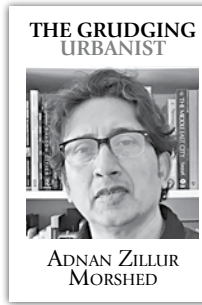


# The delicate work of decolonising knowledge



**THE GRUDGING URBANIST**  
ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

In fact, it's time for DK 2.0 now, inspired by the 2020 social justice movements in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Whether they agree with its basic premise or not, educators—particularly in social sciences and humanities—find themselves having to deal with DK in their classroom as both a disciplinary challenge and a political quandary.

For teachers sympathetic to the idea of DK, the key question is: How do you teach a curriculum that is freed from the discriminatory thought that the West and the old white patriarchy are the source and driver of what we can know of the world? They argue that a balanced curriculum is inclusive of different voices, cultures, and histories. In other words, how to bring about knowledge justice?

The decades of 1980s and 1990s were the heyday of DK 1.0, as educators sought to contest the entrenched influence of Western thought and colonialism on knowledge creation and histories of the world. Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978) played a maverick role in questioning the methodologies of many Western academic traditions. He argued that the West had essentially produced—through academic scholarship, literature, painting, and travelogues—an inferior image of the Orient, the colonial occupation of which was a historical necessity or inevitability. That image made it normal to think that colonial powers were on a "civilising mission" in occupied territories. It was the "white man's burden" to civilise the savage natives. Even Karl Marx said, "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

Today, the DK 2.0 advocates want to undo the cognitive damage wrought by colonialism and, more broadly, West-centric ideals that historically formed the basis of modern education systems across the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many educators face the dilemma of how to revise the grand old history of Western civilisation, one in which the histories of slavery, colonial extractive economy, and the marginalisation of women, non-western people and the underclass either remain absent or are misrepresented.

different ethnic groups. A reporter once asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of Western civilisation. He replied, "I think it would be a good idea." But, as critical educators would argue today, making a case that Western civilisation is a fiction is hardly enough to decolonise knowledge. Without pedagogical institutions that facilitate research, critical thinking, and knowledge creation, academic pursuits not only remain fragmented, but perpetuate the meta-narratives of the West's civilising missions. DK proponents advocate

the "modern" period between 1750 and 2000. The course begins with an exploration of the Industrial Revolution, colonialism, European Enlightenment, American Revolution, and Adam Smith's political economy—all as contexts for understanding "modernity," the battle of ideas, and the rise of the industrial city.

To understand the industrial city and its urban challenges, we look at, among other cities, London, Manchester (nicknamed "cottonopolis" because of all its cotton mills), and Liverpool. Standard histories would discuss the rapid rise of cities like Manchester and Liverpool because of the factories and the workers who flocked to them in search of work. Unlike London, Manchester and Liverpool became urbanised without much prior urban footprints, such as boulevards, public health infrastructures, parks, churches, palaces, or cultural institutions.

Liverpool is a case in point to make sense of the urgency of decolonising knowledge. By the 1890s, Liverpool had become the second-largest port in England, after London. Important commodities like cotton, tea, rice, tobacco, sugar, and grain passed through this port city. It built the world's first fireproof warehouse and hydraulic warehouse hoist system. All this is standard history: how maritime trading created a port city.

But what often remains undiscussed is Liverpool's deep complicity in transatlantic slave trade. In fact, by the middle of the 18th century, this city became known as the "European capital of slave trade." Liverpool's infamous slave ship, the Brookes, became the symbol of the brutality and racial violence that made slavery a lucrative international business. In 1788, as part of their antislavery social campaign, the Quakers of Portsmouth published the plan of the Brookes, showing how it was designed to maximise the size of its human cargo.

Europe began to grasp the evils of the mass enslavement of abducted Africans, and the hellish conditions they had to endure while laying shackled in the hull of the ship during the entire voyage. Over 25 years, the Brookes made 10 Atlantic crossings, delivering 5,163 captured Africans to slave markets in the New

World. Over 10 percent of its prisoners died on the way. All this was happening when Europe's Enlightenment philosophers proclaimed "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" as the philosophical foundations of a modern world.

The history of Liverpool is one instance of the complexities and contradictions of the ideas of modernity, colonialism, Industrial Revolution, enlightenment, and capitalism.

In a similar vein, DK advocates can study the complicated relation between Britain's Industrial Revolution and its colonisation of India. As Shashi Tharoor wrote in "An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India" (2016), "At the beginning of the 18th century ... India's share of the world economy was 23 percent, as large as all of Europe put together. By the time (the) British departed India, it had dropped to just over 3 percent. The reason was simple: India was governed for the benefit of Britain. Britain's rise for 200 years was financed by its depredations in India." This is an important observation, but with a caveat. Reducing the colonial discourse to a simplistic "us vs them" equation, or a debate between the supposed benefits of British rule—democracy and political freedom—and the evils of colonial oppression, will be a disservice to the project of DK. The key is understanding the nature of cultural and political encounters between powers, and what that understanding becomes the revisionist basis of an impartial approach to things that we learn.

Decolonising knowledge is not and should not be easy. It requires research and dispassionate reasoning. It can create a critical conversation by enlarging the analysis and deepening the investigation into the complex meanings of modern life in the domains of knowledge production, power relations, and globalisation. It is important to remain vigilant about institutions that produce knowledge and how they exercise power to legitimise it.

I would like to visit the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool someday soon.

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The Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015 was motivated by the South Africans' desire to decolonise their history, knowledge, and education. FILE PHOTO: AFP

They want to bring in the voices of other people with the belief that such inclusivity would make students aware of the urgency of knowledge justice. The goal has not been the reactionary abandonment of Western ideals, but the creation of an equitable foundation of knowledge.

The idea of Western civilisation was itself a powerful ideological tool that was exploited to create a hierarchical view of the world and its

that students in the 21st century must have a fuller, deeper, and wider understanding of the world and its peoples, cultures, societies, politics, and economics. Most of all, they need to understand the false claim of pure civilisations by looking at how cultures encounter each other and produce fusion of all kinds.

Let me explain. This semester, I am teaching a large class on architectural history, covering

## It's more than just a haircut



**IT'S** part of human nature to favour symmetry, uniformity, and evenness over something that is uneven or "disorganised." You can see it in how we like to set the volume of our media to even or prime numbers; in how we enjoy the

framing of Wes Anderson's films; in how we dress our children for school. It is also natural to want our surroundings to be the way we like them to be, and to have as little disruption or interference from other people as possible.

Any sense of ownership of one's surroundings begins with one's freedom over their body and attire—something that every individual should have. Taking that freedom away is not just a rejection of that ownership—their agency—but also a cruel exertion of "power." This is exactly what happened recently at the Rabindra University, Bangladesh (RUB) in Sirajganj.

The RUB students' outrage against Farhana Yeasmin Baten, head of the university's Department of Cultural Heritage and Bangladesh Studies, who forcefully cut the hair of 14 male students, may seem trivial—or even comical—to some. It's just hair, after all. It grows back. What's the big deal?

Before the university's yearly final exams began on September 26, many students expressed their discontent at the exams being scheduled for seven consecutive days. As a first-year student relayed during a television talk show, the students wanted at least a day's gap between every two exams. According to him, it was "perhaps due to her resentment" over their protest that she instructed students, on September 25, to trim their hair before entering the exam hall. When that instruction was not followed through—as the five-member probe committee formed by the university later saw on CCTV camera footage—the department head cut the students' hair herself in the presence of other teachers and staff members.

By September 29, Baten stepped down from her administrative posts amid the students' protests, including a hunger strike, demanding her termination. In addition, responding to a writ petition filed by Law and Life Foundation, the High Court ordered the RUB vice-chancellor and registrar to submit a report on the actions taken over one month after the incident. The High Court also issued a rule asking five respondents, including Baten, to explain why they should not be ordered to provide a compensation of Tk 20 lakh to each of the 14 victims.

All this, for a bit of haphazardly trimmed hair?

The real issue, of course, is the teacher's complete disregard for the bodily autonomy of young adults.

What the teacher's actions symbolise is that she—and other officials who were present at the scene—don't respect these students as thinking and feeling human beings. Rather, it seems that they view students as somewhat inferior, and thus assume the right to do what they (those in and with power) think is right. So, apparently, the appropriate "punishment" for students who do not want to sit for exams for seven consecutive days is to grab locks off their heads and snip away—hair and dignity alike.

It is not just inside educational institutions that young people are subjected to such



The culture of invading someone's privacy in the name of maintaining discipline and etiquette is holding our society back from becoming truly progressive. ILLUSTRATION: BIPILOB CHAKROBORTY

arbitrary and dehumanising disciplinary tactics. This often happens as a reaction to how they dress or express themselves—their apparent lack of conformity. The result can be devastating.

Take, for example, the case of 16-year-old Mehedi from Bogura's Shibganj upazila. Mehedi, who likes to sing Baul songs, wear white, and—as per Baul tradition—keep his hair long, was with his friends when they were insulted by locals for their chosen lifestyle. His protest against this treatment led to the enraged taunters entering his house on the night of September 10, beating him up, and shaving his head. They also threatened to throw him out of the village if he continued to sing Baul songs. Three of the perpetrators were later arrested by police after Mehedi filed

a case against them.

For Mehedi and also for the RUB students, it's their individuality and right to self-expression—more than their bodily integrity or choice of clothes—that are being attacked here. So prevalent is this policing of the bodies of other people—especially of the young and marginalised groups—in our society that it seems ingrained in every aspect of our culture.

Like many others of my generation, I can also relate to this culture of intrusion into people's private space. By the age of four, I had realised that I was different from my brothers. On the surface, we were given the same privileges. But there were limitations to what I could wear, how I could behave, and where I could go. For instance, the same sleeveless *kameez* that was fine for me to wear at the age

of nine was somehow inappropriate a year later. Eventually, I began to understand that the rules were different for girls in our society, as my brothers were allowed certain privileges that I wasn't entitled to.

While the policing of women's clothing is rooted in patriarchy, other sorts of dominance have come into play in the two aforementioned cases: authoritarian dominance in the case of the RUB students, and religious/cultural dominance in Mehedi's case.

Instances such as these automatically signify to all parties involved: 1) The supremacy of the person(s) wielding power; and 2) The lack of agency and even dignity of the person(s) being subjected to that power. Such abuse of power can only emanate from a heightened, albeit false, sense of superiority (based on age, sex, religion, social class, political clout, etc). The victim is thus always considered inferior.

Telling another person how they should dress, for example, is intrusive enough. But to go through with an action to forcefully alter his or her physical features—even if that does not involve physical pain—is disrespectful, degrading, and utterly deplorable.

What is more worrying is that the whole society seems to be contributing—through their words or actions—to creating a culture of intolerance for diversity and individual choice. We're investing crores into creating imposing physical structures—highways, buildings, flyovers—but what makes a society truly developed is its intrinsic values and moral codes. The idea of a properly developed Bangladesh, therefore, should include safety for all its diverse and marginalised groups. We must strive towards a society where people's individuality is respected and allowed to thrive. This means that no one should be allowed to force their beliefs or principles onto those who are lesser in age, position, or number.

After all, what good can come of forcing people into boxes of uniformity, if all it does is cause them to rebel anyway, or worse, to pass down such policing tendencies onto those younger than them, thus continuing a vicious cycle of hatred, intolerance, and bigotry?

Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MA JIAN**  
(born August 18, 1953)  
British writer

*Freedom of expression is the most basic, but fundamental, right. Without it, human beings are reduced to automata.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Language of Iran
- 6 Thrifty person
- 11 Space visitor
- 12 Kevin of "The Big Chill"
- 13 Officials with stopwatches
- 15 Top card
- 16 At present
- 17 Sock part
- 18 Tutor's units
- 20 Sister, of sorts
- 21 Peaks: Abbr.
- 22 Damon of "The Martian"
- 23 Bank fixtures
- 26 Toy store section
- 27 Hidden mule
- 28 Uno doubled
- 29 Before, in

**DOWN**

- 1 Deadly
- 2 Wonderland visitor
- 3 Singer LeAnn
- 4 View
- 5 Tangled
- 6 Distorts
- 7 The Matterhorn, for one
- 8 Asian nation
- 9 In transit
- 10 Bristles at
- 14 Ages and ages
- 19 Hook's helper
- 22 Ship staff
- 23 Worry
- 24 Pilot's employer
- 25 Morgan of movies
- 26 Dian Fossey subject
- 28 Surrealist
- Salvador
- 30 Creates
- 31 Notions
- 32 Like Thor and Odin
- 33 Miniature map
- 38 Complete
- 39 French article

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

T	H	E	T	A	S	O	R	E
R	A	V	E	L	P	O	I	N
A	R	I	E	L	R	H	O	D
I	T	T	R	O	I	L	O	U
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W	E	A	R	I	N	G	D	O
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L	U	R	E	S	U	N	L	E
T	E	X	T	S	E	E	D	S

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT