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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Ipshita Basu. In this interview, we discuss Ipshita's background and academic journey from India to the UK. We talk about her new blog which consists of original thought pieces on topics such as the politics of infrastructure, urbanisation and technology. We then move on to the performative workshop that Ipshita co-created, called Sharing Untold Stories of Postcolonial Journeys, and what it means to foster a decolonial space in an institution. Finally, we consider the experience of being an academic who is involved in activism and social justice work, as well as the challenges they often face.

Kyra: Hi Ipshita, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's so nice to finally have you here as a guest. How are you doing today?

Ipshita: I'm doing well, and thank you so much for having me here – I'm looking forward to talking to you.

Kyra: Amazing. So I like to start things off with our guest just sharing a little bit about themselves, so, first things first, where did you grow up and where are you currently located?

Ipshita: So, I grew up in India. I live in London now. But between India and London, it's been a long journey! I grew up in South India, in a city called Bangalore – you may have heard of it. It's the kind of Silicon Valley of India. But I'm not from Bangalore. I'm actually Bengali so I'm from Calcutta, which used to be the capital of British India. Of course, now the capital is Delhi. So, I'm from there, grew up in Bangalore, and then I moved to the UK when I was only 21 years old. I moved here alone, with no family, but I moved to university – I came here to study, and went back to India and then returned here for my PhD in 2004, and since then, I've been here, in different parts of the UK, and finally, I'm in London.

Kyra: So, I guess, thinking about your upbringing in India, obviously you came here when you were in your young adulthood. How would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household, and then I guess in the wider community that you were in as well in India?

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Ipshita: Yeah, that's very interesting, because, look, this idea of race as, I suppose, race as the other, right, like in the sense of somebody different from you, was heightened for me when I came here. When I was in India, I don't think we use the term "race" as much in the Indian context, and certainly my household is very multicultural. My mum is from Kenya, so she had – I mean, she's Indian but they migrated to Kenya five generations ago, and when she got married, she moved to India. So, for her also, India was new in the sense of she had that East African upbringing. My dad was from India, so he was always in Calcutta and grew up there. For me, of course, I have family coming from all of these places, and families migrating to Australia later, and the US, so there was always that kind of diaspora from different parts of the world coming home to visit because we were the only ones in India as such, other than my dad's family. So, for me, I think the first time I encountered race in the sense of colour was when my mum took me to Africa and I saw people different – so, in my first four years, I had seen only people like me, so my mum says when I saw, and they were really loving so she had like this whole family of like, you know, very mixed family and there were sort of, you know, Kenyans in the family, and they would come to me and speak in Swahili and I was like…[gasping and laughing]! And then of course, after the first couple of days, I loved it and I just felt really…mum says that I was…I was inseparable from, you know, the people there. But that was my only encounter with colour as such.

But I would say that, in India, the main thing is – we don't call it "race" but I did encounter the caste system, and that is a kind of racism in India. So, for me, yes, I come from an upper caste family, but we had these, you know, undercurrents of "That's a different caste", "This is our caste". That was there. And because I was in South India and we are from the North, there were these ideas of colour, like darker people and lighter-skinned people. That's very strong in India. You may have heard of it – you know, the paler you are in complexion and…yeah, there's this mad thing around that.

So, I would say race only…because of my mum's very mixed heritage, I got to see it early on, but I would say that there was…within the household, it was always like…my father was the one who was… He was a feminist. He was very, very kind of open in terms of "The girls should be educated professionals – they're not here to make babies", all that sort of…you know… But at the same time, it was always like…he's the kind of thread of who we are, you know, because that's the only continuous that we had, whereas mum's family was this dispersed family, you know. So, I think that kind of was supposed to be what rooted us.

You were asking me how did I…did you ask me how it was coming here?

Kyra: Yeah, I guess the difference then…
Ipshita: Yeah, it was very different. I mean, when I came to the UK, I was only 21, Kyra. I moved to Warwick, you know, Coventry. I had no clue that Coventry is called the armpit of England [laughing]. I was like, "Where am I?!" you know, this place is like…you know…it's not what I expected. And I think, back then, I was so naïve, I didn't know that there is, you know, racial difference and you can be judged like that. So, I just came in, as a young

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person, not with any connections, not with much money, and just sort of felt that, okay…you know, you slowly start realising it, that, yeah, there is… And I tended to gravitate more towards people who were coloured like me, not Indian but anyone, anyone who was non-white, I would gravitate there, and that became my network, because there was always this feeling that, no, you know, you don't belong. And of course, over time, that's changed because I've become more confident, and I've understood that, even within the white group, there are so many layers, you know. But, yeah, I think it took me time to move, you know…just… I mean, maybe you won't use this later, but half the things that I noticed when I was 21, you can imagine, a young person – in India, I was used to people looking at me, you know, like a young girl, pretty, so I was used to boys looking at me and, you know, I knew it, that, okay, I do look nice, and when I came to Warwick, I didn't get that attention, so I felt [fucking vile], you know [laughing]. And that's when I spoke to one of my flatmates, like this is weird, like [laughing], you know? And that's the thing that was not in my mind. I would get it later from other coloured men – not that I was looking for it, but I was used to the idea that, yeah, I'm [going to look for it]. So, that was one of the very naïve encounters in the early years, yeah.

Kyra: No, I find it interesting, especially when you talk about how, you know, when you visited Kenya and it was kind of like this…fascination but it was kind of like this mutual kind of thing between, you know, the community that was out there as well, and then it was, when you came to the UK was when I guess you were exposed to whiteness, more than you were in India and in Kenya, and then then you start to kind of have these kind of ideas of feeling like "othered" and feeling different and feeling like, you know…this is the kind of attention that I got in these contexts and then, coming into the UK, like it's just a completely different shift I think that's very…is very interesting.

Ipshita: Yeah. Sometimes I would be picked upon even in the classroom. I remember we had this class on… actually, it was on race and media, and it was very odd because it had never happened to me before. A professor, nice man, he was talking about race, and he said, "Oh, you know, in Spain, we have people of different colours, and, you know, like this girl, she would come in the darker category…" and I was thinking, "Why is he picking on me [laughing]?!" you know? But it was done in a very sort of…a way of explaining the idea of race…I suppose he was trying to explain it to white students that, look, even in Spain, which you think is a European country, you would have people of different shades, and she would come in the kind of darker category, and my other friend from India, [he] said she would be lighter, and that's how Spain is. And we were both were, for that [moment], "Why are we being picked on?!" like, you know, because we were…we had never thought of ourselves through the lens of colour growing up in India. It had never come. So, I felt a bit sort of…for that moment, why suddenly…? You know, it's like he's not talking about me from India or something, just my colour, you know? It had never been done so…

Kyra: No, it's interesting, and I think it's…surely it's something to do with the kind of lens of whiteness, in the sense like, you know, here, we're made to be an example, something like an object of study, like we're not anything else really, and it's interesting how like those kind of trigger those questions like at such a young age. But in terms of your political kind

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of education and I guess your understanding of these kind of issues and your own racial identity, where did that kind of start for you? I'm sure there was a strong influence from your dad – you know, you said how he was kind of a feminist, so he obviously made you aware of these kind of issues in society. But were there any kind of like books that you read as a young person or any shows that you watched growing up, and what were the kind of representations that you had access to?

Very good. So, it's very interesting. I grew up…so, I was born in 1980, so that's kind of like a cusp of a period between India as a kind of socialist, you know, a protected economy to 1990 when everything opens up. So, my first 10 years, we had only one channel, a bit like what's going on in Russia now, so, you know, you just… So, in those days, a lot of the children's shows were either Indian, so you got a lot from Indian children's literature, mythology, and some of our very few children's writers, but it was very much about child poverty, you know, so that was kind of… I can't imagine my kids watching such shows, but we had a lot of shows about poor children, struggling, and, you know, that kind of narrative. And the other influence was a lot of Japanese and Russian children's shows. Again, that would show like difficulties. Like I remember this Japanese show called Ocean and it was like about a girl who's being pushed into prostitution – and we're talking about like…I'm like an eight-year-old kid. That's what we watched, you know, whereas, my daughter is watching Frozen and other things! So, that was like one level of influence that was coming from the national channel, to kind of show, you know, this is the struggle of a child and how you come out of it and you become a great person and all of that.

And then, on the other of course, there were all the fairytales like we had, you know, but that was… We had…I think it was all the Grimm's fairytales would come through the Shelley Duvall Show, and it was an American show, so that was the only show we got on a Sunday morning and I used to love it. But when I watched it, you know, there was no way I could identify with those characters – like Snow White and…you know. They were not like me. But…it was like a fantasy, you know, that's there. So, I think what my parents tried to do, very hardest tried to, give us, especially me, through books, through taking us out to see places, through listening, to show us…not…diversity, yes, but also create a kind of like…you know, you can see the world without travelling far – that was the kind of thing. We couldn't afford to travel a lot, but your imagination can go far. So, I think that was the idea, you know, you can just, you know, yeah, you know, read a book and be in the Amazon forest kind of thing. But, yeah, I mean, there was…I think, as a child, I…you know, yeah, we were kind of taught to see that it's a struggle, you know, it's not easy. In the 1990s, things changed, you know, by the time I was 10, and then we got all those American channels. Then we were given sort of Beverly Hills and, I don't know, so many other things. So, that kind of influenced my teenage years because then, you know, we could go to McDonalds and wear certain clothes and things, but I wouldn't say I could identify with any of the characters. It was always, you know, Indian film-stars or Indian characters. I don't think we were given examples that were meant to make us feel that, oh, you know, you can do whatever you like. It was meant to tell us that…work hard [laughing]! Work hard. It's not easy, you know? So, yeah, I suppose that's the kind of thing we had, yeah.

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Kyra: You obviously completed your education mainly in India, and then you came here when you were 20 to do…I'm guessing your Master's?

Ipshita: Yeah.

Kyra: Could you maybe just give us kind of a breakdown of like your academic background, just so we can kind of get an idea?

Ipshita: Yeah. So, I did my undergrad degree in India, in Economics and English Literature, so it was like a joint honours, and then I came here and I studied in Warwick first. I did my Master's and it was in Gender Literature and Modernity, so I was looking at these things around race and gender, but through literature actually, critical literary studies. I went back to India and worked as a journalist for two years, and then came back here to do an MRes and PhD, and that was in International Development, so, yeah, to sort of move into the more practical side of actually doing things. Yeah. So, that's been my sort of academic background really.

Kyra: I guess you've stayed in a kind of…a kind of similar field, but I think you've maybe gone into different areas, from like Economics and then into like Gender Studies and then International Development. What was kind of your thought process behind making these changes, I guess?

Ipshita: See, the thing is, for me, I was always very passionate about, you know, getting involved in things around justice, social justice. Even in college in India when I was an undergrad student, I was very active in sort of…we had these movements around anti-dam protests and issues around [ballot], and I didn't do it just because it was – I really, you know…and we had a group of friends who were into it.

So, what was clear for me is that I could not do like a corporate job, you know – it was just not an option. I worked as a journalist. I mean, the way I thought is that I'll study, do my Master's, and I'll work in India as a journalist and I'll just write, but my experience with journalism was not that great because when I started out I realised it's, you know, as a woman in those days, I wasn't… You know, the kind of articles I wrote, the editor wasn't interested in. He wanted me to cover like the Page 3 stuff, like fashion show, and speak to somebody in some art show. He was not really interested in, you know, like I wrote articles on, you know, a [ballot rights] activist, and just like kind of, no, not interested in putting it on. So, that's when I had to say, okay, I am interested in, you know, writing about issues of justice and so on, but if it's not going to be published the way I think it will make a difference, then what can I do, right? And I'm not going to be happy in a corporate job – not for me. So, that's when I decided to do my PhD. And with a PhD, I mean, it's not easy being an academic, but at least I have the freedom to carry on working on these areas, right? So, that's really been my – and that stayed. I mean, I did my Gender Literature and Modernity MA [whenever] I came back here, and, every time, I had to try to get funding because it was impossible to do any of this without, you know, the funding. And when I came back also for the PhD in International Development, it had to be backed by funding,

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but the main thing was, okay, if I work on this, I can work on the issues that I care about – you know, that I'm willing…if… Yeah, I was never a nine to five person [laughing] – it was just not going to happen! And if [it had to be hard], it had to be something I felt for, yeah.

Kyra: Yeah. No, I really admire that and I think, you know, you're clearly not afraid to kind of like dip your toe in things until you find the thing that you're really passionate about, and you're doing the right kind of work that you want to do.

Ipshita: Yeah. Early on, I knew the only thing that I can do without being pushed or I can stay at is write – I love writing! And I love going out meeting people, getting to know, okay, what's happening, write it. So, that has stayed. That's, you know, that's how it is, like I love writing.

Kyra: Amazing. And what was your PhD in International Development, what was it specifically about?

Ipshita: So, like I said, because, in my college years, I was quite involved in the sort of anti-dam, basically anti land displacement movement, these movements specifically affected Indigenous communities, so people who are, you know, defined as scheduled tribes in India. So, when I did my PhD, I was quite clear that it had to be something on that, and so that's what my thesis was on, a new state that was created in India for Indigenous tribes and I looked at the whole idea of justice and development. Like we think of development as kind of…something that is necessary, but how development, you know, is a space where claims for justice are made, you know, and what does that mean, especially from the perspective of Indigenous people. So, that was my thesis really, looking at ideas of…and quite relevant today, like how can we use recognition and redistribution, right, so we at least say recognise me as a distinct group. It's not just to be recognised, you know, it's about a transformative change also in terms of…you know, we're not asking to be recognised as different, just for the sake of being different – we are asking for a systemic change in the way in which, you know, material things are distributed, decisions are made, how much we are able to make decisions. So, how can we bring these things together in a democratic set-up? That was really where, you know…and that still stays for me, I mean, wherever you look, you know… So, yeah, so my thesis was basically looking at these, you know…looking at how this is ultimately very political. Ideas of justice are not just norms. They are very, you know, they are…the way in which they are framed is very sort of, you know, sort of…politics is the most important thing in that, basically [laughing]. So, I always try to explain that because a lot of justice theorists try to…focus quite a lot on the norms of it, but the bit they miss is the power aspect, you know, the complexity of that. So, that's what my thesis does, yeah.

Kyra: Amazing. And I'm guessing it was…during your time as a PhD student was when you obviously kind of came into the understanding of like postcolonialism and how that theory itself kind of helps to kind of understand these situations.

Ipshita: Yeah.

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Kyra: When were you introduced that kind of school of thought and I guess coming to the terms with the idea of kind of like decolonisation?

Ipshita: So for me, I was introduced to postcolonial sort of theory, literature, when I came to Warwick, actually, yeah, because, before that, the training was very much inherited from the British education system [laughing], and it's very much about…yeah… You know, when I was doing my degree in Economics also, it didn't have much postcolonial – we studied, even in Literature, we studied all the English authors, right, Shakespeare, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, so we didn't…even in India, we didn't… It's starting now. I remember our professors would say we want to become an autonomous university so that we can teach you the Indian stuff, but, actually, as for the curriculum, you're learning this, you're learning all the British cannon. So, I learnt postcolonial literature when I came to Warwick, and then of course I – and that's why I came, because I knew that there were some very good feminist and postcolonial scholars in Warwick, so I had come to that university for that main purpose. So, I mean, even though it was there in my thinking, the training of course really helped. But, Kyra, I would say that…you see, there is the educational training, but then when you start actually meeting people, like when I was working, you know, with the Indigenous communities and so on, or getting into practical development, there is so much more, right, like it's…you know, it's…it's not…it's not just a critical lens. You find yourself asking questions, like "Why is this person thinking like that, even if he or she has the opportunity not to?" right? So, I think…so I find that that thing of decolonising, in the sense that we still have these, you know, embedded ideas in terms of what is good, who is an expert… Like, in development, one of the things that hit me very early is the idea of the expert. Why is it that when you work in development, always, whenever we design a programme, the idea of the expert is a white consultant, right? Why?! Like, you know, why is…? And I…you know, and…often people say…there would be a few people that said don't get them because they're expensive – they would never say they're not good, you know [laughing]?! So, I think these things about decolonising is…is much more than what the academic training could give because it's like…it's so engrained and, yeah, you know, unless you have the white experts on a team, it's like, "Oh yeah, these locals, what do they know?" like…like… So, I think that it's a much, yeah, it's much more challenging and it's much more sort of… There's still a long way to go. You face those challenges every day, yeah. But, yeah, I think, I mean, for me, that was…it was always there in terms of, you know, values, ethos….

And I think, fundamentally, one thing is, what I've learnt is it's not…it doesn't matter how many different types of people you have in a team – often they try to show that we have so many coloured people, we have so many women, we have so many… What matters is the value you bring. What is your think? Because you could be a coloured person but you still think, you know [laughing], in a very colonised way. So, I mean, just look at our British Cabinet right now [laughing]! So, I'm just…you know, so that's the only thing that I take away, that you have to hold onto certain values.

Kyra: Absolutely, I completely agree. I think, you know, it's…I think people are also starting

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to realise like it's more than just kind of adding a few coloured people on a team or, you know, adding some books to a reading list that are written by Black writers, like it's about the kind of thought and the knowledge that they bring and what perspective are they speaking from, and, yeah, I completely agree.

Ipshita: Yeah. And I think the journey starts from you, like you have to ask yourself do I have like, you know, some ideas which I'm carrying? Like, you know, there is a certain psychology of why do I think I'm inferior to this person or why do I think that I have to behave like this to be accepted. So, I suppose, you know, and…yeah, and I suppose, if someone pushes you in a direction you don't want to, to stand up also.

Kyra: Yeah, absolutely. What was the transition like, being a PhD student, and then becoming an academic and working within the institution? Because you clearly had these ways of thinking and this kind of critique beforehand, but what was it like when you were actually within the institution now and this is something that you're a part of – like, I guess, when did your opinion of the institution just shift?

Ipshita: So, that's been another learning curve [laughing]. So, I think… Briefly, I worked in Bangladesh for two years and then joined academia, and thank god I did that because when I was in Bangladesh, I just loved it – I mean, I was working in South Asia, and then I was in an organisation which, you know, is celebrated as the world's largest NGO, so it had its very strong identity – it's called BRAC. So, that was good. But then, it was not sustainable because I couldn't be in Bangladesh forever. I had family, so I had to come back and get a job here as an academic. So, that's, you know, that's where I actually started, otherwise, I would have just been in Bangladesh and quite happy, you know, just working in the kind of…you know, with the Asian community that was there.

But then, coming into the university now as a professional was another learning because now you're not with the textbooks, you're with the, you know, the actual practice, and I would say it was very difficult to come to terms with it because I would say, yes, the university is a liberal place. It is a place which allows for dialogue and conversation. We're also fortunate that these universities are in the UK which is a democracy so we can have certain conversations without fear of repression, which does exist in other parts of the world. We have the freedom to set our own curriculum. So, when I'm given a course, I can choose what textbooks, what lectures and so on. But I would say that… My first job was at University of Surrey, and, although I was taken there for the kind of postcolonial, feminist reason, the understanding of what I could give was very limited from the perspective of the management because they assigned me a course on the politics on the Middle East, and I was like "I have no clue about the Middle East – my work is on South Asia." But that is a legacy of IR thinking, where, you know, it stops at the Middle East. It doesn't see the rest of the world as relevant for International Relations. And I was teaching British politics and Middle East politics, both of the regions I had no clue about, and international intervention because that's supposed to be something to do with development – I'm like, "It's not [laughing]! This is military intervention. This is war – it's not development!" So, that was my first three years in academia, and I was like, okay, fine, it's a permanent academic job,

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people have to struggle really hard to get it. So, I got it, but in terms of what I was teaching, even though I was brought in with a very clear, I mean, you know, my CV was clear, it's postcolonial, it's feminist, this is how far it stretched, you know [laughing]. So, I wouldn't say it was – but of course research keeps you going, you know? And of course, the whole management was so like, you know, neoliberal that it was not…a healthy place.

Ipshita: Then I moved to Westminster after three years, and of course [sighing in relief], it was so much better, you know, even the students I was teaching, because I remember in Surrey – I was asked to teach politics of the Middle East and they expected that in that I would do a lot of postcolonial stuff, right, Said and so on, which I did, and there was a student who wrote in the module evaluation like, "She's a good teacher", many students liked my module, "but she talks too much about the bad things Britain did in other parts of the world". I was like, okay….then what's postcolonial…?! You know? So, it was very liberating to come to the University of Westminster, which is much more diverse, which is much more, you know… I mean, its idea of international doesn't stop at the Middle East. And of course, when it came to development, it's proper development, right? So, I think, that way, I have found a lot more autonomy here, in terms of what I can do, a lot more, I would say, recognition and response from students because they love it – they come back. You know, when I'm doing a module which talks about race, which talks about decolonising, which talks about development, students just feel it, you know. They come, like saying, you know, "I [believe], I went through this," and they are from London! Many of our students are from London, but it resonates with them. So, yeah, a way different experience! But I wouldn't say the university, yeah, just to sum up, I mean, the university, yes, it may be a liberal space, but still we have a lot of blockages in our thinking in terms of, you know, what is actually international, what is actually decolonial, right?

Kyra: I also wanted to dedicate some time to talking about the blog that you created called 'The Politics of a New Normal'. I'm aware that it's relatively new, but, as a student, I really love to just come across blogs by my lecturers and people who work in the institution, just because I feel like I understand them and their politics on a more personal level, and I generally think that the content on blogs is a lot more accessible, and I feel like it often has like good readability, so people who don't necessarily belong to a university or have like a strong academic background, I feel like it's good because they can access these academic blogs and like really kind of see what, you know, lecturers in universities are talking about, without having to actually be in their class, which is great. When did you begin this blog and what inspired you to create it?

Ipshita: So, it's quite recent, as you rightly guessed. I did it during the pandemic because I was so frustrated that I can't travel. So, I started it in 2020, May, so it's like less than two years old. It's called 'Politics of a New Normal' because my main interest, like I was saying, is governance, social justice, identity, right, these three things, how are they related, and, for me, I find that one of the things that happens in people's lives is change comes very fast, you know, and when change comes, you're just responding, but you don't realise that the change is built on certain foundations of power, of control, which are not changing, you know? So, for example, when the pandemic was happening, it's like rapid change,

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right, but actually the foundations in terms of, you know, when we were seeing the deaths, who's dying, why is it so many BAME people dying, why are these judgements around it's this Chinese virus and this virus and that virus and so on? It's because, yes, the change comes, but we still have these fundamental regimes and governance and governmentality kind of processes that exist, and, really, the purpose of the blog is to engage with that, to engage with change, you know, as change comes, to help people understand, in a very simple way, that this is what's going on, you know. So, sometimes, what I write is pretty…you know, trying to explain like a movement, something that's shocking to the world, like, you know, when a teacher was killed in France, you know, just to explain that, why this has happened. Sometimes, it's change that looks positive, you know, like…but then I try to explain, mm, not really, or trying to just, you know… So, it's more like…really helping… Sometimes, it's about things like the digital, right, this whole thing about digital transformation, and people think that that change is going to make the world a better place, and I've sort of written a blog to explain, if you don't combine the digital with ideas of democracy and justice, you'll still see lots of exclusion going on, you know. It's not just enough to empower people with a phone [laughing], with internet, you know. What is digitisation going to do? What's it built on? So, that's really the idea, like, you know, how…and possibly, by doing that, I, you know, make it accessible for people to understand change and respond to it better, you know, to not get anxious and go into sort of right-wing kind of things [laughing], sort of, you know, "It's because of these people and that…" and sort of, yeah, change happens but you have to understand, you know, what's it built on, yeah. That's why, yeah, the blog, yeah…

Kyra: Yeah. No, thank you, and I think, you know, you talk a lot about, I've seen, like infrastructure and kind of urbanisation and the politics of that, and obviously, like you just said, like digitisation and like technology. I think it's really interesting and I think, you know, it might be…it's good because like, also, your students can access it, and it might not necessarily be something that you have in the content of like the curriculum, but it's like these questions that you still have, and I'm happy that you have this kind of platform to be able to talk about those things and share them as well.

Ipshita: Yeah. I really love that students engage with it more. In fact, they know more than I do. Like when I, you know, start talking to them about podcasts and, okay, let's look, you know, instead of reading, I'm going to give you a podcast this week – they know so many more ways of accessing the podcast! I just [give them the link….] get in on there, and I think, wow, okay [laughing]! So, I just love it. And, this time, I've just done…I'm going to have a workshop next week. I think Anna has been in touch with you on that. So, we're going to be speaking to refugees and [IR] students. You're going to do the podcast now. You know, you're going to speak to them and make some of your own. So, yeah, I just love it, you know, when students get into it and they show me so much more.

Kyra: Yeah, amazing. I highly recommend everyone in the audience to give your blog a read, and a link to it will be available on the podcast page of our website so people can access it there too.

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Ipshita: Thank you.

Kyra: But, yeah, just thank you for creating this resource for people and I look forward to seeing what you write next!

Ipshita: Thank you, Kyra! That keeps me energised to write a little more now!

Kyra: So, I also wanted to talk about how yourself and Catherine Charrette, who we've had on the podcast before, kind of co-created this workshop that you gave in November last year, called 'Sharing Untold Stories of Postcolonial Journeys'. This was kind of like a performative workshop, with the aim of obviously inspiring your participants to share the stories of their ancestors' journeys and how they've kind of been shaped by colonialism. But I guess my first question is: what kind of inspired you to put this workshop together, and what was the kind of thinking behind fostering this kind of decolonial space?
Ipshita: Yeah, that's quite good. So, basically, Catherine and I, when we started, we were asked to get, you know, support the School, as well as the University, in terms of helping colleagues and students understand what is decolonising, and we sort of did – we thought, instead of educating people through text, let's just do a survey to ask people what do they think it means, and the response was, "We have no clue, actually. We're being asked to decolonise our reading lists, but we don't know what it means!" So, we thought, look, there's no point kind of going and doing workshops several times to educate what we will see from other [things] and show them. Let's, first, let's do the report which you know of. So, we spoke to a couple of people and we put together a report to just, you know, put, you know, what different people who are working on this think it means. And the other aspect that we did, through 'Sharing Untold Stories', is to build a network of continuously, you know, engaging with this, which is beyond the university management. It's networks that are much more fluid, which is much more, you know, built around relations that happen in that room, and so kind of communities of solidarity that will take its own form – we don't know what, but let's get it going. So, the idea of 'Sharing Untold Stories' is very simple, that if we look at ourselves, we all have certain stories which are in some way affected by the colonial experience. You know, we have our own family secrets, you know, memories, things that, you know, it's not in the public domain but it is…it reflects the colonial experience. So, that's what we did, you know, we just had this workshop and we told people, "Just get any object for you which, in some way, is a memory of a family member who struggled, you know, an ancestor who struggled, who had some kind of colonial encounter," and it was fascinating the kind of things that happened at that workshop. We had people from, you know, Estates, we had people from Security, we had colleagues from…academic colleagues, we had students, you know, HR, and they were all, you know, really sort of bringing in things that like, you know, "For me, this is it," you know? For some people, it was things like certificates, like, you know, "I had to get re-trained in the UK, even though I'm an engineer!" you know, so these kind of memories, right? So, it was…it's been a good experience, and I think, out of that, we start feeling that, okay, we are all in this together, you know. We don't always realise it, but we're all in this in some way, yeah.

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Kyra: Yeah. That's amazing. And I guess at the heart of the workshop was this kind of concept of like paradiplomacy. Could you maybe talk us through that, like what does it mean for the ways we kind of interact with one another, and I guess knowledge as well?

Ipshita: Yeah. So, the idea of paradiplomacy, I think it's been…I mean, we took it from the work of a scholar called Sam [Oppono] or something – I'm not quite sure about his surname. The idea of paradiplomacy, for us, the way we interpret it, is that, if you look at diplomacy, it's basically about influencing – you know, it's influencing the way someone thinks, the way someone makes decisions, the way someone behaves – and in a way, it's kind of a tactic which happens through, you know, careful kind of conversation, right, posturing, and it's supposed to be a better way of dealing with difficult things, right, than war. Like many people would say today that a better way to deal with the Russia-Ukraine conflict is diplomacy, you know, rather than have a war. So, when it comes to things that give you pain, irritation, anger, why not have this controlled kind of conversation? So, the idea of paradiplomacy is to take that whole thing away – for me, the way I understand is, away from this architecture of states and these elite diplomats to ordinary people, right, because we all, in some way, feel…I mean, we've inherited these feelings of anger, pain, estrangement, loss, you know, feeling left out. Like you were asking, you know, when you saw these childhood kind of comments, did you relate to it? No, because it's not me! So, these kind of things, you know, or what you've experienced in a classroom, so how do we get that out without it turning into kind of something toxic, right, something where, in day-to-day relation, we can just…not let it go away, we bring it out, but we bring it out in a way that changes our mindset. I mean, if I can change someone's mindset by sharing my story of pain, I should share my story of pain. It is a story to be told. But if I can, in the process, change your mindset, change the way you behave every day, and, equally, you can change my mindset and the way I behave, and it happens through a conversation, a tactful conversation, why not? So, that's the idea of paradiplomacy, really – bring your stories of pain, your secrets, out, you know, and let's see! I mean, you know, it could possibly change something.

Kyra: And I guess it speaks to this idea of, you know, like we need to be able to be kind of empathetic, and to do that, we need to hear from the different perspectives and from the different groups that we come into contact with, and…yeah, I think I really like this kind of approach of, you know, hearing from the different stories of, you know, pain. Even though it is something that can be quite heavy, I think it's needed if we're to move forward. But yeah, I agree…

Ipshita: Yes, absolutely, yeah.

Kyra: So, how would this kind of idea…and how would this…like the kind of…what you took from the workshop, how would that translate into pedagogy, like how would that look in a kind of module that isn't necessarily related to like coloniality, race, gender, like how would that manifest in a classroom?

Ipshita: So, I think it would manifest in two ways. So, for example, I teach a module on

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nationalism and the state in the Global South. I inherited a module which was called Asia, Africa, Latin America, and I said you can't teach three continents in 12 weeks [laughing], and why don't you do them in British politics then, like why have a separate one on British politics and put three continents, not even countries, in one? You know, that's a prejudice, right? So, that's why I said, no, we'll call it Global South, and we'll pick on certain countries and talk on foundational concepts of politics, nationalism and state, because those are not just theorised in the West, they're also theorised in the non-West, so we'll understand it from their experience. So, in such a context, for example, when we are learning about, you know, politics and IR, you know, and theorising from the Global South experience, for me, this kind of, you know, sharing untold stories comes in two ways. I mean, one is, of course, you know, taking those narratives that don't feature in mainstream history more seriously, right, like, for example, women's narratives, Indigenous, subaltern narratives. But the second most important thing for me in the classroom is for every student to feel it's also your story, you know? Maybe not a single member of your family left Ireland, but it is still your story. You know, you are in some way affected by this. I mean, one thing that I always tell my students, a story, that I say, you know, when Gandhi came to London to meet Churchill, he was, you know, people in – he said, "I don't want to live in the hotel you've set for me – I want to go to Lancaster and meet the people in the textile mills because they've lost jobs," and when he arrived there, they said, "You know, because of you, we've lost jobs – you're doing all this in India," and he said that, "Look, I know, but my job is to fight for my people. Your job is to fight against your Government. But we have the same enemy," you know? So, what I'm trying to say is that, these regimes, they have, in a way, affected, you know, West/non-West, you know, working class people in different ways. They have been… So, for me, the classroom, something like this, it's really about, you know, enabling students to see that, in some way, you are all part of the story. It's not someone else's story, you know? It is your story, and you have a part to play in re-telling the story however you like. So, that's how I would bring it in, you know, and it… Today, it works. I mean, I just…I always tell my students, "I have hope from you." I mean, with all the mess around, I have more hope from you than anyone else [laughing] because you guys are so…you know, you have a way of thinking which is so, you know, tries to challenge things. So, yeah…

Kyra: Yeah. No, I really like that idea of kind of making it known that, you know, we're all connected to this in some way, and these systems, they work against all of us, not just like a certain group, and I think, yeah, like I think it's so important as well to social justice work in general to say like, you know, we need to form…like it's a coalition, in a sense, like it's not…like this one group is fighting against this, one group is fighting against that – like it should really be about being in solidarity with one another and with the community as well, but yeah…

Ipshita: Exactly! It's a bit like Black Lives Matter, right, like a Black Lives Matter protest if only Black people turn up. That's not the thing. It affects us all! I mean, something like racial prejudice, injustice, systemic racism, it affects us all, you know, whatever shade you are. Yes, we have different ways in which we experience it, but that doesn't mean that a structure like that, you know, doesn't touch us in some way, you know. So, that's what I

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would like my students to go away with, and if an activity like this, just bringing your personal and making it political in a classroom helps, then why not?! Like, you know, that's a starting point.

Kyra: Yeah. Thank you. I kind of want to continue this discussion, I guess, about decolonising the university, but focus on what it means from the kind of perspective of an academic because I think you're actually perfect for this. What do you think are some of the major challenges facing lecturers who are doing decolonial work and organising like social justice programmes and projects and workshops in the university, like what are some of the major challenges that they face?

Ipshita: Just give me a moment to think about it in terms of how to put it succinctly because there are so many challenges [laughing]…but I think the main challenge… I think there are two challenges, in my view, right? This question of decolonising, I mean, what does it mean? It's quite…it's a kind of fundamental change in terms of, you know, in terms of how we relate to others, how we are, in some way, shaped by a certain structure [of power] that excludes, that creates inequality. So, it is, for anybody engaged in this, there for the long haul. It's not…it's not something that can happen overnight. So, for me, as an academic, the main challenge is to recognise that what can I do as an academic, right? I can use the space that the university gives me to carry on that conversation because, as I said, given that this is a UK university, in a democracy, I cannot be shut down for what I say in the classroom, you know [laughing]. So, I think that is something to kind of say, okay, I can do that, that is allowed, you know, and I have to do that, you know, use that space, because that's all the university also can do, it can offer a space for, you know, conversation, for sharing knowledge, for creating knowledge. It can give you – that's why we are here. So, I would take that as my first challenge, and let me use this space in the best way I can, and keep at it, you know, don't give up hope because today it seems like a far stretch, because we don't know where it's going to go, there is no endpoint to this, it's continuous.

But the second challenge I think is there will be points at which you will face a real experience of injustice, you know, like we have now various things like maybe strikes over pay-cuts or, you know, it may be something to do with an actual experience of racism or something – I mean, it could be any kind of challenge. But I think, at that point, the greatest challenge any academic, like any other professional, faces is to be able to move away from the material worries you have, you know, financial security, children, mortgage, and decolonisation. You know, sometimes, you will face a point where you need to push a little further that puts certain things at risk. And I…my feeling is that we can only do things where the management is happy to [laughing], you know, but when it becomes some kind of a conflict, that's where we have to keep – and that can only work if the main challenge, or the way to deal with that, is to work together. That's why these solidarities which go beyond the university management, these networks that are, you know, outside of structures, as well as the management, work also from the belly of the beast, but also away from it, is important, because you will face difficult times. At that point, who are you going to work with, you know? You can't do it alone.

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So, I think, I suppose, to put it a little succinctly for me, as an academic, one challenge is to use the space of the university, continuously put in my best, and the second is to be able to, in a difficult time, work with others, not letting my material worries kind of bring me down, and third is just recognise that there is no endpoint to this, you know, this is there, I mean, this is a long-haul, yeah.

Kyra: I want to also ask, how do you think these challenges kind of impact the relationship between students and staff in the University?

Ipshita: Ah, okay. See, I think one thing is we have to remember that students are not here for a long time. I mean, they are here for three years at the university, and they have their own worries as well, you know. They have to get jobs, they have to graduate, they are struggling, you know, with the financial obligations of studying, as well as studying. So, to put the weight of, you know, decolonising entirely on a student is unfair. At the same time, we can make the space for students to – as I said, because the university is supposed to be a liberal space, it's a place that, you know, equally, students and staff can work together in that space, you know. So, I think the challenge really is that students – and I should use the word "colleagues" rather than "staff", so students and colleagues, we actually take as many opportunities as possible to…to work together, you know. That is difficult, with the time constraints and everything that people go through, but, like you are doing, you know, you're creating opportunities, like a reading group on a Wednesday afternoon, or maybe we can do some podcasts or we can have certain events or certain communities, I think these things really, you know, in that short span of three years, if colleagues and students can get, you know, as many opportunities to work together, that would be good. That's all we can do. It could be transient. It could be just it happened and then the event is over, but I think, somewhere, it does affect our mindsets, our approaches, our behaviours, you know, so that's enough. I mean, I think the thing is to say that you're not expected to do some big kind of, you know [laughing] project change here. If an event has just changed in a small measure the way we all think, that's great, you know. So, I think that's it, you know, find that… And I suppose trust each other, you know, colleagues and students to be able to trust each other, respect each other, you know, take away the hierarchies, you know, in terms of, you know, share that, okay, this is the same thing – we're all in the university, and decolonising the university is in the interests of all of us. I suppose that's another challenge, you know, that we have too.

Kyra: Yeah, no, I completely agree. I think, if like one small workshop on an afternoon can change the way someone thinks about a situation or encourages them to kind of unlearn some of the things that they need to unlearn, like I feel like that in itself is a step forward, and I think, obviously, sometimes that doesn't translate well to the neoliberal university that wants to measure everything and wants to make everything something that we can calculate. Like sometimes…like these…decolonisation is something that, you know, you feel, like it's something that…isn't something always visible, like it's felt, and I think, yeah, like you said, it requires trust and understanding that, you know, this is a long process and not something that can just happen overnight, so yeah…

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Ipshita: But it's just so powerful, like even one afternoon, you know, if you spend in a reading group or in a classroom where you talked about decolonising, or like what Catherine and I did, you know, just one afternoon, we were people bringing in their personal objectives. I mean, it's a lifetime of change also, right? Like if it creates a spark even in two people, imagine, tomorrow, that person is a lawyer or an urban planner or a diplomat, that person has already inherited a certain kind of thinking which will stay, you know. So, I suppose… We can't measure it, as you said, it's not, you know, it's not measurable, but I think it should become eventually – you know, we should also have some way of saying how do you measure a decolonial university objectively [laughing], you know. Why not? Like, you know, just like how we have a way of measuring attainment gaps and retention and this and that, I think we should also have some criteria a decolonised university has, you know, so many reading lists, so many modules, so many programmes that have been vetting by a panel that says, okay, it's a five-star decolonised [laughing]. I think that should happen…because that's the only way the world listens, right? Like if it's only subjective, it's only like our passion, they're not going to listen, like but if… Even HDI is measure, like human development is also measured. I mean, those who've written about it, yeah – I'm digressing here, but I'm saying, at some point, we have to find a way of saying, okay, if you're really serious about it, why don't you find a way of relaying to our students when they join us that it's for these reasons Westminster is a decolonial university, and these are the objective criteria, and these are the standards by which we will measure ourselves year on year, you know, and we will publish it. I think we should do that. Yeah [laughing].

Kyra: Thank you. And, lastly, just for this segment, what advice would you give to kind of early career academics or students who are looking to work in academia in the future, with hopes to promote change and transform the institution? What kind of advice would you give them?

Ipshita: Number one is work together. Try to find a network of people who share – you may have differences in where you come from, certain nuances, but find a network, you know, wherever you go, of people who share at least the fundamental ethos of, you know, change in terms of, you know, it has to be just, it has to be fair, it has to be inclusive, you know, it has to be, and it has to be monitored. So, I think you should look out for those networks, build those networks, stay connected. That would be my first advice.

And the second advice for an early-career academic or…or somebody who's aspiring to join academia is…is I think [what is encouraging], that it is frustrating, but at least one of the good things about academia, it gives you autonomy – what you do is yours. It's not like, you know, in the corporate world, you write the report and your boss takes it and your name is hidden away. You have the autonomy to shape a module or a programme or write a paper, which is an expression of your expertise. So, use that responsibly, you know? Don't feel pushed to do what somebody else says. You know, if you feel this is how it should look, I can develop something that is decolonial by taking that autonomy, taking control of it, and using it responsibly, you can…that's enough, that's quite a lot, you know.

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So, I suppose these two things, you know, work together, and use your autonomy responsibly.

Kyra: Thank you. So, unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our podcast episode, but, as a question I like to end on, what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Ipshita: Wow [laughing]! I would like student fees to be [laughing]... I don't think students should be charged so much money to get an education. It should be…you know…or at least it should be…I feel it's harsh, this kind of system. So, number one, I think higher education is a right and it should be given in that way. That's the change I'd like to see in 10 years.

And what else would I like to see? Yes, I would like to see, do you know, you know, this, what I told you, you know, a decolonial standard being followed by every university. Just like we have DEF and REF and so on, there should be something around, okay, we have decolonised to such [laughing], you know, impact. But, yeah, let's see!

Kyra: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and ideas with us today, Ipshita. I'm really pleased we got to have this conversation, especially about your work towards decolonising the curriculum, and your blog as well. It's also just been nice getting to know a bit more about yourself and your background. So, yeah, just thank you again for being open to being here today and just, you know, inspiring our project through your work.

Ipshita: Thank you, Kyra. I really appreciate it, and I wish you all the best. Thank you for what you are doing – it's really important, thank you.

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