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AYAZ KADER

Paul Thomas Anderson and Thomas Pynchon, besides sharing the name Thomas, also excel at portraying serious political matters in a comical manner. However, what stands out in his new film *One Battle After Another*, which itself is loosely inspired by Pynchon's 1990 novel *Vineland*, is Anderson's expertise in portraying the psychological drama of a wonderful father-daughter relationship.

The film follows the story of a militant revolutionary group, French 75, headed by Perfidia Beverly Hills and "Ghetto" Pat Calhoun, played by Teyana Taylor and Leonardo DiCaprio, respectively. The main antagonist is a colonel, Steven Lockjaw, who is played by Sean Penn.

Anderson's film is a powerful message against the recent US Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE) crackdown on immigrants in the US and the injustices perpetuated by the elite class against the masses. This is made clear in the beginning as the group attempts to free detainees from a detention centre. Besides that, Colonel Lockjaw – who attempts to break up the group and hunt down its members – joins a white-supremacist group and is applauded by its members for his effort.

Additionally, Anderson's portrayal of Calhoun (who later lives under the name Bob Ferguson) and his relationship with his daughter Willa is a testament to his skills as an expert storyteller, particularly in the psychological drama genre. One must be quite stoic not to feel moved at the rendering of their relationship. DiCaprio's performance is central to this emotional weight. He brings an energy that makes

the film feel lived-in rather than performed, always showing himself by his daughter's side, no matter what. On the other hand, Teyana Taylor provides a counterbalance by grounding the film's chaotic elements with a sharp comedic instinct. Her presence induces a jolt of control into an otherwise frantic dynamics of the militant group.

Although cinema as a medium has, to various extents, always confronted the power structures that dictate the status quo, this film further reinforces its position as a tool that can be wielded in protest, especially in regard to the mainstream. Regardless of whether you're into political thrillers or not, Anderson provides a perfectly tuned comedic thriller that is filled with action. Thus, before you get ready to watch it, make sure to prepare yourself for an unforgettable, suspenseful rollercoaster.

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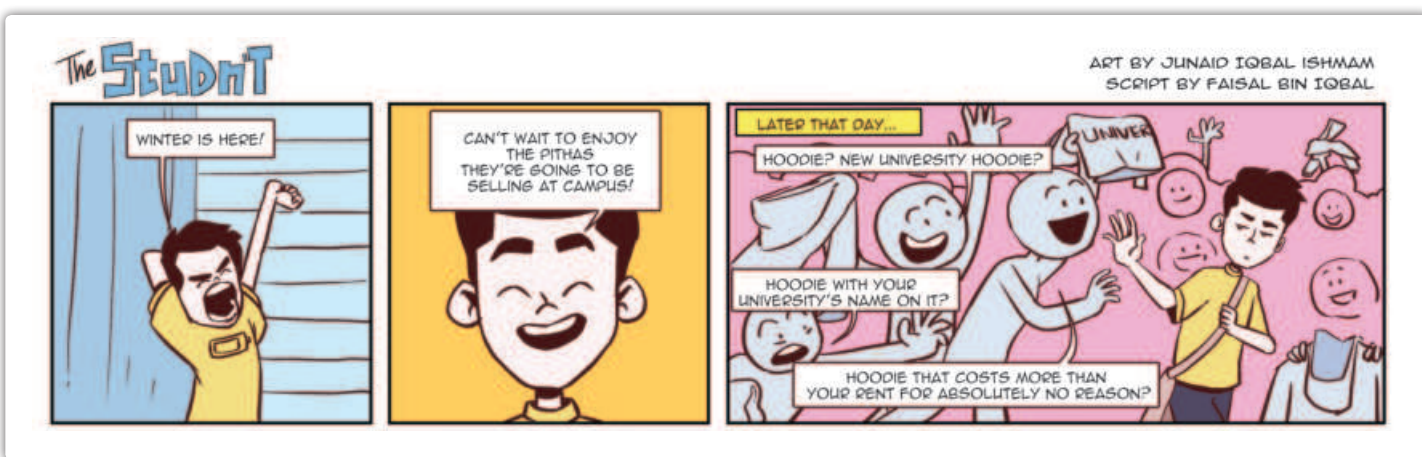
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BRAC University and Swisscontact collaborates to launch ESG-focused Academic Programme

BRAC University and Swisscontact have signed an agreement to develop a certificate programme on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). This programme will be tailored for Bangladesh's export-oriented industries, particularly the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. The initiative is part of Swisscontact's Promoting Green Growth in the Ready-Made Garments Sector through Skills (PROGRESS) project, funded by the Embassy of Sweden and the Embassy of Switzerland.

This certificate programme on ESG will equip participants with knowledge on ESG frameworks, reporting, measurement, financing, and industry case studies. The programme aims to address the urgent need for organisations to embed ESG practices as a core business strategy to achieve sustainable growth and meet stakeholder expectations.

Starting with the certificate programme in 2026, progressing to a postgraduate diploma by 2027, and ultimately introducing undergraduate and graduate majors by 2029, this initiative intends to embed ESG principles in higher education and industry practice. The collaboration advances multiple United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ikramul H Sohel, Senior Programme Officer – Inclusive Economic



Development at the Embassy of Sweden, remarked that the partnership advances Sweden's priorities on sustainability, gender equity, and green growth, and will strengthen ESG integration within higher education. BRAC University Vice-Chancellor Professor Syed Ferhat Anwar emphasised that the collaboration reflects the university's commitment to advancing sustainability alongside economic and social well-being, integrating global ESG standards with local industry realities. He added that BRAC University has been exploring ESG for quite some time and has engaged with international partners, including universities in the United Kingdom that offer similar courses. Helal Hussain, Country Director of Swisscontact Bangladesh, highlighted the initiative as a significant step towards addressing systemic challenges

in the sector, including curricular gaps and gendered barriers in the ESG talent pipeline. Farzana Amin, Team Leader of the PROGRESS project, added that Swisscontact is supporting RMG factories in Bangladesh in their green transition, where collaboration with academia can play a pivotal role in building a pool of qualified sustainability professionals.

Dr David Dowland, Registrar; Professor Wasirur Rahman Khan, Chairperson of the ESS department; Professor Syed A Mamun and Professor Shahidur Rahman from the ESS department; and Kharul Basher, Director of the Office of Communications, attended the signing ceremony.

Ikramul H Sohel, Helal Hussain, and Farzana Amin, along with Coordinator Sayedul Arefin and Senior Officers Nowshin Anjum and Syeda Suhaymah Ahmed from the project, were also present.

British Council hosts Alumni UK Gala Night 2025

The British Council hosted a grand Alumni UK Gala Night on November 25, bringing together around 300 UK alumni from diverse sectors to celebrate their achievements, leadership, and contributions to Bangladesh's development.

Sarah Cooke, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, said, "Bangladesh's UK alumni network is a powerhouse of talent and innovation. Its members, all educated at world-class UK universities, have made a remarkable contribution to education, research, entrepreneurship, climate action, governance, and the creative industries. These achievements play a vital role in Bangladesh's development and in shaping its future."

Delivering his welcome address, Stephen Forbes, Country Director of the British Council, highlighted the British Council's long-standing commitment to engaging and empowering UK alumni in Bangladesh.

Senior officials from the Government of Bangladesh, development partners, representatives from UK universities, and leaders from academia, business, civil society, and the creative industries also attended the event.



IUB celebrates 10 years of Saima Hall

Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) has marked the 10th anniversary of Saima Hall, a residential facility established a decade ago to provide free accommodation, meals, and quality higher education to underprivileged female students from remote regions of the country. Among private universities in Bangladesh, Saima Hall remains the first residential hostel offering such fully funded support exclusively for disadvantaged female students.

A special event was held on November 29 to celebrate the milestone. Students currently residing at Saima Hall – enrolled across various departments at IUB – performed at the celebration.

Saima Hall began its journey in 2015 with eight students, occupying the top five floors of a building owned by the family of A Matin Chowdhury, Member of the IUB Board of Trustees. Over the past 10 years, the number of residential students has increased to 50.

The hall is funded by the Shaheed Khalek and Major Salek Bir Uttam Trust, established by the family of A Matin Chowdhury. IUB Trustee Salma Karim oversees all hall operations, supported by a committee comprising IUB officials working under her guidance.

Speakers at the anniversary event included Trustee A Matin Chowdhury, Trustee Salma Karim, Chairman of the Board of Trustees Didar A Husain, Trustee Towhid Samad, Trustee Wazed Ali Khan



Panni, Trustee Rashed Chowdhury, Vice-Chancellor Prof. M Tamim, and Pro Vice-Chancellor Prof. Daniel W Lund. Trustee Mohammad Tanvir Madar and Trustee Dr Husne Ara Ali were also present.

Over the past decade, nearly 70 female students have completed their education at IUB while residing in Saima Hall. All of them come from disadvantaged families in remote and economically marginalised regions of Bangladesh. Many alumni are now employed at leading institutions in the banking, information technology, and other sectors, both in Bangladesh and abroad. Several have also pursued higher studies in countries including the United States, Canada, Italy, Germany, Japan, and Malaysia.

South Point School & College students shine at Commonwealth Chess Championship

Students from South Point School & College have brought pride to Bangladesh with their remarkable performances at the Commonwealth Chess Championship.

Tashrik Shaihan Shan secured a silver medal in the Open Under-20 category after a victory in the final round against India's Grandmaster Shyam Nikhil. In the Girls' Under-18 division, Woman Candidate Master (WCM) Omnia Binte Yusuf Lubaba won the bronze medal for Bangladesh. In the Blitz category, Ajan Mahmud of South Point School won the divisional award in the Under-10 section.

Among other notable Bangladeshi results, WCM Warisha Haidar secured 4th place in the Girls' Under-10, South Point's Raihan Rashid Mughdha claimed the 5th prize in the Open Under-10, Safayet Kibria Ajan scored 5 points from 9 rounds in the Open Under-12, and Sidratul Muntahana Nafi scored 4 points in 9 rounds in the Girls' Under-12.



■ OPINION ■

BCS exams in need of reform

TAZRIN RASHID PRITHA AND MEHRAB JAMEE

For as long as civilisations and empires have existed, there has been a bureaucracy. Early empires had governorships and officers loyal to the monarch who enforced the law of the land and, most importantly for any agrarian society, kept track of the grain being produced and distributed. The jobs, however, mostly went to the children of the nobility, who could afford an education. Court intrigue and nepotism also had a lot to do with it. It was China, during its Sui Dynasty (around 580 CE), that formalised the first known meritocratic system of appointing civil servants through a centralised civil service exam. This marked a democratisation in the bureaucracy, as candidates would be chosen through a competitive exam, rather than being appointed hereditarily.

The post-feudal centralised civil service on this subcontinent is, in large part, shaped in the image of the British Civil Service. After being exclusively ruled over by a mix of traditional and European bureaucrats in the company era, the then British Parliament set up the Macaulay Commission that formulated and inaugurated the first Imperial Civil Service (ICS) examination in 1853, open for all citizens of the empire aged 18 to 25.

The exam focused heavily on English as the primary language of the bureaucracy, along with Greek, Latin, Arabic, and other Indian languages as well. Civil servants required mastery over the language of the province they'd be posted to, as well as the language of the Crown. The ICS is the precursor of the modern Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exams in India, the Central Superior Service (CSS) exam in Pakistan, and, from 1972 onwards, the Bangladesh Cadre Service (BCS) exam in Bangladesh. With an aim to keep the bureaucracy apolitical and to oversee the appointment and welfare of bureaucrats, the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) was declared an independent commission in the newly drafted constitution, and the first exams in independent Bangladesh were held in 1972.

In total, 49 BCS exams have been held to date. Currently, there are 26 cadres of appointment, comprising 10 general cadres (such as administration, police, and taxation), 12 technical cadres (such as Health, Education, Agriculture), and four mixed cadres. Due to the exam being open for any citizen with a bachelor's degree, relative job security, and perceived social status, BCS government jobs still remain among the most coveted jobs in the country, especially for the middle class. In any given year,

approximately four-and-a-half to five lakh applicants sit for the preliminary exams. A little more than one thousand applicants end up getting a job.

With an almost 0.2 percent appointment rate, the BCS exam is one of the toughest exams to crack. The exam is tough – but much of it still depends on memorising huge amounts of information. This requirement is something inherited from its predecessor, the ICS exams. Just like the British system, our civil service exams still lean hard on Bangla and English literature and grammar. In any given year, 70 out of 200 MCQ questions in the preliminary exams will be from Bangla and English, covering grammar and literature. 400 marks out of 900 in the written exams are allocated for Bangla and English.

Examining language proficiency is, of course, necessary for appointing a civil servant, but the predominance of language and literature in the exams suggests a unique knowledge of language-based trivia is required to hold a bureaucratic job. The methods of evaluation of language proficiency barely reflect the realities or responsibilities of a modern public service. They're more of a relic of the colonial era. In an attempt to thin out the crowd, questions from the literature portion have become arbitrary and cannot be said to reflect an actual mastery over language or literature.

Ironically, the UK has moved on towards a more modern skill-based appointment system for its own civil service, which tests verbal, numerical, and judgement skills through comprehensive tests. A larger emphasis is given to the interview portion and problem-solving. Therefore, their recruitment process is empirically more likely to bring out the right person for the job.

In accordance with global standards, recruitment

exams in our private sector have rapidly evolved as well to assess both competence and character. A leading international bank, for instance, now requires all applicants to sit for a behavioural assessment exam even before CVs are screened. This early filter prioritises personality traits and cultural fit, narrowing the pool to candidates who are better aligned with the organisation's values.

Multinational companies follow similar models. Candidates first sit for tests measuring language proficiency and analytical ability. Those who clear this stage move on to a focus group discussion (FGD), where small groups tackle a case study under the supervision of a moderator. Here, recruiters observe how candidates think under pressure, negotiate disagreements, and contribute within a team. Candidates with the proper skillset move on to the interview round for one last round of scrutiny. Increasingly, employers are also adding practical tests, such as Excel assessments, to gauge whether candidates can perform the actual tasks required of them.

If the government hopes to build a more capable and productive civil service, it must rethink its recruitment model. Modernising the language proficiency tests with applied communication modules and comprehensive literature quizzes, increasing subject-based evaluation for technical cadres, and including FGD sessions before interviews would serve as improved tools of evaluation for our future bureaucrats. Modernising the BCS exam is no longer optional; it is essential that the BPSC ensures a system of examination fit for our era. We can hope that through necessary reformations, the bureaucracy of this republic will continue to be represented by our nation's best.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

■ SKILLS ■

What it means to teach writing in the age of AI

It is beyond debate that AI has fundamentally changed the way we write. Writing, a skill that once required rigorous and constant practice, is now often being produced by ChatGPT and other generative AI tools. According to one MIT study, using ChatGPT to write essays may lead to lower brain engagement among students. The study cautioned that persistent use of ChatGPT may further hamper the critical thinking skills of learners. So, under the given circumstances, how can teachers foster critical thinking in student writing in an age shaped by AI?

FARIHA LAMISA

To promote critical thinking in the backdrop of easily accessible AI tools, writing instructors need to design activities that push students towards critical thinking. For instance, Nur Mohammad Khan, an assistant professor in English at Dhaka University of Engineering & Technology (DUET), designs writing activities in a way that encourages students to show the process of writing rather than just the final product. He says, “I design assignments that emphasise the writing process – outlines, drafts, and reflections – so students can’t just turn in a polished piece generated using AI. I also try to talk openly with them about AI, like how it can be used responsibly as a tool, but never as a replacement for their own thinking. My goal is to uphold integrity while also supporting students in developing authentic, independent academic skills.”

Nur Mohammad’s approach promotes critical thinking as students need to demonstrate how they have developed their ideas rather than merely submitting their assignments. Maintaining a similar tone, Imran Jahan Digonto, a lecturer from the Department of English at East West University (EWU), emphasises in-class discussion and brainstorming to promote originality of ideas. He thinks that class activities can be an incredibly useful tool in the process of promoting original writing.

“We have people with divided opinions on its use, and that’s what is creating obstacles in creating a clear policy on generative AI. Our policymakers might be rigid in their way of thinking, but they need to accept that the use of generative AI cannot be averted. As educators, we need to evolve alongside our students so that the gap is not too wide.”

“I try to begin almost every writing task by inviting students into a communal brainstorming session,” says Digonto. “During such sessions, the energy in the classroom shifts, as students realise that their individual perspectives, shaped by their passions, experiences, and curiosities, are the very responses that no large language model (LLM) can replicate.”

“These sessions jumpstart creativity and promote originality,” Digonto adds. “Then, students move into drafting part of the writing in person without using any



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

tools or gadgets. I ask them to submit a brief outline or a rough draft.”

Both Nur Mohammad and Digonto emphasise keeping track of an initial, original draft of writing, so that teachers can track down the original ideas of the students, demonstrating that their writing process is free of AI influence. However, it is also important to acknowledge the current reality: AI writing tools are widely accessible. It is equally crucial to recognise that using AI effectively is a skill in its own right, one that students also need to develop.

Hence, teachers also find themselves tasked with the need to blend AI usage in the practice of writing. Regarding this, Nausheen Saba Siraj, a senior lecturer from the Department of English and Modern Languages at North South University (NSU), says, “A total ban on AI usage will be unrealistic, as students will use it regardless of a ban. Rather, originality can be promoted by allowing fair and blended use of AI as a tool for critical engagement rather than passive dependence. For example, in-class writing can be done to maintain originality, while the post-feedback version can be modified through an AI tool (like Grammarly), and students can still be asked to submit both versions together. Or, even critical reading can be taught by asking students to annotate, reflect, or critique an essay generated by AI.”

Siraj also emphasised that institutions need to find ways to incorporate AI usage in the educational scenario of the country. As she explains, “At the moment, there are no clear-cut policies on the use of generative AI in writing, especially

at the tertiary level. Since students have easy access to AI through laptops and phones, a complete ban is neither realistic nor enforceable.”

She instead insists that policies should focus on responsible and ethical use.

“We have people with divided opinions on its use, and that’s what is creating obstacles in creating a clear policy on generative AI. Our policymakers might be rigid in their way of thinking, but they need to accept that the use of generative AI cannot be averted. As educators, we need to evolve alongside our students so that the gap is not too wide,” she added.

Siraj further underpinned that universities around the globe are starting to embrace generative AI, mentioning a post from Oxford University which announced that it is the first British institution to introduce ChatGPT Edu — an education-focused version of OpenAI’s AI tool — for all of its students and staff.

“This step highlights a vision of working with AI responsibly, rather than avoiding it. Therefore, the best course of action is to develop policies around its fair and ethical use,” she concluded.

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