene is that of Emilia brushing her mistress' hair before going to her marital bed thus directly alluding to the audience's knowledge of Othello's fatal deed and the tragic fate of Desdemona. It is also interesting to note that Vogel's play comprises

...a series of cinematic takes simulating the process of filming, which enables directors to use frozen images, various spotlights changing invisible camera angles, as well as supporting a mosaic-like imagery. Though there are no blackouts between scenes, the flow of the play is constantly interrupted by cuts, repetitions and frozen images, which results in the impression of a set of small fragments combined together. (PUSKAS 2010: 135)

Desdemona is a bored aristocrat who substitutes for Bianca, a prostitute, once a week in order to satisfy her promiscuous urges. Unlike Shakespeare's Desdemona, a symbol of virgin purity and naivety, Vogel's Desdemona seems to have slept with all the men from Othello's garrison except Cassio, who is ironically, the object of her husband's jealousy. The new Desdemona thinks of her sexual appetite as a natural human phenomenon and is a vivid, playful

character, prone to sexual transgressions. She openly speaks about her sexual experimentation when she was in a convent, jokes wholeheartedly about buying some chicken blood to cover her wedding sheets and straightforwardly discusses her sexuality.

Emilia, Desdemona's servant, is purposefully given a broad Irish accent in order to emphasize the class difference between the two of them. Her daily routine of peeling potatoes and scrubbing the wedding sheets is depicted as a personal burden which would hopefully end once she becomes a wealthy widow thus finally realizing her dream of respectability in terms of social status. This is the sole reason for Emilia to stay with her husband Iago and remain faithful to him, though he is sexually and emotionally impotent.

Bianca is also portrayed in terms of her language. She speaks stage cockney and surprisingly represents Desdemona's ideal of an independent woman with her own business, financial stability and self-reliant life philosophy. Though this local prostitute is presented as an immoral woman of instincts, she is also very naïve and childish and has a dream of experiencing a marriage bliss with Cassio and giving birth to their children in a beautiful country cottage on Cyprus.

What is evident in Vogel's perception of Shakespeare's female characters in *Othello* is the fact that the frequent stereotypes of women as submissive, inferior and saintly pure are completely disregarded. The angelically innocent Desdemona in Shakespeare's play is replaced with a promiscuous and bored contemporary Desdemona. Emilia's loyalty to her hated husband and her ideal of establishing respectable social reputation are potently questioned in the modern version of Shakespeare's play. Vogel directly juxtaposes the image of the prostitute in *Othello* with her version of Bianca who dreams about a perfect nuclear family. Andrea Puskas claims that Vogel

...uses Shakespeare's women and their critical reputations, physically isolates them from their men, and imbues them with qualities previously associated with male characters. They become less abstract female characters, women with whom a 20th or 21st century reader/ spectator can more easily identify. (2010: 136)

Unlike Elaine Showalter (1979) who regards female identity as a collective, universal category and glorifies the concept of female sisterhood, Vogel poignantly questions its validity. Thus, she purposefully chooses three women of different social status, religion and life philosophies in order to portray the conspicuous diversity of what being a woman possibly entails. The category of being a woman is seen as just one of many elements that female identity encompasses, alongside with race, religion, class, etc. Similarities and differences among these elements of female identity can bring women closer to each other and at the same time divide them.

For instance, genuine affection and intimacy between Desdemona and Emilia in Vogel's play is made impossible due to frequent displays of their master-servant relationship. Emilia is painfully aware of her subordinate position in this relationship and accepts the socially imposed hierarchy as one of the elementary rules of conduct in the patriarchal society. Her inferiority, as well as Desdemona's superiority due to her aristocratic origin represents the reason for Emilia's anger, frustration, bitterness. She is quite aware of the fact that master and servant can never be friends and concludes that she has learned her lesson well:

Emilia There's no such creature, two-, three- or four-legged, as 'friend' betwixt ladies of leisure and ladies of the night. And so long as there be men with one member but two minds, there's no such thin' as friendship between women. (Scene 13, 245)

Thus, Vogel critically exposes the concepts of female solidarity and companionship as faulty and nonexistent in the patriarchal society in which, unfortunately, women consciously depend on destructive male authorities instead on each other. Although the confrontation between Desdemona's excessive libido and Emilia's prudish Catholicism produces various comic effects during the course of the play, their secrets undermine any possibility for genuine support – namely, it turns out that Desdemona slept with Iago while she was substituting for Bianca and that Emilia stole the handkerchief from Desdemona and gave it to Iago. These women realize the tragic consequence of their power games too late and are again left to rely on the mercy of the male characters that are purposefully left out from Vogel's play.

Vogel insists on portraying a huge difference between Desdemona and Emilia in terms of social background, so the servant class in her play is more vividly defined than in Shakespeare's play. Emilia's stories about Desdemona's childhood, her rich ancestry, her father the Senator, her bringing up by the nuns in the convent, the servants that obeyed her wishes, just point to different social circumstances that influenced the creation of their respective identities and thus make for the fact that their experience of the world and life would never be common or shared.

As already mentioned, this idea is further reinforced in Vogel's play through their language. Their language and socially distinct English accent demonstrate their belonging to different social ranks and further determine their social positions. The linguistic triangle of Desdemona's RP, Emilia's Irish brogue and Bianca's Cockney is presented in order to stress that each character is a prisoner of her class and determined by language: "This direct link between language and class emphasises the capacity of language to determine an individual's social position and makes languages an integral element of identity, as well as stressing the importance of language acquisition in the socialisation process" (PUSKAS 2010: 140).

In Vogel's play, language is a crucial element in the process of differentiating between social superiority and inferiority. Desdemona constantly reproaches Emilia for the way she accentuates her words and insists on Emilia shrinking her vowels and expanding her vocabulary. This criticism is further transplanted to an inferior social. Thus, Emilia criticizes Bianca, who is socially subordinate to her, by repeating the words Desdemona utters to her. This example vividly suggests that language ensures social respectability.

Race is conspicuously missing in Vogel's version of *Othello*. She focuses instead on class and female sexuality. Friedman validly asserts that in the process of de-centering of the tragic hero, Vogel "foregrounds and enacts the threat of female desire that incites the tragic action, and disrupts the familiar categories of virgin, whore, and faithful handmaiden by forging links with gender ideology and class status" (FRIEDMAN 1999: 131). Thus, Vogel intentionally discards diverse elements of female identity and focuses on the nature of its construction, which allows for her female characters to become utterly individualized and independent.⁵

However, the common denominator in their distinct female aspirations revolves around the social institution of marriage. It is depicted as a prison which limits women and deprives them of free will and individual choices. Desdemona craves for freedom and naively thinks that she will obtain it in a marital union with dark-skinned Othello. However, her marriage shows that the colour of his skin is the only asset that makes Othello different from destructive patriarchal authorities in Venice. Not only is she not saved from the conventional practices of the Christian Venetians by marrying Othello, but she also becomes aware of her husband's hypocrisy and narrow-minded attitudes through the acts of frequent physical molestation and domestic abuse. In other words, Desdemona's marriage does not offer the new, exotic opportunities she personally craves for. Sadly, Vogel portrays Desdemona as a victim of biological determinism: "Being born as a woman, she can only experience the world through men and not by herself" (PUSKAS 2010: 141).

Therefore, she decides to sleep with men coming from different parts of the world so that she could absorb their experiences of the world. She abuses her own body in order to break free from the limitations that the Venetian society has imposed on her and ultimately reach the social level of men. Flaherty insightfully claims that "Vogel presents Desdemona's aggressive sexuality as an act of resistance, albeit unsuccessful" (2014: 39). Desdemona's frustrations with the position in the society result in an individual rebellion, through her body. Thus, the moral degradation and devaluation of the body represent the

⁵ The staging of Vogel's play does not exclude the possibility of including the element of race in the play. Namely, stage directions and the play's text are open for different interpretations so that the discourse of race could be introduced by choosing a 'black' actress to perform one of the female roles.

only means of her liberation, independence and equality: "Because sex is the only power that Desdemona holds, she has no qualms about using it as a means of escape from her physical and mental environment" (FLAHERTY 2014: 39).

The same life philosophy is visible in Emilia's case, although she is socially inferior to Desdemona. Emilia knowingly states that women can "rise a bit in the world only through their mates" (Scene 6, 240). Both Desdemona's and Emilia's choices suggest pessimism and disappointment with social restrictions, but at the same time they also point to the sad fact that these women represent proper, though unwilling, products of the ideology that spawned them.

Paradoxically, the new woman in Vogel's play is the local prostitute, Bianca. She thrives upon the alleged independence due to her successful business of prostitution. Her dreams about a proper marriage, husband and sons point to a severe personality disorder. Her aspirations show that she longs to be a respectable member of the society disregarding the aspect of her identity independent of social norms and restrictions. In her case, imposed social structures seem to be justified by her personal needs and desires. "It's wot we're made for, ain't it?" (Scene 23, 250), she asks in a rhetorical fashion.

To sum up, Vogel's revised *Othello* does not offer a positive alternative to Shakespeare's play by changing the tragic destiny of Desdemona and glorifying other female characters. Furthermore, there is no hope that Vogel's female characters might rewrite Shakespeare's story in an affirmative way. However, though they are doomed to failure, the dominant perspective in the play is feminist. It does not demonstrate enlightenment and empowerment, but negative empathy (FLAHERTY 2014: 45-46). The play intentionally discards the vision of an ideal, utopian world for women. Instead, "Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves" (FLAHERTY 2014: 45-46).

Conclusion

In *Othello*, Shakespeare detects and indirectly condemns damaging patterns of proper female conduct in the Venetian society. He critically portrays socially accepted roles for women, which are unfortunately based on the absence of love in the patriarchal society. Thus, the options of loveless marriage and prostitution are wrongly perceived as valid and legitimate. Though not a feminist, Shakespeare genuinely depicts the utmost inability of female characters to overcome their social limitations.

The female craving for liberation, independence and equality is what makes *Othello* a rather modern play. It definitely represents a starting point

in Vogel's feminist version of Shakespeare's tragedy. Vogel concentrates on the issues of social status, class and language in conveying the complexity of female identity. Though the attempts of her female characters to liberate themselves are ultimately unsuccessful, Vogel does offer a significant feminist outlook in her play. Namely, rather than embracing a general framework for a complete understanding of female identity and giving precise answers, she urges women to reach and work for their individual answers. The mere fact that her variant of *Othello* was written in the innovative form testifies to the author's genuine plan to approach the play as an open-ended quest for new meanings and definitions of female experience whereby diverse insights and multiple solutions are to be provided along the way.

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ДЕЗДЕМОНА (КОМАД О МАРАМИЦИ) ПОЛЕ
ВОГЕЛ: ФЕМИНИСТИЧКО ЧИТАЊЕ ШЕКСПИРОВЕ
ТРАГЕДИЈЕ ОТЕЛО

Истраживање женских ликова у *Оћелу* (Дездемоне, Емилије, Бјанке) представља валидну основу за феминистичку критику овог Шекспировог комада. Џардинова (1996) заснива своје виђење улоге жене у ренесанси на стереотипу послушности, пасивности и подређености мушкарцу. Феминистичке критичарке попут Калаганове (1996) и Њуманове (1987), с друге стране, своје тумачење фокусирају на однос између расе и рода, као и његовим потенцијалним импликацијама у интерпретацији женског идентитета. У раду се примењују и пореде ови феминистички приступи са модерном верзијом Шекспировог *Оћела* ауторке Поле Вогел. У модерној верзији, како тврди Пускасова (2010), женски идентитет се тумачи као конструкт који се састоји из друштвеног статуса, класе и језика. Истраживање се фокусира на свесном одбацивању ренесансних стереотипа жене у модерној верзији Шекспировог *Оћела*, као и на разлоге због којих Вогелова приписује типичне мушке особености својим женским ликовима. Дездемонин претерано наглашен либидо, Емилијина чедност и Бјанкина штедљивост које Воголова представља као карактеристике „нове жене“ се у раду детаљно преиспитују.

Кључне речи: женски идентитет, раса, класа, језик, друштвени статус.