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# Teaching Tragedy: Pedagogical Approaches to Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Adam Thorpe

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters by Research in English Literature

THE UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

SEPTEMBER 2019

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## Abstract

The recent changes to the National Curriculum for English imposed by the Conservative government saw the need for English teachers to reimagine the ways in which their pedagogical practice engages students with the study of English Literature. As a consequence, these changes have also reverberated throughout post-16 education with the landscape of the teaching and study of Literature at A-Level underpinned by the government's insistence on the promotion of British values through the study of the subject. This thesis examines pedagogical approaches and practices concerning the study of Shakespeare's *Othello* in a post-16 educational setting and explores the ways in which teachers and students engage with the text within this new educational framework. The research methods consisted of a wide collection of responses to *Othello* produced by my students in the form of academic essays, individual and group presentations and class-based discussions over the duration of their two year A-Level course; this will be coupled with an evaluation of how the work of educational and Shakespearean scholars illuminates the ways in which students are able to bring presentist readings of the play in to the classroom. The findings of the research demonstrate a clear tension that exists at the heart of the study of English Literature between crypto-nationalist agenda prevalent throughout the Conservative government's educational reforms and the multicultural, multidimensional makeup of the students it serves. This thesis seeks to explore and demonstrate the ways in which the study of *Othello* can overleap the boundaries in which it has been placed and connect students with the universality of Shakespeare's work.

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## **Dedications and Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

The Conservative government's announcement in 2013 concerning the wholesale reforms to the National Curriculum was the largest overhaul of educational policy for thirty years; the underlying ethos that served as the basis of the new curriculum for the study of English in state schools was Michael Gove's insistence that students should only study literature produced by writers of English heritage and that the works of writers outside this specific cultural prism had no place on the new English curriculum. The crypto-nationalist agenda at the heart of these reforms aimed directly at English Literature courses at both GCSE and A-Level placed a clear and unambiguous emphasis on Conservative values of what it means to be British; it placed writers like Shakespeare on a pedestal as spokesperson for these values to which we must all adhere and, in doing so, marginalised the voices of writers from the landscape of literature that exists outside of British culture which the Conservative government deemed to be unworthy of our attention.

The research conducted for the purposes of this thesis focuses on the implications that the changes to the National Curriculum for English has had on the teaching and learning process. It will be necessary to evaluate the impact of a variety of pedagogical methods employed at post-16 level in order to teach *Othello* in ways in which the social, cultural, religious and political dynamics at play within the text are most effectively communicated to students whilst simultaneously preparing students for the academic rigours posed through exam board assessment specifications. The questions that will underpin the research conducted for this thesis are:

1. Why is Shakespeare the only playwright specified for mandatory study on the English National Curriculum and in what ways does the study of Shakespeare hold relevance when taught in a multicultural classroom?

2. What can be considered effective pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare and *Othello* at post-16 level and how can the effectiveness of these approaches be evaluated?
3. What are the implications of the new English National Curriculum when considering its underlying ethos and the values it seeks to promote and uphold? Does it reinforce Conservative policy values concerning the 'Britishness' of the education system or can it still serve the needs of all students across multicultural Britain?
4. What are the various ways in which a group of predominately British Muslim A-Level students able to engage with both the historical and contemporary contexts of *Othello* and in what ways does their cultural and religious identity influence their reading of the play?
5. When taking in to consideration my school's single-sex context, to what extent do the representations of gender in *Othello*, and specifically the treatment of female characters, reflect the societal and educational experiences of my students?

As this project is contextualised in terms of recent government changes to the National Curriculum for English, I will seek to critique the role and impact that government legislation has on the teaching of *Othello* as an A-Level exam text. With new governmental policy placing emphasis on English teachers to deliver a British curriculum that upholds British democratic values, it is important to determine to what extent this can be achieved through the study of Shakespeare and how accessible these values are when placed within the context of the pluralism of contemporary British society.

It is the contemporary social and political climate in which the text is taught, specifically concerning the political, cultural and religious dilemmas that arise in *Othello*, that will underpin the discourse of this thesis. The school in which I teach is made up of 74.95% Muslim students, as a consequence of this, it will be of significance to focus my research on the depiction of Islam in *Othello* and how it is reflective of modern attitudes towards Islam in both the current social and political sphere. It will be necessary to contextualise the play in terms of the educational climate in which it appears, but also in light of the rise of Islamophobia in right-wing political rhetoric and the implications this has on student engagement with the play; it will also be of central significance to research the effectiveness of a presentist approach to the teaching and study of *Othello* to determine the extent to which contemporary societal and political tensions impact student engagement with, and understanding of, *Othello*. In terms of student engagement with relevant critical theory during the course of study of *Othello*, and indeed the other exam texts on the AQA English Literature B specification, there is a level of autonomy afforded to teachers in terms of which, if any, critical theory needs to be applied to the exam texts; when taking in to consideration the assessment criteria against which students will be examined (a more thorough interrogation of which is covered in Chapter Two) nowhere on the exam mark scheme or course specification is it explicitly stated that students must engage with certain areas of critical theory, as such it is entirely at the teachers discretion if and where this may be applied. The caveat to this is, in order to achieve 20% of their overall grade, students must complete two pieces of coursework; this section of the course is entitled 'Theory and Independence' which requires students to write about one poetry text and one prose text of their choice and then apply a different area of critical theory to each text from the following: narrative theory, feminist theory, Marxist theory, eco-critical theory, post-colonial theory, and literary value and the canon. However, when reflecting on the transitional phase students encounter from A-Level to degree, and the challenges that arise during this phase concerning the study of Shakespeare, Carol Atherton (2010) suggests that students studying Shakespeare at post-16 level should be exposed to "a wide variety of approaches to

Shakespeare” and “given the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on them.” Atherton highlights the work already taking place concerning presentist readings of Shakespeare’s plays on university courses and suggests that students studying his work at A-Level should also be exposed to, amongst others, the “Tensions between historicist and presentist approaches...this process of ‘teaching the conflicts’ gives students an insight in to some of the debates they will encounter in more depth at degree level” (Atherton, 2010, p. 57). It is important to emphasise the relationship between historicist and presentist readings of the play and, as Atherton suggests, consideration of both in the English classroom is possible simultaneously in order for students to appreciate the balance that can and should be made between the two.

Existing literature concerning this premise focuses on the various ways in which English pedagogical practice approaches the teaching of Shakespearean texts and, more specifically, the range of methods that can be employed by classroom teachers to help support students in their dealings with the moral and ethical dilemmas that are apparent in both the texts they study, and the lives that they lead. As Grady and Hawkes (2006) suggest, the “present can’t be drained out of our experience” when reflected in historical contexts surrounding Shakespeare’s plays, or indeed the playwright himself, and whilst “we should read Shakespeare historically” Grady and Hawkes posit “how can we decide whose historical circumstances will have priority in the process, Shakespeare’s, or our own?” (Grady & Hawkes, 2006, p.3). It is through this approach Evelyn Gajowski (2010) suggests that “presentism has developed as a theoretical and critical strategy of interpreting Shakespeare’s texts in relation to contemporary political, social and economic ideologies, discourses, and events. In so doing, presentism has consequently challenged the dominant theoretical and critical practice of reading Shakespeare historically” (Gajowski, 2010, p.675). When considering student engagement with Shakespeare’s work, their emotional and academic investment in Othello and the parameters within which his plays are read and studied in the classroom “we need urgently to recognise the permanence of the present’s

role in all our dealings with the past. We cannot make contact with a past unshaped by our own concerns.” (Grady & Hawkes, 2006, p.3). This approach to the study of *Othello* in the context of post-16 education sees students take up the challenge of understanding and reflecting on the necessary historical contexts of the play whilst simultaneously recontextualising these approaches to focus on how the messages of the play align with, or deviate from, our own “political, social and economic ideologies”; indeed as James O’Rourke (2011) argues, “the stronger pole of the presentist argument lies in the argument that the moral value of studying the literature of the past depends upon our ability to bring its concerns forward in to our present moment” (O’Rourke, 2011 p. 31). This research project will focus these notions specifically on the teaching of *Othello*, its relevance to students in the British education system, and the implications of teaching this text when considering the current social and political climate concerning the rise of radical extremism in Western society.

Additionally, research also suggests that, when teaching the play, Othello’s supposed “Islamic identity” when considering his character “in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack” ultimately had the effect of “Othering” him to students in a “multicultural” secondary school (Clarke, Dickinson, Westbrook, 2010). As the students who will be the main focus of this research are predominantly Muslim, it will be a focal point of this thesis to determine the extent to which this view is applicable within this educational context and how, based on their own readings of the text, Muslim students respond to the moral and ethical dilemmas raised in the text when considering the supposed violent nature of Othello’s character. The significance of considering the impact of social, cultural and historical factors surrounding pedagogical practice are well established. When considering approaches to the teaching and learning process, research has suggested that social and cultural influences can have a significant impact on students’ responses to the texts they study (Daniels, 2001). Studies conducted around the practice of teaching *Othello* to students in light of social and political turmoil, and specifically in light of the rise in Islamist extremism shortly after 9/11, has sought

to understand how best to approach the concept of evil and violence within the text and, as a consequence, how students can begin to conceptualise the depiction of violence in the modern world (Schapiro, 2003). This research will be extended to consider the relevance of teaching *Othello* in the context of modern day radical extremism and the various pedagogical practices employed by classroom teachers that seek to both meet the demands of the new National Curriculum for English whilst simultaneously dealing with the moral and ethical implications of teaching such a text. Further research has also been conducted concerning the varying degrees in which the violence in Shakespearean texts is reflective of wider public anxieties concerning society's inability to control "their social and natural environment" (Mousley, 2007). As a consequence, if the National Curriculum for English aims to "develop culturally, emotionally, spiritually and socially" (National Curriculum, 2014) it will be of prime concern to explore the extent to which these concepts are achievable through the study of Shakespeare and *Othello*.

It is pertinent to note at this point that the data collected that informs this study stems from a range of pedagogical activities surrounding the teaching of *Othello* that have been part of my approach to teaching the text for a number of years; I felt an important part of the data collection process was to ensure the teaching of *Othello* was as reflective of my methodology over the previous three years teaching the play as possible. Whilst I naturally altered and adjusted certain elements of the course in order to tailor my teaching to the needs of the students and deliver content in a manner that was of greatest benefit to them, the overall structure and approach to teaching the text remained broadly consistent and in line with previous academic years; as such the teaching and learning environment created was not in any way purposefully orchestrated to achieve any one particular set of outcomes or responses. For clarity and transparency, there were several occasions across the two academic years within which this study was undertaken where students agreed to come back during non-contact time in order to finish discussions about a particular topic which we did not have time to conclude in lesson and would have limited opportunity to do so in the

subsequent lesson; these instances were relatively infrequent, however. This data will be collected in a number of ways: firstly both academic and reflective essay tasks will be set that aim to challenge students' understanding of the texts that they study and reflect on how their response to the texts changes and develops as their learning progresses. Class-based discussions and debates will also be considered as a way for students to engage with ideas that may be contrary to their own and to challenge each other's moral and ethical viewpoints concerning interfaith marriage, sexuality, use of violence for good and the depiction of women in *Othello*. Students will also be asked to deliver, at the end of their first academic year of post-16 study, a presentation to their class in which they will discuss the myriad of ethical and moral dilemmas dealt with in the texts they have studied and the implications they have concerning the wider social and political climate in which the texts have been taught.

Additionally, in order to meet the required ethical standards for a study of this nature as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in their 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (2018) publication regarding the collection of my students' data (all of whom were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen at the time the data was collected), it was imperative that my students and their parents understood the nature of my research, the processes involved, and that they may withdraw their consent for the inclusion of their data at any time. In order to obtain this consent, I sent a letter and consent form out to all parents and guardians of the students in my A-Level classes which outlined the rationale behind my research, how I would collect my data, and the need for me to publish specific aspects of their data in my thesis; students were required to return the consent forms to me in which they and their parents agreed to the above data being both collected and potentially published: all students (and their parents) in both A-Level classes gave their consent to this.

The BERA guidelines regarding the ethical implications surrounding my research also stipulate that it is imperative that my students felt respected and comfortable when discussing a variety of issues that arise from the text including the representations of ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and cultural identity (2018). It is an essential part of the teachers' role to facilitate a trusting and tolerant working environment, as outlined by the Department for Education's Teachers Standards, which aligns with BERA guidelines surrounding discussions about sensitive and intimate issues. Additionally, it was at times appropriate for other (female) colleagues of mine to participate in discussions of this nature (particularly when taking in to account the make-up of my school) in order for there not to be just a male voice in a position of authority within the classroom environment and to also offer alternative readings and views of the above issues to offer students varied, alternate perspectives. Furthermore, I consulted frequently with my department's Head of English (who is female and Muslim) particularly concerning issues that were going to be confronted and discussed in upcoming lessons regarding the role of Islam in both the play and Western society, certain religious and cultural nuances that I was unaware of which helped to better inform me of the of the contexts which we were to discuss.

## **Overview of chapters**

### **Chapter one:**

This chapter evaluates the educational context in which *Othello* is taught as an A-Level exam text and details the changes to the National Curriculum and its subsequent impact on the teaching and learning process of A-Level English Literature. Once this context has been established, the focus of the chapter then examines the ways in which A-Level students engage with *Othello* in relation to the educational climate in which it is taught.

### **Chapter two:**

This chapter examines the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of *Othello* to post-16 students and considers the obstacles English teachers encounter throughout the process. As a consequence of this, focus then shifts to an evaluation of various pedagogical approaches to teaching *Othello* and exploring the various moral, spiritual and ethical dilemmas students encounter throughout the study of the play.

### **Chapter three:**

This chapter explores the social, cultural and religious experiences of my students and seeks to determine the extent to which depictions of Islam in *Othello* mirror their own personal experiences of their faith and how this in turn reflects the wider social and political spectrum in which Islam exists. Attention is then extended to determine the extent to which the gender politics of the play are reflective of the gender politics experienced by my students in contemporary Western society.

## Chapter 1 – British Values and Shakespeare: Student Voice in the Classroom

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 was a pivotal moment concerning the direction in which the teaching of English would take and “set out, in a very specific way, the substance of what children would be taught” with the emphasis placed on the importance of “educational value” underpinning the construction of the National Curriculum; Thatcher’s government made “the teaching of English the focus of previously unprecedented concern” with the subject seen as the driving force behind the need for students’ educational experience to have “a positive impact on individuals’ personal growth, cohesive national identity and even economic prosperity” (Olive, 2015, p.21). Placed at the forefront of the drive to enrich students’ lives was the study of Shakespeare, who the Department of Education and Science (DES) made “the only compulsory writer” on the English curriculum (Aers, 1991, p.33). Additionally, as Bethan Marshall (2011) highlights, despite criticism from both the political left and right, ultimately the curriculum “proved popular with teachers” mainly because, with the exception of Shakespeare, the English curriculum “did not prescribe a canon of books that had to be studied” which, as a consequence, “allowed considerable freedom for teachers to pick whom they pleased” to teach; the removal of teachers’ autonomy over which writers and texts would best suit their students “was the first thing to go in all future editions of the English National Curriculum” and replaced with a “canonical list” that “is in many respects an indication that a conservative bias has been maintained over all subsequent curricula” (Marshall, 2011, p.190). Indeed, subsequent revisions of the National Curriculum in 1993, 1995, 1999, and 2008 all saw adjustments and alternations “designed to boost standard English and reduce prescribed content” (Olive, 2015, p.23) within the teaching of English at Key Stages 1-4, with the only content throughout each iteration being the compulsory study of Shakespeare; this enduring exclusivity afforded to Shakespeare as part of the fabric of the English National Curriculum suggests that governmental policy treats “his work as cultural artefacts” which are inherently

“used to promote national identity [...] with a cultural importance that appears to be confirmed by their enduring social relevance” (Ward and Connolly, 2008, p.11).

Consequently, the new National Curriculum for England, first announced by the Education Secretary Michael Gove in 2013, maintained Shakespeare’s continued reverence as National Poet and mouthpiece of British national identity, whilst simultaneously revising the specturum of writers available for selection across the wider curriculum. Whilst Gove’s initial proposal to scrap GCSEs all together in favour of an entirely new approach was dismissed by exam regulator Ofqual, who stated that there were “significant risks” in trying to reform the whole curriculum whilst simultaneously eradicating competition between different exam boards. Instead, Gove’s proposal centered on reforming the ways in which students would be taught and assessed across all subject areas, with reforms initially focusing on English Language, English Literature and Mathematics, with teaching of the new curriculum to commence at the beginning of the new academic year in 2015. For English Literature at GCSE level, students are now required to study texts originating from the English Literary heritage and must include literature from across the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, poetry originating from the Romantic era and at least one Shakespeare play. Critics of the proposal highlighted that the Department for Education’s (2013) claims that “study of high quality English literature should be the principal focus of study for this GCSE” seemed to only take into consideration literature produced by British writers as being deemed to be of “high quality” whilst seemingly marginalising work produced by writers from other cultures. This approach can be seen in the exam text offerings from the four main exam boards used by schools in England: AQA, OCR, Edxel and WJEC (See Appendix A). Whilst Gove stated through the aforementioned Department for Education’s policy that the English curriculum should offer students the opportunity to study literature in “depth” whilst affording students the “chance to develop culturally”, the strict set of criteria adhered to by the four main exam boards suggests Gove’s vision leant to a more monocultural ideology aimed at reinforcing a sense of British cultural identity rather than offering students the opportunity to explore a

mixture of different cultural voices within literature that is so reflective of the society in which students live. Shakespeare's place in the new curriculum is one now familiar to English teachers as he has been, and still is, the only compulsory author to appear in an English National Curriculum since the first iteration in 1989 (Elliott & Olive, 2019); rather than seek to broaden and expand the current curriculum in order to expose students to a diverse and wide-ranging set of playwrights, and as a consequence hand autonomy over to English teachers to make informed choices about the texts their students study, Gove's curriculum "marks a return to the 1989 iteration's positioning of Shakespeare as the uniquely statutory representative of drama, erasing the need for students to study drama by other major playwrights" (Olive, 2015, p.127). The insistence on the teaching of Shakespeare across Key Stages 3 and 4 is coupled with "an unashamedly conservative definition of inclusivity" and ignores the opportunity for "a celebration of diverse cultures and elements of society"; Gove's stance that pupils should "appreciate *our* rich and varied literary heritage" has come at the expense of exposing students to an assortment of writers, voices and experiences that transcend the British Isles (Olive, 2015, p. 132). Whilst the lack of a truly diverse range of writers is evident in the new curriculum, Muñoz-Valdivieso's (2017) view must be considered that at "a time of dangerous nationalisms and the raising of new borders" it is helpful to see Shakespeare "as an imagined community to which readers, performers, audiences and scholars belong" (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2017, p.76), it is this space in which students are able to engage with, and find meaning in, his works. Indeed, the compulsory teaching of Shakespeare on the new curriculum feeds in to "the present globalisation of culture" which, as a consequence, "is producing a parallel globalisation of the playwright" (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2017, p.68). It is harnessing our students' engagement with the universality of Shakespeare's work, both on the national and international stage, that English teachers most focus their efforts, if the new curriculum fails to reflect the cultural diversity of the students it serves, then the significance of the teaching of Shakespeare must now be seen as a way to bring "us together better than any other, and which reminds us of our almost

infinite difference, and of our strange and humbling commonality” (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2017, p.76).

It is this cyclical approach to the construction of the new curriculum concerning the insistence that all students study Shakespearean plays both in Key Stage 3 (two plays) and Key Stage 4 (one play), that is so at odds with Gove’s assertion that the new curriculum offers English students the opportunity to study a wide-ranging scope of texts. The assertion that the ambiguity of language used in the curriculum document suggesting that the Shakespearean play studied at Key Stage 4 does not have to differ to those previously taught (Elliott & Olive, 2019, p.2) is significant; having worked with several English departments in schools across the Local Education Authority (LEA) it has been my experience that some schools are choosing to teach their students their GCSE Shakespeare texts to their Key Stage 3 students (the schools in which I have seen this use Key Stage 3 to offer students the opportunity to understand the narrative of the play and to incorporate drama activities to enable to further support this understanding) and then reteach the same play as part of the Key Stage 4 course in preparation for their GCSE examinations. Whilst these schools differed in many ways (intake of students, same-sex cohorts, and socio-economic background of students), the schools that I reference all had one thing in common: their GCSE English Literature exam results were well below the national average and, in a bid to drive up results, each department had resorted to teaching, and re-teaching, the same Shakespeare play across five years of their students’ education. It is not being suggested here that this approach has been adopted by schools across the country, however there is a suggestion that in some cases, particularly in schools which are struggling to meet national average targets for GCSE exam results, there has been an over-correction in favour of ‘training’ students to pass exams instead of delivering a rich and varied curriculum. Whilst Gove criticised previous governments for the lowering of standards on previous curriculums “as many students only read one novel for GCSE, the curriculum’s impression of wide-ranging study is misleading” (Olive, 2015, p.130) it appears, for some schools at least, rather

than offer schools the opportunity to teach a 'wide-ranging' English curriculum, the instance that the study of Shakespeare is mandatory for all students has forced some back to 'teaching to the test'. Indeed, a 2019 survey conducted by Elliott and Olive centered around which Shakespeare plays are taught in English classrooms and why teachers choose particular texts reflected on "a sense that, while the qualities which make a good play for under 14s are those which promote enjoyment of Shakespeare, between 14 and 16 the qualities are more strongly related to exam performance." Respondents to the survey noted that their rationale for choosing a specific Shakespeare play to teach the GCSE English Literature course centred around the text being "memorable" in order to help students cope with the challenges of "a closed book examination", that the play is "short" and could be "revisited" several times all of which were contextualised around the "constraints of time" to teach the course content (Elliott & Olive, 2019 p.10-11). Whilst schools do have the choice for students to certificate in English Literature at the end of Year 10 and then study the English Language GCSE separately in Year 11 or visa versa, many schools choose to combine teaching the two courses over a two year period. Viewed in this light, Gove's (2012) assertion that the new curriculum will "transform the teaching of Shakespeare in schools" does not stand up to scrutiny.

At the heart of Gove's and the Conservative government's underlying principles for these reforms, as highlighted by Patrick Wintor in *The Guardian* (2013), was the need for "independent schools, academies and free schools to respect British values" with the premise that intended to strengthen "this standard further, so that all schools actively promote British values." The Teachers' Standards, published by the Department for Education (2011), which all teachers must consistently meet throughout their career, specifically state that "showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others" and that "not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs" are mandatory as a classroom teacher. The parallels drawn between the professional standards

which teachers must uphold in terms of the outlined definition of “British values” and the teaching of the new English Literature curriculum, with its seemingly relentless focus on teaching these values through exclusively British writers, poses serious moral and ethical dilemmas when taking into consideration the range and scope of the multicultural background of students studying in the English educational system. Are we to believe that the grandiose “values” claimed as inherently “British” are evident in contemporary British society? Are English students being given the opportunity to explore the complexity and subtle nuances of these “values” through an English Literature curriculum that places a rigid and unwavering emphasis on its own cultural identity? Are students afforded the opportunity to explore the voices of writers’ who share their same experiences, whether they are issues concerned with race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or political attitudes? Can we, as teachers of English, claim to promote ideas concerning “mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” when the English curriculum appears to marginalise and silence all other voices and experiences in favour of predominantly white British writers who it could be argued, whilst studied in isolation, promote a specific experience whilst ‘othering’ the voices of writers who question or challenge these views? And, finally, how can schools promote these values in the context of, not only the teaching of the new English curriculum, but delivering the curriculum to our students in the current social and political climate where all values, whether they are ‘British’ or human, are seemingly up for debate?

Whilst the changes to the British educational system over the last thirty years have seen a significant shift in direction and ethos, one constant that has endured these rafts of changes is the inclusion of, and significance placed on, the importance of the study of Shakespeare: both as a cultural institution and as a representative of the ‘British values’ which the UK education system seeks to promote. At this point it is important to note the process by which governmental legislation translates to exam board specification; as Elliott and Olive outline, the Department for Education (DfE) in 2014 initially stated that “curricular guidance requires two plays to be studied between the ages of 11 and 14; it also requires one to be studied

between 14 and 16” whilst “students of English Literature A level from 16 to 18 must study at least one play by Shakespeare” (Elliott & Olive, 2019, p.2). Once this initial legislation has been passed, it is the responsibility of all exam boards to create a new syllabus for both GCSE and A-Level courses based on the guidelines set out by DfE, following the creation of this syllabus it must, as AQA (2015) outlines, be “accredited by the exams regulator, Ofqual. During the accreditation process, Ofqual ensures our specifications are fair and meet the national curriculum criteria.” Whilst it is at the exam boards’ discretion which of Shakespeare’s plays fall in to the category of ‘appropriate’ for study at both GCSE and A-Level, there is “the existence of such a thing “as an A level play” with an identification of “a sense that literary merit is important, and that a Shakespeare play studied at A level should be representative of his work, rather than a quixotic choice” with both “Hamlet and Othello” outlined as key examples of this representative approach (Elliott & Olive, 2015, p.2). The relevance and significance of the inclusion of *Othello* as part of the AQA exam board’s 2015 reforms to their English Literature A-Level specification, as part of the wider national educational reforms imposed by governmental legislation, is increasingly significant when also taking in to consideration the social, cultural and political zeitgeist of the moment. Set against the back drop of the Trojan horse scandal engulfing schools throughout Birmingham concerning, what transpired to be, a false assumption that an attempt was being made by prominent Muslims in the local community to impose strict Islamic teachings on the running of state funded schools, a rising wave of radicalised Islamist terrorist attacks across European countries and a surge of Islamophobic rhetoric from far-right groups and political leaders alike, the study of *Othello* has never been more prominent and relevant. From the animosity displayed towards Othello’s race through to the tensions surrounding his religious and cultural heritage, *Othello*’s place on a contemporary Literature syllabus serves students and teachers alike, “...to trace in the cultural, religious, and ethnic animosities of its Mediterranean setting, the genealogy of the racial conflicts that fractured their own societies.” (Neill, M, 2008, p.1) It will be the purpose of this thesis to explore the various pedagogical approaches to teaching *Othello* at A Level within the aforementioned social,

political and educational climate in which it exists and how the teaching of the text serves to complicate the crypto-nationalist agenda that underpins the ethos of the government's 2015 educational reforms whilst simultaneously supporting students' engagement with the text whilst also navigating their own "fractured" society.

At this point there is a need to acknowledge the rationale behind Shakespeare's placing within both the National Curriculum and British literary heritage. Michael Dobson (1992) highlights the "crucial century from the 1600s to the 1760s" as a significant moment in the canonization of Shakespeare as poet and playwright in that the time period embodies the "extensive cultural work that went in to the installation of Shakespeare as England's National Poet" (Dobson, 1992, p.5). Indeed, Dobson goes on to highlight the "quaint paradox" of the relationship between the "full scale canonization" of Shakespeare's work with the "wholesale adaptation" of his plays that took place throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century; as a consequence, Dobson argues that "the social and cultural forces which converged over that period to establish his supremacy have preserved it ever since", it is this process that has ultimately served to "enshrine Shakespeare's texts as national treasures." Whilst there is not the space here to explore the, as Dobson alludes to, paradoxical nature of the social and cultural climate which lead to the canonization of Shakespearean literature, it is worth noting the extent to which Shakespeare was, and is, institutionalised amongst British literary heritage and within the parameters of the English education sector in terms of his continued placing as national poet.

However synonymous Shakespeare is with British literary heritage and, as an extension, British national identity, there is scope to consider the ways in which his works confront, embrace, and can be used to celebrate multiculturalism both in Britain and the West. The tension surrounding the influence of immigration in Britain, and particularly London, at the latter end of the sixteenth century, just as Shakespeare himself arrived in the capital, was one which Shakespeare most notably portrayed in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. As

Andrew Dickson (2016) notes, Shakespeare's contribution to his collaborative work with several different authors on 'The Book of Sir Thomas Moore' included a speech referring to immigrants in the play as "strangers" with the timeless warning that if the British were to travel "to France [...] to any German province [...] Nay anywhere that not adheres to England: Why, you must needs be strangers". These lines, Dickson argues, were written by a playwright who "had a sharp eye for the troubled relationship between ethnic minorities and majorities". Shakespeare's willingness to confront the hypocrisy and xenophobic rhetoric evident in Elizabethan England prefixed his work on *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* and laid the groundwork for his delving in to the complexities of "the tensions between urban communities" and the "fractured complexities of multiculturalism" (Dickson, 2016) that are so evident in both plays. It is Shakespeare's willingness to confront and challenge the toxicity of the inherent challenges faced by the wider spectrum of attitudes towards Britain as a multicultural society, both then and now, which surely must be embraced by teachers and students alike in order to interrogate, mediate on, and celebrate the diversity of British culture. When reflecting on the challenges faced whilst teaching *Othello* in an all-girls Catholic comprehensive in London, Husna Choudhury (2007) notes that her "desire to put race at the forefront of formative education in order to reinterpret texts with a greater freedom" (Choudhury, 2007, p.190) whilst simultaneously creating a "multicultural environment" in the classroom was central to her ethos as an English teacher. In order for her students to engage with societal issues surrounding multiculturalism in Britain, both past and contemporary, it is the "importance of finding a balance between pluralism and assimilation that does not lead to forced cultural conformity, yet does not lead to segregation in society" (Choudhury, 2007, p.189) that lies at the heart of students' engagement with the issues surrounding race, religion, and ethnicity in *Othello*. Choudhury goes on to suggest that rather than seeing Shakespeare as the mouthpiece for a monocultural Britain, students should instead engage in discussions and reflections on "the racial other" in order to equip them with the tools to "understand the cultural perception in the West of the 'other'" (Choudhury, 2007, p.195); as a consequence, this approach will enable students to "not just

[...] understand Othello but themselves, or the constitution of the self” (Choudhury, 2007, p.199). Karin deGravelles (2011) extends this notion of confronting multiculturalism and its reflections on British society by suggesting that, due to the “play’s unclear political stance” it is of significance to focus students’ attention not on “a clear and linear understanding of race in Shakespeare’s time” but instead for them to engage with the “blurring and rupture of boundaries in the play...to recognise the way the play seeks to engage us and the forms of response culturally available” (deGravelles, 2011, p.158/172). This celebration, of course, is not limited to the confines of the British education system and when reflecting on the experiences of teaching *Othello* to a group of multi-racial students in America, Solomon Iyasere (2004) argues that his “students’ emotional relationship with the drama, especially issues of racism and interracial marriages” served to illuminate “more about them than about the plays.” Whilst the study of Shakespeare requires the careful balance between students seeing their own experiences reflected in his work with the need for “a consideration of the drama on its own terms” that Iyasere’s students were able to engage with the play, and as an extension the multiculturalist tensions dealt with in the play, on a visceral level is worthy of celebration; indeed, viewed in this light, Iyasere goes on to state that the “greatest richness of the plays comes from the insights they give us in to our own nature” (Iyasere, 2004, p.61).

However, the perceived ‘Britishness’ of the new curriculum could be seen as an attempt to reinforce a dominant sense of national identity at a time when the current political and social climate in Western culture has seen prevailing conflict and tension between nationalism and liberalism; this tension has subsequently dramatically polarised public opinion specifically concerning immigration, multiculturalism and a prevailing sense of national identity. As an extension of this, Donald Trump’s election and subsequent staunch anti-Muslim stance has become symbolic of the rise of right-wing political ideology to reemerge throughout western politics; from the newly elected coalition government in Austria partly made up of the far-right Freedom Party, through to the nationalist Alternative for Germany party winning over ninety

seats in parliament during Germany's 2017 general election. This political climate was also exemplified in the dogmatic rhetoric emanating from the Leave campaign in the lead up to the 2016 referendum to decide whether Britain would leave or remain in the European Union; this rhetoric specifically concerned the perceived external threat to an inherent sense of British identity and, as a result, the values which British citizens adhere to, posed by mass immigration. It could be argued that Gove's insistence that the National Curriculum must seek to maintain and actively promote British values was strengthened by the 2014 Trojan horse scandal, one year before the introduction of Gove's new National Curriculum; as stated in *The Guardian* (2014) a report produced by Peter Clark (former head of the Metropolitan police's counter terrorism command), which was commissioned by Gove, stated that there was a "coordinated, deliberate and sustained action to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamist ethos into some schools in the city". The report also stated that a "sustained and coordinated agenda to impose upon children in a number of Birmingham schools the segregationist attitudes and practices of a hardline and politicised strain of Sunni Islam." The report concluded that, "left unchecked, it would confine school children within an intolerant, inward-looking monoculture that would severely inhibit their participation in the life of modern Britain". Whilst tackling this issue to ensure that schools in Britain remain secular was the government's prerogative in order to consolidate their ability to ensure they maintain, as *The Guardian* (2014) reported, an "integrated role in modern British society"; Gove's insistence not only on an adherence to the promotion of British values across the curriculum but also a sole focus on British writers at the expense of work by writers from other cultures, and the marginalisation of post-colonial literature, was a politically motivated decision made at the expense of the multicultural society in which the education system serves, and to the expense of the students for which it is designed.

Having taught the new English curriculum for the past three years across Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, the prevailing reaction to the contents of the curriculum from my students is one of bewilderment, and at times, frustration at the marginalisation of writers from other cultures.

The school in which I teach is an all-girls state comprehensive in Batley, West Yorkshire; in my second year of teaching the school was graded by Ofsted as 'Outstanding'. The overall makeup of the students who attend the school, which offers Key Stage 5 provision in addition to the mandatory Key Stage 3 and 4 curriculum, is outlined in the school's latest Ofsted (2013) report as:

- A larger proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs are supported through school action than found nationally. The proportion of students supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- The proportion of students receiving pupil premium , which is additional funding given for looked after children, students known to be eligible for free school meals and children of service families, is higher than the national average.
- The large majority of students are from Pakistani and Indian backgrounds with the remainder coming from a variety of other heritages.

In addition to this, school data reports that 74.95% of students practice the Muslim faith with the school covering an incredible amount of work to help both students and their parents integrate in to the local community. One of the many ways in which the school tried to achieve this sense of integration was through working closely with the former MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox. In June 2016, Cox was murdered shortly after leaving her constituency surgery in Batley by far-right extremist Thomas Mair. Jo Cox's work with our school mirrored her wider work as an MP; she sought to promote inclusivity and unity within the Batley and Spen community, and sought to create and mediate a sense of inclusion and togetherness with all members of the community regardless of race, religion or ethnicity. Her murder, committed a short distance from my school, had an incredibly profound impact on the school community, and specifically on our students who saw Cox as a symbol of the way in which they can feel a sense of inclusivity in to the local community.

I have always felt that Gove's insistence that the new 2015 curriculum must demonstrate and reinforce 'British values' to students was subtly directed towards schools like mine, with the cultural, religious and ethnic makeup of the majority of our school's students; there are approximately 1,200 students enrolled in the school with a wide ranging mixture of first, second and third generation British. Following seven years worth of discussions I have had with students in my English classes, one notion that has struck me time and again is the innumerable amount of students, despite identifying themselves as British Pakistani or British Indian, have never felt a true sense of connection, belonging and inclusion in the community in which they live. To be more specific, through their life time of incalculable experiences of racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and, for an increasing number of students, the knowledge of Britain's historical colonisation of India and the enforcement of British rule of law on their lives and the lives of their ancestors, many of my students feel there are societal, cultural and political barriers in place in order to prevent their sense of inclusion and integration in to British society. Paradoxically, the question must be posed that, if Gove's vision for a new curriculum steeped in 'British values' being ideologically driven to deliver a very specific version of what it means to be British, and identifiable as a British citizen, to explore these values, learn from them and adhere to them throughout their lives, how are these values accessible to our students who, on the most basic level, through their own experiences of British society feel they have been devalued, dismissed and silenced by the very establishment which governs their education?

This requirement for schools to actively promote a set of values that initially the government struggled to define, extends across Key Stage 3, 4 and 5 and it is the prevalence of this requirement in the teaching of A-Level Literature that forms the basis of this study. When teaching *Othello* to a class of fifteen A-Level students, all of whom were Muslim, it became apparent very early on in the course that, not only was Othello's race of central interest to the students in terms of trying to flesh out the tragedy of his character, but it was also the

depiction of his spiritual, cultural and religious heritage that many of my students found to be able to compare with their own experience. If, as my students identified, Othello's race is of central importance to their understanding of the tragedy of the play, then it will be of central importance to disseminate to what extent my students feel the depiction of not only Othello's race but also his religious identity and the struggle he faces when trying to integrate in to what was a predominately white, Christian society is of central importance to both their understanding of the root source of the play's tragedy whilst also evaluating how the depiction of Islam and the presentation of Othello's spiritual and religious heritage is reflective of modern Western views of the Islamic faith.

For the purpose of this thesis, my focus will centre on the AQA exam board's A-Level English Literature B course specification; it must be acknowledged that there are seven exam boards available for schools to choose from, AQA is the country's most used exam board with 42% of all A-Levels examined by AQA. On this particular course, students spend the first year of their two year course studying the Tragedy genre; this genre focus requires our students to study *Othello*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and a collection of Keats' poetry (including the following poems: 'Lamia', 'Isabella' or 'The Pot of Basil', 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'The Eve of St. Agnes'). In the course specification the AQA (2019) exam board state that:

This coherent specification has a distinct philosophy which centres on different ways of reading and the connections that exist between texts within a literary genre. In this way, students can gain a solid understanding of how texts can be connected and how they can be interpreted in multiple ways in order that students can arrive at their own interpretations and become confident autonomous readers. Students are then not only equipped with the knowledge and skills needed for exams, but also experience a rich, challenging and

coherent approach to English literature that provides an excellent basis for further study in the subject.

With a specific outline given from AQA (2019) which states the Tragedy genre has “a long tradition in literature, with their origins in the ancient world and with a specific emphasis on drama. Texts have been selected and grouped together because they share some of the common features of traditional tragic...drama while also offering some interesting variations. We are, therefore, looking at an older historical form and measuring later texts and their approaches to tragedy...against a literary genre which is long established.” It is with this “origin in the ancient world” that our students begin their study of the Tragedy genre and its evolution through Aristotelian, Senecan and Shakespearean tragedy before finally arriving at a modern take on the genre through Miller’s ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’. The purpose of this process is to give students a firm foothold in the genre before breaking off in to exam classes to then deal with the set texts on the specification where students, over the course of the academic year, continue to explore the various ways in which the tragedy genre is depicted across the three texts.

The significance and importance of Shakespeare’s place at the heart of the English canon is unquestionable; it has been my experience that, on the whole, my A-Level students have always enjoyed his comedy, tragedy and history plays and take a keen interest in the debates and discussions that arise from his work. Studying *Othello*, one of only two choices available from this specification and genre (the other being *King Lear*), my students have, for the last three years, thoroughly enjoyed; however, when taking into consideration the social, political and educational climate in which the current syllabus is being taught, it became apparent to me from my students responses to the texts on offer was that they found the choices available to them narrow and problematic. To a growing number of my students, they began to question, not necessarily the validity of the text in front of them, but rather, the absence of texts that they feel would be equally significant written by authors with similar

experiences to their own. If Gove's vision of offering English Literature students the opportunity to study and appreciate the "depth and breadth" of literature why, then, are teachers and students alike limited to just one Renaissance playwright? Even more specifically, why is there such a narrow focus on just two of his works? If we aim to offer "depth and breadth" to our curriculum, to allow our students to develop socially, politically, emotionally, spiritually and academically, it appears that all of these aims need to be achieved in a narrow and constrained educational environment designed to adhere to, and promote, a specific version of what are classed to be 'British values'. When asked to think about the study of *Othello* in the wider context of their community and British society, many of my students felt a certain sense of trepidation and suspicion about the motivations for the construction of the new syllabus. During a class discussion with a group of Year 13 students, whilst considering the content of her English Literature course, one student said that:

Despite the multiculturalism of British society, and Britain is a multicultural society, rather than have a syllabus that reflects that and the mixture of voices and experiences within that society, what we are allowed to study does not reflect that at all. Some might point to *Othello* and say "Look, a play with a black protagonist" but all we hear is a white version of the black experience, and the experience of him being a person of colour is dampened down and reduced to something insignificant rather than given a platform to express ideas about *Othello's* experiences. (Summayyah, 3rd Generation Indian, Year 13 Literature and Biology student)

An insightful and, I must admit, slightly unconventional response to one of Shakespeare's seminal works, and one that requires our attention. The problem, it seems, does not lie with Shakespeare or his plays; in isolation, the students in my A-Level classes enjoy his work and write beautifully about their own responses to the text. Instead, the issues seem to lie outside of the literature itself, and instead with the social and political climate in which this

specific piece of work is being studied. The rest of the class enthusiastically concurred with this assessment of the syllabus and unanimously agreed that a balanced “mixture of voices and experiences” across the full English Literature A-Level syllabus simply does not exist. Instead, the students pointed to the majority of “voices” that emanate from their programme of study across the two year course (see Appendix B) are predominately, in their words, “White. Male. British...and dead”. What my students perhaps lack in subtlety they more than make up for in insight and relevance, with the possibility of studying a selection of just five female writers (Austen, Levy, Atkinson, Christie and Atwood) in comparison to the potential study of twenty-one male writer’s work on the full A-Level course is demonstrative of this view. Whilst this a particularly galling view of Gove’s reforms in its own right, of particular concern amongst my students is the lack of a voice of the ‘other’ that is truly representative of the experiences of minority and marginalised groups. When thinking about *Othello* and the text’s place on the syllabus, my students emphasis on the notion of Othello’s character being a “white version of the black experience”, which they see as indicative of an ideological construct being placed on “the experience of being a person of colour” rather than having access to literature on the syllabus that allows students of various races, religions and cultural backgrounds to study literature written by authors who share those same experiences. As Shakespeare is the only writer that Gove’s new curriculum states specifically must be taught at both GCSE and A-Level, my student’s view that the black experience depicted in *Othello* is “dampened down and reduced to something insignificant” feeds into the rationalisation that the ‘othering’ of minority groups in contemporary society is reflected in the A-Level English syllabus. In his essay ‘Images of White Identity in *Othello*’, Peter Erkison (2002) states that, “At the very outset *Othello* plunges us so forcefully into a tumult of racial contempt keyed to visible physical features-Roderigo's "the thicklips" (1.1.65), Iago's "old black ram" "tupping your white ewe" (1.1.87-88), Brabantio's "sooty bosom" (1.2.70) said right to Othello's face-that we are in danger of seeing this vicious rhetoric as the whole story of race in the play.” In terms of pedagogical practice and students’ attempts to deal with race in the play, it could be argued that once students

confront the overt racism depicted throughout the narrative, our understanding of Othello's character is fundamentally constrained by this and we cannot see past the prejudicial attitudes that encompass his character for the rest of the play. In the same class discussion, another student went on to comment that she didn't think that:

The complexity of race and racial identity is explored by Shakespeare. Again, it feels like his character is reduced to the most basic and xenophobic stereotypes and it doesn't really go past that. *Othello* is a play of the triumph of white privilege. (Ayesha, 2nd Generation Pakistani, Year 12 English Literature and History student)

Whilst specific pedagogical approaches to dealing with race in the play are reserved for Chapter Two, it is interesting to observe that, at the end of two years studying the play, the class ultimately felt that Othello's character is merely "reduced" by the stereotypical traits attributed to the Elizabethan and Jacobean depictions of Moors and the sense of "racial identity" and the "experience" of a person of colour in a predominantly white, Christian society is downplayed in order to reassert the dominance of a white, Western culture. Martin Orkin notes that, "...by 1601 there were enough black men in London to prompt Elizabeth to express her discontent "at the great number of 'Negars and blackamoors' which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain." and goes on to outline the views, "that Elizabethan Englishmen saw the natives of Africa as barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous" (Orkin, 1987, p. 166). If we take these depictions of native Africans as the 'norm' for Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, and apply them to Othello's character, my students' views that our understanding of the black experience, or indeed the experiences of the 'other', are essentially inaccessible for my students who see the portrayal of Othello not as a depiction of the complexities of racial tension and societal segregation, but instead as a failure to fully explore, and give a voice to, their own

experiences as a minority group within contemporary society. Indeed, Ayesha's classmate claimed that:

Othello's tragedy isn't his death, it's that he's lost his sense of worth. His identity has been stripped away and all that's left is his 'accomplishments' of taking a prominent role in Venetian military and, to some extent, society. (Zainab, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 12 English Literature and English Language student)

With others in the class concurring with this analysis, it is interesting to note that some of my students seeing the 'stripping away' of Othello's 'sense of worth' and, in essence, his cultural identity, is particularly significant when considering my students' reactions to the tragedy of the play. Rather than focus on Othello's fall from grace, the destruction of his love for Desdemona or Iago's conquest to manipulate and destroy those who he feels have wronged him, the overwhelming sense of loss of identity, and as an extension cultural and religious identity, is what resonates most pertinently amongst my students. Indeed, my students went so far as to say that, rather than merely a loss of identity, a distortion of Othello's sense of his own identity is where the tragedy of the story truly lies. My students have pointed to Othello's desperation to cling on to his title, his sense of security in the world, the apparent protection marrying the daughter of a Senator would offer him, his need to conceal, reject and, worse still, fight against and kill the very spiritual, cultural and religious upbringing that defined his character in his early life that resonates most amongst my students. When, at the beginning of Act 2, Othello announces that the, "Turks are drown'd" (2.1.195-196), we come to realise that Othello presumably has more in common spiritually, culturally, religiously and emotionally with the "turban'd Turk" (5.2.349) than with the "potent, grave, and reverend" (1.3.76) Venetians whose interests he is sworn to serve and protect. This tear in Othello's character, between his true sense of self and the lack of ownership he feels over his own identity, and who he feels the need to be in order to conform to a society that fundamentally views him as an 'other', resonates with students

throughout the A-Level classes that I teach; they see the similarities between Othello's predicament and their lives as young, Muslim women in modern British society. As Ammaarah points out, she feels that Othello must only be allowed to celebrate the authority he has been given, rather than the authority he achieved; the Senate promote Othello to general of the Venetian army, not out of acceptance of his cultural differences or their desire to integrate him into Venetian society, but out of the gains the state will make as a consequence of Othello's skill as a leader and a killer. Upon hearing of Desdemona being "abus'd, stol'n...and corrupted" (1.3.60) the Duke responds that Brabantio shall "You yourself read" the "bloody book of law" (1.3.67-68); however, upon realising that the 'abuser' is Othello, the Duke ultimately allows Othello to live when confronted with the apoplectic Brabantio because "...the fortitude of the place is best known to you" (1.3.220-221). With the Venetian state's military interests in Cyprus at stake, and the financial and military interests of the state are under threat, the Senate are forced in to absolving Othello of any blame for their greater good. Similarly, when considering Othello's sense of religious identity and how this is then reflected in the lives of my students; it was suggested by Ayesha that:

To me, looking at the history of Christianity, it always appears to me to be a white religion. The reason for that is, historically, the British have colonised different countries and with that they bring Christianity to that country. In India, for example, the *fa'afafine* (men who attend weddings dressed up as women, they are thought to bring good luck) was slowly eradicated with the rise of imperialism, colonisation and the exposure of Christianity and homophobia (I'm not saying Christianity is homophobic); but those ideas were brought to India and now that culture and community have been driven out of society.

This sense of forced conformity, of bending to the will of the state and to adopt cultures given to them at the expense of their own is an idea that runs throughout my English classes, both in terms of the reasoning behind Othello's isolation in the play and, to a large

extent, my students sense of the Muslim population and their 'othering' in modern British society. Hassan Mahamdallie (2015) draws parallels between anti-Semitic rhetoric and its similarities in its function when considering the continuing 'othering' of Muslims and the placing of the Islamic faith in Western society in that "hostility to Islam in the modern Christian West has gone hand in hand" with the demonisation and sustained antagonism of minority groups. Mahamdallie goes on to argue that it is not only the political far-right that holds hostile and derogatory views of Islam but also "significant sections of the left and anti-racist groups...believe that the principle enemy of the values emerging from the Enlightenment is not war, neoliberalism, austerity and the far-right, but Islam and its followers." With the consequences of this ideological narrative culminating in the "othering" of Europe's Muslims" (Mahamdallie, 2015, p.6). Additionally, Leonie Jackson (2017) highlights the notion "that culture may have replaced biology in new racism" when considering the rise of Islamophobia in the West whilst still "predicated on a fear of the 'other' [...] the ideological underpinnings remain the same." Jackson goes on to consider how the English Defence League (EDL) "characterise Muslims as the bearers of an innate and opposing Islamic culture which could not be absorbed into Britain until Islam was entirely reformed." This notion of the reforming of religious and cultural identity in order to conform to the expectations of a particular set of societal values is one that my students can identify and assimilate with in terms of their own experience and those faced by Othello both at a personal and societal level; the perception of Islam's place within British society appears to be defined by absolutes, from the "good Muslims who are like us and can be integrated" or conversely the "(bad) Muslims with excessive and problematic cultural diversity who are present as antagonistic and must be contained" (Jackson, 2017, p. 179). Similarly, the 'problem' of Othello's Muslim heritage and "lascivious" (1.1.126) nature making him "an abuser of the world" (1.3.78) is established from the outset and attempts are made by Brabantio to 'contain' the threat he poses not just to the sanctity of the family home but to the security and authoritative Christian state. Of course, this sense of 'othering' of Muslim

communities in a non-Muslim country is not confined to Britain; during one class discussion Acma, who moved to Britain at sixteen having been born and raised in Germany told us that:

There's a lot of overt hatred and discrimination towards Muslims; we've been laughed at to our faces and been sworn and spat at in the last few years. The hatred is clear and they don't try to hide it. If you don't dress like Germans you'll be looked at disapprovingly, even some Muslims who've adopted German cultural identities in favour of maintaining their own cultural identity will ostracise you. It felt very much like conform or get out of our country. (Acma, 1st Generation German, Year 13 English Literature and English Language student)

Acma's experience of the consequences of the demonisation of the Muslim faith is reflected in what Scott Poynting and Victoria Mason (2007) refer to as "the emergence of a new global figure of threat and enmity" as the "collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s" ultimately led to "Muslim populations finding themselves increasingly encoded as the new 'evil other'" (Poynting & Mason, 2007, p.63). Whilst stories of Islamophobia and Islamophobic attacks on Muslims are all too common in Western culture (according to a recent report by the *Independent* (2017) newspaper there was a 23 percent increase in reports of racially and religiously motivated crimes in the eleven months following the EU referendum), Acma's recount of her life in Germany, and the reasons for her parents to leave the country, begins to demonstrate the source of my students beliefs that, ultimately, they are unable to fully adapt to Western life, culture and customs whilst simultaneously embracing their own cultural and religious identities. This clash of cultures and the tensions that exist between religious identities is reflected in Eldred Jones's argument that, when looking for inspiration for settings of their plays, Renaissance dramatists would have looked to North Africa because it was a "...ready made source of conflicts in the clashes between Christianity and Islam" with tales of "...forced conversion, heroic resistance to such conversions in the face of

threats and tortures, as well as the willing surrender of some to the new religion.” (Jones, 1965, p. 14) Whatever Othello’s plight after he was “taken by the insolent foe//And sold to slavery” (1.3.136-137), whether the “insolent foe” were his Muslim Ottoman enemies or his Christian Venetian masters is up for debate, as is whether Othello gave a “heroic resistance” against his enslavers or took “willing surrender” to his “new religion”; what is certain is that, by the time the play begins, Othello has been stripped of his cultural and religious heritage, and has taken on (or, as many of my students would argue, been forcibly given) the mantle of Christian warrior.

The destructive nature of this clash of cultural and religious identities, so prevalent in the lives of my students and their families, played a prominent role in Richard Twyman’s recent production of *Othello*. This production placed significant emphasis on the hypothesis that Othello’s character originated from a Muslim heritage as depicted through the play opening with Othello and Desdemona taking part in a traditional, but secret, Islamic marriage ceremony; however, when Othello next appears on stage at the beginning of Act 1 Scene 2, he dresses himself first with a bullet proof vest and then hangs a Christian crucifix around his neck. The symbolism of this act is crucial to understanding the need for the sense of ‘conformity’ Acma talked about when considering her own cultural and religious beliefs growing up in Germany; here, Othello conforms to the expectations of the society in which he lives, adopting Christian values and belief system at the expense of his own. The destructive nature of this need for conformity, the ‘stripping away’ of his own sense of identity as Ammaarah earlier stated, is laid bare when, at the point of committing suicide, Othello turns to the crucifix once more, this time, however, he has a blade hidden inside it which he uses to end his own life. The transformation of the crucifix from a symbol of conformity and protection for Othello to one of death and destruction is particularly poignant and further demonstrates the consequences of not only of the perilous predicament Othello found himself in but also, having been robbed of his former self and forced into a world that overtly opposes his cultural and religious identity, the fundamental destructiveness of a

society the refuses to embrace the 'other'. In this particular production of the play, by metaphorically dying on the cross, Othello places himself in the position of sacrificial lamb, sacrificing himself in order to preserve, in his mind, his Christian nature: his request for the representatives of the Venetian state to "speak of me as I am" (5.2.338) emphasises his desperation to be considered their equal as he proceeds to repent his sins and die as Jesus did, the ultimate act of redemption following his murder of Desdemona. Paradoxically, however, Othello also places himself in the position of enemy to Christian doctrine, when he reenacts his punishment of a "turban'd Turk" who he "took by th'throat the circumcised dog//And smote him thus" (5.2.349-352) stabbing himself, not as Othello, but as the "turban'd Turk". Whilst this act might be seen as the ultimate representation of Othello's loyalty to the Venetian state and Christian theology, by placing himself in the position of the enemy, Othello also unwittingly places emphasis on the destructive nature of the oppressive and tyrannical means by which he was "sold to slavery" and, as a consequence, was robbed of his own sense of cultural and religious identity.

It could be argued that the blending of the public and private aspects of Othello's tragedy mirror the public and private struggle that takes place amongst Muslim communities in terms of their integration into western societies. The foundations for the deep-rooted xenophobic and racist attitudes towards Othello are laid in the opening moments of the play and, fundamentally, do not detach themselves from Othello until he is dead. The message here appears to be stark: the complete separation between Christian and Muslim beliefs is irreversible; the "entrenched" distinctions between both religions makes integration between them impossible and those who dare to transcend these religions are punished by death. My students were astonished by how quickly Brabantio mirrors Iago's spiteful, toxic attitude towards Othello and reverts to the "entrenched" fears of the Moors and the "spells", "medicines" and "witchcraft" (1.3.61-64) that Othello must have used to dupe Desdemona in to marriage. The complete distinction between Iago and Brabantio's characters in terms of their social standing only serves, as one student pointed out, "to underpin the embedded

fear, suspicion and prejudice that exists within Christian society towards Muslims” (Suffiyya, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 13 English Literature and History student); from a lowly flag bearer to a senator of Venice, both characters work in tandem to reinforce Othello’s ‘otherness’ in Venetian society. Both characters work as a demonstration of the breadth and depth in which this prejudice exists and, as an extension, the ‘otherness’ not just of Othello, but of Muslims in the Western world.

I began teaching my A-Level class *Othello* in September 2017 and, two weeks before I was due to finish teaching the text, the US Supreme Court had upheld Trump’s decision in the previous month to ban travellers from six predominantly Muslim countries entering the US. As reported by Fox News (2015) Trump, upon initially introducing the ban, stated, “We have no idea who is coming in to our country, no idea if they like us or hate us” and ultimately signalled the need for a “total and complete ban on Muslims”. Class discussions on the treatment of Othello’s character and his seeming fundamental inability to find acceptance in Venetian society, coupled with Trump’s demonisation of 1.5 billion Muslims, centered around my students continued perception of their own sense of ‘otherness’ and an inability to feel acceptance in Western society. When the point was put forward to the class that many characters in the play speak highly of Othello, including the Duke and senators of Venice, my students very much saw these acts of gratitude as sinister and manipulative, rather than sincere. It was quite clear that their own experiences of being a Muslim in Western society, coupled with the current societal and political zeitgeist concerning Muslims and Islam, shaped their perception of the play and the role that religion and cultural identity plays in the narrative. One student saw Othello simply as an “enemy of the state” who, rather than being “lov’d” (1.3.127) by those around him, instead could be viewed as a symbol of Western imperialism used and exploited by those around him to further demonstrate and re-emphasise their sense of authority and dominance. My students saw this parallel between the institutional abuse Othello suffers at the hands of those around him with modern attitudes towards Islam, multiculturalism and the political climate surrounding

immigration. During a class presentation on the depiction of Othello's character in Act One, Aasifah said:

I think the handling of Othello's character by the other (white) characters in the story is really reflective of modern attitudes towards immigration. For example, Othello tells us that, when he 'served his purpose' to Brabantio of not only protecting Venice and her interests, as well as telling him the stories of far off lands, he (Brabantio) "loved" Othello. However, the moment Othello stopped simply 'providing a service' to Brabantio and now became part of his bloodline (by marrying Desdemona) suddenly Othello was seen as a 'cancer' that needed to be removed. Similarly, the attitude towards immigration in the western world appears to be that we will use it to our advantage when it benefits us, but the moment it causes us concern or we have to suddenly change our perspective on the society we live in or alter our lives in order to be able to accommodate others, just like Brabantio's relationship with Othello, there is resistance and a perceived threat towards our sense of safety and security. (Aasifah, 1st Generation Pakistani, Year 13 English Literature and Biology student)

The inherent hypocrisy that my students identified, both within the dominant powers within the play, and their perception of the immigration policies of Western superpowers, further highlights their growing sense of being 'othered' by the society in which, just like Othello, they fully intended to serve socially, politically and economically. During one particular lesson, the idea of society being controlled by fear, notably demonstrated through the rhetoric of Trump, and the threat to Western 'safety and security' was discussed. My students on the whole held the same belief that, whether looking at Othello's treatment by the state of Venice, or attitudes towards immigration, multiculturalism and Islam in modern Britain, the 'safety and security' of the dominance of white power is what is under threat from the 'other' who seek to destabilise this historical supremacy. This recognition of the British

Empire as a colonial power is significant when dealing with the continuity of 'othering' families and communities who are not historically British in modern society; Ammaarah, a student in my Year 13 class whose grandparents migrated from South Africa during the Apartheid era, said of their experience of moving to Britain in the 1980's:

It feels like when they moved here their religion was pretty inconsequential to the people who already lived here it was more, if anything, the differences in race. But then slowly, as more people emigrated here, and the Asian/immigrant communities started to develop, the anti-immigration attitude appeared. And then 9/11 happened. (Ammaarah, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 13 English Literature and English Language student)

This explanation really put in to context the shift and change in attitudes towards ideas about migration and, specifically for my students, Islam and societal perceptions of both. The majority of my students had only just been born shortly before 9/11 so it's impact on current attitudes towards Islam and the Muslim community might not have been as obvious as one might expect. What was palpable from the reaction to this idea from the class, was the perceived notion that the events of 9/11 pushed Islamic theology to the fore of Western societal consciousness, and in so doing, opened up Islam and the Muslim community to the same tirade of abuse and mistreatment that Othello also suffers when the white, Christian power is perceived to be under threat at the beginning of the play.

Interestingly, however, it is not only Othello's character that my students empathise with in terms of how far the tentacles of prejudice reach; the vilification of both Desdemona and Cassio, at different points in the play, serve to emphasise the deep rooted fear and hatred of the 'other' and reinforce the notion of Othello as "enemy of the state". My students felt that Cassio's 'love' and admiration for Othello were sincere enough, and that his loss of "reputation" (2.3.245) could be seen as punishment for this genuine sense of loyalty. The

extended punishment served to Desdemona, from her father's fury to her eventual death, was also seen by my students, as a consequence of not only that she "deceiv'd her father" (1.3.290) but that this deception also transcended both cultural and religious divisions. The means of her death was of particular interest to my students, one of whom commented:

It almost feel to me like Shakespeare made the Muslim character kill her in order to issue some sort of warning about crossing the religious divide; he's almost saying 'if you betray your father, your culture, your religion' then it will mean you're either abandoned by those who love you, or you'll die for it. If she'd stayed on the side of Christianity she would have lived, which is good; but she chose to cross over to the side of Islam, abandon her faith, and her new faith killed her, which is obviously bad. I don't think it could be clearer than that here, Christianity is depicted as the good and Islam as evil. (Hafsah, 2nd Generation Afgan, Year 12 English Literature and English Language student)

When asked to put this view in to the context of how these attitudes fit in to their perception of the function of different religious beliefs in British society, understandably, a lot of my students were keen to discuss the murder of Jo Cox; as the MP for Batley and Spen, of which my school and the vast majority of our students are constituents, Cox spent huge amounts of time working with members of the community, schools and faith leaders to emphasise the need for social integration for those new to the Batley and Spen community and the need for a strong and meaningful cohesion between its members. As reported by *The Guardian* (2016), Thomas Mair, the far-right terrorist who murdered Jo Cox, referred to her as "one of the collaborators" pitching "a very bloody struggle" between "the white race" and the immigrants who, according to Mair, sought to "invade" Great Britain. In Mair's eyes, he was a patriot serving his country, fighting against an enemy encapsulated by immigration and multiculturalism, with Jo Cox seen as a conspirator to this 'invasion'. My students were quick to reference the divisive and toxic rhetoric of the Leave campaign (UKIP's 'Breaking

Point' poster and Boris Johnson's claims of the NHS being funded "£350 million" if Britain left the EU were two examples frequently used) to emphasise their growing sense of vulnerability at being seen as 'outsiders' in a country they have lived in all of their lives and, more worryingly, as also "the collaborators" who pose a threat to the "safety and security" of British society. Their fears were genuine, deep-rooted and, as their teacher, painful to listen to. My students were entirely able to empathise with the segregation of Othello and Desdemona's characters from the world in which they exist; many of whom agreed that their community and religion, particularly in light of Jo Cox's murder and the anti-immigration rhetoric which was emanating from political parties on a daily basis in the lead up to the EU referendum, were being painted, just like Othello, as enemies of the state who must be removed in order to preserve and maintain the established social order. Looked at in the wider context concerning the Western social and political climate, a report in the Financial Times (2017) that Trump's former National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, claimed "we're in a world war against a messianic mass movement of evil people, most of them inspired by a totalitarian ideology: Radical Islam." Whilst, conversely, "Ms Merkel's willingness to admit more than a million mostly Muslim refugees into Germany make America's alt-right regard her as a traitor to western civilisation." Considering these viewpoints in light of my students' own fears about their place in modern British society makes for worrying reading: if Islam is being painted as "radical" and its followers are "evil", if proponents of inclusivity and unity among religious and non-religious members of our community are murdered for upholding these views, if the leader of Germany is depicted as a "traitor" for her "willingness" to offer compassion and empathy to those in need, then my students' fears about their own sense of place and purpose in society are entirely justifiable. If they see *Othello* as a symbol of their own plight and suffering offering them a platform to explore and better understand themselves, then the inclusion of the text on the AQA A-Level syllabus is entirely justified; however, equally, the toxic and dangerous social and political context in which the text is taught is entirely unjustifiable.

The views of my students outlined in this chapter point to a narrow and restrictive educational context in which the play is taught and studied; this, in turn, can be seen to reinforce a stifling conservative ideological framework within which students must try to explore the social and political tensions that lie at the heart of the play. There is a danger, then, that archaic and restrictive pedagogical approaches will further reinforce the static and potentially harmful understanding of the 'British values' at the heart of the government's educational reforms; as will be explored in Chapter Two, a broader more adaptable approach to the teaching of the play is required in order for students and teachers to recast these values in order for students to better understand the subtleties of the play, themselves and the social, political and educational environment in which it is taught. As Wade and Sheppard (1994) posit whilst considering the experiences of former high school students on the "failure" of their English lessons to engage them with Shakespeare's work, the "students blame methods of teaching, not the plays themselves" for their inability to see the value and relevance of Shakespeare's plays to their own lives; Wade and Sheppard go on to argue that restrictive and outdated teaching practice turns "what should be interactive, dramatic and widely appealing" educational experiences in to those that seem "static [...] and elitist" (Wade & Sheppard, 1994, p.21). It is the rendering of Shakespeare's plays as "static" and "elitist" that is most troubling when considering the detrimental impact archaic and disengaging pedagogical approaches to the teaching of his plays can have; as Shakespeare is initially taught at Key Stage 2 and 3, these negative responses can be deep rooted and will serve not just to see Shakespeare as a playwright and cultural institution but more damagingly to reinforce the monoculturalist ideology seemingly at the centre of Gove's curriculum reforms. Indeed, as Shakespeare is the only author to remain a constant in every iteration of the National Curriculum since its 1989 inception, there is a danger that this form of teaching can lead students to feel they are studying *why* Shakespeare is the embodiment of British canonical writers rather than *how* his work can in inform reflect their individual and shared experiences. Instead, it is fundamental to the teaching of Shakespeare that "teachers position learning as a social process based upon encounter between the experiences of

pupils and the curricula” with the aim of enabling “the pupils’ subjectivity and personal experience as a means of interrogating cultural formations” (Ward & Connolly, 2008, p.303). It is within this context that archaic and restrictive pedagogies refrain from allowing students to see themselves in Shakespeare’s work, its universality will become lost and students’ ability to engage with his work within the spectrum of “moral welfare and social cohesion” (Ward & Connolly, 2008, p.303) will become unachievable.

Instead, pedagogical approaches to Shakespeare should promote “positive engagement with what might otherwise seem daunting and unapproachable material”; whilst there is no blueprint for *the* way to teach Shakespeare to students across the Key Stages, it is widely recognised that the “emphasis is on activity: pair-work, role-play, hot-seating, improvisation” (Blocksidge, 2005, p.15) and, most significantly, on “performance, since only dramatic methods can give insight into the dramatic medium” (Wade & Sheppard, 1994, p.23). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my students’ engagement with *Othello* was recontextualised having watched Twyman’s production of the play; for many of my students, this was their first experience of watching a play in a theatre, for that first experience to be Shakespeare and to see a part of their identity, Islam, playing such a central role in the narrative of the play feeds the notion that Shakespeare’s work can be used to explore “values and issues in which literary examples are mere illustrations” rather than a formulaic examination of “a great literary work that may or may not raise interesting points for discussion” (Ward & Connolly, 2008, p.304); I believe it is here, in this cross-section between the power of the dramatic form and the need for academic engagement with Shakespeare’s plays, that the heart of pedagogy must lie. Additionally, as a consequence of the production focusing on the links that can be made between the character of Othello and his Islamic faith, reflecting on comments outlined earlier in this chapter, there was a sense that my students felt legitimised in bringing their own experiences to their readings and responses to the play. Exposing students to these kinds of productions of the play, where attitudes towards race, religion, cultural and national identity are brought to the fore help

teachers to “reject the use of literature as a means of homogenizing taste and developing national identity” and, as a consequence, help students and teachers alike to feel “more at ease with a multicultural agenda” and create an environment which positions “the classroom as a site of exchange rather than indoctrination” (Ward & Connolly, 2008, p. 304).

## **Conclusion**

The study of Shakespeare lies at the core of the new English curriculum and is reflective of what Elliott (2014) refers to as the consequence of political discourse based “largely around cultural entitlement and cultural capital: the bankable properties of Shakespeare” (Elliott, 2014, p.284). Whilst this approach may serve to adhere to Conservative political ideologies surrounding the ‘Britishness’ of the new curriculum, it does so at the expense of exposing students to literary texts that extend beyond the boundaries of British authors and instead narrows the scope of the literature students study to instead raise “the potential for privileging a high culture as ‘essential knowledge’” whilst simultaneously ostracising and marginalising “multicultural texts and authors in favour of more homogenous ‘classics’” (Elliott, 2014, p.284).

Therefore, if the rhetoric of Gove surrounding the introduction of the new curriculum is considered, the study of Shakespeare takes on a new resonance in light of the crypto-nationalist agenda set out by Conservative educational policy; as my students have demonstrated, it is their engagement with *Othello* and their use of the text not just to study as a piece of classic literature, but to engage with its ideas and values whilst simultaneously being sensitive of, what Mehrunissa Shah (2013) refers to as the “need to regard the histories and values they bring to lessons with sensitivity.” As a consequence my students, like Shah’s, continue to take “ownership over the narrative and interpret meaning through the lens of their various experiences” (Mehrunissa Shah, 2013, p. 203).

The teaching of *Othello* then, must adhere to these qualities and at the forefront of this approach teachers must allow their students not just to study *how* Shakespeare became representative of British canonical literature but *why* his work still resonates with a student body made up of various cultures, religions, and ethnicities; all students must be allowed to see the value of their own experiences reflected back at them through the literature that they study, only by doing so can we continue to claim that Shakespeare speaks for all of us.

## Chapter 2 – Teaching Tragedy: Pedagogical Practice

In order to be able to fully evaluate a variety of pedagogical approaches to the teaching of *Othello*, it will be necessary for me to contextualise the academic environment in which the text is taught and the implications this context has on both the teaching of, and students' engagement with the text. As stated in Chapter One, the students in my school's A-Level classes study the AQA exam board A-Level English Literature B course and, as a consequence, my attention will be focused on this course's assessment criteria and the various ways in which A-Level teachers deliver *Othello* to suit the assessment needs and requirements outlined by AQA (2019):

- **AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
- **AO2:** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
- **AO3:** Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
- **AO4:** Explore connections across literary texts.
- **AO5:** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As stated in the previous chapter, Appendix B illustrates the academic context in which *Othello* is taught, with the text being one of two Shakespeare plays that are compulsory to study across the A-Level course. One of the difficulties that many, if not all, English teachers face in the delivery of exam texts is that, as well as a restriction of time to teach the text, the balance between allowing students to use the text as a tool for self-discovery, self-reflection and exploration of ways in which Shakespeare's work reflects the current socio-political climates whilst also maintaining a clear sense of focus on the demands and requirements of the exam board can be a difficult balance to maintain. I do not think it is too controversial to

suggest that, in a world of Ofsted, school league tables and the ever increasing financial pressure on schools to fund their own sixth form courses, the pressure on teachers (and, as an inevitable consequence, students) to achieve the best results possible is greater than ever before. It has become almost a daily ritual in our school staffroom to discuss and try to resolve the complexities of delivering a rich, dynamic and engaging teaching and learning experience, whilst simultaneously preparing students to meet the rigorous requirements of exam boards across the country. With the curriculum changes that were introduced to the teaching of English in 2015 outlined in Chapter One, emphasis is now placed on student exam performance (80% of a student's overall A-Level grade now comes from the results they attain from the two exam papers they sit) with two pieces of coursework making up the final 20% of their grade. With the AQA exam board, along with WJEC, OCR, Edexcel and CCEA, placing so much emphasis on student performance in their end of year exams, and effectively removing any real sense of purpose for the skills needed to be able to produce a piece of coursework, there appears to be a real struggle between the natural inclination of the vast majority of English teachers to offer a meaningful and enriching education to their English students, and the sacrifices that almost inevitably have to be made in order for students to be prepared to sit their exams; sadly, the phrase 'teaching to the exam' is one that will be all too familiar to teachers (and I don't think this is restricted to English teachers) across the country and, with pressure mounting on teachers from governmental policy through to Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and school leaders, the zeitgeist of the teaching profession seems to be one very much expected to produce exceptional exam results year on year. Whilst each of the aforementioned specifications offer varying degrees of flexibility in terms of their A-Level English Literature course content, all four exam boards fall broadly within the parameters of governmental policy which has subsequently been moderated by exam regulator Ofqual. All four exam boards conform to the 80/20 split between externally assessed examinations and an internally assessed coursework module (this coursework is subsequently externally moderated to ensure teacher marking judgements fall in line with exam board tolerance); as previously discussed, the study of

Shakespeare is the only compulsory element of the course evident across all four exam board specifications with the range of texts required to study varying between five and six, with an element of unseen content also required across three of the four (OCR being the exception). Whilst the focus of my research centres around the teaching of the AQA English Literature B course, and specifically the teaching of *Othello*, the demands, challenges, and pedagogical approaches to the teaching of the course are not exclusive to any one specification; whilst the available course content may differ across exam boards, (teachers are able to choose two genres from the list of crime, social and political, tragedy, and comedy for AQA whilst the OCR exam board offer a choice of topics ranging from American Literature 1880-1940 through to the Gothic, for example), the level of academic rigour combined with broad and challenging areas of study remain consistent throughout.

This tension surrounding the educational reforms is being felt throughout English secondary schools; a poll conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Tes (formerly known as the Times Educational Supplement) a year after the introduction of the new curriculum found “only a quarter of the profession believe the curriculum is “fit for purpose”” with the new curriculum being largely “condemned” by teachers on the basis that “the revised rules on what they must teach as “ideological” or “political”” with the additional failure of the new curriculum not taking into “account...the modern world”. The survey, which took a “representative sample of 678 teachers in England”, concluded that one key failing of the new curriculum is the “belief that it is out of touch with England’s multicultural society, particularly in history and English Literature.” (Ward, 2015) The latest national school consensus report published by the DfE (2019) outlined the following statistics in terms of the ethnic make-up of students in British schools:

The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic origins has been rising steadily over recent years. In primary schools, 33.5% of pupils of school age are of minority ethnic origins (up from 33.1% in January 2018). In secondary

schools, 31.3% of pupils are of minority ethnic origins (up from 30.3%).

Pupils from Asian origins are the largest minority in all school types except pupil referral units.

The diversity amongst the student body evident across British schools necessitates the requirement for an inclusive curriculum and pedagogical practice that serves to illuminate this process. Shah, reflecting on the complexities faced when teaching canonical texts in a British school to students from multicultural backgrounds similar to my own school, suggests that the “diversity of my students meant that much of the power of original interpretation lay with them” and that ultimately “their responses are entrenched in the readings they make of the world: they produce worldly readings of canonical texts.” Indeed, Shah argues that the complexity of the students’ “cultural identities are not to be severed for the sake of conformity. They are vital to the books read in classrooms and to personalized learning” (Shah, 2013, p.201). The challenges faced by my colleagues and I, and teachers across the country, to engage students in the literature they study imposed by the new curriculum, to help them see its relevance and importance in their lives, and in their educational lives, coupled with the need to meet the academic demands of exam boards, is one felt by many throughout the educational sector as highlighted by Shah, with the failure to do so reaching far beyond the confines of the classroom and exam hall. Will Hazel (2018), writing for the Tes, also reports that exam boards including AQA, WJEC, and Edexcel “are producing GCSE-style test papers for children as young as 11, so schools can begin drilling pupils for exams five years before they are due to sit them” which “Ofsted’s chief inspector describes as “deeply worrying”” (Hazel, 2018). It is at this juncture pertinent to again reflect on the rationale behind the introduction of the new National Curriculum, the principles were for it to be “more ambitious for all children” with students having “access to a stretching academic curriculum” that ultimately “improves standards for all” (Gove, 2014). However, the need for a broad, balanced, and enriching curriculum has for many state schools across England failed to materialise; instead, there appears to be a trend of narrowing students’

opportunities to experience a wide spectrum of learning opportunities across Key Stage 3, 4, and 5 with the attitude of teaching to the test, as discussed in Chapter One, again the default approach rather than the “ambitious” and “stretching” of students’ engagement with curriculum subjects. Stories of students “being made to study *Macbeth* in English for five consecutive years because that is what is going to come up in their GCSE exams” (Hazel, 2018) have become all too familiar amongst my colleagues and as part of a wider national picture as highlighted by Emma Mort of the National Union of Teachers (NUT); as previously stated, the high status, high pressure environment in which the English curriculum is being taught has seemingly forced the teaching of English down a narrow tunnel with only the light of GCSE examinations to guide the way.

These waters are further muddied by the knock on effect that this narrowing of the curriculum has on retention of students on to English A-Level courses (this issue will be dealt with in more detail later on in this chapter) and the attainment levels on these courses when taking in to consideration issues prevalent in the wider educational climate; Ann Mroz (2018) highlights the increasing number of A-Level students being offered unconditional university places (“23 per cent of teenagers have at least one”) with concern that students with “these guaranteed offers of places will have “taken their foot off the pedal” and therefore fallen short of the results they could have achieved.” As a consequence, Mroz goes on to posit, “What is more important? Pupils learning things or us knowing that they’ve learned them?”; when taking in to consideration the subsequent impact of the educational reforms at Key Stage 3, 4, and 5 there is a clear fear that “the pendulum has swung way too far towards the latter” (Mroz, 2018). With this view in mind, it will be the focus of this chapter to determine the extent to which classroom teachers are able to best prepare their students for the academic rigours of the A-Level AQA English Literature course whilst simultaneously affording students the opportunity to use *Othello* to develop their own sense of social, political, emotional, and cultural awareness and identity.

The tension that exists at the heart of this hypothesis is the seemingly dichotomic nature of the English teaching profession: on the one hand the basic assumption must be taken that the role of the English teacher, as well as imparting their knowledge and passion for the subject, is to create an enriching learning environment that fosters a sense of creativity and passion in order for students to be able to develop culturally, emotionally and spiritually; however, particularly in light of the changes made to the English curriculum outlined in Chapter One, this vocational calling to the teaching profession, now more than ever, feels at odds with the relentless drive to raise standards in schools which, alongside an inherent fear emanating across schools throughout the country of a failing in the annual publication of, what *The Guardian* (2019) reported as “unjust” school league tables. The enriching learning environment teachers want to provide their students with is being eradicated and replaced with a seemingly functional need to prepare students with the ability to pass an exam, at the expense of the culturally relevant experience the study of English is meant to afford students. This struggle is not just contained within the current educational climate; indeed, as Aers and Allen (1991) highlight, since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 the struggle between conforming to exam board requirements and making Shakespeare accessible and engaging for students has been central to English pedagogical methodologies. Indeed, Allen argues “that deskbound approaches will fail to interest many pupils” and that ultimately “personal engagement and commitment lies at the heart of all English studies, including Shakespeare” (Allen, 1991, p.46-p.48). Furthermore, Aers extends this notion of the need for teachers to personally engage their students with Shakespeare and his work by suggesting that “Shakespeare must be sold to the class” with Aers pointing not only to students seeing the relevance of studying Shakespeare as part of the curriculum, but what feeds in to the wider implications of the consumerist nature of the education system with students the “consumers” and “demanding” the necessary tools for them to thrive in the marketplace once outside of the education sector. As a consequence of Shakespeare existing within the confines of a consumerist ideology, it is not feasible to assume that students will automatically be “sympathetic with tentative claims that Shakespeare offers

them a vital human experience. If Shakespeare is going to be sold to the class, he has to be sold with vigour". With other competing markets vying for student attention, particularly when considering the push for students (and especially, when taking in to consideration the context of my school, female students) to follow careers in STEM subjects, Aers and Allen's claims that the teaching of Shakespeare needs to remain "relevant" with the "situations Shakespeare depicts closer to the ones in the students' own experience and fantasies" (Aers, 1991, p.35). However, the continuity of this issue coupled with the impact of this mechanical one-size-fits-all approach to teaching English is still being felt at GCSE level, with the consequences of the ways in which students are taught and examined also being felt in the uptake of students applying to study English at A-Level. A recent report by Ofqual (2019) has highlighted a fall from 74,350 applications to study English at A-Level in 2017 to 58,870 applications in 2018 with Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders stating in the *Independent* (2019) that:

Unsurprisingly, the mechanistic nature of these GCSEs is failing to inspire a love of English in students. It is very sad to see that this has resulted in the decline in A-level English entries we are now witnessing.

The poignancy with which Aers and Allen's views on the need for a rich, engaging, and holistic approach to teaching Shakespeare resonate with current educators should not be understated; the decrease in the number of students studying the subject at post-16 level is a timely reminder of the struggle English as an academic pursuit now faces. Placed in this context, if the new National Curriculum legitimises, however unwittingly, a continuation of the balance between a course that is culturally enriching but that also adheres to the notion of teaching to the test then it must be considered that English teachers hands are tied in their ability to effectively balance the two.

The cyclical nature of these issues can be contextualised within the prism of the teacher recruitment and retention crisis which Wheale (1991) refers to as the “consistently inadequate provision in skills” amongst the teaching body throughout the 1980’s where “one tenth of teachers changed their jobs or retired in 1989” and in to the 1990’s which was encapsulated by “the dreary record of Britain’s failure to take mass education seriously” (Wheale, 1991, p.7-p.8). Looked at within the current educational climate, a similarly bleak outlook is also prevalent, a Parliamentary briefing paper published by the DfE (2019) surmised “around 42,000 full-time equivalent qualified teachers left the state-funded sector in the 12 months to November 2018” with the addition that “32.3% of newly qualified entrants in 2016 were not recorded as working in the state sector five years later.” Coupled with the new generations of teachers replacing the previous that have naturally taken place over three decades of educational reforms, that approximately 10% of teachers in England left the profession in the year proceeding the publication of the report speaks of a system that has lacked consistency and cohesion over the course of the last six years in which the government has failed to meet its recruitment targets (Ward, 2016). That these targets were missed, and as teacher numbers continue to fall, during the same period in which the new National Curriculum was introduced is no coincidence. The challenges facing the teaching of English Literature and, as an extension, Shakespeare, are vast; the cohesive and unified ways in which this must be approached amongst the English teaching body become all the more arduous when considering the lack of structural certainty and the profession’s inability to retain a larger number of the teaching cohort, both existing and newly qualified teachers.

Whilst the pressure being placed on teachers to essentially train their students to perform to the highest academic standards may have resulted in overall improved attainment levels than in previous years, the statistics released by Ofqual suggest the repercussions of this mechanistic approach to the teaching and assessment of students is having a damaging and corrosive impact not only on the ability to inspire a love of the subject, but also the very essence of what makes the study of English so vital for our students. A Twitter community

called 'Team English' made up of predominantly secondary school English teachers, with over twenty two thousand participants, reaction to this news (see Appendix C) was telling. Based on the responses to the drop in retention numbers at A-Level, these responses further highlight the tension that currently exists between the want to deliver a culturally enriching English curriculum versus the need to satisfy exam board expectations and, ultimately, to help students achieve their target grades and maintain school league table performance. Whilst Appendix C only gives a flavour of the response to the issues highlighted in the Ofqual report, it does reflect many conversations and attitudes various teachers have both in my department and those in our local catchment area and, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest, in English departments across the country. These examples tell of exasperation and resignation many English teachers have concerning their ability to deliver the English curriculum effectively whilst simultaneously fostering a love for the subject amongst their students. Conversely, other contributors to the discussion offered an alternative insight, not just to the discussion at hand, but the pedagogical approach that needs to be taken in order to deliver an enlightening and enriching curriculum; paradoxically, however, these approaches seem to be an antithesis to the exam board assessment criteria outlined above. Interestingly, one contributor suggests that, in order to maintain and nurture a love of the subject, focus should be taken away from the exam board assessment criteria and instead focus should be clearly maintained on the love of the narratives and the personal responses students have to them rather than on adhering to, and basing teaching on, a predetermined assessment checklist.

It will be necessary to explore areas of this criteria to determine effective ways of maintaining this fine balance between strict exam board criteria and the freedom and creativity which should form the basis of English pedagogy. With reference to Assessment Objective 3 (AO3), where students are asked to consider the contextual significance of the play, one difficulty facing teachers and students is the weight on which to place the historical significance of the contextual factors surrounding the play. Whilst it is not too much of a

stretch to suggest that, in terms of the context of both the production and reception of the play, Othello's race is fundamental to our understanding and reaction to the play, the exam board are not necessarily as open to historical readings of the play as many teachers and students appear to believe. In the most recent AQA examiners report, it was noted by the chief examiner that:

In the answers on *Othello*, there was much discussion of Othello's race, regardless of relevance, and some responses on both texts contained unfocused and generalised material on women and patriarchal societies.

Without reading the exam scripts the report refers to, it would be conjecture to make assumptions on the "relevance" of the arguments students formed about Othello's race in response to the exam questions on the AQA English Literature B June 2018 paper (*'Venice and Cyprus are polar opposites: Venice represents civilisation and control, Cyprus represents catastrophe and chaos.'* *To what extent do you agree with this view?* and *'Ultimately it is hard to see Emilia as anything other than a tragic victim of male power and malice.'* *To what extent do you agree with this view?*) so no attempt will be made here; instead, what can be interpreted from this report is that, on the whole, students are attempting to engage with, and form their responses around, Othello's racial identity. The AQA mantra regarding exam responses is very much 'deal with the question'; the difficulty many students have seemingly faced, in light of the AQA examiner's report, is that whilst the majority of sixth-form centres teaching *Othello* are placing significant emphasis on teaching the importance of race and cultural identity in the play, students are not necessarily equipped with the ability to embed their understanding of these issues within their argument in relation to a specific exam question. The AQA (2019) exam board's definition of the term 'literary context' is defined as:

Working with genre involves looking at ways in which authors shape meanings within their texts. It also involves thinking about a wide range of relevant contexts, some of them to do with the production of the text at the time of its writing, some (where possible) to do with how the text has been received over time and, most of all in this specification, contexts to do with how the text can be interpreted by readers now.

Whilst the ways in which it is possible for students to engage with *Othello* contextually in terms of 'how the text can be interpreted by readers now' is reserved for later in this chapter, it is significant to note that the exam board are seemingly guiding teachers and students away from an over reliance on more formulaic and, often, generic responses to the play and the racial elements than emanate from it. However, having attended several AQA exam feedback CPD sessions, and throughout my research for the purposes of this thesis, it has become increasingly clear that there is a fundamental lack of understanding between schools and the exam board about what is the best and most appropriate way to deliver the exam content effectively whilst simultaneously delivering a rich and vibrant A-Level Literature course.

The context of reception approach to the exam board's assessment criteria should be fully embraced and a holistic approach in the teaching and learning of the text should be encouraged, without fear of moving away from the tried, tested and static teaching approach to the text; if the governmental focus concerning British values centers on the requirement to promote tolerance and respect across society, then the argument must be made that the need to frame the teaching of *Othello* needs to take into consideration relevant wider contemporary contextual factors concerning, for example, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, the surge in far-right extremism and the rise in Islamophobia prevalent across Western democracies. The tension that exists between the mandatory study of Shakespeare and the supposed desire to offer students the opportunity to embrace British

culture whilst simultaneously maintaining agency over their own cultural identity is reiterated by Sarah Olive (2015) who suggests that, “The holding up of Shakespeare as a figure through which to assimilate children from diverse backgrounds to one great, English tradition, for example, can be seen as at odds” with governmental educational policy “to figure inclusion as embracing diverse cultures rather than a single, unified national culture, espousing cultural pluralism rather than a common cultural heritage” (Olive, 2015, p. 41). If we are to embrace the notion that students are able to embrace their own ‘diverse culture’ through the lens of Shakespeare, then adherence to a ‘Presentist’ reading of *Othello* will go some way to affording students the academic freedom to combine the historical reflections of the play with their own perceptions of when, how and why Shakespeare fits in to their own cultural landscape. For this approach to succeed, it will require an acceptance on behalf of exam boards, examiners and teachers that encouraging students to appreciate the historical context in which *Othello* was written can be achieved without confining their broader reading of the play; this, in turn, will encourage students to see the validity of the cultural pluralism of contemporary society and reject the rigid conservative values that may undermine this process.

As discussed in Chapter One, whilst the framing of the new English curriculum may appear to be ambiguous through the adherence to a set of predetermined ‘British values’, it is the role of the English teacher to ensure that students are able to access a more tolerant and well rounded perception of these values in order to be able to negotiate the complex diversity of the social and political makeup of the Western world. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a tension that exists at the heart of the English teaching profession that not only threatens the opportunities for students to explore and better understand these issues, but that also threatens the appeal of the subject itself to potential future English students. Writing in the *Tes*, Yvonne Williams (2018), a head of English in a secondary school in southern England expressed her concerns that:

Among my colleagues, there is a suspicion that the only context examiners are prepared to acknowledge is the social and historical. If this is the case then there will be a return to huge chunks of information not properly applied as candidates try to get in enough material to meet the percentage assigned to AO3.

There appears to be a prominent disturbance in the links between exam board expectations regarding how students contextualise the texts they study, how teachers contextualise the texts that they teach and the ways in which students ultimately apply this contextual knowledge to their exam texts; Olive goes on to argue that, "...cultural materialist and new historicist works emphasise the socio-cultural situation of texts and combat the idea that literary works have a fixed intrinsic value" (Olive, 2015, p. 78). Whilst this may be the case, and is doubtlessly a view shared by many English teachers across the country, if these perceptions and attitudes towards the various ways in which the contexts of production and reception of *Othello* can be understood by exam boards and teachers alike is restricted, English teachers will ultimately feel hamstrung in terms of the scope within which they can teach the play. Moreover, Williams and her colleagues are far from alone in their concern about the dangerously narrow ways in which the exam board will reward discussion only concerning "social and historical" contextual factors; this concern was just as vehemently expressed during a recent AQA A-Level examiner feedback session I attended, with a collection of A-Level Literature specialists from around the country in attendance, the majority of whom echoed the sentiments expressed by Williams. These concerns have real and profound ramifications when considering the ways in which exam text, and in this case, specifically *Othello* are taught and studied. Williams (2018) illuminates this point further:

I continue to question the appropriateness of political micromanagement of the assessment process. The "reformed" specifications themselves have offered exciting possibilities. But unless we curb the excesses of the

accountability framework, teachers will feel pushed into formulaic teaching, making the reformed A levels a very artificial and plastic experience for themselves and their students. It will prevent them using their subject knowledge in ways that could fulfil Professor Smith's intention of making English literature more colourful and appealing and even threaten the long-term appeal of English.

This "political micromanagement" of the "assessment process" is significant when considering the relationship between exam board, schools and sixth form colleges. On the one hand the rhetoric emanating from both the DfE and the four main A-Level exam boards concerning the teaching of Literature speaks of a rich, diverse and fruitful English syllabus; however, the dichotomy of this rhetoric appears to be framed by an inherent sense of fear on the part of teachers delivering A-Level Literature courses across the country: fear of not matching seemingly ambiguous and unclear assessment criteria which, as a consequence, necessitates an increased sense of a fear of failure in exam performance on the part of their students. Not only will this inherently impact on their prospects of meeting the entry requirements for their desired university courses or apprenticeship schemes, but teachers and school leaders alike have the constant pressure of school exam performance and how this will impact their standing in school league tables, recruitment numbers and, fundamentally, in the judgment of Ofsted. While this may paint a bleak picture, it perhaps illuminates the rationale of English teachers who take a 'safety first' approach to teaching *Othello*, making the experience, in Williams' words "formulaic...artificial and plastic" in its delivery and, worryingly, serves as a threat to the "long-term appeal of English". As a consequence it has become a necessity of the A-Level Literature teacher to manage the weight of expectation from school leaders, navigate the expectations of exam board assessment criteria whilst simultaneously adhering to their innate principles of delivering a "colourful...appealing" and engaging English Literature course.

In order to try and expose my students to a variety of key concepts and questions that the study of *Othello* elicits, I decided to deliver a series of 'Masterclasses' to my students; essentially these 'Masterclasses' took on the form of university-esque lectures delivered to both Year 12 and Year 13 Literature students that covered topics such as 'Iago and Motiveless Malignity', 'The Women of *Othello*: Feminist icons or victims of Patriarchy?', 'Storytelling in *Othello*' and 'Race in *Othello*'. These 'Masterclasses' served to explore key ideas and concepts that arise from the play, with the approach that, rather than impose specific readings of the text for students to then regurgitate, students would be offered suggestions and hypotheses surrounding the topic that would then be interrogated and explored further in mini-seminars following each 'Masterclasses'.

During one seminar that followed the 'Race in *Othello*' masterclass, my students' interest in the overall significance and importance of race in *Othello* was explored; discussions on the topic subsequently lead to a consideration of how the play can be used to confront and understand modern depictions of race in Western society. In terms of looking at *Othello* as a historical text, and thus the depictions of race as reflective of 16th and 17th century attitudes held by Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, on the whole my students saw very little value in this in terms of its relevance to a contemporary audience. Indeed, Okri's assertion that: "*Othello* 'must be viewed as the white man's myth of the black man'. He should not be viewed as a fully formed character with a clear psychology because he really represents a white myth or stereotype about black masculinity" (deGravelles, 2011, p.160). This view resonated with the majority of my students, for many of whom the 'historical' reading of *Othello*'s character, and specifically the 'mythological' understanding of "black masculinity" left them dissatisfied with their own perception of his character:

There seems to be a very clear set of rules and expectations placed on people of colour, or Muslims, or gay, or atheists, or Africans (regardless of skin colour): it feels to me that everyone else outside of the rich, white, Christian

circle is 'wrong' and will be labelled and pigeon holed as, essentially, the enemy. All you have to do is watch the news and see how people who don't fit accepted attitudes towards a particular subject are grouped together as one and attacked. (Husna, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 12 Literature and Sociology student)

When probed further about why the power structures governing societies, whether that is through governmental policy or the media's portrayal of certain societal issues, take this approach to groups who, in Hussna's words "don't fit accepted attitudes" towards, her answer was revealing:

I think it's about social control and maintaining power and authority for those who have enjoyed these positions for so long, and they see anyone else outside of themselves as a threat.

I asked the class to consider this statement in a modern context and how this might be reflected through the play. One student suggested the media coverage on black gang violence, predominantly in London, and how young, black, men were depicted in the media:

It feels like the media are saying that people stabbing other people is a 'black' problem and suggesting that only black people are capable of such acts of violence. (Faeezah, 1st Generation Indian, Year 13 Literature and English Language student)

She then referenced rapper, journalist and author Akala and his explanation of the depiction of knife crime in London. We searched for his views on this issue and one particular video in which he was interviewed by *The Guardian* (2019) caught their attention in which he suggested that:

...the idea of black on black knife violence is rooted in this nineteenth century pseudo-scientific gene based racism. Black people are genetically violent. It doesn't make any difference if they're a Premier League footballer, well educated, or a corner street drug dealer, it doesn't make any difference...black on black violence is literally rooted in that history of empire, in the inherited historical guilt, in fear and in the sense that black people are irredeemable. When a white, middle-class school kid kills half of his classmates it needs explaining; whereas when a small number of black kids participate in violent crime, it's black on black violence, and doesn't need explaining because, of course, blackness is a perfectly reasonable explanation

When looked at in these terms, my students' suggestion that Shakespeare's depiction of race, and the racial tensions that both begin, and run throughout the play all stem from what Okri referred to as the "white man's myth of the black man" is an intriguing one. Indeed, the class made several references to the outpouring of racist and xenophobic attitudes that emanate from characters who, at this point in the play, Othello believes love and respect him. Iago's assertion at the beginning of the play that our perception of Othello's character should be reduced to "an old black ram" (1.1.89-89) who, taking on the form of the "devil" (1.1.92), has stolen half of Brabantio's "soul" (1.1.88), serves to reinforce the "myth" of the black experience to which Okri proposes. Additionally, Dymphna Callaghan (1999) extends this argument, noting that the depiction of Othello's character on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage is a, "...double impersonation of Othello - the white actor playing a Moor who is trying to assimilate in Venice" (Callaghan, 1999, p. 87). Referencing Othello's speech delivered to the Senate, offering defence for his marriage to Desdemona, Callaghan suggests that, "...he attempts to play white and straight, against the aberration signified by his blackness and by his sexual transgression" (Callaghan, 1999, p. 87). Consideration of

the staging of the play is significant when taking into consideration the extent to which my students were able to see the true value of the black experience through the presentation of Othello's character:

*Maryam:* It's so hard to feel like you're seeing the true Othello, even though you do get his back story early in the play.

*Suffiyah:* Yeah, that speech to the Senate doesn't make sense to me in a lot of ways, it just doesn't sound like the real him if that makes sense.

*Maryam:* Definitely, it's clearly an act.

*Suffiyah:* It feels like he's trying to be who they want him to be, rather than who he actually is.

*Saudah:* I think that's the scene where you can see the white writer and actor the clearest.

*Suffiyah:* What do you mean?

*Saudah:* Well if we're talking about Othello and his experience as a black man, you don't really get that, I think the actor and audiences' privilege will naturally get in the way of it.

*Zainab:* Yeah I know what you mean, it's like it can't really be authentic.

*Maryam:* So it's pointless then? [the class laughs]

*Saudah:* No I'm not saying that, maybe just the idea that it highlights their prejudices rather than his experience.

My students struggled to look beyond the suggestion concerning the restrictions of Shakespeare's depiction of race as, in their view, narrow and constrained by a predetermined set of prejudices. When they were presented with Callaghan's assertion that the play, "...dramatizes the possible consequences of not excluding the community" and ultimately "reenacts the exclusionary privilege on which such representations were founded" (Callaghan, 1999, p. 96) the majority of the class were in agreement that this "privilege"

hampered any real attempt for them to see past the archetypal and problematic depictions of race in the play. Instead, through subsequent class discussions, it became apparent that the depiction of race in the play was significant for its study in the reactions of those around Othello when confronted with an outsider attempting to integrate into their Western society and their culture: it is the depiction of their prejudices and the extent to which they will go to protect their own interests and nullify any perceived threat from outside forces. Indeed, before the audience meets Othello, we are already introduced to the, what Akala called, “pseudo-scientific gene based racism” that neatly fits with the stereotypical version of the black man as lecherous, demonic and morally corrupt; this concept of ‘gene based racism’ is given further weight when we realise that, far from this attitude being consigned to the evil antagonist of the play, this inherent and entrenched ‘othering’ of Othello quickly manifests itself in those around Iago. Roderigo’s generalised declaration that, by marrying Othello, Desdemona is in the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.126) offers further insight into the innate and, it seems, acceptable assertion that all black men are “lascivious” and barbaric; there is a fundamental implication that these are not accusations levelled at one black man, but about all of those (Muslims, Africans, atheists) who do not fit, and conform to, the established power structure of white Christianity in Europe. Indeed, not only is Othello ostracised and ‘othered’ because of his fundamental status as ‘Moor’ within Venetian society, but, by the end of the first Act, the effects of the process of stripping away his own sense of cultural, religious, personal and spiritual identity are already in place. From Iago’s character, through to Roderigo, and right up to the hierarchical authoritarian governance of Venice, the underlying view of Othello as ‘other’ is laid bare. When trying to comfort the seemingly inconsolable Brabantio at the end of Act 1, the Duke of Venice attempts to appease Brabantio by telling him “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.” (1.3.287) In response to an essay question given to the class following on from this masterclass, one Year 13 student, Suffiya, explored the notion of whether ‘Othello’s race is the source of Iago’s vendetta in the play’. Throughout the essay Suffiya explores a range of motives for

Iago's vendetta against Othello; however, on the subject of race being Iago's underlying motivation, Suffiya suggests that:

...these racist views may not necessarily be Iago's fault alone; as a white individual also existing in a society that, at the time, had underlying racist and racial stereotypes integrated into every aspect of daily life. "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son in law is far more fair than black", this is said by the leader of Venice showing even those with power and influence assumed the worst in black people although he (the Duke) does to some extent support Othello as an exception from this stereotype; he implies that people fair in skin colour are better in virtue than 'Moors' in all of their forms and Othello does appear as virtuous is morally more fair than dark; however, this problematic view would have allowed the continuity of the underlying threat of racist discrimination and 'othering' of Othello to continue and reinstate his position of outsider and may have excused Iago's behaviour to himself making him feel guiltless as every white person at the time regardless of gender and status would have held these views too.

In response to the various ideas covered in the 'Race in *Othello*' masterclass, it is interesting to note that Suffiya's focus does not centre exclusively on Iago as an individual representative of white racism, but instead she considers Iago in the context of a collective white consciousness who is legitimised and, it could be argued, spurred on by the power structure in place which only ever defines Othello by his 'otherness'. At this point in our discussions, I asked the class to consider Martin Orkin's (1987) assertion that, considering the staging of *Othello* within the context of apartheid South Africa, the early colonisation of the country and "those who stood most to profit from the "implications" of racism, communicate attitudes often almost identical to those Shakespeare gives Iago" (Orkin, 1987, p. 187). One of my students, Ammaarah, who was referenced in Chapter One and whose

grandparents grew up in South Africa during the Apartheid era, naturally took an interest in this view:

*Ammaarah:* I think when looked at in that way, you can see how the play lets you see the racism differently.

*Acma:* Especially when it lets you see how society is built around racism.

*Ammaarah:* My grandparents always talked about it like it was such a form of control, you couldn't get away from it.

*Acma:* How did they cope with it?

*Ammaarah:* To be honest they ended up leaving (South Africa), that's how scary it was. You can see that that's how Iago and Brabantio try to use racism, to control something that they're scared of.

*Maryam:* And like we've just said, you can see how they both profit from it too, like Sir said, they use it to hide behind but also to try and get what they want.

The parallels between how racism is presented in the play and the ways in which racism was systematically used in apartheid South Africa are stark, and one way in which recontextualising Shakespeare's approach to exploring the consequences of a racist ideology helped my students, as demonstrated above, appreciate the subtleties of its value. Reframing their own perceptions of how racism in *Othello* can be considered enabled my students to see Iago's use of racist rhetoric as what Orkin referred to as, "a *tactic*- when he believes it may afford him some material advantage over the man whom he wishes to control and if possible destroy." (Orkin, 1987, p. 187) My students' earlier assertion that the racism of the play helps them to see the "machinations" of the racial prejudices that surround Othello and how it works to nullify his threat holds some value, and illuminated their perception of racism as a "tactic" used as a means of social control. In a follow up lesson after I had marked the class's essays, the students were keen to discuss the various views the rest of the class had on the weight of argument behind Iago's main motivation for his

hatred of Othello being his race. We discussed Suffiya's initial ideas about the racial prejudices that underpin the power structure in the play and several students were keen to focus on the role of both Brabantio and, to some extent the Duke, in the othering of Othello. One student, Afifah, made reference to the Duke's attempted appeasement of Brabantio, that Othello is "far more fair than black" (1.3.287):

I think the Duke's idea that Othello is "more fair than black" might be the most racist comment made about him in the whole play. Brabantio, Iago and Roderigo are obviously prejudice towards Othello in their comments about his race but I don't know if they're even being truthful. Iago is deceptive, he lies to absolutely everyone, including the audience, for such an evil character it would be weird if he wasn't racist. Brabantio, I think, is only really bothered about his own reputation and standing within the senate, he's trying to cover himself in case any of the other senators question or look down on him because his daughter has married a black man. However, the Duke's attitude, to me, suggests that he's linking goodness with white, and negativity with black. He's taking away everything that Othello is and placing on him the white version of the soldier that he wants Othello to be.

On the whole, the class, and I too, found the premise of Afifah's argument both intriguing and hard to deny. This initial idea lead to a discussion about Othello's 'othering' by not just the Duke but the entire scope of Venetian society; if the Duke is representative of the power structure governing Venice, then his implication that ultimately Othello should be considered "fair" in character despite being "black" serves to highlight the undertone of racist profiling that Othello is only too aware of throughout the play. Looked at in this light, it was not surprising to the class that, as Othello's life descends into chaos, he declares that Desdemona's "...name, that was as fresh//As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black//As mine own face." (3.3.388-389) Indeed, as Orkin highlights, the play serves to demonstrate,

“...the destruction of a love relationship” with the subtext that both “racism and the abuse of the legal process” (Orkin, 1987, p. 188) contribute significantly to Othello and Desdemona’s downfall. Direct correlation was drawn between the abstract qualities of Othello’s reputation as referred to by the Duke along with Othello’s view of Desdemona’s reputation once he believes in her infidelity, with the supposition that both characters reputations ultimately appear “black”; it was Othello himself who begins to retreat into the prejudices that engulf his character from the beginning of the play; this view sobered the class’s views on Othello (up until this point, they had been sceptical to feel any real sense of catharsis towards his character). The idea of entrenched and reinforced attitudes towards ‘Moors’ and Othello seemingly believing that they must be true brought the class back to the notion that, through the inherent attitudes directed towards Othello by every character in a position of power, authority and (seeming) friendship, Othello is stripped of his culture, his religion, his own sense of identity, to become the version of himself that has been created for him, by those who fear him most: a violent, deceptive, threat, not just to Desdemona or himself, but to the rigid, white, power structure in place designed to perpetuate white, Christian dominance and vanquish those who attempt to destroy (the “Turband Turks” (5.2.349)) or, even worse, infiltrate (Othello) and disrupt the zeitgeist. However, it is when considering the play’s “fine scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying use of racism” that held the truest value to my students’ overriding engagement with, and understanding of, racism in the play; as Orkin surmises, ultimately it is Othello’s “rejection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play, as it always has done, continues to oppose racism” (Orkin, 1987, p. 188). Additionally, for my students, this neatly contextualised the ‘othering’ of Othello’s character with our discussion from our previous lesson about the depiction of ‘black on black’ knife crime and the presupposed notion of black people being “genetically violent”: that this misconception is evident in Othello’s character only further served to reinforce in my students their own sense of vulnerability and fear of being ‘othered’ due to their lack of ‘conformity’ within British society.

For the AQA exam board there has been a greater emphasis placed on the significance of, and students' reactions to, the use of stagecraft and dramatic methods (AO2) used by Shakespeare and how these methods influence audience response to the text. This focus has also afforded teachers the opportunity to simultaneously consider not just the impact of dramatic methods on students' reading of the text, but also to explore some of the moral and ethical dilemmas that arise in the production of the play and how production companies use *Othello* to shed light on current social and political issues. Writing for the British Library (2016), Hugh Quarshie's view on the portrayal of Othello in the text and his initial hesitation in taking on the lead role stemmed from his fears that:

We may see the world through the distorted prism of his plays which calls in to question Shakespeare's depiction of race and the validity with which we, as a modern audience, can hold this depiction whilst still seeing Shakespeare's work as an unequivocally reliable guide in the exploration of human nature.

Quarshie's article serves as an excellent starting point in terms of allowing students to not simply accept the depiction of Othello's character as a true reflection of Elizabethan attitudes towards people of colour, but to question this portrayal in light of current social and political attitudes towards race, religion, gender and sexuality: if we can reimagine the significance of attitudes towards race in the play, then why can't we apply the same approach to other facets of the play? How does the presentation of the women of the play fit in with current attitudes towards gender inequality and sexism? How is Othello's supposed renouncement of his Islamic religion in favour of conforming to Christianity viewed in light of current social and political attitudes towards Islam, Islamic theology and the integration of British Muslims into British society? Modern productions of the play are a vital tool for teachers wanting to explore these issues and more; new productions of the play should be seen as a means to rigorously interrogate current moral, social and political dilemmas that students face.

Fundamentally, Quarshie's (2016) initial reluctance for taking on the role of Othello was due to his fear "that black actors who took on the role ran the risk of reinforcing racist attitudes towards black people." If we are to reframe the teaching of *Othello* to encompass a more tolerant and wider view of these issues emanating from the play, if we are to seek a move away from the safe, rigid and narrow approach of focusing purely on what the historical records tell us about attitudes towards race then a rigorous interrogation of how the play's key ideas fit, and sometimes do not fit, with modern values towards race, religion, cultural identity, gender discrimination and sexuality is required. Having watched Quarshie's production of *Othello*, the overall reaction from my students was one of genuine surprise and enjoyment; by casting both the role of Othello and Iago to black actors, my students suggested this shed a new light on their perception of Othello's character as a victim, not of white suppression, but of succumbing to the fundamental failings of human nature. In one lesson reflecting on the production Aaliyah, a student who, up until viewing this production, only saw the depiction of race through a historical lens, commented that:

It felt like we weren't watching the failings of a black man, or any necessarily racial prejudice towards black people, and I didn't really get the impression that it was a 'white world'. It just felt like we could see the man and not the colour, it's not that his skin colour is now irrelevant, but I felt like you could see him for who he really is, rather than who Iago makes him out to be. (Aaliyah, 3rd Generation Pakistani, Year 13 English Literature and History student)

There is a suggestion that, when it comes to the depiction of race in *Othello*, there is a general agreement amongst both teachers and students alike who formed part of my research for the basis of this thesis that Shakespeare, to put it bluntly, is 'having his cake and eating it'. On the one hand there is the rational, noble, poetic Othello of Act 1 "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them" (1.2.59) versus the barbarous and savage

Moor of Act 3 “Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!” (3.3.448) which could suggest to students ultimately, a sense of conformity on the part of Othello’s character neatly slotting in to the prevailing racial stereotypes of Elizabethan England with the, in Quarshie’s words, “clever and cunning” white man used as a tool to draw out these prejudicial qualities. By stripping away this racial tension that does exist at the heart of the play, when Aaliyah talks of seeing Othello as a “man”, the class concurred that this production allowed us to see a more humanised Othello, suffering from, what my students called, “insecurities that we all have; jealousy, the need for control and order in our lives, ambition, pride and vanity”. Viewing Othello in this light helped my students to understand the true flaws in Othello’s character, and view these flaws as a component of a shared consciousness, one that exists beyond the boundaries of racial prejudice or presupposed dominant ideologies. One question that the Quarshie production, and indeed Quarshie himself, poses is that “by bringing the play closer to our experience” is there a danger that “we take it away from Shakespeare? And does it matter?” This was a question I posed to my students and the conversation that followed was revealing, with one student in particular commenting that:

I think it’s important to know where the text comes from and the social conditions that influenced him (Shakespeare) but I don’t really see the point in studying the play unless we can make it fit in with current issues in society. I don’t think that’s the point of Shakespeare, surely if we’re studying something so old it needs to be relevant to now, otherwise we might as well just study it in history. ( Leyla, 2nd Indian, Year 13 English Literature and Religious Education student)

The prevailing attitude amongst the class seemed to be that the play’s relevance to contemporary issues and using Shakespeare as a way to understanding ourselves and the world around us is the most beneficial approach to the text and, whilst understanding of

contextual historical attitudes provides a basis for understanding reading the play initially, it is up to us to move away from this approach and mould Shakespeare into a form that makes sense to us today and away from a static reading of the play. The same student neatly surmised that:

It's not that the Quarshie production is 'taking away' Shakespeare from the text, it's the opposite, it's helping us to see the play for what it really is: the tragedy of Othello as a human being.

Again the class were in agreement with this view and it was refreshing to hear such a perceptive and personal response, not just to the text, but to the ways in which the play can be experimented with, adapted and reimagined to reflect back to the audience the ever evolving zeitgeist of their times. As discussed in Chapter One, the recent English Touring Theatre, Oxford Playhouse and Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory production of *Othello* held particular significance to my students, primarily due to the emphasis being placed on Othello's Islamic heritage and the significance his religion plays in the depiction of his character. It is with the view of, in my student's words "relevant to now", teaching the play in a way that incorporates current social and political ideologies in to it's production that speaks to students in a way that engages them with the text. Remona Aly (2018), journalist, and director of communications at the Exploring Islam Foundation reflects on this production of the play:

An Islamic prayer mat and a secret Muslim tragic-hero uttering "Ya Akbar" aren't typically associated with Shakespeare, but *Othello* has been given a dramatic twist in a new touring production that illustrates the complexities of identity in modern Britain...At a time when fictional portrayals of Muslims often suffer from reductionist stereotypes – as in the BBC's *Bodyguard*, which had a Muslim woman as a jihadi terrorist – this new interpretation offers a powerfully

nuanced message of belonging, and takes account of the centuries-long history of relations between England and the Muslim world.

Aly's nod to the representation of the Muslim faith being reduced to "reductionist stereotypes" in other forms of Western media serves to further highlight the significant role that Shakespeare, *Othello* and modern reworkings of the text have in seeking to offer students the opportunity to 'find' themselves in the literary works that they study and, broadly speaking, feel a sense of integration and familiarity with a text that, on the surface, may seem far removed from their cultural and religious heritage.

Reaction from my students to this particular staging of the play was one mainly of a sense of delight and, in lots of cases, surprise that Islam was so neatly woven in to the fabric of this production, and it offered my students a sense of shared experience seeing the vulnerability of Othello's character in light of, what appeared to be, his fear of his Islamic roots being exposed. Whilst we are overtly exposed to the Europeanisation of Othello's character and his apparent conformity to Christian theology at key points throughout the play, from his fury at Cassio's inability to keep the peace in Cyprus "Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that/Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?/For Christian shame" (2.3.155-156) to Iago's surmising that "And then for her/To win the Moor, were to renounce his baptism" (2.3.320-321); these suggestions of conformity to Christianity were interspersed with hints at his hidden faith: the opening of the production began with a depiction of Othello and Desdemona taking part in an Islamic marriage ceremony highlighting the fundamental separation of Othello's character from the, in Aly's (2018) words, "white colonial Christian state" to whom he serves. What interested one particular student of mine, Jamila, about the focus on Islam in this production was not necessarily the depiction of Othello's character as Muslim, but rather:

His clear and obvious fear that he needed to hide his religion in order to feel safe within their society, it's only when he becomes more isolated and more fearful for his life that you started to see him holding his tasbeeh (Islamic prayer beads). It wasn't Desdemona, Iago or his role as general that offered him comfort and love, it was Islam. (Jamila, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 13 English Literature and Religious Education student)

This viewpoint is both revealing and startling when taking in to consideration a recent poll conducted by Muslim Engagement and Development that found 48% of British people think that, due to Islamophobic and prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims, it is increasingly unmanageable to live as a Muslim in Britain. Aly goes on to recognise, perhaps most staggeringly, that a "report from the Muslim Council of Britain" highlighted that "62% of Britons think rising numbers of Muslims in the UK "weaken" the national identity." These statistics go a long way to help us understand why, like Jamila points out, students who belong to a minority group, may feel the best way to feel 'safe' in their social environment is to conform to the supposed 'safe' teaching of the text by looking at the static historical based approach as outlined earlier in this chapter. However, the self-reflection that took place for many of my students who saw the production, coupled with their critical eye cast on the social and political climate in which they live, surely points to a more progressive and altruistic attitude on the part of my students towards those in their local, national and international communities, as well as an insightful and evaluative exploration of the text. If, as an educational sector, we value a truly comprehensive study of English Literature as an academic discipline, these are the qualities that should be harnessed and nurtured without fear of students being hampered or, depending on your point of view, punished for not conforming to a set of rigid exam criteria. As one colleague recently put it to me, teaching students in this manner, whilst vitally important, feels like putting their exam result "in the lap of the Gods".

In order to try and equip students with the tools they need to apply their own response to the text whilst simultaneously meeting exam board criteria, it is of ever greater importance to help students understand and explore the various ways in which literary critical theory (AO4) may be applied to the text and evaluated in terms of its significance in relation to our understanding of, and reaction to, the text. As Nick Hall (2010) summarises:

Critical understanding is important here, as it directs teachers to actively enable students to connect ideas, analyse them and evaluate the impacts texts have on readers. Cultural influences on the production and reception of texts take on a heightened relevance. (Clarke, Dickinson & Westbrook, 2010, p. 290)

This view of critical understanding must be balanced by affording students the opportunity to engage with the text at a critical level whilst also ensuring that their use of critical material is both relevant and personal to their reading of the play. It is also of central importance to ensure that these critical readings are tempered by the students demonstrating their understanding of how the authorial methods used by Shakespeare contribute towards certain perceptions we gather of different characters and narrative strains. This focus was a key highlight in the 2018 AQA (2018) examiner's report for the exam paper on which *Othello* appears, which stated that:

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial or dramatic methods. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who did not respond to the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analyses of single words.

In order to try and maintain this balance, a real insight in to the use of authorial methods and an evaluation of critical reading of the play, I allowed my students the opportunity to engage in a 'silent debate' with each other. In the first instance several key authorial methods specific to *Othello* were dotted around a white board, a class of twelve students were given a white board pen and told that they had to develop ideas on the significance these methods hold in our understanding of the play and try to respond to and develop ideas written on the board by other students: all of which must be done in silence. This approach allowed the students to initially analyse their own interpretations of the authorial methods used in the play, evaluate and expand on the ideas of others whilst also simultaneously reflect back on and enhance their own initial ideas. This self-reflective approach seemed to have positive benefits for the students and their understanding of these methods and, when I was kind enough to allow them to speak, it was pleasing to note how many students had moved away from their own initial interpretations to offer a more holistic and evaluative view of their idea. In the subsequent follow up lesson to this, students were then given a series of statements from various critical sources, coupled with a variety of key themes from the play, and were asked to again analyse and evaluate their significance to their own understanding of the play whilst also taking into consideration key quotes and authorial methods used to express these ideas.

Whilst continuing to nurture a love of the subject and encourage vigorous and critical debate around the prominent ideas that emanate from the play, it is also of fundamental significance on behalf of the classroom teacher to fully prepare students for the academic writing skills needed to be able to adhere to perceived exam board expectations and criteria. Whilst observing one colleague teaching a lesson on academic essay writing, students were given the task of defining a range of essay writing 'markers' that were deemed to be of significance such as fluency markers, topic sentences, discourse markers, connectives, essay planning and structuring of overall argument. Students were then given essay paragraphs or a whole

essay with specific sections omitted and were tasked with peer marking the work focusing primarily on the language of analysis and evaluation used in these essays. Students were then asked to 'fill in the blanks' using the aforementioned list to add in the key essay writing skills they had struggled with in previous essays they had produced. As a consequence of this task, students were asked to plan an *Othello* essay in class and, once this had been checked by their teacher, they were asked to write the essay outside of the classroom in their own time. The essays produced showed the importance of this intervention and the change it had in students blending their application of the knowledge of the text whilst simultaneously building in the essay writing skills covered in their previous lesson. The first essay scored a credible mark and demonstrated many of the qualities worked on in the observed lesson, one sentence that highlighted this was, "The pointless venture combined with the likely bloodlust"; the class teacher pointed out to me that, previously, students were far too formulaic in their use of analytical language and there seemed to be little room for creativity in the ways in which her students wrote about the play, phrases like describing the Venetian army's travels to Cyprus as ultimately a "pointless venture" and the "bloodlust" of the Venetian army as an explanation for the disorder and violence that continues to take place despite the destruction of the Turkish fleet shows both a deeper understanding of the text combined with a creative flair for academic writing.

A second lesson I observed taught at a separate sixth-form centre then aimed to build upon greater emphasis placed on academic essay writing skills and apply these skills to a discursive essay question about the depiction of, and attitudes towards, the women of the play. In the particular lesson that I observed the focus was on Emilia's character and asked students to consider the different views that can taken of her character, both in terms of her function in the text and how her character feeds in to modern representations of women. Students were asked to consider her character from a variety of angles and were given a set of provocative statements and questions such as:

- What's her relationship with Iago like? Battered wife? Battle of equals?  
Blissful ignorance?
- Was she faithful?
- Bravery of the end: echoes of Desdemona's scene in front of the Duke, she speaks up for truth and for her voice to be heard, and transforms the world around her.
- How has history treated her character? Where would we place Emilia in the MeToo/feminist era?

The class were asked to debate their own responses in small groups; students, being given an appropriate amount of time were then asked to deliver a brief three minute appraisal of her character to the rest of the class, who were then given the opportunity to respond and also deliver their own three minute appraisal. What was most interesting about the discussions that ensued was that, almost universally, both male and female students in attendance had wholehearted sympathy for both Emilia and indeed the rest of the women of the play, many of whom placed real emphasis on the connections made between the MeToo movement and Emilia's seemingly toxic and abusive relationship with Iago. Again, students were asked to take away their ideas concerning Emilia's character and, combined with the essay writing skills previously taught to respond to a discursive essay question about her character. One particular response caught my eye, not just because of the obvious talent for the subject the student possesses, but also because her work demonstrated what Williams earlier referred to as the need to make English Literature "colourful and appealing" whilst simultaneously moving away from the "artificial and plastic experience" of being taught the subject based on fear of exam board assessment criteria. Throughout the essay the student evaluated the significance of Emilia's character and her role in the tragedy, stating that "Iago's belief that Emilia has cheated on him with both Cassio and Othello could be a manifestation of his obsession with sex and his derogatory belief that women are only good for sex." Whilst also offering a personal and reflective response to her character, arguing that

“...she believes that it is “men’s fault” if their wives “fall”; and that husbands should recognise that their “wives” have “sense like them”. Here we have Emilia’s proto-feminist emergence as she advocates for equality between men and women”; considering her character in light of a modern, feminist reading of the play, this student was able to effectively engage in a thoughtful, meaningful and provocative debate centered on the diminishment and mistreatment of the women of the play whilst also reflecting her own personal response concerning where Emilia’s character sits not just within the play, but in the reality of the world in which we live: this surely is the hallmark of effective, tolerant and progressive English teaching to which we all must continue to aspire.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst the difficulties faced by teachers concerning the need to strike a healthy balance between preparing students for the academic rigours of external examinations whilst also giving them the space and freedom required to engage with Shakespeare on a personal and culturally enriching level is not new or unique to the new English National Curriculum, the importance of attempts to achieve this balance are fundamental to the moral and personal drive of the English teacher. The educational environment in which the syllabus is taught, however, offers challenges and difficulties to this approach that are not easily navigated. With students’ overall grades now more heavily weighted in terms of exam performance, with the influence of coursework grades being reduced from previous specifications, emphasis is repeatedly placed on dedicating substantial time to exam preparation and equipping students with the necessary skills to achieve well in the exam hall.

Concern also arises when reflecting on how students are trained to achieve high scoring GCSE English exam results from the beginning of their secondary education at Key Stage 3, this narrow and rigid testing of students (whereby all coursework modules that appeared on previous iterations of the English National Curriculum have been removed) at GCSE level

has, in some cases, stifled the creative and broad reaching English curriculum that was sold to the English teaching body and produced in places a curriculum that is formulaic and repetitive. As a way to circumvent this impasse, there is scope then for the consideration of the integration of a presentist approach to the teaching and examination process surrounding Shakespeare's place on the National Curriculum; if the perpetual relevance of Shakespeare and the study of his work is to be maintained, then adopting and encouraging presentist responses to his work both in the classroom and through the examination process may be one way of achieving this.

The teaching of *Othello* needs to embrace both historicist and presentist readings of the play to better balance out this tension and give students a sense of ownership over the texts that they study. A consideration of the significance of the othering of Othello's character as a consequence of his racial, cultural, and religious identity allowed my students to consider not just the social conditions in place that contribute to his ostracisation but served to further illuminate the parallels that they felt can be drawn to contextualise their own experience. Sean McEvoy (2003) suggests, as "Shakespeare remains high status cultural capital [...] it is the duty of a democratic state education system to make access to this capital as widespread as possible." If the study of Shakespeare as a signifier of British cultural capital is to be embraced, then it is the cultural make-up of the multifaceted student body that must be at the forefront of pedagogical practise; furthermore, McEvoy argues that if we allow "our students to make their own readings – to appropriate the plays" then they will be equipped with the skills to "challenge the political assumptions that have given the texts their high cultural status to start with." Particularly "if the readings they make" derive from "socially or politically disadvantaged positions" (McEvoy, 2003, p. 114); failure to do so will ultimately lead to a narrow and prescriptive reading of the text, and a distancing between students and the cultural heritage to which they also belong.

### **Chapter 3 - Religion and Gender Politics in the Classroom: Othello as Test-Case**

Having sought to explore and critique a range of pedagogical approaches to the teaching and study of *Othello*, it will be necessary to further examine the wider social, political and cultural contexts in which the text is taught and the subsequent impact these contexts have on student response to the play. The educational context in which my students find themselves is one of great significance when evaluating their experience of studying Shakespeare in the English classroom, with the dynamics of both their gender and religion of central importance to this experience; indeed, a notable finding in a 2016 study conducted by Tania Saeed (2016) concerning the experiences of female Muslim students in UK universities found that, “Muslim students’ freedom of expression and freedom to challenge the status quo is compromised” due to UK universities adhering to the “government’s Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, which imposed a ‘statutory’ responsibility on educational institutes including universities to pass on information about ‘vulnerable’ students ‘at risk’ of radicalisation, predominantly focuses on Muslim students” (Saeed, 2016, p. 86). As will be discussed later on in this chapter, the Prevent agenda’s inception and influence on mainstream education and the ways in which educational content has been taught is significant and, when taking into consideration the self-reflective and philosophical nature of the study of English Literature as an academic discipline, it will be of significance to explore and better understand the social, political and cultural frameworks in which students study *Othello* and how these frameworks influence their understanding of, and engagement with, the play.

#### **Othello and Islam in the English classroom**

As highlighted in Chapter Two, when taking into consideration Shakespeare’s place in the contemporary English classroom and the various ways in which students engage with his work, it is of central significance to expose students to the historical roots of the text whilst

simultaneously exploring a presentist approach to the teaching and study of *Othello*; this approach opens up the scope within which students are able to engage with the text in a way that allows them to see his work as speaking to our moment rather than being consigned to the past and out of the grasp of their political and cultural reach. This chapter will seek to unfurl the treatment and depiction of Islam in the play and how my students respond to its portrayal both in terms of Othello's religion as a source of antagonism whilst also considering how its apparent demonisation is mirrored in contemporary Western social and political discourse. From the failings of UK governmental policies designed to stem the flow of Islamist extremism both at home and abroad, through to the divisive and abhorrent narrative created by Trump's anti-Islam rhetoric, my students are tasked with tackling the portrayal of Islam within the confines on an educational context in which "Muslim female students continue to oscillate between the vulnerable and fanatic" (Saeed, 2016, p. 85). To what extent it is possible for my students to engage with, and freely explore, their own response to Islam's portrayal in both the role it plays in the downfall of Othello and their own perceptions of Islam's place in Western society? Do the confines of Conservative educational and security policies that seem to hold Islam, and as a consequence Muslim students, with such fear and suspicion hamper their ability to freely express their views on the tension between Christianity and Islam that exists at the heart of the play? As an extension of this dynamic, it will also be necessary to interrogate the implications of the gender politics at play in *Othello* and the extent to which the portrayal of the female experience and the persecution of both Desdemona and Emilia resonate with my students own experiences, not as Muslim, but as young Muslim women living in a Western society that places so many expectations and restrictions on their experience within educational, societal and political contexts.

Whilst considering the religious dimension of the play, throughout their two year A-Level Literature course, my students kept returning to the topic of Othello's character as one which can be viewed as radicalised or, in the words of one student, a "radicalised Islamist" who

poses a threat not only to the state of Venice, but also to the rule of law established through Christian theological doctrine. By the time *Othello* was being performed in London in 1604, an acute awareness, and sense of fear, would have been prevalent throughout Shakespeare's audiences concerning the external threat posed to the Church of England and Protestantism from Roman Catholic adversaries intent on imposing their version of Christianity on to newly Reformed England; this tension was coupled with the ever increasing external threat of the expanding Ottomanoan Empire, creeping its way closer to Christian Europe and, along with it, a reminder of the long held fear of defeat and conversion to the Islamic faith. It is here, in this intersection between the battle of two world faiths where my students felt Othello's character finds himself; the consequences of these anxieties that exist around his existential crisis are what gives Othello's radicalisation a platform to take place and, ultimately, give birth to the tragedy of the play. Saeed defines radicalisation as, "an attempt to bring about a change; this could take the form of a 'violent struggle', or an internal struggle; it could be present at one moment in some individuals and groups, but completely absent in others" (Saeed, 2016, p. 87). The concept of radicalisation is one that is both familiar and alien to my students; familiar in the sense that, as young Muslim women, my students find themselves inextricably tied to the notion that, as Saeed argues, "...the Muslim community as a whole is rendered 'suspect'" in an academic context. Whilst the Prevent agenda was designed to inform and protect students from extremist ideologies, instead its greatest difficulty is overcoming "...such a narrative, instead of supporting Muslim students against extremist ideology" it adversely "encourages a framework of otherization, where Muslims have constantly to prove their legitimacy as British and Muslim students" (Saeed, 2016, p. 89). It is the consequences of such policies that my students feel, and have expressed to me not only during my research for this thesis, but across the eight years I have worked at the school, are a contributing factor to their continued sense of alienation and, for some, isolation from feeling truly integrated and accepted in to British society. It is here where my students truly empathise with Othello's plight and, in many cases, are able to draw some parallels between their experiences and those Othello is subjected to throughout

the play. During one class discussion, having just read Othello's proclamation that he will, "...withdraw//To furnish me with some swift means of death//For the fair devil" (3.3.477-479), my students were aghast at, not only the volatility of Othello's reaction to Desdemona's supposed infidelity, but also at the relative ease and speed at which his conversion from virtuous and honourable husband to blood-thirsty executioner takes place. Following a number of questions and responses back and forth between my students and I about Othello's 'conversion', one view was that:

From his point of view, I do see why Othello feels he has to kill Desdemona, to me it's about his self-preservation; what I don't understand is how and why he falls for Iago's lie so quickly, isn't he meant to love her? Isn't love about trust? It's the same thing when I try my best to understand why they (radicalised Muslims) do what they do. It doesn't make sense to me as a human or Islamically, so I don't get why they do it. If they're raised in the same environment as me (here Summayyah is referring more specifically to the 7/7 bombers and the Manchester arena bomber, Salman Abedi) with the same beliefs, then what makes them do it? How do you get in to that mindset? Both Othello and those bombers had their own truth, yes there is influence and manipulation, but that doesn't mean they have to abandon everything that they believe. (Summayyah, 3rd Generation Pakistani, Year 13 Literature and Biology student)

Summayyah makes some salient points, and poses some fundamental questions, not only concerning Othello's motivations for turning 'Turk' in light of the sense of betrayal and level of threat he experiences from those closest to him, but also for the wider implications of how and why prominent societal conditions can create a vacuum wherein members of minority groups can be so readily radicalised. One such condition, as referenced earlier, is the collective othering of minority groups wherein all members of the Muslim community fall under the basic assumption of being a threat, or a potential threat, through radicalised

Islamic ideology. Johnson (2017) highlights Trump's call to ban all Muslims entering the United States "...until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" in the wake of terrorist attacks in California and Paris in 2015 whilst Perraudin (2019) points to the newly elected British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's assertion that "Islam inherently inhibits the path to progress and freedom" and that, as reported by Elgot (2018), Muslim women who wear the burqa are comparable to "letterboxes" and "bank robbers", this collective Islamophobic rhetoric emanating from the highest political offices in Western democracies continues to stoke the flames of xenophobia and fear amongst Western societies and furthers the continuation of the marginalisation and othering of minority groups. As Saeed goes on to state, it is, "...the manner by which radicalization is explained in media and policy circles simplifies it in a desperate attempt to understand modern day terrorism, where individuals, despite their varied background and life experiences, are clumped together under the category of radical extremist, where an interpretation of Islam make Islam itself suspect" (Saeed, 2016, pp. 88-89). I believe it is here that Summayya's questions concerning how and why Othello can descend from "the noble Moor of Venice" to savage beast, how members of Summayya's own community can go on to commit such horrific acts of violence against other British citizens, can be explored; the parallels that exist between them are such that, in order to fulfil the need to replace the sense of isolation and ostracisation from society with a feeling of purpose and belonging: reason, rationality and morality fade into the background, and what remains is a consuming and unstoppable sense of fear, desperation and isolation. Indeed, as Daniel Vitkus argues, Othello's character ultimately "...reverts to the identity of the black devil and exhibits the worst features of the stereotypical "cruel Moor" or Turk - jealousy, violence, mercilessness, faithlessness, lawlessness, despair...Othello enacts his own punishment and dams himself by killing the Turk he has become" (Viktus, 1997, p. 176). It is through the depiction of Othello's suicide, whilst trying to offer a reminder of his devotion to the Christian state of Venice by re-enacting his killing of "a turban'd Turk" (5.2.349), Othello only succeeds in further alienating himself from those with whom he so desperately wishes to align with; by placing himself in the

position of the black, Muslim enemy he was initially sent to conquer, he inadvertently completes the cycle of radicalised outsider. The consequences of his sense of isolation and fear serve to expose Othello, like the radicalised 7/7 and Manchester arena bombers were exposed to the horrors of Daesh, to the schemes of outside influences who seek to manipulate, control and, ultimately, radicalise: consequently, Othello's character becomes the 'villain' that was created for him, provoked through the "pestilence" (2.3.334) of Iago, along with the governance in place in Venice, who only ever saw him as an 'other' and treated him as such. Concerning Saeed's proposal of the dangers of an oversimplified, one-size-fits-all approach to combating the radicalisation of minority groups, I asked my students to consider an alternative perspective to the process of identifying a radicalised threat; the unanimous verdict amongst the class was that, in order to pin down the initial motivation and reasoning for radicalisation to succeed, it requires an understanding of an individual's social, political, cultural and spiritual experience in order to conclude how and why such a shift in a person's ideological mindset can take place. Armed with white board pens, the class were asked to draw up a list, along with a brief rationale for their ideas, concerning a range of reasons why Othello may be susceptible to radicalisation. The class was asked to consider:

1. Othello's motivations and desires to intercalate into Venetian, and Christian society,
2. what he sacrifices in order to achieve this, and
3. the environment that would need to be created for Othello's character to become vulnerable to Iago's manipulative machinations;

after much discussion, the class drew up their final list:

- Longing for acceptance (1)
- Sense of purpose and function within society (1)
- Safety (1)
- Meaningful relationships (friends/parents) (1)
- Love (1)
- Loss of cultural identity (2)
- Religious identity (2)

- Fear of failure (personal and public) (3)
- Isolation (and fear of) (3)
- Sense of vulnerability (3)

My students were quick to point out that, in order to have a well-rounded and coherent understanding of Othello's 'internal struggle', and his radicalised descent into murderous vengeance, it is the implicit subtleties of his character's experience that shed light on his motivations for killing Desdemona and himself. My students were in unanimous agreement that the objectification and generalisation of all Muslims, and of the Islamic faith, would offer little or no insight into Othello's mindset or motivations, just as this same approach offers only a simplistic understanding of the motivations of individual radicalised terrorists. Concerning Othello's actions at the end of the play, both his murder of Desdemona and his suicide, one suggestion from the class was that:

Iago plays on Othello's desperation to integrate into a white, Christian world which he (Othello) knows he doesn't belong. Othello thinks that he's lost everything that makes him feel safe and wanted, like Desdemona's love for him, his religion, his culture, and maybe his role as the army general, and all he's left with is fear and a sense of isolation. It's like he's been cornered and had everything that made him feel complete taken away from him; that's when he becomes exposed to being 'radicalised' by Iago. (Amira, 1st Generation Indian, Year 13 Literature and History student)

Amira's consideration of the personal, social and political environment that exists in a space outside of Othello's control, but consequently directly influences his state of mind and subsequent actions, plays on the idea of Othello becoming a version of himself that is created for him through the context in which he exists. The opening and closing of the play are both revealing in their adherence to this process; by the end of the first Act, Othello has been contextualised as a "beast" (1.1.117) like "lascivious Moor" (1.1.126) who has

entangled Desdemona in “chains of magic” (1.2.65) and is seen, consequently, as an “Abuser of the world” (1.2.65). Shakespeare, whilst playing on well-established preconceptions of Moors and, as an extension, Muslim Ottomites, also highlights the social narrative that is required in order for Othello to be both ostracised and radicalised due to his sense of isolation combined with his need for acceptance and purpose. When Iago states that, “These Moors are changeable in their wills” (1.3.342) we are made aware of Iago’s identification of the fundamental weaknesses in Othello’s character which he will so mercilessly exploit; Iago’s dismissiveness of Othello as an individual through the collective “These Moors” also serves to adhere to what Saeed earlier referred to as an establishment of “...a framework of otherization” which fundamentally contributes to Othello’s rejection, ostracization and radicalisation at the hands of Iago. The religious imagery used in the final moments of the play, and the final moments of Othello’s life, serves to both reinforce the otherization of Othello’s character and demonise, “...the Turk he has become” (Viktus, 1997, p. 176). Upon the discovery of Desdemona’s body, Emilia refers to Othello as “...the blacker devil” (5.2.132) and tells him that “This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven//Than thou wast worthy her”, upon the realisation of the gravity of his error, Othello proclaims, “Whip me, ye devils//From the possession of this heavenly sight!//Roast me in sulphur! //Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (5.2.275-278) signalling the damnation of his soul as befitting punishment for the crime he has committed. Consequently, this signals the perception Othello now inhabits as the cruel and evil monster that was placed on him at the beginning of the play: it is at this point that Othello’s character mirrors Iago’s, the devil hiding in plain sight. Desdemona also plays foil to Othello in the sense that she is depicted as “heavenly” (4.3.63), angelic and elevated to the status of martyr, thus reinforcing Brabantio’s proclamation at the beginning of the play that she is, “...tender, fair, and happy” (1.2.66) and that her “delicate youth” (1.2.74) has been violated by the “lascivious Moor”. It is this parallel drawn definitively between the two that solidifies our perception of Othello: outsider, invader, imposter, Other, cruel, inhumane. As my students noted time and time again, however, this view of his character cannot be considered to be reflective of his true self, but of the

radicalised, abhorrent version of himself that the Western world created for, and imposed on him.

The stripping away of identity and individualism so apparent in *Othello* is also reflected in recent governmental policy and legislation designed to combat terrorist threats in the UK. From its conception, the PREVENT (2015) strategy sought “...to reduce the threat to the UK from terrorism by stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism” encompassing all forms of domestic terrorist threat emanating from the extreme far-right through to Islamist extremism; as outlined in governmental guidelines, the Prevent agenda serves to:

- respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it;
- prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support; and
- work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation that we need to address.

Whilst the initial premise of this strategy seemed logical in its conception, it became apparent within the first few years of its introduction in to UK legislation that the notion of identifying terrorist threats, or the possibility of people being susceptible to radicalisation, was problematic and counter intuitive to its original ethos. Following several terrorist atrocities across Western nations committed by Islamic extremists, the narrative surrounding the exponential threat of terrorism shifted and soon, “...the European Union’s (EU’s) Muslim populations became the centre of attention” (Ragazzi, 1997, p. 164). Indeed, as Francesco Ragazzi goes on to argue, “David Cameron’s 2011 speech in Munich crystallised and summarised an emerging discourse, according to which multiculturalism [...] was at the root of the problem of domestic terrorism” (Ragazzi, 1997, p. 165). This speech, delivered by the then UK Prime Minister, can be seen as a shift in discourse surrounding the integration of

minority groups into British society and culture and, arguably, gave weight to the tidal wave of Islamophobia and far-right anti-Islam rhetoric that has come to dominate Western politics. As a consequence of this attack on multiculturalism, Ragazzi concludes that, "...voices have emerged to support social and cultural policies destined to limit the expression of ethnic, religious, and political identities to consensual national identities and 'common values'" (Ragazzi, 1997, p. 164). The suppression and stripping away of these identities is a notion that many of my students say is all too familiar to them and, in the words of Maariyah, a Year 13 student, a few months away from starting her undergraduate Literature degree:

It feels like what we have to accept if we want to live a quiet life here. I wear non-Muslim clothes, for example, that I think won't offend strangers on the street, but then that are also acceptable to my parents. (Maariyah, 1st Generation Pakistani, Year 13 Literature and Religious Education student)

This is a feeling shared amongst many of my students and one that, for them, has become part and parcel of life as a British Muslim. This mindset, seemingly adopted by my students as a makeshift safety blanket, has manifested itself amidst the backdrop of the introduction of the new National Curriculum that, as discussed in Chapter One, seeks to promote a set of "common values", notably, "individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs". When I put this definition to my students, in light of their reflections on life as British Muslims, the words "respect" and "tolerance" drew, to put it bluntly, laughter, and in some instances, indignation. Surmised, their views suggested that, in order for these values to be adhered to, multiculturalist ideals must be embraced, with the freedom to experience agency over their own identity, rather than have to squeeze themselves into a societal structure that, fundamentally, does not consider them as equals and an educational system's ethical foundations that are at best contradictory and at worst negligent. The suppression of these humanist ideals reveals an inherent hypocrisy and a fundamental disconnect in the implementation of, and current discourse surrounding, the Prevent agenda and National Curriculum both of which are contextualised within the current

political narrative; as Ragazzi notes, “PREVENT had been a divisive policy from the start...reliance on the ‘community’ as the privileged site of preventing counter-terrorism reinforced the idea that terrorism was a problem of the ‘Muslim community’...” and that the, “...contradicting objectives of community cohesion, playing in to Islamophobic narrative about the alleged risk posed by the Muslim population as a whole” (Ragazzi, 1997, p. 166).

This continuous demonisation of minority groups living in Western societies is repeatedly reflected through the narrative of right-wing populist discourse; the political policies of the Trump administration have sought to alienate such groups in order to adhere to right-wing populist politics, but also to appeal to a white nationalist ideology, whose abhorrent rhetoric has been echoed by Trump to maintain and heighten the continual normalisation of white supremacism in mainstream Western politics. From the Trump administration’s 2017 executive order prohibiting Muslims from entering the United States, to the rhetoric used by Trump, as reported by Bailey (2019) to describe the movement of immigrants towards North America as an “invasion” by “animals” who, in his terms, “infest” the US; it is this wider political context which my students bring with them in their response to the social and political dilemmas that are prevalent throughout *Othello* and heavily inform their reading of the text:

If you think about how the Leave campaign used people from other countries coming here as a reason to leave the EU, or how Trump’s friend (Steve Bannon) is basically openly racist and wants people to be divided, it’s not difficult to see how politics is creating hatred between different people, different religions, different cultures. The difference to me is that, in *Othello*, there were certain rules that meant everyone had to put up this act of integration and tolerance towards him, but the moment they thought he was the villain, the underlying racism was exposed. (Sana, 2nd Generation Indian, Year 12 English Literature and Sociology student)

For my students, the direct correlation between current right-wing populist political agendas towards the 'Other' and the environment in which Othello exists within Venice is difficult to ignore and one that speaks to them on a personal level when they consider their own place in Western society. The parallels between Trump's labelling of migrants as "animals" and the bestial, animalistic language used by Iago to depict Othello both work to serve the same purpose: to discriminate against those who are seen to be a threat to the established political order. Brabantio's assertion that Othello has "enchanted" (1.2.63) Desdemona with "foul charms, // Abused her delicate youth with drugs and minerals" (1.2.73-74) forcing her to "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom // Of such a thing as thou" (1.2.70-71) directly attacks both Othello's cultural lineage as well as his racial identity and heritage, reducing the perception of his character to "thing". This continuous dehumanisation serves as justification for their relentless vilification of his character and the subsequent alienation from society he experiences; this epitomises the cruel and callous world in which Othello inhabits, one that strips him of his own identity and creates an unrecognisable monster. So unrecognisable that, in the final moments of the play, he says to himself "Man but a rush against Othello's breast // And he retires. Where should Othello go?" (5.2.268-269). Here, Othello has become emotionally and spiritually detached from himself, the impact of his dehumanisation so overwhelming that this once proud warrior loses the will to defend himself, unable to recognise the "beast" he has become. Ultimately, we witness Othello's persecution at the hands of the state which punishes those who, the state themselves, have painted as villainous and as a threat to the security and safety of Venice. Brabantio's determination to read "the bloody book of law" (1.3.67) upon discovering Desdemona's and Othello's elopement is a poignant precursor for Othello's demise and eventual suicide, which Daniel Viktus argues, "read in the context of the play's persistently Christian language of divine judgement...merely confirms his identity as an infidel - an irascible creature whose reckless violence leads him to damnation" (Viktus, 1997, p. 175). Whilst Othello's motivation for taking his own life may be viewed as a misguided act of retribution, ultimately he enacts the state's persecution and punishes himself and, consequently, "...like Judas, Othello is

damned for his betrayal of innocence” (Viktus, 1997, p. 175). To repeat an earlier point: Othello, like the perception of minority groups attacked and ostracised by right-wing populism, becomes the villain that is created for him. As discussed in Chapter Two, whilst it may be tempting to adopt a safety first approach to the teaching of the play and relying solely on the rigid historical contexts surrounding *Othello*, it is through the lens of presentist readings of *Othello* that my students were able to see with greater clarity the ways in which his plight is not consigned to history, but one that is present and evident in contemporary society.

### **Othello and gender politics**

From the outset of the play, Othello’s ‘otherness’ is ingrained into his psyche and he cannot be redeemed in the eyes of those whom he wishes to love and serve; as Ania Loomba (1997) points out, “*Othello* yokes together and reshapes available images of ‘blackamoors’ and Moors, giving us a black Moor who has both a slave past and a noble lineage, black skin and thick lips as well as great military skill and rhetorical abilities, a capacity for tenderness as well as a propensity for violence” (Loomba, 1997, pp. 91-92). He is, what Daniel Viktus calls, a “walking paradox, a contradiction in terms” who has, on the one hand, been “converted to whiteness, washed clean by the waters of baptism” but who, during the play’s conclusion, displays, “...his true color - demonic black, burnt by hellfire and cursed by God” (Viktus, 1997, p. 161). The paradoxical nature of his character fundamentally demonstrates the stripping away of his character’s identity, to the point where he no longer recognises the version of himself that he has become. However, to extend the paradoxical perception of his character, Loomba also suggests that “Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones” (Loomba, 1997, pp. 91) in reference to his prejudicial assumptions concerning Desdemona’s fidelity. Whilst Othello is undoubtedly a victim of prejudicial anxieties surrounding his integration into Western culture, the relative ease with which he believes in the

likeliness of the promiscuity of Desdemona serves as a reminder that, just as the people of Venice believe in the “demonic” nature of his character, Othello mirrors Iago’s assertion that Venetian women “...rise to play and go to bed to work” (2.1.114) through his own reciprocation of his inherent views of Venetian women when he proclaims Desdemona to be, “...that cunning whore of Venice//That married with Othello” (4.2.88-89) who must die at his hands, “...else she’ll betray more men” (5.1.6). My students take a somewhat holistic view of Othello’s own insecurities and prejudices in the context in which they appear; it was commonly agreed amongst both my Year 12 and Year 13 Literature students that the speed in which Othello begins to portray these prejudices stems from his proclamation at the beginning of the play, “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.291); it is here where Othello can now begin to share the oppression and stigma placed on him with Desdemona, by placing his “life” on her honesty and loyalty, he has now made her responsible for his safety and protection in a world where danger lurks around every corner:

It’s not a coincidence that he (Othello) marries the daughter of a Senator. I’m not sure how much their relationship is about love, and more about him seeing an opportunity to marry her to help him fit into society. If he married a poor girl, how would that help him? If anything it’d make his life even harder, instead he marries someone who, through her dad, has access to money and power. (Aisha, 1st Generation Indian, Year 12 Literature and History student)

This view brings into question the motivation and reasoning behind Othello’s own prejudices, particularly those directed towards Desdemona. The prevailing opinion amongst many of my students is that, without Desdemona’s protection, Othello will again be vulnerable to those whom he knows are his enemies, even those who seemingly, “...lov’d me” (1.3.127) whilst he conformed to societal expectations, but wanted him executed the moment he strayed beyond those boundaries. For my students, Othello’s isolation and vulnerability,

contextualised under the umbrella of 'Moor', also serve to better understand the level of his manipulation at the hands of Iago and the intensity with which Othello's character experiences prejudicial attitudes which then, in turn, manifest their own prejudices within his character. At the point where Othello refers to Desdemona as a "cunning whore" he reveals something which his experiences as a black Muslim have taught him, that he is there to be deceived and manipulated; in his eyes, Desdemona's "cunning" nature is not only a consequence of her promiscuity, but as a result of his 'otherness': true love, happiness and a sense of belonging have not been, and cannot be, anything other than an abstract, unattainable notion for a character who has been trained to experience nothing but ostracization and duplicity. When he refers to himself in the third-person, that Desdemona had, "...married with Othello", we begin to see at this point in the play, a detachment in Othello's character from himself, he views himself not as a human being with control and agency over his life, but as symbolic of the 'Other', a representation of a race, religion and ethnicity that opposes the Western Christian society which he feels so isolated from. In his desperation to reclaim himself and the notion of his identity, Othello tries to desperately claw back the order and authority that his marriage to Desdemona was meant to bring, becoming detached from himself allows him to see her not as a shield he can use to protect himself from external threats, but as an opposing force that has crept behind enemy lines, who will ruin his chance to establish himself as a figure of authority with a sense of belonging amongst the Venetian ruling class. As a consequence, Othello's fit on stage where he, "...foams at the mouth and by and by//Breaks out in to savage madness." (4.1.54-55) is a literal representation of his "true color" as "demonic" and "cursed by God", at this point Othello's transformation from his capacity for "tenderness" to "violence" gathers pace and his descent into barbarity and murder become increasingly inevitable. This is by no means a mitigation for his misogynistic tirade directed towards Desdemona, rather, his fits on stage serve to symbolise his fractured judgement of Desdemona's fidelity and the morally corrupt perception he now has of her.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Othello's persecution as a result of his cultural, religious and spiritual heritage is mirrored in the continuing demonisation of the Muslim faith and is overtly played out through contemporary Western political discourse; from Baroness Warsi's interview with Cowburn (2019) in which she expressed her condemnation of the Conservative Party's reluctance to confront and eradicate a prevailing Islamophobic ideology that has spread throughout the party to Trump's (2019) recent racist tirade directed at four US congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley and Ilhan Omar suggesting that they should "go back" and "fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came." Despite three of the four congresswomen being born in the United States (Omar was born outside of the United States, in Somalia) Trump's continual racist rhetoric shines a light on the core issues surrounding right-wing nationalism and the ever present demonisation of minority groups based on their religious, cultural and ethnic identity. These seemingly brazen and flippant attacks on prominent members of the political world that are increasingly prevalent in right-wing populist rhetoric contextualise the educational environment in which my students are currently exposed; their struggle, like those of the aforementioned congresswomen, is the threat posed to their sense of ownership surrounding their national and religious identity. As reported by Mindock (2019), Omar and her colleagues are framed by Trump, and those who follow his white nationalist agenda, as a direct threat to Western cultural and political identity. Leonie Jackson (2018) defines the machinations of Islamophobia as emanating, "...from a cultural anxiety generated by the notion that previously Western spaces are being undermined by the presence of Muslims" (Jackson, 2018, 145). It is this heightened sense of "anxiety" which then serves to reinforce the notion that "...Western subjects are positioned as the legitimate cultural managers of local, national, and global territories, while Muslims are constructed as objects whose presence changes or contaminates the fantastical ideal spaces appealed to" (Jackson, 2018, 146). This perceived "contamination" of Western "territories" through the integration of people of the Muslim faith is the very essence of Trump's feeding of, what Omar (2019) calls, "...the fever of right-wing nationalism", that has spread throughout Western political

discourse. Seemingly, it is this starting position in which Othello finds himself as, fundamentally, a source of threat to the security and safety of Western territorial and ideological dominance; he finds himself in the paradoxical position as the Muslim enemy within, whilst simultaneously serving as military leader and enforcer of white Christian dominance in Venice, the Mediterranean and beyond. Alongside the overtly racist attitudes projected towards Othello's character during the first two scenes of the play, through the Duke's insistence that the safety of Venice's stronghold with Cyprus is best placed with Othello as, "...the fortitude of the place is best known to you" where "a more sovereign/Mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you." (1.3.220-223) suggesting that preserving and maintaining political and military dominance over the 'Turks' supersedes the domestic threat posed by Othello through his 'deceptive' marriage to Desdemona. It is through the Duke's instance that it is only Othello who is able to save the plight in which Cyprus finds itself that we begin to encounter, on a national level "...a fantasy of white supremacy" one in which, "the belief in white mastery over the nation and the conception that ethnic minorities are merely objects to be moved or removed according to white national will" (Jackson, 2018, 146). That Othello is "hotly call'd for" (1.2.44) by the senate upon news of the Turks invasion of Cyprus, serves to reinforce the idea that Othello is already being reduced to 'object' by the state who, rather than being accepted into societal and military hierarchies with any sense of legitimacy or equality, is "moved" by the governing powers in Venice to reinforce their own sense of political and military might. The Duke's second guessing of the Turks' deceptive nature when it is declared that, "The Turkish preparation makes for Rhodes" (1.3.14) also reinforces his belief that it is "safer" for Othello to engage in battle with the Muslim Ottomites because it is in this light that the Duke, and the state of Venice, also view their general: the converted enemy within.

It has been a popular opinion amongst my students, as well as Othello's 'otherness' being used as a way to present him as an enemy of the state, that the gender inequality so evident throughout large portions of the play also paint the women of the play in a similar light.

Daniel Viktus, referencing Thomas Goffe's *Amurath the First* in tandem with *Othello*, suggests that both characters, "...exhibit a masculine "courage" which they direct against a demonized femininity" who both seek to push back against the fear that their female love interests "...feminine charms and wiles will supposedly weaken their military "virtue".

However, both characters ultimately suffer the same fate, as their deadly treatment of the women of the play, "...exposes the murderer's misogynist code as damnable and deadly to himself" (Viktus, 1997, p. 173). Teaching in an all-girls sixth form, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that my students feel it is the female characters who deserve equal recognition in terms of the tragedy of the play; it is the flaws in Othello's character in terms of his inability to look beyond his own chauvinistic prejudices, just as much as the xenophobic and racist prejudices of those who surround him, that highlights the "deadly" "misogynistic code" that underpins the play's narrative. Iago's hyper-sexualised and objectifying depiction of Desdemona and, as an extension, women in general, quickly and quietly seeps in to Othello's misunderstanding of his wife, to the point where Desdemona becomes a direct threat to Othello's "military' virtue" (Viktus, 1997, p. 176). Othello's attempts to reinforce his sense of dominant masculinity, coupled with his desperation to cling on to the state of power and authority that he has coveted throughout the play's exposition and subsequent narrative is constantly reinstated; one student vehemently argued that Othello and Brabantio's conversation about Desdemona at the end of the first act is demonstrative of her character being positioned as a commodity to be used and, ultimately, discarded, in the toxic power struggle at play between the male characters:

Brabantio: Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:

She has deceiv'd her father and may thee.

Othello: My life upon her faith! (1.3.289-290)

Whilst Brabantio's initial disbelief surrounding Desdemona's disappearance and apparent elopement may be temporary, his response quickly transforms firstly to accusations that Desdemona has been "abus'd" by "charms" (1.2.171-173) cast on her by Othello's

“witchcraft” (1.3.64); however, the Duke’s summation that Brabantio should “...take up this mangled matter at the best” (1.3.171), scuppering any sense of justice that Brabantio may have sought by condemning Othello to the “...bloody book of law” (1.3.67) as punishment for his apparent crimes, sees Brabantio’s anger turn towards Desdemona, recontextualising her in the above exchange with Othello as deceptive, manipulative and treacherous. Brabantio’s exclamation in the first scene of the play that Desdemona’s elopement is akin to “treason of the blood” (1.1.169) feeds into the notion that she has “deceiv’d her father”; the language of personal and national betrayal used in these lines “...conflates two core anxieties” in Act One: one experienced through the domestic tension enveloping Brabantio, Desdemona and Othello whilst the second is played against the backdrop of a sense of national crisis looming on the Mediterranean, there is a distinct parallel drawn between “...the invasion and loss of Desdemona and the invasion and loss of Cyprus.” Here, as Roger Christofides (2016) argues, “Desdemona’s sexual integrity and the military integrity of Cyprus are interchangeable” (Christofides, 2016, p. 26) and both, in parallel, are under threat from Muslim invaders attempting to assert power and dominance over both commodities. Iago’s task of reframing Desdemona as ‘promiscuous’ and ‘whore’ in Othello’s mind is made far easier for him by her own father’s hubris surrounding the legitimacy and security of his role as Senator: just as Othello places his “life upon her faith”, so too has Brabantio hung his credibility as Senator around his daughter’s neck. Having read the play in its entirety, and watched several productions (both film and theatre), my students’ reaction to Desdemona’s character is mixed; on the one hand they admire her rebellious nature, willing to defy her father and ingrained societal conventions to marry the man that she loves; they feel sympathy for the treatment that she receives from Iago, Brabantio and, towards the end of her life, Othello. However, some students have pointed out that ultimately they feel disappointed and let down by her loss of ownership over her identity when confronted with Othello’s admonishment of her character. During a class discussion centered around the notion of Desdemona as a tragic figure, a group of Year 13 students considered both her relationship with Othello once they reach Cyprus and the manner in which she dies:

*Jamila:* It feels like she blames herself for her death because of how she treated her father.

*Faezah:* It's like she spends the rest of the play making up for what she did in the first Act.

*Abigail:* I don't get the point of that.

*Jamila:* Maybe it's to show the restrictions placed on women, it's not like she could ever realistically get away with it.

*Faezah:* Don't you think Othello just replaces Brabantio in a weird sort of way?

*Jamila:* What do you mean?

*Faezah:* Well she was brave and went against his (Brabantio's) wishes, but then that almost seemed too crazy, so she tried to be obedient with Othello in the same way she knows she should have -

*Abigail:* But it's a different relationship, she's meant to be in love with Othello.

*Faezah:* True, but she's also meant to 'serve' him too. That part of their relationship is the same.

*Jamila:* Maybe it's the point that she tried to rebel but couldn't?

*Faezah:* I guess both of them (Desdemona and Emilia) do rebel, but then they both die for it.

However disappointed they were with the shift in narrative surrounding the rebellious nature of Desdemona's character, there was an underlying sense of understanding of the social restrictions placed on the women of the play and the narrow parameters in which they were allowed to explore their sense of identity and worth in amongst the overtly masculine world in which they inhabit. One conclusion that my students went on to consider was that Desdemona's suggestion that it is "I myself" (5.2.125) who is to blame for her death which stems from the notion that, having betrayed the trust of her father whilst also transcending the boundaries of patriarchy, she has been socialised to accept that she must be punished

for the 'crimes' she has committed: if her father and her husband both ultimately scorn her, then the blame lies with her. My students are always keen to point out that Emilia's character does offer Desdemona an alternative view of herself, and of the gender roles that play out in a marriage, telling her that, "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." (4.3.101) repositioning the infidelity and immorality of men as the motivation for women to enact their own "ills"; whilst my students agreed with Emilia highlighting the hypocrisy of the male ego, it was Desdemona's response to this that was most telling for them, "God me such uses send, Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (4.3.102-103) To my students, this signals the reversal of Desdemona from the brave, bold, rebellious character we encounter in the first Act, to one who is desperately seeking to conform to, "A maiden never bold" (1.3.94) and hide behind her femininity in order to survive the tyranny of her husband.

A revealing discussion amongst my students concerning Othello's treatment of Desdemona also emanated from Othello's response to Brabantio's fury surrounding his own sense of betrayal; when Othello declares that his "life" rests upon her "faith" my students were quick to point out that this line could be rewritten as 'her life' upon her "faith" as she has unknowingly entered in to a marriage in which her survival will depend upon Othello's belief in her honesty and loyalty to him. Othello has benefited greatly from Desdemona's refusal to be curtailed by her father's expectations, but, now that they are married, Othello has hung the success of his, and her, entire existence on the notion that she will conform to the very narrow and restrictive expectations that he has of her as his wife: their marriage, conducted under the cover of darkness, now feels like a life sentence for Desdemona, one that insists she takes responsibility for Othello's love, happiness, sense of belonging and his status of authority within the Venetian military. What Othello fails to realise is the underhanded punishment both he and Desdemona receive for their transgression as they are, "...inevitably removed from Venice, exorcising from the central reservations of power the threat they embody to the home..."; whilst Othello has placed his "life" in Desdemona's hands, he is seemingly unaware that she will have to navigate this struggle, not in the safe confines of

Venice, but in the perilous waters of Cyprus where, "...these monstrosities are expelled." (Christofides, 2016, p. 28) In this light, my students assertion that Othello "replaces" Brabantio in terms of which character Desdemona must now "serve" further highlights the perilous position in which she now finds herself, without the safety which the confines of Venice afforded her, Cyprus will ultimately serve as a place of punishment for the "monstrosities" they have both committed. If the violent storm that brings about the destruction of the Turkish fleet on the shores of Cyprus at the beginning of the second Act signals a moment of relief and euphoria for the couple, just as the Duke's blessing of their marriage signifies similar feelings in Venice, so too does the destructive natural phenomenon also serve as a precursor to the death and destruction of their relationship due to the seemingly unnatural nature of their love. Iago's failure to bring about the downfall of Othello in Venice only serves to heighten his resolve that his plan will be a success in Cyprus, for Othello and Desdemona it represents a place of isolation and vulnerability that strips them of the safety and protection offered to them in Venice. Ultimately, Desdemona's banishment from Venice, coupled with the weight of expectations placed on her shoulders through her responsibility to sustain Othello's "life", is swept off to "...Cyprus" a place which is "paradoxically associated with purity and promiscuity" and encompasses "...the perfect place for Desdemona to step ashore just like Aphrodite. The perfect place for Desdemona to be whored and then killed" (Christofides, 2016, p. 30). Rather than seeing Desdemona's refusal to conform to societal expectations in Venice with any sense of liberation or agency over her life, my students saw her character as an archetypal Aphrodite character who is punished for her sexual liberation and transgressions. Reflecting on this comparison, one of my Year 12 students commented that:

Desdemona's tragedy is that she has any sense of control over herself removed by the men in her life, she's a victim of men and their insecurities and a weird hang up they seem to have about the possibility of women

enjoying freedom and sex in the same way they do. (Zainab, 2nd Generation Pakistani, Year 12 Literature and Sociology student)

Zainab's empathetic response to Desdemona being cast in the role of "whore" and how her perceived sexual nature is viewed as one that should be oppressed and one that is deserving of punishment drew comparisons from the class to issues regarding honour killings, a concept all too familiar to my students in light of recent media coverage surrounding the issue. Desdemona's refusal to conform to the oppressiveness of her father, her objectification and demonisation as a consequence of Iago's manipulation and her murder at the hands of her husband struck a chord with the class who saw Desdemona as not only an Aphrodite-like character, but one that embodies the plight of countless women today who become victims of male "insecurities". Following on from this comment, the class pointed out that the place of Desdemona's death, both on the island of Cyprus and also in their marital bed, works to reinforce the underlying sexual dominance male characters exude over the women of the play. What is meant to be a place of love, sexual consummation and unity is transformed into a place of punishment, masculine toxicity and death. The symbolism of their bed sheets becoming a "shroud" (4.3.24) signifies the extent to which Desdemona has been "whored" by the men of the play; Othello now sees her in such terms whilst equating sex with death, and Desdemona as "that cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.89) who "must die, else she'll betray more men." (5.1.6) Jennifer Feather (2013) suggests that the "blood" (3.3.452) which Othello demands in recompense for the injustice of Desdemona's supposed infidelity, "...is not primarily an expression of his essential savagery but of the way that he intends to utilize bodily damage to restore his own and Desdemona's integrity" (Feather, 2013, p. 242). Just as Zainab commented on Desdemona's tragedy revolving around her treatment from the men of the play, this could be extended to encapsulate the inherent social conditions in which Desdemona finds herself, one that fundamentally relies on the control, dominance and marginalisation of women to the extent that "Othello's notion of "blood" as punishment for her 'crimes' is his attempt to "restore the

integrity of social identity” through violence that is “absolutely central to the Venetian social order” (Feather, 2013, p. 242).

Whilst the chronic lack of diversity and representation of minority groups within the GCSE and A-Level curriculum has been outlined in Chapter One, above all else it is the representation and depiction of the female experience that my students found most relatable; whilst there are obvious flaws to this, Desdemona and Emilia embody a very specific version of the white, Western female experience, my students did feel a sense of universality to their plight in terms of the gender imbalance that is evident throughout the play. During one class discussion following a presentation on gender representation in the play delivered by a group of Year 12 students, the group focused on the depiction of the female experience and to what extent this may resonate with a contemporary audience:

*Fatima:* It feels like they're all under threat (Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca) and that their status as a women is their curse; I honestly don't even think it's just Iago and his attitudes towards women that is the problem.

*Taaibah:* Look at Cassio and Othello and how, at different points in the play, they treat the women in their lives, it's so bad.

*Fatima:* It's like whatever they do, they can't do right. If they shut up they die for it (Desdemona), if they defend themselves they die for it (Emilia). The only one who survives is Bianca and, let's be honest, she's a whore...

*Aaisha:* That's probably what keeps her alive!

*Tayba:* Exactly! So what's being said? Women are good for sex and nothing else?

*Taaibah:* Basically yeah.

*Tayba:* Which is also ridiculous because that's what Desdemona dies for!

*Fatima:* So as a woman you're basically stuck in a never-ending circle and you can't do anything about it.

The same group of students were then asked to then think about the treatment of the women of the play and place this in a modern context:

*Zainab:* Well the circle that all of the women are stuck in, you can't do right from doing wrong, it's like that American footballer (US Women's Soccer player Megan Rapinoe), she said that Trump loves them because they're winning the World Cup for America, but then he's clearly got a problem with her because she's a woman.

*Tayba:* Yeah she's really outspoken.

*Zainab:* So she's got to do great things for her country, but then also shut up and not have a voice.

*Fatima:* Isn't that why Jo Cox was killed? She had a voice, used it for good, and was killed for it.

*Zainab:* You can see why women are so afraid to speak out, if you challenge anything that you don't like you're in danger of being attacked, physically or verbally.

As this discussion developed it was recontextualised to take in to consideration, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Trump's attack on four female members of congress being of no coincidence and that, as well as the overt racist rhetoric emanating from his speeches, the subtle implication is that the threat posed to him by female politicians is just as great as the 'threat' he fears from their race and religion; as of June 2019, just three of the twenty-two available positions in the Trump administration's cabinet are held by women. The lack of a truly representative voice and any sense of equality women experience in the modern world that my students refer to is still evident in every facet of society, evidenced most recently through a report produced by the World Bank Group (2019) which states that only six countries in the world (Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden) give women the same economic rights as men.

As this stream of inequality and injustice seeps through every corner of our society, what impact does this have on young Muslim women and their experience of the current educational climate? Unsurprisingly, it is evident that these forms of religious, cultural and gender discrimination evident throughout the Western social and political spectrum inevitably find their way in to the educational mainstream and influence Muslim girls' experience of the British education system. In a recent study conducted by Heidi Safia Mirza and Veena Meetoo (2018) concerning the experience of Muslim girls in British schools, it was suggested that, "Muslim young women...are actually 'in danger' of falling between the cracks of virulent racialised Islamophobic debates on the one hand, and racialised post-feminist discourses of female equality on the other", this tension is further exacerbated by what Mirza and Meetoo refer to as post-feminist "hegemonic masculinity" which serves to "recast" young women who are "interpellated through popular culture and discourses of 'success, choice and empowerment' into seductive new forms of gender inequality." However, this recasting of gender inequality "is predicated on a particular middle classed whiteness" (Mirza & Meetoo, 2018, pp. 3-5) suggesting that young Muslim women are discounted and, essentially, robbed of any sense of agency, identity or voice in the state school educational system. As discussed in Chapter One, despite the government's insistence that students study Literature courses that offer an understanding of the "depth and breadth" of the subject which affords all students a culturally enriching experience, the climate in which Mirza and Meetoo argue young Muslim women fit in to their educational experience appears to be the antithesis of this ethos. It has been the purpose of this research to examine the ways in which my students engage with Shakespeare and *Othello* within this context and explore how the study of both playwright and text can offer students an opportunity to discover a sense of inclusivity and belonging in the world of Shakespeare, allowing them to push back against the social injustices in which they find themselves. New, exciting, relevant and engaging approaches to teaching Shakespeare in the English classroom are now more important than ever before; despite recent reports of falling numbers in the uptake of English Literature at A-Level, coupled with the complex and challenging environment in which it is

taught, English Literature, Shakespeare and *Othello* have offered my students a fruitful, enriching and liberating experience that has helped to better shape their understanding of themselves, their culture, religion, identity and the world in which they live. When considering the testing times that lie before us, Othello's words to Desdemona on the shores of Cyprus may offer us comfort and hope:

If after every tempest come such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!  
And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas  
Olympus-high, and duck again as low  
As hell's from heaven! (2.1.178-182)

## **Conclusion**

The experience of a deep-rooted sense of alienation and ostracisation many of my students spoke of over the course of this research project concerning their place and sense of belonging in British society was a sobering reminder of the struggles they, and older generations of family members have endured; it has also been a stark reminder of the weight of expectation and responsibility placed on the shoulders of politicians, local authorities, schools, and teachers to ensure that the education sector plays a significant role in continuously striving towards social integration and cohesion. Unfortunately, as previously established, educational institutions are not a nirvana in to which Muslim students can escape preconceived ideas concerning the role a young Muslim woman should play that circulates throughout societal discourse concerning Islam's place in British society.

As a consequence, the othering of Othello's character and more specifically how his character is systematically dismantled and reduced to conforming to a predetermined set of stereotypes for which he is then pilloried and punished is one with which my students

empathise; the 'radicalisation' of Othello, shunned to the fringes of society and demonised for his religious and cultural differences, was a stark signifier of the extreme and dire consequences of the continual oppression of minority groups: it is a lesson that should be understood not just by students, but by policy makers and educators alike who share a responsibility to address this imbalance and create a truly inclusive educational environment.

Through the recognition of the inequalities faced by young, Muslim girls in the current education system, a platform can be built upon which a true sense of equality can be established throughout the wider educational population and beyond; however, the "road to understanding the complexities of Muslim girls' education in Britain is not simply about 'empowering' girls through access to a classroom and teacher", but instead to "move towards a sophisticated understanding of the way policy and practice systemically intersect with power and privilege to reinforce race, gender, social, sexual, cultural and religious inequalities in one of the wealthiest countries in the world" (MeeToo & Mirza, 2018, p.237). If the promise of the National Curriculum is to ring true, then educators across the sector must strive to ensure that these inequalities are readdressed and an educational experience is cultivated to ensure the multiculturalism of British society is embraced and equally served; this, ultimately, will enable the study of Shakespeare and English Literature to be a truly transformative experience for all.

## Conclusion

It has been the purpose of this thesis to determine the impact of teaching Shakespeare and specifically *Othello* to post-16 students, specifically in light of the recent governmental changes to educational policy implemented by the Conservative party concerning the study of English Literature. The research conducted sought to determine the relevance of studying the play in the current social, political and educational climate and the ways in which a group of female Muslim students responded to the text and to gauge the impact of various pedagogical approaches used in order to effectively engage these students with the play.

The questions that underpinned the research conducted for this thesis were:

1. Why is Shakespeare the only playwright specified for mandatory study on the English National Curriculum and in what ways does the study of Shakespeare hold relevance when taught in a multicultural classroom?
2. What can be considered effective pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare and *Othello* at post-16 level and how can the effectiveness of these approaches be evaluated?
3. What are the implications of the new English National Curriculum when considering its underlying ethos and the values it seeks to promote and uphold? Does it reinforce Conservative policy values concerning the 'Britishness' of the education system or can it still serve the needs of all students across multicultural Britain?
4. What are the various ways in which a group of predominately British Muslim A-Level students able to engage with both the historical and contemporary contexts of *Othello* and in what ways does their cultural and religious identity influence their reading of the play?

5. When taking in to consideration my school's single-sex context, to what extent do the representations of gender in *Othello*, and specifically the treatment of female characters, reflect the societal and educational experiences of my students?

### **Thesis research questions: a summary**

1. Shakespeare's placing as cultural shibboleth within the British literary heritage has seen his standing as a central figure in the study of English across decades of multiple iterations of the English National Curriculum. His centrality to literary academia speaks of his ever present and universal significance concerning the values and ideals that constitute British identity; his works are upheld as the voice of a nation, both past, present, and future and are seen by elected governments as a tool with which to reveal and embed a sense of national identity amongst students generation after generation. Shakespeare's continual relevance within current societal and educational climates demands that he holds reverence for *all* students, with the universality of his work able to engage and capture students' imaginations; in so doing, allowing for the intricacies of students' experiences to be viewed through the lens of the texts they study.

2. In order for this to be achieved, effective and engaging pedagogy is central to the evolving relevance of Shakespeare within the English classroom. Pedagogical approaches to the study of *Othello* outlined throughout this thesis point to an inclusive and organic methodology which seeks to engage with, and incorporate in to, the study of Shakespeare the values and experiences of the students to whom the text is taught. Offering students the academic freedom to consider the human values and principles on offer in the play whilst simultaneously encouraging them to re-evaluate those qualities in the context of their own experiences and identities proved successful in eliciting responses to *Othello* that bridged

the gap between the personal and academic; by doing so, my students were able to demonstrate an acute appreciation for Shakespeare's canonical status and enduring relevance to their own lives.

3. The socio-political climate that formed the backdrop for the introduction of the new English National Curriculum in 2015 was confronted by the Conservative government's belief that the curriculum should seek to uphold and, where necessary, promote 'British values' to all students. The mandatory study of Shakespeare that forms part of this ethos categorises the playwright as spokesperson for such values, and consequently, contextualises his work as representative of current British democratic values. Whilst this is problematic in terms of the set of ideals being placed at the door of any one particular writer, this research has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Shakespeare's work can be used in the English classroom to confront, interrogate, and recontextualise these principles in order to reconfigure Shakespeare's place within the curriculum and as part of a British multiculturalist identity. The wider applicability of this research points to a need for educators to continue striving towards finding new, relevant ways of allowing their students to embrace their own sense of cultural identity within the English classroom whilst simultaneously see their own experiences reflected back at them through the lens of Shakespeare's work: my students have demonstrated the continual potential for all students regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or religious identity to embrace Shakespeare's work and make it their own.

4. The combination of historicist and presentist approaches to the teaching of *Othello* allowed my students the opportunity to explore the impact historical contexts had on the production of the original play whilst simultaneously balancing these understandings with how these contexts serve to illuminate their perceptions of their own experiences. My students' religious and cultural identity was a prominent fixture when considering their reactions to the play's depiction of race, cultural nuances, and religious tensions; this was further explored and conceptualised through their consideration of contemporary

Shakespearean actors and their reflections on being cast in the role of Othello coupled with their own responses to their viewing of the production of *Othello* that placed his Islamic heritage at the heart of his personal tragedy.

5. As an extension of this, consideration of the gender politics at play in *Othello* gave my students the opportunity to consider how the treatment of female characters mirrored their own experiences; the misogynistic subterfuge evident in the play was a stark reminder of the level of inequality and social barriers my students face in their educational lives and beyond. It was this broad spectrum of identification that took place throughout the reading of the play that rang true for my students, allowing them to see pieces of themselves in the fabric of *Othello's* narrative.

### **Summary of findings and conclusions**

The narrow and prescriptive framework within which the teaching of *Othello* was placed through the Conservative government's overhaul of educational policy concerning the teaching of English Literature at A-Level has dramatically shaped the ways in which Shakespeare is taught to post-16 students. This framework has since been further muddled when taking into consideration the wider educational context into which it was introduced, attention centered around the Trojan Horse scandal and the deficiencies of the government's PREVENT agenda, both of which made national headlines as the government plans for their educational reforms were taking place; this study has sought to explore the relevance the teaching of Shakespeare and *Othello* takes and is only further heightened when reflecting on the tension that existed, and still exists, concerning the multicultural society in which the new curriculum serves.

Teaching the text across four A-Level Literature classes composed of fifty-four students, 95% of whom are Muslim, afforded me the opportunity to explore the ways in which the

government's insistence for the promotion of British values through the literary texts that are taught is feasible, and to what extent students engage with these values. It was through this process that, conducting the necessary research for the purpose of this thesis, I was able to examine how and why Shakespeare can still be considered our contemporary and that, rather than serving as a tool with which to reinforce preconceived British values, Shakespeare and *Othello* opened up new avenues for my students to reflect on and critique the reality of living in contemporary British society both as young women and as British Muslims. Whilst it was evident that my students had reservations concerning the choice of texts on offer for both GCSE and A-Level English Literature courses, their concerns were never about the inclusion or relevance of Shakespeare, but instead on the lack of balance and diversity amongst the authors whose work they were able to read; however, as late as July 2019, there seems to be the beginning of an acknowledgment concerning the culturally restrictive nature of the English curriculum with the Edexcel exam board making sweeping changes to their syllabus that will now include writers from other cultures such as Imtiaz Dharker, Grace Nichols, Tanika Gupta and Benjamin Zephaniah.

Whilst considering the removal of voices from minority groups on the English curriculum, it was of great significance to note that my students' first real sense of connection with *Othello*, and specifically his character, was the treatment his cultural and religious heritage seemed to endure. The stripping away of his sense of ownership over his own identity and forcing him into the confines of a narrow framework of white Christianity resonated with my students in terms of their experiences, and the experiences of their family members, whilst trying to integrate into British society and also attempting to maintain their own sense of cultural and religious autonomy. Additionally, it was the suffering Othello endures at the hands of Brabantio, Iago and the wider Venetian state that my students felt is reflective of the suffering of minority groups attempting to integrate into and assimilate multicultural Britain; however, rather than seek to combat this sense of inequality and injustice, my students were

of the opinion that the reforming of Literature courses at GCSE and A-Level has only served to restrict this process further.

In terms of pedagogical practice, it is evident that teachers are under increasing pressure to balance dynamic and engaging teaching of the text with the daily pressures they face from a combination of Ofsted inspections, performance management targets and the impact exam results have on school league tables. These constraints may ultimately serve to create a sense of restriction in the freedom teachers need in order to create a learning environment that allows students to fully explore a diverse range of readings and reactions to the play; instead, these restricting factors serve to create an atmosphere of fear amongst teachers who feel the need to teach to the exam in order to satisfy the above limitations. At the time of writing, the overall picture of uptake of English Literature at A-Level is a worrying one, with the number of students opting to study the subject as a part of their post-16 education falling year on year; if we are to stem the flow of students opting to study other subjects at the expense of Literature, making the subject accessible, relevant and engaging are of paramount significance. Additionally, tension also exists in terms of the emphasis that is placed on the historical significance of depictions in *Othello* of race, gender dynamics, sexual identity and religion with the consideration of a presentist approach to the play and how it speaks to contemporary social, political and religious contexts. If we are to make the study of Literature and specifically Shakespeare relevant, valuable and appealing to potential future students, particularly in the current educational climate, then reading his work in light of contemporary contextual issues is vital. It must be acknowledged that the above will only ever be achievable if there is a clear understanding between A-Level exam boards, teachers and students concerning the ways in which the play can be contextualised, studied and written about.

When applying this process to my own teaching practice, considering the works of various scholars and the ways in which the depiction of Othello's race can be confronted helped my

students to understand the subtle nuances of how ideas concerning his race manifest within the narrative. My students were able to question the extent to which *Othello* is truly reflective of the black experience and the various ways in which this stereotype is also mirrored in contemporary depictions of race through various forms of media and other cultural contexts. However, it was the recontextualisation of their perceptions of race in the play that allowed them to rethink their understanding of how the portrayal of Othello's race can be evaluated; a combination of one of my student's recounts of her family's experience in apartheid South Africa coupled with the destructive nature of racism on the individual we witness in the play allowed my students to appreciate the ways in which *Othello* can be seen to work in opposition to racial prejudice.

Students benefitting from the opportunity to watch new productions of the play also embraced the opportunity to see themselves and their own personal experience in *Othello*; his experience as a Muslim outsider trying to adjust his cultural and spiritual identity and the devastating consequences of this were powerful in their message. The depiction of Islam on stage in their hometown and its role in Othello's struggle also resonated with my students in a way in which the play had previously failed to do. Moreover, this experience equipped my students with a more coherent understanding of how the struggles of Othello as a Muslim were also a reflection of wider contemporary societal issues concerning the difficulties faced by the Muslim population and their attempts to integrate into British society. It was also of significance to consider how these philosophical insights into the play are then balanced with the need to prepare students for the academic rigours of their A-Level examinations, it is fundamental to the study of the subject that their insights and responses can then be translated into relevant and evaluative essay responses to the text; significant work is required to ensure students are able to formulate their responses to the text with a cohesive and sustained argument that meets the rigours and demands of the exam board.

Running throughout the course of this thesis is the consideration of my students as Muslim and the ways in which their faith impacts their role as both student and specifically student of

Shakespeare within the current social, political and educational climate. As an extension of this, based on the rise in Islamophobic and misogynistic attitudes prevalent in the British social and political narrative, the impact on my students as young Muslim women and their experience of the British education system revealed a tension in both their freedom to see themselves in the texts that they study and also how both Islam and the female experience are depicted in the play. The presentation of radicalised Islam and how this is reflective of both Othello's struggles and the perception of Islam within contemporary Western society was of central focus when considering the religious context of the play; it was evident throughout discussions on the topic with my students that they felt these perceptions are reflected clearly through both UK and US political rhetoric, with the demonisation of Islam and the grouping of all Muslims as one entity symptomatic of the oppressive and prejudicial attitudes faced by Othello.

These prejudices are partly a consequence of the failures of governmental policy, namely the PREVENT agenda, which have led to a generalised depiction of all Muslims being seen as vulnerable to radicalisation; these failures have, in turn, led to sow further divisions between minority communities and the state. As highlighted by my students, this demonisation and sense of 'othering' of minority groups is reflected through Othello's character, my students demonstrated a perceptive understanding of how power structures governing society can work to ostracise minority groups and reflected on the lasting damage this causes in terms of social integration and cohesion. Furthermore, the heightened levels of misogyny and persecution experienced by *Othello's* female characters allowed my students to consider the ways in which toxic masculinity functions in order to objectify and dehumanise women, again this afforded my students the opportunity to reflect on not only how misogyny is reflected through the personal relationships of the characters, but is also mirrored in the wider contemporary political spectrum. It became apparent to my students that women, and specifically women representative of minority groups, are trapped in a vicious circle of prejudice from which it appears at times impossible to escape. However,

whilst the prevalence of the marginalisation of young Muslim women in the UK education system exists, as has been evidenced in this thesis, the study of Shakespeare and *Othello* offers them the opportunity to reject these forms of oppression and begin to take agency over their lives.

### **Recommendations and Limitations**

As a consequence of these findings it is of importance to highlight recommendations for further consideration. In order to create a valuable and purposeful learning environment in which students can engage fully with *Othello*, there must be a clear and unambiguous understanding between government policy makers, exam boards, examiners and teachers concerning the specific contextual scope that students are able to apply to their study of the play; doing so will offer students a greater sense of connection with the text and an invaluable way in which they can see Shakespeare and his work as relevant to their lives. As an extension of this, there also needs to be a clearer understanding in terms of how governmental policy makers tailor the English curriculum to fully appreciate the multicultural makeup of the educational system and offer students of various cultures, religions and ethnicities the opportunity to study literature produced by writers with whom they share common experiences.

The teaching profession is an incredibly demanding and rewarding profession; it requires skill, patience, enthusiasm and dedication and I am endlessly amazed at the relentlessness with which colleagues throughout the profession exhibit these qualities continuously. If we are to maintain the high standards of pedagogical practice which we have set for ourselves, then continual strides on the part of English teachers throughout the education system will always be required to ensure that Shakespeare is taught to students in ways in which allow his work to speak to contemporary issues relevant to the lives of students whilst also helping them to appreciate the historical significance of their origins.

It must be acknowledged that the sample size of students used for the purposes of this research was small in relation to the number of students who study the subject nationally, additionally the text choices for the study of Literature at A-Level was only considered from one of four main exam boards. As a consequence, in order to advance this study, a broader consideration is needed of students from a variety of cultural, religious, social and economic backgrounds in order to gauge a broader insight into the benefits and limitations of the educational reforms.

Finally, it is evident from the national picture that urgent work is necessary not just to engage students with Shakespeare's work alone, but also to afford students the opportunity to reassess the study of Literature; unless students are allowed to see the relevance, purpose and benefits of viewing the study of Literature as an academic pursuit, it is of grave concern that the numbers of students opting to study the subject at post-16 and higher education will continue to fall. As an extension of this, greater significance must be placed on working to help integrate minority groups within British society so that all members of these communities feel a sense of equality within the society of which they are an important part; it is the responsibility of government departments and policy makers to ensure that the education system is used as a means to achieve this.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

	AQA	OCR	Edexcel	WJEC
<b>Shakespeare</b>	Macbeth	Macbeth	Macbeth	Macbeth
	Much Ado About Nothing	Much Ado About Nothing	Much Ado About Nothing	Much Ado About Nothing
	Romeo and Juliet	Romeo and Juliet	Romeo and Juliet	Romeo and Juliet
	The Tempest	The Merchant of Venice	The Tempest	<b>Othello</b>
	The Merchant of Venice		<b>Twelfth Night</b>	<b>Henry V</b>
	<b>Julius Caesar</b>		The Merchant of Venice	
<b>19th Century novel</b>	A Christmas Carol (Dickens)	Great Expectations (Dickens)	Great Expectations (Dickens)	A Christmas Carol (Dickens)
	Great Expectations (Dickens)	Jane Eyre (Bronte)	A Christmas Carol (Dickens)	Jane Eyre (Bronte)
	Jane Eyre (Bronte)	Pride and Prejudice (Austen)	Jane Eyre (Bronte)	Pride and Prejudice (Austen)
	Frankenstein (Shelley)	Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Stevenson)	Frankenstein (Shelley)	Silas Marner (Eliot)
	Pride and Prejudice (Austen)	War of the Worlds (Wells)	Pride and Prejudice (Austen)	War of the Worlds (Wells)
	<b>The Sign of Four (Conan Doyle)</b>		Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Stevenson)	

**Post 1914  
Prose/Drama**

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Stevenson)		Silas Marner (Eliot)	
An Inspector Calls (Priestley)	Animal Farm (Orwell)	Animal Farm (Orwell)	An Inspector Calls (Priestley)
Blood Brothers (Russell)	An Inspector Calls (Priestley)	An Inspector Calls (Priestley)	Anita and Me (Syal)
The History Boys (Bennett)	Anita and Me (Syal)	Anita and Me (Syal)	Blood Brothers (Russell)
DNA (Kelly)	DNA (Kelly)	Blood Brothers (Russell)	Lord of the Flies (Golding)
<b>The Curious Incident... (play script) (Stephens)</b>	<b>My Mother Said I Never Should (Keatley)</b>	<b>Hobson's Choice (Brighouse)</b>	Never Let Me Go (Ishiguro)
A Taste of Honey (Delaney)	Never Let Me Go (Ishiguro)	<b>Journey's End (Sherriff)</b>	The History Boys (Bennett)
Lord of the Flies (Golding)		Lord of the Flies (Golding)	
Animal Farm (Orwell)		<b>Blood Brothers (Russell)</b>	
Never Let Me Go (Ishiguro)			
Anita and Me (Syal)			
Pigeon English (Kelman)			

## Appendix B

### 4.1.1 Aspects of tragedy

Students study **one** of the following Shakespeare plays:

Author	Text
William Shakespeare	<i>Othello</i>
	<i>King Lear</i>

Students study **two** texts including **one** drama from the following list. At least **one** of the texts must be written pre-1900.

Author	Text	Time period
F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	
Thomas Hardy	<i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i>	Pre-1900
John Keats	'Lamia', 'Isabella or The Pot of Basil', 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'The Eve of St. Agnes'	Pre-1900
Arthur Miller	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> (drama)	
William Shakespeare	<i>Richard II</i> (drama)	Pre-1900
AQA English Literature B Poetry anthology (tragedy)	Extracts from the Prologue of 'The Monk's Tale' and <i>The Monk's Tale</i> , 'Jessie Cameron', Extract from <i>Paradise Lost</i> , 'Tithonus', 'The Convergence of the Twain', 'The Death of Cuchulain', 'Out, out...', 'Death in Leamington', 'Miss Gee'	

### 4.1.2 Aspects of comedy

Students study **one** of the following Shakespeare plays:

Author	Text
William Shakespeare	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>
	<i>Twelfth Night</i>

Students study **two** texts from the following list: **one** pre-1900 drama text and **one** further text.

Author	Text	Time period
Jane Austen	<i>Emma</i>	Pre-1900
Geoffrey Chaucer	'The Nun's Priest's Tale' including Prologue and Epilogue	Pre-1900
Oliver Goldsmith	<i>She Stoops to Conquer</i> (drama)	Pre-1900
Andrea Levy	<i>Small Island</i>	

Author	Text	Time period
Oscar Wilde	<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> (drama)	Pre-1900
AQA English Literature B Poetry anthology (comedy)	'The Flea', 'Tam o' Shanter', 'A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General', 'Sunny Prestatyn', 'Mrs Sisyphus', 'Not My Best Side', 'My Rival's House'	

## 4.2.1 Elements of crime writing

Students study **three** texts from the following list: **one** post-2000 prose text, **one** pre-1900 poetry text and **one** further text.

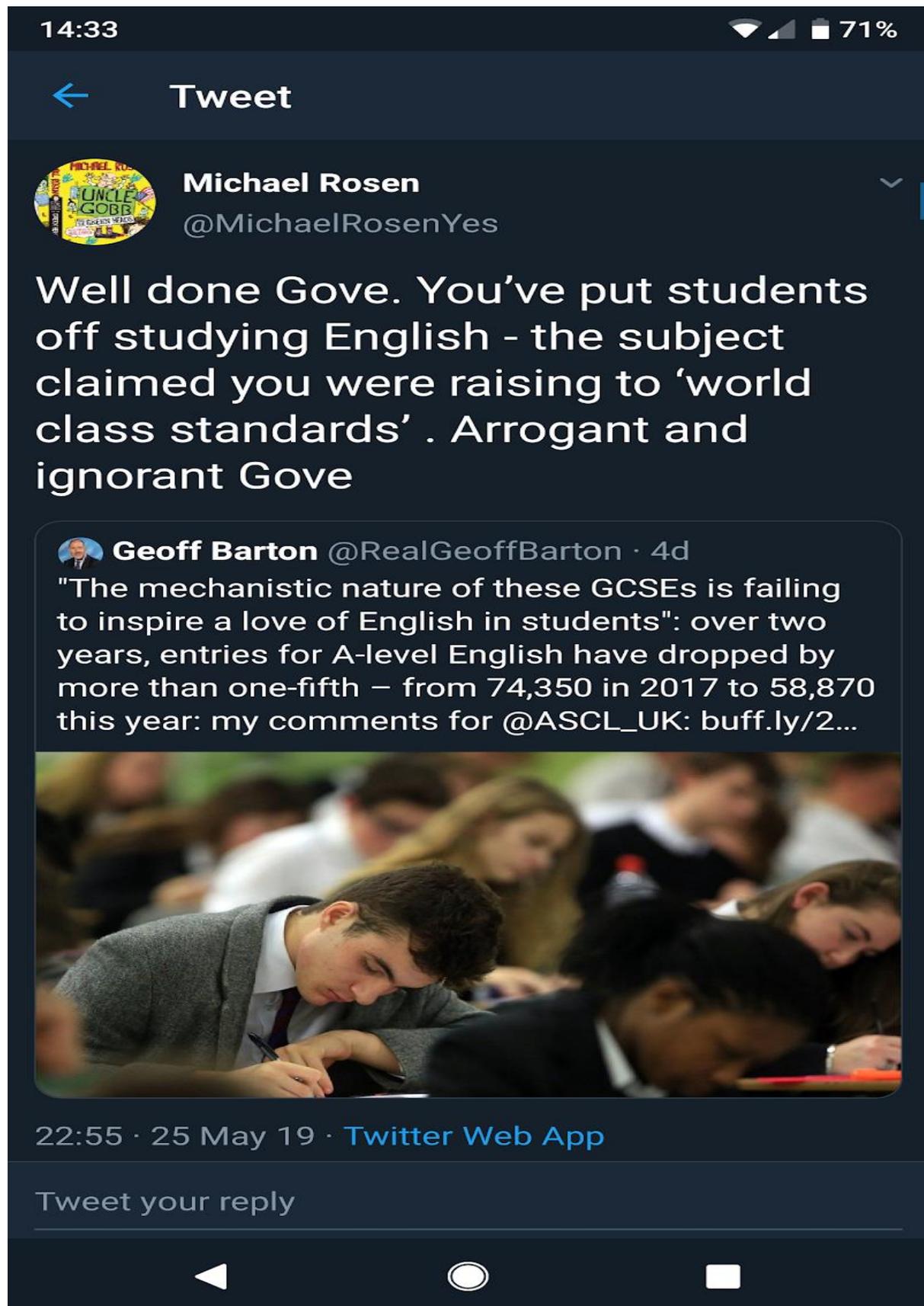
Author	Text	Time period
Kate Atkinson	<i>When Will There Be Good News?</i>	Post-2000
Agatha Christie	<i>The Murder of Roger Ackroyd</i>	
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	<i>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i>	Pre-1900
George Crabbe, Robert Browning and Oscar Wilde	'Peter Grimes', 'The Laboratory', 'My Last Duchess', 'Porphyria's Lover', 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'	Pre-1900
Charles Dickens	<i>Oliver Twist</i>	Pre-1900
Graham Greene	<i>Brighton Rock</i>	
Ian McEwan	<i>Atonement</i>	Post-2000
William Shakespeare	<i>Hamlet</i>	Pre-1900

## 4.2.2 Elements of political and social protest writing

Students study **three** texts from the following list: **one** post-2000 prose text; **one** poetry text and **one** further text, **one** of which must be written pre-1900.

Author	Text	Time period
Margaret Atwood	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	
William Blake	<i>Songs of Innocence and of Experience</i>	Pre-1900
Jim Crace	<i>Harvest</i>	Post-2000
Charles Dickens	<i>Hard Times</i>	Pre-1900
Tony Harrison	<i>Selected Poems</i> 'V', 'National Trust', 'Them and [uz]', 'Divisions', 'Working', 'Marked with D'	
Khaled Hosseini	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	Post-2000
Henrik Ibsen (Translated by Michael Meyer)	<i>A Doll's House</i> (Methuen Drama Student Edition 2008)*	Pre-1900

Author	Text	Time period
William Shakespeare	<i>Henry IV Part I</i>	Pre-1900



14:33

71%



## Tweet



KARDWELL

@Kardwell

I've been helping my niece study English literature for her upcoming A-levels, and Rosen hits the nail right on the head. It's been a quite depressing process rather than joyous.



**Michael Rosen** @MichaelRosenYes · 3d

Well done Gove. You've put students off studying English - the subject claimed you were raising to 'world class standards'. Arrogant and ignorant Gove [twitter.com/RealGeoffBarto...](https://twitter.com/RealGeoffBarto...)

9:04 · 27 May 19 · [Twitter for Android](#)

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**Cate Hannah** @CateHannah1 · 20h

Replying to @Kardwell

I second @ReynardannaAnna - I have yr12 Lit. We're studying Othello, Tess t'Durbs, Death of a Salesman, Kite Runner, Blake, A Handmaid's Tale - but have read & talked

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← Thread

It doesn't have to be this way. My y13s have LOVED A-Level English. We study Othello, Atonement, RII, Gatsby, poetry by Browning and Wilde and even some Christie. Wonderful! We never talk about AOs we talk about stories and characters and how we respond to them. It's brilliant.



**KARDWELL** @Kardwell · 2d

I've been helping my niece study English literature for her upcoming A-levels, and Rosen hits the nail right on the head. It's been a quite depressing process rather than joyous. [twitter.com/MichaelRosenYe...](https://twitter.com/MichaelRosenYe...)

9:27 · 27 May 19 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

19 Likes



**Anna Reynard** @ReynardannaAnna · 2d

The exam asks questions that encourage the kids to think and to debate. It welcomes quirky ideas and it rejects dull and formulaic language analysis. Honestly, it doesn't have

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## Tweet

about stories and characters and how we respond to them. It's brilliant.



**KARDWELL** @Kardwell · 2d

I've been helping my niece study English literature for her upcoming A-levels, and Rosen hits the nail right on the head. It's been a quite depressing process rather than joyous. [twitter.com/MichaelRosenY...](https://twitter.com/MichaelRosenY...)



4



19



**Oliver Rowe**

@ollie\_rowe

Replying to [@ReynardannaAnna](#)

Teaching to AOs is a sure fire way to kill any subject. Students need to think, interact with and interpret content in a way that is meaningful to them. Debate and discussion make A level teaching joyous!

17:24 · 27 May 19 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

2 Likes



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