"But They're Nothing Like Us!" A Pedagogic Approach to Shakespearean Drama in Kuwait

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Abstract

This paper considers teaching British canonical texts such as William Shakespeare's tragedy Othello, the Moor of Venice *in multicultural settings. The author discusses her experiences with teaching Shakespearean drama to a group of undergraduate students who are not essentially interested in Western texts. Making connections to the students' immediate lives proves to be essential in drawing the students into a more active learning environment that brings Shakespearean texts closer to home. By localizing Shakespeare's text, the students were able to find literary value that resonates with their own lived experiences. The classroom thus becomes a place of safety and finding one's voice both inside and outside the classroom.*

Key words: *Shakespeare, Arab, personal narrative, pedagogy, cultural studies*

When teaching literature to undergraduates, it is crucial to be aware of the cultural implications involved in addressing students with different backgrounds. We cannot simply transfer William Shakespeare's work to a group of Kuwaiti and Arab students and expect them to feel as interested as students in a Western classroom. Literature breaks through boundaries and crosses national frontiers, but how transferable is British literature to a contemporary Kuwaiti classroom? Renaissance drama has always been part of the canon of English literature and the presence of a name like Shakespeare's in the undergraduate syllabus is almost unquestionable. We cannot deny the prevalence of British literature in the construction of the English canon, although it is contested by postcolonial critics, and there tends to be a pedagogical move away from 'English Literature' and towards 'literatures written in English' or 'World Literature.' Yet we cannot have graduates of English literature without exposing them to the literary

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genius of Shakespeare and the provocativeness of his work. Kuwait can boast about Sulayman Al-Bassam, playwright and theatre director, founder of the Zaoum theatre company as well as of the Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre of Kuwait. Al-Bassam is famous for re-workings of Shakespeare (i.e. *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*). Although his works are well known internationally, not many students are aware of his adaptations. Scholars are interested in Al-Bassam's work while students remain distant and disconnected from the arts in general, and theatre in particular. To teach them a Shakespearean text and illustrate its importance is crucial to draw their attention to the universality of the work and its timelessness. But how is this done in a very practical sense? This paper draws on personal and pedagogical experiences in teaching Shakespeare.

I used to teach at an undergraduate institution in Kuwait that caters to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, those that are less privileged socioeconomically. I do not wish to categorize or homogenize their experiences, but, for the sake of qualitative data, many of my students come from tribal backgrounds. The majority of the students were *Bidoon*. The Bidoon Rights Organization defines this category as Kuwait-born individuals who do not possess citizenship, and are also referred to as 'stateless' or, more recently, 'illegal immigrants.' According to Rania Al-Nakib in her *Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting*, Kuwait's population is heavily divided:

> Kuwait's population is usually split into a series of binaries: Kuwaitis / non-Kuwaitis; original / naturalized citizens; Muslims / non-Muslims; Sunnis / Shias; hadar (townspeople) / bedouins; men / women; and adults / children. With these varying categories come varying degrees of legal rights and social belonging. In each binary, it is the first that is most recognized, so 'original' Kuwaiti Sunni Muslim, hadar and male adults – a decidedly small group considering that expatriates outnumber locals by almost two to one, and women, bedouins and youth make up the majority of the local population. This divisive approach often puts members of the various binaries into dichotomous relationships (...). (2015: 5)

Al-Nakib accurately diagnoses the split conditions in Kuwaiti society. When teaching the youth one must be vigilant about the social and political atmosphere while utilizing literature to assist the youth in thinking critically about their own lives. Most of the youth are passive learners, struggling to deal with their socio-political realities. In Kuwait, the Bidoon community suffers from a denial of access to public education, healthcare, employment, and other basic rights and services. As such, my students are

part of an under-privileged community in their own country. They come to the campus with personal burdens, personal stories about the lack of human rights, and the long dead Shakespeare is certainly not on their agenda of priorities. At times, I felt slightly uncomfortable with teaching them about Shakespeare, a Western figure, so alien to them and their troubles. I knew I had to make Shakespeare semi-interesting, semi-relevant and tailor his work to their interests and lives

The Renaissance course I teach deals with sixteenth-century British culture, history, and socio-political ideologies. In an over-packed semester, students must engage with the material and approach the difficult Shakespearean language. For Arab students, the English language is not easily accessible, and there is no question about the daunting language of the Renaissance. To address the complexities involved in teaching both language and content that is difficult to grasp, one has to first become acquainted with culture; culture cannot be separated from the classroom.

As any teacher of literature, I started the semester feeling excited about teaching. But there is always a contradiction, a conflict between theory and the practice of teaching literature. When I first introduced Shakespeare's *Othello* to my students, I was met by blank faces. Every teacher of literature expects (perhaps naively) that students will react favourably to Shakespeare. There was an overwhelming silence in the classroom, and a general consensus that Shakespeare was overrated, boring, and too difficult. More significantly, the man is dead. Did the students really care whether Shakespeare was the epitome of the English literary tradition? There was a huge cultural gap between Renaissance England and modern-day Kuwait. It was a lot to ask of today's students to relate to a time and culture that seemed so distant. Not only did I want my students to absorb the material, but I was also striving to instil an appreciation of the studied works. I felt slightly optimistic and, at times, worried that I was aiming too high. I believed wholeheartedly that the instructor's job was to transfer that love of literature to students. Drama was one way I could begin to explore this goal.

Rudyard Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West* asserts that East is East and West is West but contrary to Kipling's conviction, my own research has always been centred on the idea that "East is East and West is West, and the twain *do* meet." Recent postcolonial scholarship has highlighted the importance of upholding difference, specifying different experiences of women worldwide, and fearing homogenizing "women" or "Easterners." Although this approach is critically crucial, and has liberated different women from falling under one category, it has neglected human

commonalities and parallels in the human condition. My personal approach to teaching literature is that it is universal, and it is this universality that I attempt to underline and accentuate in my teaching. In "Borders and Bridges" Ngugi Wa Thiong'o insists:

> It is only when we see real connections that we can meaningfully talk about differences, similarities, and identities. So the border, seen as a bridge, is founded on the recognition that no culture is an island unto itself. It has been influenced by other cultures and other histories with which it has come into contact. (2005: 391)

As a literature teacher, I am deeply committed to finding the humanitarian value in reading literature. When I assign texts, my intention is to find commonalities between the characters' fictional lives and reality. Patrick Hogan's *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* underpins this very idea of human commonality. He argues that "literature…is not produced by nations, periods, and so on. It is produced by people. And these people are incomparably more alike than not. They share ideas, perceptions, desires, aspirations…and emotions" (2003: 3). As such, even though Shakespeare's work is 'coloured' with Englishness, the text still manages to speak to the readers on multiple levels. At a first glance, these commonalities are not immediately obvious. Given that connections and parallels are important in establishing a bridge between different cultures, I aim to tackle the similarities between Othello and Desdemona's fate and my students'. In *Othello*, the question of gender is perhaps not as obvious as the problematics of race and social intolerance. However, *Othello* remains 'infested' with racial slurs and social discrimination.

To begin with the question of race, we address the issue of social hierarchy. Othello is a Moor, a black man, and, it is inferred, a Muslim. Usually, I insist on students understanding his racial and religious background, and, admittedly, I highlight the "Moor/Muslim" part of his identity so that they could empathize and connect with him. Because Othello also seems to convert to Christianity, I tread carefully when discussing his religion. My aim is never to highlight Othello as a traitor of Islam as apostasy is considered a serious crime in Islam. Since students need to connect with Othello, I do not draw their attention to this issue, but rather choose to focus on his outsider status. Othello is of a darker skin colour and, in Kuwait, as in many other gulf states, darker skin colour is often regarded as inferior. Students immediately pick up on the racial slurs

and their interest is peaked. There are racial politics at hand within the classroom and the community. My aim is to start a critical debate and discuss issues of identity, citizenship, and tolerance. I ask the students to pause and think: how different is Othello, Shakespeare's creation, from us? Immediately, we are able to discern that Othello is an outsider, rejected by society, who struggles to make a home for himself. Like my *Bidoon* students, Othello finds himself on the margins of society. He belongs and does not belong, he is both an insider (having married Desdemona) and an outsider (racially). He has worked for the country, served in the army, and yet he remains "unhoused" (1. 2. 230). Othello is at once at home in Venice and a stranger. This question of belonging is at the heart of the discussion in class. Because my students are born and raised in Kuwait, yet do not have legal status, they suffer from a complex relationship with identity. What does it mean to belong to a community? What kind of psychological repercussions are implicated in identifying oneself as a member of a community that does not grant you equal rights or socio-political status? Othello's tragic flaw is his insecurity, his uneasiness about rightfully belonging. Although Desdemona chooses to marry Othello, he remains unconfident about his place in her heart (as well as about his place in society). It is this lack of belonging that mitigates his jealousy and insecurity. After questioning her fidelity, Othello finally murders Desdemona. The couple's tragic ending can be interpreted in endless ways. The discussion with my students is always fruitful. For the most part, they perceive Iago as the symbol for society's backwardness, racism, and social intolerance. The annihilation of Othello is due to external factors (Iago's manipulation, society's injustice) rather than any mere action on Othello's part. They are able to sympathize excessively with Othello, while at times, even excusing his murder of Desdemona. When I explain what the tragic flaw means, this tends to become the main issue in the debate on the meanings of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Everybody admits that they have a tragic flaw. They have felt insecure, afraid of rejection (especially in love matters), and they have acted out of character. Most male students tend to sympathize with Othello's jealousy and do not label it as "jealousy" but rather choose to see his murder of Desdemona as him defending his honour. Honour must be protected at all times, and while murder is highly problematic, and a sin, the students recognize that Othello cannot allow himself to be cuckolded. The discussion often begins with nervous laughter and ends with a solemn consideration of the murder of the beloved – does it really benefit anyone? Othello ends up killing himself and that, too, in Islam, is considered a sin. How successful is Othello in maintaining his

honour and fulfilling his life as an outsider, a soldier, and a lover? The text raises many questions that disturb my students and we are left pondering what they might have done in a similar situation.

Othello and Desdemona's interracial marriage is transgressive in every way. It is a personal act of love, yet it also carries political significance. In *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* Ania Loomba states that "Desdemona not only disobeys her father and chooses her own husband, she defends her choice in front of the Senate, openly affirming her sexual passion for Othello" (Loomba 2002: 101). There is a plethora of feminist debates surrounding Desdemona's stance in the play. Is she an active socio-political agent? Is she passive, allowing Othello to commit her to "whoredom" and becomes a victim of a man's irrational bouts of jealousy? While there are many different interpretations, I urge my students to consider the ways in which Desdemona's desire to choose her marriage partner mirrors the dilemma of traditional marriage versus marriage for love in their own lives today. In Kuwait, and in many parts of the Middle East, traditional marriage is still alive and well. Gender relations are dominated by patriarchal ideologies. It is not common for a woman to rebel against her family's (or father's) wishes, let alone in a conservative or *Bidoon* community. There are multiple factors that shape my female students' experience. Like Desdemona, they are expected to be modest, "good girls", "honourable" and refrain from upsetting the status quo. Desdemona's choice is considered a betrayal of her father. Brabantio (Desdemona's father) states: "O, she deceives me past thought… O treason of the blood!" (1.1.169). Brabantio's understanding of this familial responsibility and fixation on blood ties and kinship is very reminiscent of Bedouin and *Bidoon* traditional culture. The emphasis on patrilineal blood ties is a distinctive part of tribal culture. As such, Shakespeare's Brabantio is not altogether different from Bedouin and *Bidoon* fathers who will not have their honour threatened. Similarly, the concept of purity of race is still a dominant ideology in modern Kuwait. Blood does not mix, in the same way that sixteenth-century English culture upheld the concept of "pure" Englishness. Blood is mentioned many times in the text and it is this obsession with blood as both a physical, visceral, and biological element as well as a social marker of identity and lineage that is theorized in our interpretation of the play. Blood is understood in multiple ways, and it is almost always a marker of lineage, and that lineage is considered one of purity and bearing the essence of the family.

When we consider Desdemona's insistence on choosing her husband, students are usually divided in opinion – there are those that

support her rebellion, while there are some who believe her death is the price of her calculated rebellion. This brings us to the topic of ethics and ethical criticism. How do we make a moral claim, if a moral claim cannot be universal and absolute? Are we, as readers, making moral judgments about the characters? I tell my students that it is our job to interpret, to give the text meaning and, at the same time, there are many ideas (such as gender roles) and questions that are touched upon in our discussions. Can my students separate their own cultural assumptions from the text? An objective reading is impossible. Desdemona's choice to marry Othello is provocative and dangerous, yet it grants her agency. When we consider gender roles in the region, Desdemona's performance of this agency is not always regarded favourably. The aim of highlighting Desdemona's choices is for students to consider different gender roles and expectations. Both Othello and Desdemona suffer because of society's expectations of ideal femininity and masculinity. When juxtaposing these fictional experiences with real lived experiences of men and women living in the Middle East today, the play's message becomes one of tolerance and inclusivity. It is an ongoing debate and allows the students to think critically and express their own lives verbally and in a written form.

As such, *Othello* is not a text that is simply concerned with patriarchy and even less, "femaleness." It deals with marginality, otherness, and the subversion of power structures. When considered in this light, it opens up room for more discussion. Literature, then, (Shakespeare, in this specific context) is meant to be inclusive. It should not alienate students, but rather bring them closer to the text, bridge the gaps between their lives and imaginary lives. Using the texts as starting points to create a sense of personal agency is crucial. For instance, my students' personal experiences and oppressive environments are significant. When we discuss these experiences we bring the text to life and bring their experiences to the forefront of the discussion.

> When the student feels the validity of his own experience, he will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy and understand in an original way… The instructor's function is… to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them (Rosenblatt 64).

The Humanities, then, are not apolitical. The study of literature is relevant and instils a deeper understanding of one's reality. Empathy is also fuelled and developed through understanding other realities and

cultures. By bringing Shakespeare to modern-day Kuwait, at the end of the semester, my students are able to enjoy the work, yet they are also able to develop critical insight into their own lives and their status in society. At the universal level, we are able to stress commonalities and parallels, while at the social level, in particular, we are able to address issues that truly matter.

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