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Podcast transcript:

Fatima: Hello, welcome to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I'm Fatima Maatwk. I will be your host today. I'm very happy and excited to welcome our guest today, Tanveer Ahmed, who is doing her PhD looking into fashion design education at the Open University, and she teaches at several universities in London, and is also a member of our Steering Group for the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. Thank you very much for being with us today, Tanveer.

Tanveer: Thank you for having me!

Fatima: It's an absolute pleasure. I think I'll dive just right into it and ask you, so, why Fashion Design? Tell us the story...

Tanveer: Oh, that's a really nice question to start with I think. So, fashion has always been something that's really excited me, since I was a young adult, a way to express yourself, a way to resist dominant ideas in society, to play with sub-cultures, and so it was always something that was really, you know, it was more than just an interest – it was my vocation. From early teen years, I was making clothes for friends, I was selling clothes to make money, and it was always something I loved. But when I got to...when I got to studying Art & Design, I was quite clear that I didn't really want to study Fashion Design because I could see there was a disconnect between the experiences that I had, the sub-cultures I was interested in, the music culture that goes around a lot of fashion culture, and the very industry-driven education that we're taught in not just the UK – it's a real kind of global industry in fashion design education. So, initially, I didn't want to be part of that, and my undergrad was studying textiles, which is quite different really – it's experimentation with fabrics and it's a very different industry to the garment industry and to big, luxury, big-house designer labels, what we can really call capitalism. So, as a teenager, I didn't really...wasn't able to articulate this, but I felt it, I embodied it, and I didn't want to be part of that. It was when I came to postgraduate study that you have to specialise a lot more, and that's when I specialised in fashion.

It was a very competitive system to get onto a postgraduate at fashion schools, and although I was lucky enough to get onto a well-known MA in Fashion, I didn't finish the course, and I didn't complete because, as I was studying, I began to become more aware of how we were being led to industry positions and it wasn't something for me. It was disconnected from my own personal narrative, my own personal journey into design. Essentially, you know,



growing up, I identified as being from South Asian, Indian heritage, and I was used to seeing fabrics always part of our household – aunties sewing things, people in the family buying fabrics, making clothes, and a very...you know, the everyday forms of fashion that I was used to seeing were completely from the capitalist ways that I was viewing. So, when I didn't complete that course, I went and worked as a designer, but I kind of moved away from Fashion. But it was when I began to teach, and I started to get some work teaching Fashion, that I started to feel really...find it really difficult and frustrating that I was being expected to teach capitalist forms of fashion design practice which are embedded in racist, sexist, patriarchal, heteronormative, universalist, singular, rational ideas of how a body should look, how the body should be dressed, how certain bodies exploit other bodies, and that's what really led me to trying to find different ways of re-thinking the canon and decolonising fashion design, and to re-connect it really back to the experiences that got me passionate about fashion in the first place, and how everyday folk, everybody is interested in the garments that they wear, but we don't need to, you know, buy sweat-shop and exploit other Black and brown women to wear clothes on our body really. I hope that's not too much of a long way to say that there's different...essentially, there's lots of different ideas of how we dress our body, but it's always the capitalist, or we can call it racist really, idea that gets taught to students and gets practised and how the industry is held up at the moment really, in most of the world.

Fatima: Absolutely. You've mentioned your South Asian, Indian heritage, and how little representation or how little space you had in the curriculum because of the industry also. How did you deal with this conflict over this little space? What kind of processes were taking place when dealing with that?

Tanveer: I think that's a really good question and I think that...you know, I didn't...I kind of...got used to, really, keeping that part of myself hidden, for a long time. So, that's what Eurocentric curricula does: it means that non-European forms of knowledge are devalued, they're considered worthless. You know, I heard, as a student, I heard racist language being used, lots of things that lots of Black and brown, non-European heritage students have heard throughout their life, and I was the only brown student at that time in the institution I studied my undergraduate studies in. I was the only person that was brown that was graduating, so I was not just, you know, one of the minority, I was **the** minority, and that's quite...that's quite a common experience for many of us, in my generation – I'm in my forties. So, you know, it was something that was kind of...kind of pushed to one side, but it wasn't until I started to do the PhD and started to have that space, I think that's what's... what's really amazing about having the opportunity to do research, is that you're on the treadmill and you're just...in Design pedagogies, it tends to be your industry experience is privileged over research experience, often, so as long as you've done work in the industry, you often get teaching roles, and you're expected to teach about the industry. But what was happening was that I was seeing this disconnect, and I didn't ever have time to really think about it because you have to prepare for the next term, and the next term, and taking a step away from there and doing this research has been quite life-changing for me because it's



allowed me to explore different ways of thinking about how we could practise an alternative, non-Eurocentric, non-capitalist, non-patriarchal, decolonial form of fashion.

Fatima: You mentioned that the undergrad degree is then the one you didn't complete and now you're doing your PhD in Fashion Design. What happened in between? Because it seems you created this decolonising space...

Tanveer: So, it was actually, it was the MA. So, I did my undergrad in Textiles, and it was the MA that I didn't complete in Fashion. And then I worked as a photographer and designer with a friend, and we actually worked for the music industry, so we did something completely different, where we worked as designers and very much saw ourselves as a feminist practice. We paired our names together - we didn't want it to be one of us before the other – so we did practices like that. We produced images, and we worked in quite a unique way. So, we [sought/saw] a difference in the music industry and worked with musicians, predominantly, who needed to have images for their music artwork. So, that was the kind of work that I was doing, that I think was able – you know, there was space to do things a bit differently I think then. And it's interesting because there's, recently, some projects that are talking about re-valuing women's contributions to parts of the music industry, and we were part of early...kind of capturing artwork for early drum and base musicians in the late-'90s in the UK, and lots of the female contributors were overlooked, and we'd worked with quite a few of the females. So, recently, actually, we've started to be contacted by people who are trying to, again, kind of look back at the canon of early British underground music, and who were the female contributors. So, we had this kind of...maybe this kind of underground space, as it was, as it were, to do this kind of work, but it's when you go into the institutions of education that that work is kind of valued when you walk in with that, you know, kind of experience behind you, but when you begin to practise it, it's quite different and it's not valued quite as much, I don't think, at all really. It doesn't quite align with the pedagogical values of a lot of designerly ways of thinking.

Fatima: Yeah, I was just thinking that this is very interesting to hear for those who are possibly now starting or considering to study Design or Fashion Design, because I think it's a challenge that many would be facing.

Tanveer: I mean, Fashion has always been really popular with female students, so like, in the groups of students I've taught, generally, you know, male students are in the minority. But people have written about Fashion sometimes being this space of the misfits in society, the students who don't fit in. It's really common for Design students to have learning differences – dyslexia, dyspraxia. The spaces that I've taught in, Black and brown students are...there's often quite a high proportion because often they and their families really value fashion because it's something that they've all grown up with. It's quite a safe space seeing people make clothes and people selling. Many working-class Black and Asian students have got family that have worked in factories. It's something their families are quite proud of them going into. And yet, as they kind of progress in the field, it becomes harder and harder for



them to work. So, it's really...yeah, it's quite an amazing space actually, so it's really sad that, when those students often enter those spaces, the knowledge that they bring with them is generally discounted. So, a typical student will have said to me over time, you know, "Why are we making clothes in this particular way? I already know how to do it. Why do I need to follow a set technical Western methodology? My auntie taught me how to cut straight into cloth and it doesn't waste cloth – and this is better, isn't it?" And I know they're telling me because I'm also not white and they know I'll understand, and I'm like, "Urgh...yeah, I agree with you, I've also had that experience, but the curricula says we've got to do it this way – you're just going to have to shut up really and get on with it." That was the sort of teaching that, in my early career, I had to do in order to survive, but it became more and more untenable as I went along because it didn't make sense, and, also, in terms of sustainability and climate change, it's really wasteful. It's built on a wasteful process. It's built on students designing as much as they can, getting it made as quickly as they can, all of the things the capitalist model celebrates. So, you know, really, in order to...in order to address all of these things, all combined under the heading of capitalism, we need to see how all these things intersect, and it's quite difficult unless you have the space to really extract all these different ingredients and understand what's happening. It's not just a reading list that you need to change. It's the canon that you have to change, and that's hard work.

Fatima: Absolutely, I couldn't agree more! You've mentioned already a few aspects of how Fashion Design is colonised or colonial. If you think more broadly, what kind of spaces within the discipline do you feel have been colonised?

Tanveer: Yeah, that's a very important question I think. What's happened is there's a real disconnect between designing and making, and so we have, for example, you may have heard of Rana Plaza, 24th April 2013, where 1,100 people died. This may be taught to students a little bit, they may know about it, but really understanding the system of how garments are made, who makes them, which bodies get exploited in the process, that isn't taught, you know. Trade unionism isn't taught. And these things mean that students...your typical student is ill-equipped to deal with getting a job in their first fashion company and being told to go and get things manufacturing and exploit other human beings as part of that process. So, what I would like to see is Design students, Fashion Design students, learning about trade unionism, learning about factories, going and visiting factories as part of their Design education – I think that would be really important. Going to understand what is a pesticide that's being used in cotton production and why it is that the average US farmer only lives to 52, cotton farmer, because of the high number of pesticides that are being used. So, all of this information is out there, but, at the moment, what Fashion students get taught is...fantasy. They get taught how to design fantasies, and they're not taught really about any of these other things that are around the process. So, they're basically taught the colonial model of...of what garment design is, and anything else is excluded, so that all the uncomfortable reality parts are excluded out of the classroom. It's the same with, I think, you know, more widely, with all forms of education, we know this, you know, and it's really heartening to see students rally around justice for cleaners in higher education institutions



because, until we really recognise how we're all connected to the building that we learn in, and that everybody needs to be respected in that building, we can't deliver an education that is fair, you know. I know you know this [laughing]! So, yeah, it's really that so much of the basic epistemologies underscoring the discipline of Fashion are based on exploitation, on appropriation, and unequal power relations. So, it's a difficult task to really try to take out one element and just say, okay – because that's what's happening at the moment. You'll see a lot of kind of sustainable designers say, "Okay, let's focus on plastics or how we can address this part," but they then don't address the fact that who's making these things, and we need to do it in a holistic way, and we need to, yeah, we need to do it in a holistic way really because this taking out one element here and there really makes things worse I think actually.

Fatima: Yeah, I really agree, and I think part of the problem is that, even for myself, until now, all the things you mentioned about sustainability and fair-trade, exploitation, were not things I necessarily connected to decolonising a discipline or a curriculum in that sense. I thought of them more as my responsibility as a potential consumer. So, it's...I think it's really important to clarify how these things are embedded within education. So, part of what I understood now is that, to decolonise, we also need to be teaching about these things or this needs to be about what we teach. Are there other things you can think of that decolonising Fashion Design would involve?

Tanveer: Yeah, definitely. So, part of my PhD has been testing out alternative, non-capitalist, non-hierarchical methods of teaching really. So, I think, you know, what's really important is...is embodied practices. So, I've been using embodied storytelling, talking about...bringing in garments that my mother wears and talking through those garments as a way to re-think the Eurocentric canon, so that really we think about relational and situated experiences. It's also really important, I think, for collectivism. So much of education is individualised, and so to really focus on co-creation as part of the learning process has been really important to me, and I think there are ways of doing it. However, it does come up against assessment, which is the...the real elephant in the room for all of these decolonisation processes, alongside fees. So, you know, who gets to get in the classroom in the first place is a big problem while we still have some of the highest education fees in the world in the UK, and, yeah, that's such a huge, big problem to think about, and then how do we assess these kinds of projects. So, I found that I can...you know, I can only go so far, but, you know, there are kind of alternative spaces in higher education institutions, so kind of networks, workshop spaces, working group spaces, safe spaces, and these spaces, even the committee that we are part of, these spaces are spaces where you can do the work equally and have maybe a greater sense of autonomy because you're not restricted by assessment. So, I think, thinking beyond the curricula, thinking beyond the classroom, has been, for me, the most important thing that I've really been trying to push more for.

Fatima: I can relate a lot to the limited autonomy we have because, often, especially because I'm still at the very beginning of my career, I have very limited autonomy in terms of



what I teach, how I teach also somehow, and of course assessments. So, I'm wondering, considering that the spaces you referred to, they basically exist outside the institution, so they are other spaces, but for lecturers in the classroom, with their curricula, what do you think they can do or need to do to decolonise Fashion Design curricula?

Tanveer: Yeah. I mean, I think the first thing is really that there has to be audits of what's happening. So, I think it's very...the kind of capitalist model of education is so fast-paced that people just, often, the reality is you're completing one year and you're starting to do the curricula for the next year, but I think actually trying to step back objectively and to see things from a marginalised perspective, and do audits of courses, I think is really crucial for... for how this work can be done. I think that there's some really good work in Art education with, for example, a group called Shades of Noir, who do something called a safe space crit. So, in Art & Design education, we have quite a violent space in the classroom called a crit, and the crit has European history, and it's where you're meant to present your art and design work to your peers, and it's kind of a space where people critique one another and they say what's working and what's not working. But unless you have a really good facilitator, and unless you, yeah, you have some kind of general house-rules and respect, it can be really misused, and my experience is that these spaces are often quite abusive spaces and it can get into personality politics, and it's a place that's ripe for racism, particularly if a student has produced racist art or design work, and so it becomes a racist space, not just for the student but for the educator as well. So, I know many colleagues who've been in these crits, these discussions with students, and felt racism towards themselves from artwork that students have produced. So, finding ways to facilitate these discussions, this very particular methodology that Art & Design education has, is really important.

I think we need to have working groups as well around cultural appropriation and racial capitalism - they're embedded in Fashion Design, and I've yet to see this happening anywhere. I think that cultural appropriation is a weekly news feature now on BBC-wherever news, which is amazing, but at the same time, nothing is really being done about it. There were lots of interesting initiatives for how you think through how students draw on cultural difference as part of the design process, as part of the intellectual project, but most educators I've come across in Design don't have a clue how to do that work, and forming networks of allyship as well could help with that, but that's a really crucial thing I think needs to be done.

Yeah, I think those are – and working with other groups, like, you know, technicians and librarians, is a really important part of this project, like, you know, the resources often don't exist. So, I have, at one of the colleges I work with, a really good relationship with the librarian about making sure that we get the right books in, and not just one copy, multiple copies of these books, because what we tend to see is that the canon has got 20 copies of the Eurocentric book in the library and then we've got, you know, one copy of the book that deals with coloniality in the library, so everybody's trying to get it at once. So, it's finding ways to make sure that there's equal attention to these works too.



But I think that those would be...you know, kind of working groups, safe space crits, you know, audits, these are the sorts of things we should be working through to come up with these projects, but also the representation of the staff themselves. So, at the moment, I know who they are. There's only probably a handful of Design educators who aren't white in the UK. I've often been...because I've been teaching for over 20 years, I've often been the only non-white person working in my department – yeah, very, very few of us, and we all know who each other is as well because, when you meet them, you're like, "Oh wow, you know, where have you been? Great to meet you!" So, it's about representation as well, and getting those people into senior positions so that we can help with the interview process, you know.

So, again, something unique to Design, Art & Design culture, is we don't admit students just based on their exam grades. They're admitted to their degree by a portfolio interview, so they're expected to bring along a collection of art that they've done. So, here's the example: when I was 16, I knew that, at 18, I was doing my A Levels in this country, that I would need a portfolio to get into an Art School, and my Art teacher told me I'd need to have some life drawing. So, life drawing is a nude model sits and you draw them. Coming from a Muslim background, I couldn't even dream of asking my parents to go to a class like that, and my teacher said, "You're not going to get in – you have to have that artwork there, even if you... you could draw yourself or you could draw your face." I was thinking, you know, I...a really young teenager, "I don't want to do that! What can I do?" And so, I had to take a deep breath. I didn't have that in my portfolio, and I drew lots of pictures from magazines of people, and, on the day I went to interview, the person, you know, gave me a place and said, you know, "Where's your life drawing?" and I just said, "I haven't got any." I was too embarrassed to say, "I'm not allowed to go to those lessons," but I said, you know, I draw lots of people and their bodies but they're clothed, from magazines. So, that person must have seen something in me and gave me the place, but how many...how many lecturers don't understand that and are looking for a certain type of Eurocentric Western art canon? It's really difficult for many students, and many students are also opposed to it as well, based on religious beliefs, based on human rights beliefs. It's a really...quite a violent thing, you know, in terms of power relations, to have a person who is not wearing clothes in front of you, who's, 99% of the time, a woman, and to draw that person, and it's seen as the norm in every single Art College in the world really, I'm sure bar a few countries where it wouldn't be allowed, and that practice should be questioned. It's a very sexist practice. It's highly problematic. But it's not seen that way, and so it disadvantages those students who don't come from that background where it's accepted. So, we need to...we need to have more diversity in...on our panels, otherwise we're never going to move beyond these kind of problematic canons.

Fatima: Yes. I'm wondering, because a lot of the things you mentioned, I can imagine happen consciously or in the sense they're just accepted, that is the way it is, and it's not seen as problematic; at the same time, I could imagine some things can run a bit



unconsciously, or happen without much awareness about it being colonial or racist or sexist. So, what do you think we can do to become better at identifying colonial undertones in our curricula?

Tanveer: Yeah. I think it...I suppose it goes back to doing audits, and I think, if we had much stronger working groups who were able to look at these things... Also, we can embed some of these ideas in evaluation of courses. So, all courses are evaluated at the end of the year, but you don't tend to see evaluation along the lines of racial justice, for example. So, what if we had criteria for racial justice – how did that curricula meet those aims and objectives? We'd have a very different evaluation system happening. So, there are definitely ways to do this, but it takes the...you know, it takes a certain type of thinking. I think we are in that moment, you know, post the murder of George Floyd and the ongoing Black Lives Matter, that there is a moment. It may slip away – you know, we're hearing news all the time that's against these political strides that have been happening for Black and brown people, you know. So, I think, while we can, we need to embed, as much as possible, ways to have social justice oriented pedagogies, socially-conscious thinking, embedded in pedagogical practices, you know, while we can, before it's taken away again.

Fatima: Yeah. I'm thinking...so, I feel like there is many things we can do, and some of the things you mentioned sound actually quite simple, in the sense that institutions can start teaching about everything that's going wrong, and yet the industry is the way it is, so I see a bit of a problem. It sounds as if, technically, the fashion industry needs to collapse or to drastically change, so I'm thinking do you think it's even possible to work on decolonising or to decolonise Fashion Design curricula when the industry remains the way it is or what needs to happen so that we can actually decolonise curricula with the existing industry remaining how it is?

Tanveer: Well, I think, for Fashion Design, many of the students are catalysts for the fashion design industry. So, your typical student that graduates often goes straight into the industry because it's built on youth. So, there is opportunity in education to experiment with alternatives because I think if we...I think we should even be really doing this at kind of primary/secondary level, but if we can get people, before they get into the industry, to be thinking about these things and to question profit-driven design, we have got an opportunity for things to change because hopefully we'd get sufficient numbers of graduates who come out and they're uncomfortable and they reject that way of working.

On a bigger scale, there are, you know, historically, there have been lots of pockets of resistance to capitalist design over the centuries and in many different parts of the world, so this work is possible. You know, only a few years ago, Philip Green of Top Shop was still lauded by the fashion industry, and it's been just a matter of months before his flagship store is now for sale – you know, he's kind of vilified by the fashion industry now. So, in a similar way to how Hollywood is having to re-think who they are, and following the Me Too scandal, we're starting to see calls for greater diversity, more female directors, more Black



and brown directors, more film scripts that reflect the experiences of non-white audiences, in the same way, we will see, I hope, similar things happening with the clothing industry because, you know, unlike film, where we can watch a film and it's optional, we all have to wear clothes, and we all have to make a decision about what types of garments we wear, and how many garments we wear, and, you know, already, today's news is talking about how, as a society, we need to move more toward eating less meat and less dairy to save the planet. In the same way, garments need to be thought of in the same way, that disposable garments, garments that culturally appropriate other cultures, garments that are made in almost sweatshop labour, all of these things are connected to a decolonising project for how we make more sustainable and human right-focused type of garment for all of us that we wear. We know that, for most of us, our great-grandmothers, or great-great-grandmothers, were doing that. The knowledge is there. The knowledge has been in our families. It's lost within just one generation really. So, I'm often, in my teaching, I've taught 16-year-olds before, who come to me, who don't know how to thread a needle up, who come and they don't know how to use an iron. When things have ripped, they've just gone and bought something new, a new t-shirt for £3 from Primark, and they literally have never repaired a garment in their life. It's hard to buy packs of needles now. It's hard to buy sewing threads. You know, when I grew up, there were, in London, there was always a small shop that was your little local fabric shop. In markets in London, there was always several stalls with fabric on. Now, it's become much more elitist. It's something that's, you know, kind of... The Sewing Bee TV programme has made it more popular, but it's still quite expensive to buy fabric, in most areas, unless you go to a real kind of small local market. So, it's...the ability to change things is there, but we need to kind of think more about vernacular ways of thinking and learning, rather than kind of these expert-driven, profit-driven, exploitative ways of learning because we know that, you know, like we were saying, we know that our grandmas or great-great-grandmas were doing this and had far less and lived sustainably. You know, in the last century, it's been something that's happened kind of post-1940s and 1950s, really post-War generation which has kind of driven up the excess and changed things quite dramatically, you know, quite shocking really. You know, you can see just in this country how things have changed in one generation, you know, so that anybody you speak to who's over the age of probably about 70 in the UK will remember what their mothers were doing in World War II and how they had to unravel garments and had to think very creatively, and they'll look back on that and think, oh yeah, that was great, but they'll still go out and buy lots of things, kind of '60s generation [laughing] so... You know, the knowledge is obviously there, but it's been hidden away.

Fatima: I mean, it gives me some hope, the things you're saying, so I'll try to stay optimistic [laughing].

Tanveer: Exactly. I mean, I'm a really optimistic person because I think, the same as you, when you meet students and they're full of kind of hope and really lots of energy and enthusiasm, and it's just really explaining to them how colonial logic – you don't even have to use that terminology about how colonial logic works to devalue so many ways of thinking



from around the world, and when they learn that, they're really excited, and when you start to say, "Well, actually, you probably have some ideas yourself based on what you learnt as a kid," and many people say, "Oh well, actually, yeah, you know, 15 years ago, we used to do this...20 years ago, we did this..." So, yeah, people get really excited, so there's definitely a huge drive for exploring and opening up the canon. And, in a city like London, where there's so much diversity, this disconnect with the Eurocentric canon is needed more than ever – I mean, we really have got, you know...we've got areas in London where, at secondary schools, it's more than 80% of students might be Black and brown, from different ethnic groups. It's quite an extraordinary city really, and that should be reflected – the local should be reflected in the curricula, for sure.

Fatima: I like that. You also made me feel, and I'm sure our audience will also be having similar thoughts, that it's actually a very personal thing. So, I have similar memories with my grandmother and the clothes she used to make for me, and for my dolls, and, yeah, the one piece of clothing from my late father that I have, which is a very traditional Egyptian garment for men. So, thank you for all these insights really. I find it very inspiring.

Tanveer: It's really nice when you've mentioned that about your late father because I think that it really...we feel so connected to the person, don't we, and garments are such a way of evoking those memories, and you start to see how important they are for keeping the memory of somebody alive, and how important that they really are in our lives, and, you know, how it's been...so much of this knowledge has been erased through this kind of, you know, fast fashion and this kind of disregard for how these...how these clothes were made, you know. The way that cultural appropriation works now, it just lifts a motif and just sticks it on, as if it was just something nice, and totally disregards the context and the symbolism and how it then goes on to offend different groups. It's just become commonplace because shops want to just produce as much as possible and, you know... A typical fashion design is meant to have...is meant to teach students to do one design and then to do 60 variations of that design [throughout ?] [laughing]. So, they say to you, "Okay, here's my design here" and it's like, "Yeah, do 60 variations", and it's like why...why...? The only reason we're doing that is so that when you're in a fast fashion studio, you can show 60 different – you know, the collar this way, that way, the sleeve this way, that way, all different varieties of ideas, and it's all very superficial and it's all based on waste cloth, and we never talk about where the cloth came from so...

I was really upset one year where a student was doing their dissertation on sustainable fashion. I was teaching her practices of this. And then, when she came to – for Fashion students, they make a final collection. She wanted some embroidery done on her clothing, and she just ran out of time, she couldn't do it. They are allowed to outsource their work, and she sent it to India to get embroidered, and when I asked her where she sent it, she didn't really know. When I asked how much the workers would be given, she wasn't entirely clear with me. And she had done exactly the opposite of what her research focus had been. In that moment of panic, she had gone and done it, and it's so easy, at the click of a button,



to get something sent halfway across the world, get it embroidered in 48 hours, but there's a human cost, and, you know, when she explained it to me, she was kind of like really embarrassed. But that's what happens. And we all do it. It's easy to think, oh, it's just one purchase or it's just one thing, and these organisations design themselves that way, so that it makes it as easy as possible to just buy one little thing – "It's only one thing, it doesn't matter" or "It's only one season that that company made that offensive advert or did that..." you know, took whatever, you know, ideas from someone – "It doesn't matter, does it?"

You know, it's interesting about Egypt, actually, because one of my...one of my case studies for my PhD is looking at the sketchbook research of a student that looked at Egyptian culture. It's very typical that a student will do – I've seen so many over the years – they'll look at Ancient Egypt, and they go to the British Museum, which is steeped in colonialism, because they're told to do primary research, and they go and use, you know, do little sketches of things, and they don't have any idea about why these things were happening or, you know, why these things have been curated for them to look at, and then they kind of show Egyptian culture as being stagnant and, you know [laughing], kind of still stuck hundreds, thousands, of years ago, you know. I could see that what she was doing is she was really kind of decontextualising all of Egyptian culture and then, re-contextualising it, she then lifted certain motifs, like wrapping, mummification, and she then inserted them into a European canon of avant-garde European artwork to produce some design ideas, and that's what generally happens. You could literally see the steps the student is taking in order for cultural appropriation to happen, and a total disregard of an entire people and race and ethnicity and thousands of years' knowledge, and, yeah, you can see, in six pages [laughing], it's like, right, this is what happened and this is what educators need to intervene into to really contextualise, situate, and show practices as being embodied, that they're connected to real human beings, and to understand why they did that before you move into just purely aestheticizing them and, you know, celebrating them in this particular way. But, yeah, it was interesting, the role of the Museum in all of this, and how the Museum curates, you know, basically stolen artefacts, and part of Art & Design culture, and many, many different educations, is that tutors tell students to go to museums, and it's like, eh, okay, well, that's actually not...that's not straightforward to just go – museums aren't necessarily...museums and libraries aren't these neutral places that they're set out to be. So, that's why it's important to try to connect with librarians, I think, who can be on our side to explain that to students and to navigate them round the...the Dewey decimal system, which is based on, you know, kind of highly racist classifications of knowledge and people bodies. So, yeah...

Fatima: There is a running joke amongst Egyptians in the UK, that we say the Egyptian Museum of London, so not the British Museum in London [laughing].

Tanveer: Totally [laughing]! I mean, it really is... You know, I've seen, over the years, so many students use – because I'm based in London – so many students using the British Museum, in really highly problematic ways. I mean, I remember, as a 13-year-old, going on my school-trip to the British Museum. We'd all go to the British Museum, and the first question



everybody says is, “Why does it look like a Greek temple outside?” you know, if it’s British [laughing], and the teacher, you know, says to you, “Be quiet and go to the Chinese Galleries” or go to this gallery and do some...do some sketching or something. You know, they’re highly problematic spaces, or the resources that we teach our students with.

So, a second part of my research has also been looking into the Eurocentrism embedded in the actual tools that we use in fashion. So, we have mannequins that are these kind of standardised body sizes, that are hugely problematic, and they’re based on, you know, gender binaries as well. So, you know, over the years, I’ve also taught kind of just evening dressmaking classes, so they’re just like community classes, and in community classes, people are measuring their bodies, and measuring-tapes don’t go round because they’re only a metre long, and it’s a horrible experience when people feel that there’s something wrong with them because they don’t fit the measuring-tape, and yet, these are the things that we continue using. And we all feel it when we go into a shop, everybody: the shops are designed to make us feel crappy about ourselves, you know [laughing], from the mirrors in the changing room to... Not one human body is standard, you know – that’s the first thing I’ll teach in dressmaking, that, you know... And the standardisation is...the history of it is hugely problematic. They’re based on US bodies from the 1940s or something, and we still use those standardised bodies. Marks & Spencer’s has tried to increase the sizes to reflect, kind of post-1960s, bodies were changing dramatically. People were having vaccinations, people were growing taller, were growing bigger, and their bodies were changing, but, before then, you know, they were still based on the average height of the person in the 1940s, and, no surprise, we go into shops and we can’t fit into anything, and then we’re meant to feel then that, you know, that we’re not right, and it’s universalist thinking, as we know.

Fatima: I always like to ask our guests – I know this is also a broad question, but I would like, just to wrap up the conversation really, to ask you: what is something you’d like to see developed within higher education, say in the next 10 years?

Tanveer: I’d love to know what everybody else said [laughing]! For me, the most important thing is that we need to abolish fees. I’m fortunate that I’m from the generation where I didn’t pay fees for my undergraduate, and my postgraduate was much cheaper than it is now. I would have gone and studied, but I know many people that wouldn’t have studied, and I’ve taught in further education, and, every year in the group, there’s been a couple of Fashion students who have said, “I can’t go and study at degree, my Mum and Dad won’t let me - we didn’t realise that you have to pay” - every single year. And even when I say it’s a loan, they say, “Oh no, my parents said we’re not allowed to get loans. That’s impossible – I can’t get a loan. My family don’t believe in that.” And it’s so upsetting to hear that. It’s so upsetting how, you know, how...how people are expected to live with these huge loans. It’s appalling, and I do think there’s a real contradiction in how we talk about decolonising education when we know that it’s only certain people that even get into the education space, based on their family wealth or their cultural capital or, you know, their ability to kind of understand systems and even fill in these application forms and things. So, I think



sometimes I do have a bit of a personal moral dilemma thinking about should we be really putting our efforts into abolishing fees and then thinking about how we decolonise the curriculum because any kind of work on decolonising the curriculum has first got to talk about access – who gets into the classroom, who gets to be an educator, you know, and that’s...you know, really, that is, to me, **the** most important question. So, there is a bit of a disconnect. Sometimes I worry that it’s becoming this kind of really elitist discussion about decolonising, and not really thinking about the intersections of class here. It’s, em, yeah, something that, em, really, really worries me about movements for decolonisation, that we don’t talk enough about abolishing fees in this country. So, it’s something, yeah, to think about... What sort of other things did people say?

Fatima: I mean, one interviewee actually said the same thing, so abolish fees.

Tanveer: Oh, interesting.

Fatima: I think that’s a...a dream we all share. There were also conversations on having...on increasing this space within which we can have such conversations about decolonisation, about everything that’s going wrong, so to normalise, really, that we can speak about these things.

Tanveer: Absolutely. I mean, I think, as well, the key kind of question for where this conversation moves to is going to be about questioning what the role is of the higher education institution in itself. So, I think the outreach programmes that universities do, and how they engage with local communities, is really important in this area, and, really, it comes to the fundamental question, again, of access, like, you know, we have these institutions in our communities – what is their responsibility to the local community, you know? Why is there no access for local community to come in? You have to have a pass to enter into these spaces. It’s about knowledge. Why is there no support? Why is there very limited outreach work to help local communities, particularly in areas like Oxford and Cambridge? You know, how many of the local kids are getting into these spaces, you know? It’s...it’s...yeah, very, very, very worrying, and something that we need to think about, because I don’t think we can decolonise the university. I think we can move toward expanding the space of the curricula and the work we’re doing, but from what I’ve read, and from what I think more and more, I don’t think it really makes sense that we can kind of try to decolonise the knowledge production within the university, but to...the university is built on colonial violence – its money was extracted through colonial violence. Its trustees, the people, the structures are set up in hierarchical, top-down ways – that goes against the thinking, if you want to have non-expert, non-hierarchical forms of thinking. Therefore, to decolonise, you have to literally tear it down, pull the bricks down and start again, and I don’t think you’d call it a “university” anyway [laughing] after that. You know, you’d have to call it some kind of “multiversity” or something different. You wouldn’t call it a Master’s, you know, and you wouldn’t call it these particular names – Bachelor of Arts or Science. So, yeah, there’s kind of really big questions here. The more you drill down, the more you...all of



us, you know, engaging in this work have these kind of big moral dilemmas with ourselves about what these questions mean. But it's exciting that, you know, particularly for someone like me who's been thinking about this for a long time and teaching it, that, before, I didn't talk too much about it, maybe just with one or two friends, and now I'm able to...to talk more widely about it, and more and more Fashion departments have got in touch with me to ask me to come and talk about my research, and it's being valued more. It goes hand-in-hand with really the drive for anti-racism. So, I think that, you know, what was exciting at Black Lives Matter was that it resonated with white people. That hadn't happened before. Black Lives Matter had been going on for many more years before, but it was that footage of George Floyd that made us all so deeply upset and disturbed, that changed things, and it resonated with white people, and that's been, you know, the big shift I think. So, while it's still happening, because it may not happen, we don't know [laughing], you know, we should try and change the structures and get these working groups, networks, this project at Westminster going as much as we can do because we just don't know what's round the corner and whether things will change. We already know that there are calls from the British Government about stopping the use of critical race theory. We know, in the US, that's happening, people questioning the term "white privilege", not understanding it, and yet kind of misusing it. So, I think, while we've got the opportunity now, we should be doing as much as we can, quickly [laughing].

Fatima: Yes, I completely agree. Thank you so much, Tanveer. It has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

Tanveer: Oh, it's been the same! It's been really nice chatting to you, and, you know, I shall remember now what you and your Egyptian friends call the British Museum [laughing]! I shall remember that with students, for sure, definitely.

Fatima: Thank you.

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