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Podcast transcript:

Fatima: Hello audio listeners, welcome to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I'm Fatima Maatwk and I will be your host today. I am very happy to welcome our guest today, Dr rashné Limki, who is lecturer in Work and Organisation Studies and Director of Equality & Diversity at the University of Edinburgh Business School. rashné has had a very interesting and inspiring journey across both disciplines and oceans really, so welcome, rashné, and thank you so much for being with us today.

rashné: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Fatima: I think, just to start off, maybe you can tell us a bit about your journey. We know you started with Engineering and then you went through several stages really through to Organisation Studies, across through these disciplines and the oceans, the lands. Can you tell us a bit more about your journey?

rashné: Yeah, sure. So, I grew up in India, am Indian. I was in India for the first 19, 20 years of my life, and the way I kind of narrate this always is, you know, in India, I was a, quote/unquote, "good student", I got good marks, and, you know, there is a certain narrative or a certain kind of discourse in the Indian context which is if you get good marks, you kind of stream yourself into the Sciences after the 10th grade. I never kind of felt pressured into doing that, but I think, in a way, that was always just kind of present for me, and so I ended up going to Engineering school, and I did enjoy the Sciences, studying the Sciences. I ended up going to Engineering school, which I didn't quite enjoy the study of it, and, for a variety of reasons, I kind of ended up leaving India and going to the States, went to a liberal arts institution called Oberlin, again with the intention of continuing with Engineering but also kind of, you know, broadening it to what we would call the Humanities and Social Sciences. So, I took a bunch of Literature courses, Sociology, Politics, etc. And by the end of my first year there, I kind of realised I really enjoyed studying Science but I wasn't really into the kind of training myself to be an engineer, that I wouldn't particularly enjoy the practice of engineering. And so, by the end of my first year, I switched to Politics.

Also, I think a really important...[figure] perhaps for the switch...em... So, I arrived in the US around like August 22nd 2001, so just about 20 days before 9/11, and I was fortunate, I think, to...to kind of be in contact with, in conversation with, a variety of people, a variety of



students on campus that were...racial justice activists, queer activists, which was a first for me. It was kind of an introduction for me. But I think it helped me understand the US very quickly, not just through the lens of September 11th but kind of...but of the history of...you know, begin to understand the kind of history of race in the US, which is not to say, you know, I had no understanding of it, but it was a much more kind of...the beginning of a much more complex understanding. And I think, from that perspective too, I kind of felt a bit kind of motivated to move out of the Sciences, move towards...towards something else, and what I thought the something else was was International Human Rights.

So, I had thought that I would go to Law School, study Law, you know, try and kind of find my way into the practice of Human Rights Law. And that's what I was kind of moving towards, the entire undergraduate degree. At one point, it kind of became that I had to go to grad school sooner than I had imagined because of a whole bunch of immigration reasons, and I started – it was too late for me to kind of sit the L.SATs and go to Law School, so I started looking at Politics programmes, and [sort of like] MA in International Relations, Human Rights, etc. And I did apply to a whole bunch of those, but I realised, as I was applying to them, that studying those programmes would be soul-crushing for me and I wouldn't enjoy it. And so, on the advice of a few mentors, etc., I ended up applying to the Ethnic Studies programme in San Diego, again, never something that I had ever imagined myself doing, not just Ethnic Studies but also a PhD. So, the Ethnic Studies programmes were Master's, PhD, kind of combined programmes. You couldn't...at least at San Diego, and a couple of other places, you have to apply to a Master's PhD. My intention still was, you know, finish the Master's, go to Law School. And I ended up staying because I...I really kind of enjoyed the work. I started teaching my very first year in the Master's programme. I kind of realised that the classroom could be an activist space. I really enjoyed the teaching. I enjoyed the research, and enjoyed the reading, the writing. It was just like this whole new world kind of opened up to me again.

So, I stayed in the programme, despite the fact that I was kind of growing to really dislike living in the US, and I was feeling very ready to leave a few years into the programme. And, as it happened, my PhD supervisor, Denise de Silva, moved from the US to the UK. She ended up moving to a business school, which is a story in itself, so I ended up following her to a business school, and, although my research didn't changed, my teaching changed a lot and... And it took me a while to kind of settle into it and to begin to enjoy it, but I did kind of find a way of making it my own, and I've just been in business schools and in the field of Organisation Studies since then.

Fatima: Thank you. That's a very interesting journey, and, coming from Egypt, I can very much relate to the thing of needing to become a medical doctor or an engineer, and there is a lot of social pressure and family pressure related to it. I can also imagine like how



interesting and difficult it must have been to go to the US at that time. I can imagine it having a shape or an influence on your journey. So, did you, maybe when you went to the US or in the UK or even before then, did you ever find yourself having to navigate your racial identity at the university and the classroom, or did you feel represented in the curriculum?

rashné: As I said, you know, I grew up in India for kind of...a lot of the kind of formative years of my life, and, in India... I mean, now, when I kind of look back, I think of things in terms of... not necessarily race but kind of racial logic, racial power, etc. But in India, the language that we use is more around castism, communalism, and I'm from a kind of very small ethno-religious minority called Parsis. Parsis, generally, have a kind of very...even though we are a minority, a very, very small minority, kind of...kind of more respected, valued kind of socioeconomic position, which isn't to say that it's, you know, it's kind of fundamentally a kind of rich or well-educated community, but it is the kind of discourse that we like to tell about ourselves. It is also, in many ways, a kind of image that is, you know, that is attached to us, and continues to be attached to us, in India.

So, from that perspective... And I went to a school, so after the 10th grade, I also went to a school that was historically kind of set up for...for Parsi or for Zoroastrian students. I don't think it was always – anyway, at some point, it became a girls-only school, so, you know, it was a very.. Although my classmates were not just, you know, we're so small you can't have a sort of strictly Parsi school, but, you know, for all of those reasons, like I didn't experience myself in any way as...as other – and by "other", I mean in a way that's kind of, you know, attached to sort of forms of oppression, right? So, there was always "other" because we were different, but not necessarily, em, notions of otherness in terms of oppression.

And I don't think, even beyond that, beyond the 10th grade, when I went to junior college and then on to Engineering school, I don't think I ever felt that questions of being represented in the...in the curriculum...I don't think they ever really emerged for me. I don't think those were... I mean, I think the curriculum was pretty dire, in any case, but...but not because of over-representation or under-representation. It was just very... I mean, again, looking back, it was very uncomplex, un...yeah, it just wasn't the best curriculum.

And then, once I went to junior college, it was all Science anyway, so, you know, kind of became even more dire.

I think my first experience of like, "Oh, I am something beyond a Parsi" was when I went to the US, and that was the first time I kind of became a person of colour, became an immigrant, you know, became all of these things. Again, I think, at that point, especially in



the US, I wasn't really thinking about things like "Am I represented in the curriculum?" mainly because I was quite comfortable with being an outsider in the US and kind of feeling...that, you know, it was kind of my responsibility to actually learn more about the context of the US and those that had been othered within the kind of US nation state and things like that. So, I never, again, questioned whether or not I was in the curriculum because that's not what I was...was looking for.

Fatima: I really can relate to so many things because we have a very similar structure maybe of the educational system in Egypt, and there was no space for these questions. I also found it very interesting what you said, you said you became a foreigner, a person of colour, so like seeing this step as a process of becoming something, as a very interesting angle to me. Maybe if we stay, for one more question, with back then while you were growing up: was there any, I don't know, books or shows, something you watched or read growing up that somehow stayed with you and that you sometimes still think of maybe now or...?

rashné: Um...I don't think so because, bizarrely, like I did read quite a bit when I was growing up, or at least that's how I kind of remember... So, we didn't have a TV for most of my life when we were growing up. I think maybe I was already a teenager by the time we had TV. So, we used to watch movies and things of that sort, but, you know, there was no...no shows, no things of that sort. And also, for many of those years, like, you know, India didn't really have sort of multiple channels and satellite, so TV meant something very different [laughing].

And I used to read...and it's interesting because...I think...I don't actually remember... I remember reading, bizarrely, a lot of PG Woodhouse, so, you know, the Jeeves and Wooster series, but I don't...yeah, I think... I'm hesitating because I don't think I actually then started to read properly, em, until I went to the US, and I think it was a very bizarre experience in the US, when I think it was the first time I encountered Indian novelists, right? So, like even in school, for instance, we...we didn't study Literature, we studied English, and so part of it was, you know, kind of language, grammar, you know, things of that sort, right up to the 10th grade. And some of it was...you know, what could kind of pass for literature, but it was always textbooks and like short essays and short stories, and I don't ever remember...I don't remember ever reading fiction, being assigned fiction. We used to have a period, I think every week, called kind of Library, you know, when the entire class would go up to the library, and people generally hated that, that time, and a lot of what we read were like comic-books and things of that sort.

So, yeah, I don't actually remember... I know that I used to read because my parents used to take me to the kind of public library in our neighbourhood as well, but I don't have much of



a memory of what I used to read, just because, em...I feel like I actually, again, came to reading, like seriously reading novels, etc., when I was in the US, and, again, sort of encountering this entire world of...of people, you know, from India, from South Asia, who were writers and just doing this amazing, amazing stuff. So, yeah...

Fatima: I can understand. I mean, most of the literature we had in school was, interestingly enough, British, a lot of Shakespeare and...and it was a public school in Egypt, so that was quite...interesting in terms of coloniality. So, moving a bit to the discipline or the curriculum or higher education in general, how would you say are decolonisation and anti-racism relevant to, I would say, Organisation Studies, but you have quite a few disciplines so you can also just respond with anything that comes to your mind...?

rashné: Yeah. I mean, I think... So, there's different ways of, I guess, thinking about it, but the kernel remains the same. So, the way I think about decolonising in the context of the curriculum in general is, you know, everything has a history, everything has a present, and everything has a future, and, by that, I simply mean, em, there is a way in which we need to historicise what we know and how we know. A lot of that is related... And then sort of think about how it operates today, what its implications are today, and what implications it has sort of moving ahead into the future, so kind of do a bit more speculative work. And I think there's two things, right? So, if you look at the field of Organisation Studies, you could very easily kind of track perhaps a direct line to...to ideas and practices that emerged through the very act of colonisation. But if you look at fields like race and ethnic studies, etc., I don't think those fields necessarily get [?] because they already talk about race and they talk about colonialism, but I think there is a big difference between talking about colonialism and talking about...or thinking through coloniality. I think a lot of our methods of producing knowledge and understanding the operations of racial power, racial difference, racial power, gender, etc., you know, all of that, is still very imbricated in what you would call kind of colonial ways of knowing, right - so, our investment in categories of race, our investment in categories of gender, you know, whatever it might be. And a lot of people, I think, still tend to view race and colonialism, or race and coloniality, as in the study of race and the study of coloniality, as two separate things. So, yeah... So, I think, em, one is kind of the historicization. I don't think you can do decolonial work without the kind of historical work, and I don't think you can do decolonisation without an investigation of the methods that we use, or the methods that have produced knowledge and the methods that we continue to use to produce knowledge. And by "methods", I don't mean, you know, quantitative and qualitative, or, you know, those kinds of things. The methods I actually mean, what are the kind of underlying assumptions that we make when we are producing knowledge or that we take for, yeah, that we take for granted when we're producing knowledge.



Fatima: Have you found any tools for decolonisation that you find helpful, because it's often quite hard to get from the quite vague and sometimes abstract colonial nuances we see and then to do something or to actually do decolonising...?

rashné: Yeah. So, that's interesting, right, because, for a very, very long time – and I still do kind of resist the idea that there is a toolkit or a toolbox that you can use to decolonise, because I think, fundamentally, what you need to.. And I don't think, to be perfectly honest, I don't like the word "decolonise" that much anyway, not because of, you know, oh...and this is true, I agree with it, but it's not because, if we say, you know, [that anything is to be] decolonised, that thing wouldn't exist as is, right? I agree with that. You know, you can't decolonise the university because the university wouldn't exist, and that you can't decolonise the curriculum – I get all of that, I agree with it, but that's not why I don't like the word "decolonise". I just think, for me, it's just such a fundamental thing that we need to do to kind of produce a more expansive way of understanding the world and understanding how things operate in the world, and attaching the word "decolonise" to it just makes it seem...sort of instrumental. I'm not quite sure...how to describe that. But, in any case, I think, insofar as we're talking about any kind of rethinking of how we do the curriculum, I think the question is: what are the questions that we're asking, that we need to ask very different questions, right?

So, if there is a kind of...toolkit that is available, I think what is probably...the only useful way is to kind of get people to sort of think about what are the questions that I am currently asking and that I should be asking – so what are the different kinds of questions that I should be asking. So, this is a very kind of...brief example. Last year, last summer, I worked with a few PhD researchers and a couple of course organisers, so one for an undergraduate course and one for a Master's course, to kind of rethink the curriculum along decolonial principles. And one of the courses that we were working on was this...this was the Master's course, it's called Organisation Behaviour, and so, to me, like where do you start with this, right? What you essentially start with is: what does the notion of behaviour...where does that idea come from, what is the kind of historical legacy of behaviourism, what does it have to kind of do with colonial practice, with practices around race and gender, etc.? So does this...become this way of kind of, you know...when we say "behaviour", we always understand it to mean something, right, and so to call it Organisational Behaviour kind of, you know, makes it seem like this is...natural, somehow, that it's a normal thing to talk about, that it doesn't have a history. So, you begin by unpacking what behaviour or behaviours it means in this colonial legacy. And then, if you kind of go into the various topics that are taught within organisation behaviour, you know, what are those kinds of topics? So, for instance, you might have conflict, power and conflict, em, in an organisation. Okay, but so, you know, what are the ways in which power operates in organisations, along lines of social and ethical difference? You know, conflict, we, again, tend to think that there are methods of dealing with conflict, but actually, there's...the methods of dealing with conflict also are kind of contingent on how



we think of relationships, right? So, if you think of like indigenous practices of conflict resolution, they perhaps operate very differently from the sort of normative conflict resolution practices or conflict, you know, practices that address conflict, even [though I don't want to] use the language of resolution. So then, kind of beginning to think about, okay, so what are the other available ways to think about conflict that come from different understandings of power and relationships and things of that sort, and you kind of just keep, you know, asking very different kinds of questions for each of the topics, and you come up with a completely different reading list, you come up with a completely different framework for addressing this notion of behaviour and, you know, all of its components. And it is difficult work, and I think people... You know, if this isn't what you do, like people do need support to be kind of guided through things.

But I think it's really...I think it's really interesting and worthwhile work. My experience so far is there is actually an openness to it, that there is far less resistance, in my experience, resistance and dissent if you kind of explain what it is that you're really talking about, right? I don't talk about this as like – I use “decolonising the curriculum” as a shorthand, but I never would kind of put it down in any real way, like I would talk about it as, you know, “rethinking the curriculum along decolonial lines” or “using decolonial principles” or whatever it might be, but I would never, you know, seriously [take on anything decolonial].

Fatima: So, I'm wondering, in your role as Director of Equality & Diversity, both EDI in general and decolonisation, anti-racism, have become quite big, let's say, efforts or spaces in higher education. In other cases, we can say they've become trends, so, em... And, in your opinion, what could we do or how can we ensure that we do this kind of work with actual depth and so that we move away from it being any form of tick-box or checklist-like approach? How can we make sure that we are genuinely doing the work?

rashné: I think, I mean, there's a few different...different things here, right? So, if we're talking about how do we ensure, so people that have a commitment or an investment in this, and have a history or have experience doing this, then I think the question is: how do we not get co-opted into various sorts of institutional programmes and agendas and things of that sort? So, kind of self-reflection, self-questioning, you know, all of that that... I think, sometimes, it is sort of impossible to not...to not get co-opted, to an extent, in which case, I think, you know, having healthy kind of distance and cynicism about what it is that you are... that you're involved in, so that you can continue to do the kind of more important, non-co-optable work, you know, the actual kind of disruptive work, I'd say is important.

I think the other thing – and like, you know, again, I talk about this quite a bit in the context of both the EDI role that I have but also a couple of other kind of positions that I have at the



university, is I'm not really interested in the people that aren't interested in this work, right? Like I'm not interested in trying to convert people, not interested in trying to get them to see the light. I'm interested in the people that are curious and questioning. I'm interested in the people that need the kind of...engagement and support to be able to rethink their own practices, you know, rethink their own understanding, things of that sort. And when I kind of do trainings or workshops around...around EDI, I kind of lead with... What is kind of non-negotiable, right, in terms of how I kind of start off workshops, is experiences of racial, gendered, you know, ableist violence are people's realities, and here are the ways in which it concretely manifests amongst us, right? So, I kind of start off with what we oftentimes call like the lived experience angle. So, to me, that's the kind of starting point.

And then you kind of go into, okay, what produces this form of lived experience – you know, how and where do we have a responsibility, not for...you know, not in a kind of like “You are responsible for what people are experiencing” but more that you are responsible for addressing the ways in which this experience comes to be, right? So, what are the ways in which you intervene? What are the things that you can do or, you know, yeah, rethink on an interpersonal levels? What are the things that you need to understand on an institutional level? And also kind of insisting that this is incredibly complex stuff, and that what is most important, in the first instance, is being...being attentive.

So, again, this whole thing of like asking the right questions, right, asking why something might be appearing the way it is, asking why somebody might...present their experience in a particular way or be experiencing something or whatever it might be. And I think those things, it's harder, I think – I could be wrong, but I think it's harder for those kinds of conversations to become co-opted, right? I don't think that you can... And even if you want to make it into a tick-box, right, so even if you want to say, okay, everyone at the university has to undergo a training of this sort, and then 100% have undertaken it, the tick-box still is secondary, right? What is primary is the conversation.

Fatima: Absolutely, yeah. And, as you were saying, it's quite complex work and it can be very uncomfortable. So, I think, something we always talk about in the project is that this kind of work can often bring certain discomfort or even pain up, and, somehow, then we find ourselves in this balancing act to kind of cope with what comes up but also be able to...heal, in a way, so that we can continue the work. So, how can we, in your opinion, or what could we do in order to be able to cope and continue these kind of efforts?

rashné: I mean, you know, this question kind of comes up over and over again, right, sort of how do we...how do we keep doing the work, and the two answers I have, one is making sure that you have the right community to be able to do the work, but beyond that, even if



you have the right community, I think sometimes you are going to have to step back and say, “I’m done, I’m not doing this” right? But, by that, I mean not permanently, because most people just need to take a step back for a while, find their feet again, and step back in. And, unfortunately, this stuff isn’t going anywhere, right, it’s not going away. We’re not going to miss out on fighting the good fight if we kind of retreat for a bit. And, yeah, and I think that that is important, to sometimes say, “I need a break, I can’t do this anymore.” Because, also, I think, for those people where this is kind of fundamental to their way of being, you can’t do anything but return, right, because that is who you are. And that return might look very different, like, you know, you’re not necessarily returning to exactly the same thing or whatever - the return might look very different. The kind of activity of engaging in practices of justice, of redress, etc., are just part of how you operate and part of what makes you feel like yourself. You are going to come back.

I think, you know, I think sort of being more...honest, perhaps, about how and where it is that we find ourselves. I think there are going to be times when you can’t draw those boundaries, where you feel overwhelmed, where you feel, you know, you’re headed towards burnout, and that is going to happen, and you’ll...I think you kind of have to also trust yourself, right? So, on the one hand, like we don’t need to valorise burnout, right? You know, most people kind of just agree with that now, like we don’t need to be doing this. I think perhaps there’s also a way of saying, actually, if we give ourselves permission, then we know when to pull back, we know when it’s just not working anymore. And we know what to do because there isn’t...there isn’t some kind of like magic solution out there, other than, you know, taking rest, doing what makes you feel good, you know, all of the things that, yeah, again, we know we need to do to kind of recuperate. But I don’t...I don’t know – I mean, maybe there are people out there that have figured this out, but I don’t think that there is a way to...never feel boundaryless, never feel overwhelmed, never feel just constantly tired and upset and angry, like I don’t know if that’s a possibility. But I think, yeah, I think there are moments which we will, if we allow ourselves to kind of know this isn’t good anymore, it’s not working, because, when we hit that point, we’re not actually being productive – and I don’t mean “productive” in a capitalist way, I mean “productive” of something positive, you know, transformational. I think that’s how it works for me, or I’ve realised that’s how it works for me.

Fatima: So, I have one final question for you. It’s one of Kyra’s brilliant questions and it’s one of our favourite questions, gathering the dreams of all our guests on the podcast. So, what is something you’d like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years, or any time really, what’s something that you really want to see happen?

rashné: I think I’d like to see the university, or academia, higher ed, just be a more joyous place. I think, you know, everyone talks about...or a lot of people talk about, not everyone,



but a lot of people talk about how much they enjoy teaching, how much they enjoy...as difficult and as sometimes frustrating and as labour-intensive as it can be, that, for the most part, we enjoy being with students. And I think, you know, the university is a space that... actually could enable some really amazing relationships. It's a space that is full of relationships, right? And the people that we encounter as students are pretty...pretty amazing, and I think part of that amazingness is that they're generally still quite young and therefore not necessarily as jaded. And I find...you know, em...this is true of myself as well, you know... When I was an undergrad, I think I went into Oberlin quite like bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and I left quite angry and...not as bright-eyed, let's just put it that way. And sometimes I think that's important, in the sense of like let's not pretend that the world is beautiful, but I think a lot of it just has to do with the ways in which institutions kind of crush people into being...especially students, into being...being a particular way. Yeah. And I would like...I would like the kind of ego that is attached to teaching – meaning, you know, you show up to class, you do well on your assessments, right, and that's what makes us feel good as teachers, like our classes are full, our students do well. Like if we could...shift that a bit, which is very hard, like I'm saying that but I know that, you know, [when in my] class, when not everyone shows up, like I also feel something. But if I kind of put myself aside and say this isn't really about me, you know, or hopefully it's not really about me, it's about people having lives... Yes, if there was more space for just people to like be able to live their lives a bit more joyously, so that learning could also be...yeah, be joyous, you know, learning together could be...could be less about the outcomes and more about the relationships. Yeah, I think that would be pretty amazing...

Fatima: Yes, absolutely, and I think many of our listeners will probably also wish for more joy in learning and in institutions. Thank you so much, rashné. It's been a pleasure today talking to you, and, yes, thank you for being our guest today.

rashné: Thanks very much – I enjoyed this.

Fatima: If you enjoyed listening to this episode, let us know on Twitter @PSJProjects. To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj.