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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 Mrinalini Greedharry, a Professor at Laurentian University in the land we now call Canada. Her research is largely anchored in English but has developed to include interests in historical and organisational questions about English as an academic discipline. In this interview, we delve deeper into Mrinalini's upbringing, her recent article, and how we can begin to decolonise English curricula.

Kyra: Hi Mrinalini, thank you so much for being here today. I've been looking forward to having you as a guest on the podcast. How are you doing?

Mrinalini: I am doing very well. Thank you for asking.

Kyra: So, I like to start things off with the guest telling us a little bit more about themselves. So, first things first, where are you from?

Mrinalini: Oh gosh, that's such a complicated question, isn't it? Em [laughing]…I don't know why I'm so taken aback by that. I should have prepared. I am from a lot of places. I was born in Mauritius, which is where my father's family is from, and my parents came to England when I was a baby, and I went to school in England until I was a teenager, when my parents decided to go to Canada. Then I spent most of my teenage years and my undergraduate years in Canada, and a Master's degree, I did my Master's degree in Canada, and then I came back to the UK to do my PhD, hoping to stay here, em, but then, you know, you try things and life says something else to you [laughing]. So, I've been sort of between…between the UK and Canada ever since my PhD because I got my first, em, job, my current job [laughing], in Canada in about 2008, so I've been coming and going since then.

Kyra: And just going back to your childhood, how would you describe your upbringing, in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household?

Mrinalini: I really…I find it really interesting that you ask that question, em, because I do think it's really important to think about your formation in those terms, and I think people

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take it for granted a little bit that, “Oh well, I was this, and I always knew I was this, and that’s how I’ve lived my life”, and, em, I would say…some things…a little bit…perhaps a bit more unusual in my family. So, my family, by ethnicity, is South Asian, and, as I said, my Dad’s family is from Mauritius, so diaspora, diaspora Indian, but my Mum is from South India, and from a religious minority in South India too, and so I think I grew up, certainly from my Mum’s family, with people [who are] very dark-skinned, and there’s a lot of colourism and anti-blackness in South Asian culture. My Mum grew up herself with a strong sense of being an outsider and what it’s like to be an outsider in India, and so when I was growing up, I think perhaps somewhat…a bit more unusually maybe than a lot of South Asians in the UK, we talked about it a lot, and it was something that was part of my consciousness that, em, you know, things can happen to you through no fault of your own, em, and my parents experienced all kinds of things in their daily work lives too. I remember – so my parents were both doctors who worked in the NHS and, you know, my Dad would come home from work on the bus and he’d discover little holes in his suit because kids had been burning cigarettes into his suit, simply, you know, simply because of who he was, what he looked like. So, I think I grew up with a sense of…how can I put it…a sense that things…there were things to watch out for – I would put it that way. But, also, at the same time, interestingly I think, again, in a South Asian context, where, as I said, there is colourism, my Mum was the person with the darker skin, and, em, and I grew up in a household where there was a very strong sense that, em, there was nothing to be ashamed of about who you were and what you looked like, em, because I think I didn’t experience… Sometimes, when I hear my peers, South Asian peers, especially in the UK, talk about things, I think I never experience that, I never experienced a certain sense of feeling like I had something to make up for, I guess, is how I would put it. I definitely had a sense of things I had to watch out for, but not things that I had to feel bad about in myself.

Kyra: So, do you feel like being kind of conscious, I guess, from such a young age, and like being able to have those conversations and see those things, unfortunately, you know, happen to your parents and see what they experienced, do you feel like that kind of…maybe looking back now, like as an adult, like you can say how you can appreciate kind of being in the know of these things, but you think, at a young age, that kind of hindered your…kind of your choices and kind of the opportunities that you might have went for, like growing up?

Mrinalini: I think that I have to put an important kind of caveat into what I say, which is that, you know, I grew up in a middle-class home, in that sense, in the sense that both my – not that my parents were…because my Dad wasn’t, but my parents were in middle-class occupations, and so I think there was a lot of class privilege that kept things…kept certain kinds of things smooth. But, I have to say, I guess we will get onto this, but, you know, I’m a person who studies English Literature [laughing], and, eh, I did encounter, at various points in my education, people who sort of suggested to me that “That’s not really an appropriate thing for you to be studying,” not that I wouldn’t be good at it necessarily, but that, you know, that’s just not something brown people do. And so, I think it probably did take me…not very much but it took me slightly longer to think “I like doing this – I’m going to do

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this". But I think…but I think because of the certain…because of the class privilege, certainly, I wouldn't say…I don't think it would be accurate to say that I experienced kind of…the idea that there are things that I wouldn't be able to do, like that I wouldn't be able to go to university, for example. But, yeah, I think it's more in the sort of streamlining, like, yes, you can go to university, but you should study Medicine, right [laughing]?! People…people said that to me, and they still say it to me when they find out – "Oh, you work in a university and you've a PhD – are you a scientist? Are you an engineer?" And when you say back to them, "No, I'm a Literature Professor," they just sort of…[laughing]…they're like, "Ah…" that's it.

Kyra: It's like that awkward, "Ah, okay…" [laughing].

Mrinalini: Yeah, exactly [laughing], yeah.

Kyra: So, could you share a bit more about your university experience, like what did you study and where?

Mrinalini: So, I did my undergraduate degree at the University of Saskatchewan, which is where my parents – my parents had gone to Saskatchewan, Canada. I did enter to study, em, to study Sciences and to go into medical school, actually, because it wasn't…it wasn't a burning desire that I really had [laughing], and in my second year, a couple of things happened. One is that I took an English class, my first English class, and the professor actually did take me aside and say – like about the first week I think. She was a retired professor. She taught a class just sort of to help the department out. And she said to me, "What do your parents do for a living?" and I told her, and she said, "Yeah, I think you should do that – that's what…that's what you people are good at." And I thought [sighs], okay, I have to drop this class, right, because I just thought there's no way I'm going to spend my time trying to convince this person that, you know, that I should – I mean, I was a second-year student – that I should even be in a classroom studying English Literature. That was a Medieval Literature class. So, there were moments like that, I just thought, okay… But also, in the middle of my second year, my father died, and, em…you know, it puts things in perspective, and you think, okay, I have to do what I have to do, and so I switched – I did switch to an English course. I switched to studying Literature then, and I loved it! Every other professor I encountered, em, was absolutely encouraging, and I loved the subject. I just really enjoyed the material, I enjoyed being in the library, I enjoyed talking about literature, em, and so that…that was a great experience, and, actually, when I finished my undergrad, coincidentally [laughing], my professors who had been teaching me Medieval Literature, because obviously I'd put that course off since I had the negative experience, em, were among the most helpful in helping me to get to grad school, really supportive, really – wrote letters for me, helped me out, em, and I had a very clear sense from then that I wanted to go and do a Master's degree in English. When I did my Master's degree is when I discovered, eh, that there were other things about Literature that were really interesting, like thinking about colonialism and race – more colonialism than race, em…but…but yeah, I think that's when I really got hooked…because I hadn't…I hadn't been taught any of those

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things really as an undergraduate. So, I had a very, em… In Canada, we study our undergraduate degree for four years, and I had an honours degree, so I [laughing]…I did a thing that I think not that many English students do anymore, which is that I literally went through from the beginning to the current moment. I studied every single period of English Literature, every genre, every form. It was a very thorough, thorough education. We never talked about colonialism or race.

Kyra: And now, obviously, currently, you are based at Laurentian University in the land we now call Canada, and I'm aware that this university is kind of special, like, I mean, the location – you're situated on like traditional land of the…I'm trying to not…I'm trying to pronounce this correct, so correct me if I'm wrong, it's Atikameksheng Anishnawbek…?

Mrinalini: So, I have to say well done to you for attempting that because my pronunciation is in no way better. But yes, we are on traditional lands. Sorry, you were going to go somewhere with that…

Kyra: I was just going to say, well, you're obviously situated there, and the institution also like prides itself on being kind of dedicated to like, you know, the development of programmes and like partnerships that contribute to kind of the advancement of like Indigenous communities and world views, and I was just going to say the question, kind of: what is your role within the university? You could also mention kind of the things you do outside of formal teaching as well.

Mrinalini: [Sighs] This is…this is a really difficult moment at which to answer that question because, yes, it is true that Laurentian has…has, in the last…maybe five to six years, taken…taken a kind of a leadership position in Indigeneity in Canadian universities, em, which is very important because of course colonialism is ongoing in Canada, but, this spring, the university went through a very serious financial collapse and, in the course of that, almost all Indigenous programming was cut. But not - I [should] say at that point, it's not programming - staff, Indigenous faculty and staff who had dedicated, you know, had been seriously dedicated to the project of indigenisation at the university were let go, and the university basically backtracked on its commitments, public commitments that it had made to Indigenous education, and, em… So, it's a very awkward moment. It's a very awkward moment [laughing] to be answering that question. I think… So, I – from the perspective of post-colonial, eh, post-colonial politics and decoloniality, you know, there's nothing more important really than Indigenisation of the university. From an organisational point of view, there is a way to do it, and it takes much…I think it takes much more preparation, much more grounded understanding of what is it that people who have been working at your university have been doing, actually, already, towards these things. You can't just bring kind of things in. And I think this applies to decolonising in the UK too, to be honest, right? You kind of have these moments where organisations become very invested, for one reason or another, in something that they think is important but also looks good politically, and they just want to do it, and they just want to put it on top of everything and say, you know,

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"We're committed to this – we're doing this", and of course, you know, structurally, they are more or less prepared to be doing that. And I would say that one of the things we've suffered at Laurentian is that there was a lot of will, goodwill, but there wasn't a lot of structural preparation. So, what I mean by that is, you know, for example, you can't just bring in the most highly qualified Indigenous academics unless you have prepared a community to receive them, otherwise, they have to deal with a tremendous amount of stress and burden as individuals, who are sort of made, you know, responsible and tokens for, em, for a structural process. So, I think, you know, I think that's very difficult, and I think that's definitely happened at Laurentian.

So [laughing], sort of to kind of reel it in a little bit more towards me, I was hired in my department to do post-colonial [stuff], and I really love doing that there, in that location, I really love working with my students. They're definitely [laughing] the best thing about the job. But my experience has been that, for example, that work never really connected with, for example, the university's strategic aims, with its ideas about – we've never talked about decolonising [laughing] at Laurentian, interestingly. We always talk about "indigenisation". I'm curious what the difference in those vocabularies mean because…because I think…because, in my department, there had been people, already, for many years, who had been teaching about the connections between colonialism and literature, for example, but those things didn't necessarily get hooked up with indigenisation, and I think that's a missed opportunity. I think that's a missed opportunity in the institution that doesn't understand, "Oh, what had we been doing towards these goals before?" rather than just thinking, "Oh, we need to bring in new people and we need to do this thing," you know, kind of on top of things. So, I think there was that, but I have to say also [there have been] other opportunities. I've been involved with the Palestine Solidarity Working Group and so, outside the classroom, again working with students on…on…and other faculty members on causes, you know, on causes that relate to colonialism still going on right now in the world that we live in. So, it's been a very…it is a very interesting location for that kind of work, actually, yeah, and I think there's a lot of need and a lot of potential, but I think the financial collapse that happened [in the spring], my feeling is that that's going to be used to…retreat from a lot of the things that we gained.

Kyra: Yeah. And I think…I mean, we've had conversations in kind of our own meetings, like for the project, and we've also had a guest speaker from Canada previously, and we kind of talk about this difference between like indigenisation and decolonisation, and why it's more decolonising in the UK and then what we refer to as decolonising is kind of indigenisation in the land we now call Canada, and I think it's probably, out there, I can only speak from my own kind of perspective, but I feel like, in colonies like Canada, decolonisation, it's really to do with kind of the land and giving that back, which is so much more difficult to do than indigenisation where it's kind of like we're kind of changing our thinking, we're changing the way we see systems and things like that. I think it's more…it's kind of the difference between kind of like…total kind of reconstruction and then just making like reforms here

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and there, and I think that that is probably one of the differences that we kind of pick up and we've noticed as well. Is that something that you kind of see and experience?

Mrinalini: Definitely. Definitely. I think…I think you…I'm sure you've seen it yourself, that, even with decolonisation, there's kind of a…there's a sense that…there's a sense that a lot of people would be content with relatively tame reform, whereas what is needed is really full-scale restructuring. I think that's true anywhere that you have Indigenous and Black and populations of colour who want to, em, you know, speak back to a system, em, and the system says, yeah, okay, you can have a little bit, we are paying attention, we will…we will put your slogans on our press releases and on our brochures [laughing] to recruit you to our institutions. But, em, yeah, I think that…I think that is probably… I mean, I was thinking about it, one of the good things I think about having so much conversation around decolonisation and indigenisation is that you…that there's an opportunity to say this, that there's an opportunity to push past the performativity a bit and say, "Well, yes, it's great that you're all talking, but what are you doing?" That's a very, very, very thin silver lining [laughing], but I'm trying to [find] some sense of…it…we are…we are having more volume of conversation, and so perhaps that is going to lead to structural change in ways that we…maybe we couldn't have imagined – I couldn't have imagined. I mean, in that sense, to be fair, I couldn't have imagined the institution I work in now, when I was an undergraduate, you know, if I think about a professor – I'm sure it happens, but if I think about a professor now saying to a Black or brown or Indigenous student, "I don't think you should really be here in my classroom," I think there would be natural outrage about that, whereas, you know, 20-odd years ago, it was kind of like, "Oh well, you know, yeah, you're going to face some stuff like that – just ignore it and keep on moving." So, it is…it is changing, but, yeah, that deep structural change is…I don't know how we get there.

Kyra: And just thinking about how you've also worked in universities in Finland and the UK, what kind of comparisons could you draw up in terms of the response to race and coloniality, and maybe you could like divide your answer into what you noticed in your students and then in faculty?

Mrinalini: It's quite interesting because I…I have taught such different student populations and that's what really makes a difference. When I…when I was a PhD student, I was a PhD student at Goldsmiths College, and so I was a tutor there, and my classrooms were largely Black and Asian people, and they were people who wanted to know about these things, you know – they were interested in questions about race and colonialism because they all…because we always have been [laughing]! We've always been interested in the questions, whether anyone is teaching about it or not. And those classrooms were so different because, when I arrived in Canada, for example, my classrooms were completely working-class, first generation, white settlers. It's a completely different classroom to be teaching. In Finland, the situation is a bit more complicated, and then it's… There was a great deal of interest in questions of colonialism and race, but at that time when I was teaching in the University of Helsinki, there wasn't necessarily the sense that that was a

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problem that – I'll put it this way: I think it…there was a sense that that problem was something that was from far away. It related to others. It related to other societies, to other histories, and it wasn't really about Finland. I think that would be different now. I think that would be very different because there is a general awareness that these things are actually more linked, em, than we've talked about them before.

But in terms of the faculty, that's a more difficult question to answer. You know, at Goldsmiths, there was a recognised speciality, I guess, in post-colonial studies, so there were a lot of professors who were about that and there was an understanding that that was an important thing to be studying. It was part of Goldsmiths' brand. It still is, in some ways. And I think that was less true when I arrived in my university in Canada. And then there's always that interesting divide between, you know, you could be teaching about colonialism and not touch the subject of race. Weirdly – I mean, I'm not really sure how that's possible, but I know that it is possible. So, for example, I've definitely worked in places where people were very interested in your academic speciality, "Oh right, you study postcolonial theory, you know about these things…" but weren't necessarily interested in talking to you about race, or even in acknowledging the dynamics of race in your classroom, in your own experience of the institution. So, there's a kind of weird fault-line there, I think, between race and colonialism, and I think now we're talking more about race than we have ever done in the university, really, openly, in any university.

Kyra: Why do you feel like there are these parallels, like thinking about Canada, Finland, and the UK? Do you think it's just a kind of matter of location and like the students that you teach, or do you feel like it's even rooted in colonialism itself – like, the UK, being a kind of country that is the coloniser, Canada being a country that has been colonised, do you feel like that is the kind of difference?

Mrinalini: There are definitely those differences, and so I think one of the difficulties about answering the question of, you know, what's different in each location is that there's a dynamic between several things, and I think the main things are, em, yeah, as you said, whether the country itself has been a colonising power. So, in the UK, definitely, it's been – it's the coloniser, so there's a different context for teaching about that. In Canada, you have this weird thing where they've been colonised and they continue to colonise, so there's a kind of…there's always a difficulty there of thinking, well, what are we going to talk about when we talk about Canada in the context of, for example, post-colonial studies. And then Finland, Finland has been colonised, for many years. Most of Finland's history [laughing] in the last…well, in the years before independence, the sort of 600 or 700 years before independence were of being colonised, but of course they also have their own Indigenous people who remain in a colonial relationship to the Finnish state. So, again, there's complexity there. The complexity there, I think, is in the use of the language. So, that's…and I really want to make clear, you know, I was teaching in Helsinki [laughing] from 2003 to 2008, so that's…it is a different historical moment. I think the things that we talked about then are – it's not the same now, wouldn't be the same now. There's more consciousness.

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There's more willingness to talk about Finland in terms of colonialism, although I think it would still be somewhat controversial to put it in those terms. So, there's that, you know, there's the country's own background.

There's the particular students you encounter in your classroom, and their relationship to colonialism. My students at Laurentian…they are…the ones I teach now especially, they are of a moment where these things are talked about around them, and they know that they don't know things, and they want to know, and they're keen to find out, and they're critical and they're willing to let go of, you know, things that even…for students even 10 years ago, might have said, "Really, is colonialism so bad in Canada, really?! So, there's that, the student population.

But then I think there is also this layer of, em, if I can call it this, kind of academic…well, your discipline really. So, for example, when I was a PhD student, my PhD supervisor was a very well-known postcolonial scholar called Bart Moore Gilbert. So, there's a certain amount of prestige attached to that, right? You're a student at a London university, your supervisor is a well-known postcolonial scholar, post-colonial theory is, you know, has its kind of aura of being theory and difficult and philosophy and all those things. That's another part of it too, where people think, oh, this is academically important to study, and it makes you…you know, it's a sign that your university is on the cutting-edge, right? "Oh, you've got a post-colonial specialist?!" That's old language – you wouldn't use that now. But that plays its part in it too, right, in terms of [sighing]…in terms of how much people are paying attention and what they want to talk about, and I think that is…that's a difficulty. I think that's part of the difficulty between race and colonialism. Colonialism, studying colonial history, being a person who does post-colonial theory, that has had a kind of regular disciplinary value for a while. Studying race is always hard. It's always a little bit more difficult to get people to…acknowledge the intellectual depth and capacity it takes to study race properly, as an academic, and not just to have an opinion about it. I would say that's something you still actually kind of encounter now, that, you know, notwithstanding histories, the race, and sociology, and, em, anthropology, you know, kind of critical investigations of race from all kinds of disciplines, African American Studies itself, Ethnic Studies, there's still this kind of feeling that, well, you're just talking about something that has to do with your own life and it's not really rigorous, you know, it's not deep - and it is, it's a tremendous body of knowledge.

Kyra: And just thinking kind of structurally, what do you think are some of the issues that like postcolonial research still faces in higher education? You might be able to just answer this from your own experience in carrying out your own research.

Mrinalini: I think that's…it's [sighing]…it's connected again a little bit to what I said a bit earlier, that, you know, there come these moments when institutions, and then of course funding agencies, are profoundly interested, if you use the right word. So, now, if you use the word "decolonisation" – post-colonial is actually a very passe word now [laughing],

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people don't really use that! That would be the subject of a whole other podcast. But, em…so, it's kind of tricky because, em, if you put the right word on things, sometimes, then people are interested in funding them and giving you the resources, but, again, the question becomes I think – to me, the problem is that organisations, and funding agencies too I think, have such a kind of short memory. So, they're just thinking, "Oh, you're using this word now – I'll give you some resources to do something." They're not thinking, "Well, who's actually been working on this? What's actually been done? What is the deeper history and knowledge of this?" So, I think…I think that's one aspect, and so I think there are, yes, still a lot of researchers who are not funded because they can't hitch the real and deep analysis they do to the words that are now being used, or the way that organisations and funding agencies want to tackle the problem, right? They have their own ideas about, again, what kinds of things do they want to see done, not what kinds of things actually need doing and should be funded.

I think the other thing about research in general though – and I think this speaks more to the kind of general…the general marketisation of academia – is that some of these things [sighing]…they don't actually need money, they need time, they need people to be having the time and the space to go away and think deeply about things, and that's not really, em, available.

But one third thing I will say, I'm working right now with a group of colleagues on a special issue on race and coloniality in the workplace, in work and organisations. So, for example, one of the difficulties we've encountered, because we've been sending papers out for review during the pandemic, is that, of course, we want our authors to be peer-reviewed by people who…who understand their work in many ways, and so you're putting more and ore pressure all the time on the very academics who are already over-burdened, so younger, Black, women academics, women of colour, and asking them to do the review work so that you can get that kind of scholarship published. And so, there's a very small pool of people trying to do all the work, and the very people who don't get the most resources and don't get the most help from the organisation. So, I think that's one thing that is very much on my mind at the moment because, em, you know, I just [laughing]…I know those are the best people to do that work, to do those reviews, and yet I also know those are the people I don't want to put more burdens on. And so, in post-colonial, in literary post-colonial studies in the UK, probably more broadly, the reality is that there are still very, very few black and brown people doing that work, which sounds weird, right? You'd think that's an area that there would be, but… So, we do need…we do need more…we need more academics who are in a position to do that kind of work, I think.

Kyra: I wanted to dedicate this section of the podcast to talking about your recent article, 'The Limits of Literature as Liberation – Colonialism, Governmentality, and the Humanist Subject', and this particular debate was pretty new territory for me, but I think your writing in this paper really helps to kind of break down and contextualise kind of literature and its perceived purpose in both like Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies, and of course

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Management and Organisation Studies as well. But when did you actually begin to kind of piece this paper together, and what inspired you to kind of study literature and think about how it can be a tool for colonisation but also liberation?

Mrinalini: That part is easy to answer because that actually goes back to my graduate studies when I was a Master's student. I discovered Postcolonial Studies when I was a Master's student. That's what I wrote my Master's thesis about. And it was sort of accidental [laughing]. I was at a conference and I was listening to people give papers about a post-colonial theorist called Homi Bhabha, and, em…and that's when I really started thinking about the relationship that colonialism has to literature, as a form of knowledge. And so, that's…that's…I would say that's probably central to my work, in my own mind [laughing], in general. I am interested in the way that forms of knowledge are part of how we colonise people. So, my PhD dissertation, for example, was about psychoanalysis as a form of colonial knowledge. But this particular article came about because I was invited to give a keynote in Sweden in November of 2018, I think, where a group of Management and Organisation scholars were…wanted to gather together and talk about why did people in Management and Organisation draw on literature as if it's some endlessly good, pure, liberating thing. So, they wanted to, actually, they wanted to have the conversation, and that's something I've been working on ever since I became a student of Post-Colonial Studies, so there was a nice…there was a nice, natural fit there. The other keynote speakers there were Management scholars, but they talked about history, for example, and, em…ethnography, and how those forms of knowledge are also problematic. So, it developed out of that talk. But it was a difficult beast to write [laughing], because it…because it was trying to bring a lot of different conversations…a lot of different strands of conversation about colonialism together, between people who don't normally talk to each other. Literature scholars don't have a good reason to talk to Management scholars, and vice versa really. So, that's become something that I'm working on more and more, em, because those questions…it goes to the structural question you asked about, for me, in some ways, because I think about all the energy and time and years that, you know, people have spent writing about post-colonial theory and literature, and not talking about the way that Literature Departments are organised and the fact that you don't have Black and brown students in them or Black and brown faculty in them, so how can – again, as we talked about before, you know, how can you split those things from each other? How can you talk about literature as colonialism and not talk about, well, how do we organise this thing and who is here and who gets to be an important voice?

Kyra: I agree. And I think some of the conversations that we've had as well is that you find individuals from certain disciplines, particularly in kind of like Business, where they don't see their work as having like a colonial past or sustaining kind of forms of coloniality. So, why do you feel like a kind of post-colonial approach to Management Studies is important?

Mrinalini: So, a couple of things about that… One, to be very clear, which, em, which I do talk about in the article, there are scholars who do post-colonial Management Studies, and

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they do some really interesting work, and I think, you know, one….one [laughing] kind of perhaps a bit more obvious reason, but key reason, why it's important is, em, we still live in a world constructed by colonialism, and so it's very important that people who teach about business, about management, about organisation, are teaching their students to think about how that relates to practices of business and management. It's a small…it's a small group of people inside Management and Organisation Studies, but it's…it's, em…it is becoming…I think it has…it has enough of a critical mass now to be something. But I think, really, there's kind of two reasons why I think it's important. One, I think it's important because, you know, when managers are being trained in cross-cultural communication, for example, they need to understand what the colonial and racial undertones of that are. That's a sort of basic level. The other level, which is more kind of for the academics themselves, is, as you said, to understand that forms of knowledge have colonial logic built into them, and if you just think, "Oh, I'm going to, you know, I'm going to use literature to…free up my students and allow them to do something they couldn't do otherwise," that's problematic if you don't understand that, actually, literature has been used to colonise people. Anthropology is a colonial discipline. Sociology also has its own history and roots in [laughing] a very racist and colonial view of the world, right? Western knowledge…Western knowledge is still very much…it's still very much operating in terms of logics and practices and methods it hasn't thought through, and that's…I think that…that is a…that's something I would like to see now – I would like to see us really sort of turn more to, yeah, well, how are we teaching people these subjects that we teach them. So, you get a degree in Sociology or Literature – what do you know about the colonial background of your subject?

Kyra: And I picked up…you mentioned in the paper that the significance of literature as governmentality has never been lost on post-colonial scholars because postcolonial critics recognise the power of literature to colonise rather than liberate. Could you just talk a bit more about kind of what you mean by that because I feel like that was really…it really just stood out for me…?

Mrinalini: So, this is…this is kind of a historical answer, but it…but I'll connect it up to the present as best as I can [laughing]. English Literature is a discipline that doesn't form in England, right? People might be…might naturally assume that, well, of course, we study English Literature in Britain because that's our literature and so we just study it, but that's not why we study literature. Literature, as a discipline, came into being because of the British colonial project in India and that they needed to…develop the characters and the ethics and the morals of the Indian people they governed, without putting a kind of…without, em…without changing their religion, and so they decided, well, let's teach them English literature because that way they'll become English, but they won't really sort of realise that they're becoming English. So, at that most basic level, the formation of English Literature as a subject that we study comes from a colonial need to govern, colonise subjects. So, that's one part of it, there's the historical beginning, and you can say, well, that's, you know, that's, you know, 1830, so we're well past that now, it's not the same thing, but, actually – this is what I mean about practices and methods by which we study

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subjects – many of the ways that we study literature now use the same techniques, right? We give a text to a student, we ask them to read it closely, and then we ask them to, em, reflect on, em, you know, how the text is constructed and what kind of effect it is supposed to have, and, to some degree, when we talk about characters, for example – this is a thing that I encounter a lot in my classroom, that [laughing] my students don't relate to the characters in the literature that I'm teaching, right, the Indian, African, Caribbean literature. They kind of find the people…not that they find them weird or other or anything like that, but they don't know how to relate to them. That process of teaching people to relate to characters in novels, that's easily hijacked into a colonial way of…teaching people what…you know, what's a good person, what's a right action, what's a kind thing to do, what's an ethical thing to do.

And so, you know, often, when we teach – and we use a different word now – when you teach multicultural literature, part of the point is that you teach people that so they'll understand and be tolerant and sympathetic of people who are different than them. But you're using the same technique. You're getting them to read literature to sympathise with the characters and understand – sometimes, in some cases, to say, "Oh, those people are just like me," not to say, "Actually, those people are different than me – they come from a different cultural context [laughing], they have different ideas about the world, and I have to just learn that other people have their differences, and it's not for me to relate to them or not relate to them. They have their own lives. They have their own universes." So, it begins in an actual colonial need, a discipline, but it carries on in practices that are…that are training people… And I don't mean manipulating. I'm not trying to suggest that people are being hoodwinked in any way, but that people learn to do things with literature that reinforce a colonial point of view.

Kyra: Yeah. And do you feel like, in a sense, that also kind of taps into like just whiteness in general and just the system of whiteness and how we take kind of that as the default, and that's why it's difficult, like you say, like to identify with characters that aren't white because it's always just been seen as kind of the default setting? Do you think it all kind of ties into that as well?

Mrinalini: Yeah, I think it does, and I think, you know, this is one of those places, in the Literature classroom - you know, we've been talking about this weird separation between colonialism and race, but when you're in the classroom, this is definitely one of the places where, actually, it is about race. It is about, well, can you have, you know, can you have a Black heroine, who has these and these and these qualities, can you have a love story between these people, and have people kind of accept that, yeah, I felt that, that was real and plausible to me? And I can tell you [laughing], having taught Literature for many years, that there are many, many, many times when students just say, "I don't buy it. I don't identify with it. I don't relate to it." And then you think, okay, so what?

Kyra: Yeah.

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Mrinalini: When I was an undergraduate [laughing], I remember I had a seminar where I complained. We were reading…we were actually reading a short story by [Bharti Mukanushee], an Indian American writer, who I just…I just…I just hated the story, really, I just hated it. I was the only person of colour in the room, and I said, I spoke up in the seminar discussion and said, "I don't like this, and here's why I don't like it…" I remember the professor saying, "Well, maybe it's not written for you." And I remember thinking, if an Indian American writer is not writing for me, you know, a person of Indian descent who's been raised in the West, what does that mean?! Who is writing for me? What can I say something about? What can I read? I puzzled about that for many years afterwards because I thought…what does that mean…you know? If you are a Black British person and somebody tells you that, "Oh well, you know, maybe Andrea Levey is not writing for you," how do you…how do you respond to that [laughing]?! I don't know. I'm not sure. It's weird [laughing]!

Kyra: And I also picked up on how you kind of break down some of like the theoretical differences between postcolonialism and postmodernism. Could you perhaps like talk about that as well and why was important for you to kind of point that out in the paper?

Mrinalini: One of the reasons that came about in the paper was that, em, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-everything, right, it comes from this moment where people think, "Well, I understand what that does philosophically – it's to say that there are no grand narratives, and, em, and things are more complexly part of their contexts, and we don't have one story that we're trying to tell about things anymore." And so…but so, then, within that, you don't necessarily…people don't necessarily understand what's the difference between post-modernism and post-structuralism, and is postcolonialism just a variety of postmodernism, sort of postmodernism for Black and brown people, if you like. And so, people can go along reading post-modern…postmodern and poststructural theory, and think that I don't need to worry about post-colonial because the brown and Black people are going to do that. And so, what I wanted to do in the paper was to say partly that I know that you…those of you who are deeply engaged in post-modern and post-structural philosophy understand about some of the basic critiques of Western philosophy that are being…that are being made in those philosophical movements, but you don't understand what the history of colonialism and questions of race have to do with them, and for that, you need post-colonialism, you need critical race theory, you need queer studies, you need feminist studies, to some degree, too. So, it was to say that…it was really to say that, just because you understand about postmodernism, it doesn't mean that you've understood the power dynamics that post-colonialist and critical race theorists are trying to draw attention to, that there is a power knowledge formation that those people are trying to do. And I took my cue there from a literary theorist called Linda Hutcheon, who really was the person who articulated this, who said, you know, it's very easy to be postmodern and never to do anything about changing – kind of, in a way, what we've been talking about, right? You recognise that there's difference, that there's complexity, but you don't actually change

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anything. You don't have an analysis of power. And if you don't have an analysis of power, you don't have to change anything. To be fair, there are some varieties of post-colonial studies that probably function very much like that too [laughing], but the kind that I'm trying to do at least is…is very much embedded in an analysis of power.

Kyra: Thank you. So, just going back to talking about English Lit curricula, like I understand, like many other disciplines, there are still areas that kind of fail to reflect the diversity in people and perspectives that we see in society, and there's also areas that kind of continue to perpetuate whiteness and obviously forms of colonialism, and I thought we could dedicate this last segment of the podcast to discussing what it means to kind of decolonise English Lit and what can be done to kind of make that a possible future. So, just as a first question: in what ways is English Lit still a very much kind of colonial discipline?

Mrinalini: I think this is a locational question too, right? This also depends on the location where you're teaching English Literature. And because of colonialism, of course, English Literature is taught in very many places [laughing]. I think…and so the reason I say that is partly the distinction we talked about earlier, which is, you know, in Canada, English is still a colonial discipline because Canadian students take degrees in English Literature. That's odd! They should be taking degrees in Canadian Literature, or, better, they should be taking degrees in Indigenous Literature, right? If we think of that form of understanding literature in relation to the place and the formations that it comes from, then that is what Canadians should be studying. In the UK, of course, then, as we talked about, it's different because, okay, British literature belongs here, and em… So, then, you know, how do you decolonise it? And, em, partly, you do that by teaching different kinds of texts, but I…for me, and this is what I've been thinking about really, mostly, for the last 10 years, and in my classroom in particular, it's about changing the way you teach those texts. So, as I just said to you, you know, when we teach literature, what are we teaching people to pay attention to and why? What is it that that's supposed to be doing? And where in those techniques are we still hiding or, better, are unaware of how that is a colonial way of thinking about what you should do with literature? So, I gave the example of, you know, using – [...] I've done the same thing, right [laughing], like you're going on holiday somewhere and somebody says, "Oh, read a book about that place – you know, it will help you enjoy when you get there," kind of thing, and yeah, it does, but it's also…it's also part of that whole formation of knowledge that we have literature about other people so that we can know them, learn about them, figure out what to do with them… And that's so embedded in Literature that it sounds a little bit weird to say, "Well, let's do something else with it!" And, you know, somebody could well say to me, "What is it you want to do with Literature, Mrinalini? Why do you want people to read it? What do you want them to do with it?" and I wouldn't honestly be able to tell you because I've been trained to read literature that way myself, right, and so part of what I am doing as a teacher nowadays is trying to work out, "Why do I want them to do that? What am I asking them to do, and what should I ask them to do instead?" So, part of that work, I think, is actually about making people uncomfortable, to be honest, in the classroom, to say, "Okay, you didn't relate to that person," and I've never

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[laughing], I've never said this to a class, but I'm thinking it now, right, to say, "Okay, you didn't relate to that character – so what? Now what do we do?" and kind of going into those uncomfortable moments and think, right, why did we want to do that with that text and what could we do instead? And, as I said, I don't have an answer, but I think that's... I think the decolonising there is in...what you do in the classroom and what you...how you are teaching your students to relate to the object of knowledge that they're there to study with you, yeah. Does that make sense?

Kyra: Yes, it does.

Okay [laughing]!

Kyra: What does that mean, deconstructing the canon entails then, what does it kind of...what does it mean?

Mrinalini: Yeah, I think [sighing]...always a really difficult question to answer as well because, you know, kind of in classical...kind of classical Post-Colonial Studies, so work that goes back to people like Edward Said, you don't necessarily need to be teaching anything different. So, you know, Said reads, you know, Jane Austin and Joseph Conrad and says, "Here's...here's...where the colonialism appears in these classic texts," and that's a completely legitimate strategy to say we're going to read the same things, we're just going to read them with a different perspective. Then, I think – and I think here, again, we get into that difficulty between colonialism and race – the other answer to this is that, no, you just need to read whole other kinds of things, you need to read texts in which Black and Indigenous and People of Colour are represented, and they're represented in ways that are, you know, humanising, and no dehumanising, and you need to just see that literature is capable of doing other things. This would be literature as liberation, right? So, I think...and so I think, ideally, of course, all of those strategies, you need to be using all of those strategies at the same time, and that's...it's challenging. It's challenging. It's challenging to departments. Again, kind of organisationally, if you've structured the degree that your students are studying on the canon, then your options are either to keep doing the canon but in a different way, or to kind of, you know, completely start again and do an intense structural change, and, as we've already discussed, you know, that's not a....that's not people's go-to answer, right [laughing]? They don't really want to do that.

Kyra: No.

Mrinalini: But I think...I think that is changing. I think that is changing in British universities, because there are so many – you know, like Goldsmiths, for example, has this MA in Black British Writing, so there are places where you can go and study...study literature, you can study different literature. Whether you study it differently, I don't know, but yeah...

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Kyra: What else do you feel like lecturers can do to kind of decolonise or indigenise their pedagogy and practice?

Mrinalini: I think one of the easiest ways, genuinely, is to use examples of…examples by…by non-Western…writers from the Global South, Black writers, Indigenous writers. I think genuinely to use those examples in situations where the content is not about race or colonialism. It's to remind people that, actually, this is always relevant – this is something you should always be paying attention to. Because, you know, when you're using an example in a lecture [laughing]….there's a…there's a much greater range of things that you could use as your example than most people do – and I include myself in that. I have also my own go-to things. And it's a good challenge, I think, pedagogically, to say, no, think of other ways that you can bring this material…you can normalise this materialise being in your classroom.

Kyra: Absolutely. And I think this ties really well into my final question for you, which is: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Mrinalini: You know, when I read the questions when you sent them to me, I really struggled with that one.

Kyra: I think everyone does, to be fair [laughing]!

Mrinalini: I think it's…I mean, there are so many things, and they're so…I mean, some of them, I think, are obvious. I think, you know, one of the things that is very disturbing in general in higher education is just the increasing marketisation of education and…and the effect that has on the relationships between students and teachers. So, when I thought about it in that way, I thought about… One thing I would really…really I would like to see is a move towards…em…I don't even know how to put this [laughing]…a move towards reconstructing the possibility of a genuine pedagogical relationship between teachers and students. I think that's really been eroded. I think it's being eroded all the time. And that is the part of my job that I absolutely love, when I know that I can go into a classroom and have a real conversation with my students, and they're not worrying about their grade and they're not worrying about how much money it's costing them to sit in that classroom, that they're actually…not…not even so much paying attention to the material but willing to trust me, to engage in a relationship with me where we can get to know each other and I can…I can figure out, okay, this is what you need from this educational situation, and I can do that, I can adjust myself to that, because that's what you need to learn right now. That kind of…that possibility of being able to pay attention to your students and for them to be able to pay attention to the learning relationship, I think that's disappeared in many places. One of the things that I really treasure about my relationship with my students in Canada is that we have much more freedom in our classrooms in Canada, in universities, and so it's still possible. I can have a conversation with a student and it can carry on, you know, for two,

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three, four years [laughing]. I've quite a few students that I still have those conversations with now. They've graduated and gone, but there's a real…there's a connection about…about that information there, and I feel like we're heading into an era where that just won't be possible anymore, em, and that really worries me.

Kyra: Yeah. Thank you. And I think, as a student as well, like I appreciate your answer a lot, honestly [laughing].

Mrinalini: Is it your sense that that's what's happening to that student-teacher relationship too?

Kyra: Oh definitely, especially like I've noticed just during the pandemic as well, like that's already just kind of put like a huge strain on kind of the relationships that you get to have with, you know, your lecturers and things like that. But I think, coming from Sociology, I've…luckily, I've been able to have like quite a strong relationship with kind of all of my lecturers, and I get to have those kind of conversations, even if it is kind of like an uncomfortable conversation – like I do feel like there is…the environment is kind of…I feel…it feels like a safe enough space for me to kind of hold those conversations, and I feel like I've been lucky to be able to kind of experience that. But I know, from talking to kind of my peers and things like that, like it's definitely not something that happens across the disciplines, and I think, you know, just to hear like you, as an educator, to say that, you know, it's something that's on your mind as well, like that, I appreciate it, and I know like…I'm sure like there are other lecturers that feel exactly the same way.

Mrinalini: I think that's really important, what you said, you know. Part of what is important about that relationship is that it allows you to have uncomfortable conversations.

Kyra: Yeah.

Mrinalini: And, so, you know, what I described earlier [laughing], where I could say to a student, "So what?" I mean [laughing], I can only do that…we can only have that real moment of education if we have that relationship.

Kyra: Yeah.

Mrinalini: And if we don't have that relationship, we can't, and then everything, you know, all the possibilities shrink, and, em… We're living in a world where we're going to need more education.

Kyra: Mrinalini, I just wanted to thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's been so nice just getting to know a bit more about yourself and just your take on, you know, coloniality and decolonial work, and just, you know, having the opportunity

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to talk about your recent work as well, and I highly recommend both students and educators give your paper a thorough read, so links on where to access-

Mrinalini: Oh, thank you [laughing]!

Kyra: Links on where to access that article will be added in the description.

Mrinalini: I really appreciate that, Kyra – thank you.

To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj

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