The Race and Ethnicity Hub
BHM Event: Why Design Education needs Black Feminist Thinking

Tanveer Ahmed, Nicole, Katrina:

[THEME SOUNDS]

TANVEER AHMED: Hi, everyone. I just wanted to start with introducing myself. So, my name's Tanveer Ahmed. And I'm a PhD student in the Design Department in STEM.

And I also teach Fashion Design Education. And I've taught it for quite a long time now, mostly in London. And during the time that I've been teaching, I've said observed lots of different ways there's a dominant fashion narrative.

And it's running through the curricula, and how fashion's taught. And it's very Western led. It's very capitalist. And it's very patriarchal.

And the ways I can see this happening are, for example, the majority of the fashion history books-- the majority of the fashion history books that I see in the libraries-- tend to focus on European fashion. It'll be mostly written by men. And the collections, for example, most of the major institutions-- the museums-- create a binary between European fashions and traditional dress, and how mannequins, and pattern cut, and blocks in fashion reproduce normative ideas about the body.

So really, these sorts of observations have led me to the research I'm doing. My research is to really challenge this very European, Eurocentric thinking, and to create spaces for more inclusive and democratic ways of teaching fashion design, and why-- I want to think more broadly about why design education would benefit from Black feminist thinking.

So, I really want to thank the organizers. There's Katrina. Also, behind the scenes, there's been Babette and Sass, and also Grace, that's going to be along today. I'm really excited that the Open University is doing work for Black History Month. But I do want to also take this opportunity to think more deeply about Black History Month accusations, that it can be considered tokenistic.

And really, for me, I want to think of Black History Month as the beginning of a conversation, so that we have Black history integrated into the way we think and teach every day of the year, not just for this month, obviously. So, I'm going to talk for about 20 minutes, today. And we'll have some opportunities for discussion along the way, as well.

Katrina, can I have the next slide, please? Just a quick point about terminology before we begin today, and issues over the term BAME. So, some of you may have heard the term BAME. It stands for Black, and Asian, Minority, Ethnic.

And there's lots of complaints at the moment. I'm of the same opinion, that we need to really rethink these acronyms-- the way that we use the word BAME-- and the worry that becomes a meaningless, collective term. So, what I wanted to say today were not how I'm using the word Black. I think this is really important.

So, I'm focusing today on the contribution of Black women. And by that, I mean those of Black African and Caribbean descent. And when I talk about women, I mean that I'm defining women as all forms of women.

So, I'm using women to include non-binary, agender, or gender variant people, as well. And these voices are important. And I want to talk today about why oppressed and indigenous voices and experiences need to be a central aspect of the design curriculum, and why this is important for today's design community.

Our education theorists have argued that the ways in which our designer talk are dominated by very European led way, Eurocentric way, and racist and imperialistic thinking. So in particular, criticisms have addressed how white privilege in the institution-- such as re-staff hierarchies, for example-- how there's less staff of colour in senior management roles through the interview process, in curricula-- such as through the domination of male representations in key texts-- these forms of white privileging contribute to the under-representation and the exclusion of people of colour.

And that's especially women in art and design institutions. So there have been calls to decolonize art and design education. And some of you may have seen some campaigns, such as Why Is My Curriculum White? And there's another campaign, Why Isn't My Professor Black, and artworks such as this.

And these powerful questions huddle, engaging with racism, discrimination, and exclusion. And they help construct questions around the invisible structures of whiteness, that often shape our design departments. And this is an art installation from the Norwegian School of Art and Design, from three years ago.

So, let's turn to one institution where I have been teaching, and this has been part of my research, being a PhD student here at OU. And there were calls by students highlighting racist, stereotypical art depictions. And these were, instead, directed to discussions focusing on their technique, rather than the highly problematic content.

So, a student had posted this onto Facebook, two years ago, at one of the institutions where I teach at. Students at this institution also highlighted the Eurocentric bias in the reading list. And here's one student's analysis of those reading lists in their department.

Now, this department was to produce an extended reading list. That then resulted in two reading lists-- one with well-known Western names and one with less well-known names, creating this kind of really problematic binary of these two different reading lists. Staff tend to remain predominantly white, with most non-white staff relegated to positions of visiting tutors. And women of colour-- and especially Black women-- are underrepresented in higher education. And that's in the whole of our education in the UK. And if you want to read more about that, you can look at a book by Deborah Gabriel-- it's excellent-- called, Inside the Ivory Tower, that was released to the public two years ago.

I'm not going to jump to why I think Black feminist thinking is important in design education and art education, too. I'm going to start by referring to the term the Matrix of Domination, which is a concept that comes from Black feminist sociologist, Patricia Hills Collins, who wrote about it in her classic book, Black Feminist Thought. So, it basically refers to the way that systems of structural and historical oppression-- and so we're talking about most classically here-- your class, race, gender, and there's disability, sexuality, and others. They all work together to structure people's life chances.

So the point the Collins makes is that these different forms of oppression do not operate independently. And rather, they're interrelated. So that means that racism doesn't operate independently of capitalism. Patriarchy doesn't operate independently of bias against people with disabilities, and so forth.

Recently, Sasha Constanza-Chock has argued for the need for designers to recognize why the Matrix of Domination is important in the design process. Constanza-Chock argued that designing things like garments-- in my specialism, fashion-- or buildings, or products, often reproduces the existing structures. That means that certain types of people get access to those designs. And other types of people get excluded, or what's worse, they get harmed by those designs.

So many in the design community have heard of a design theorist, Victor Papanek. And he penned a book called, Design for the Real World. It's nearly 50 years old, now. And in that book, Papanek pointed out the multiple ways that industrial designers were failing society. And while many used his work to design sustainability, Papanek was also highly critical of design failures in recognizing non-normative bodies.

And he argued that designers need to better consider the needs of all types of bodies-- older people, those with disabilities, the young, people outside of the mainstream. Now, he didn't mention race. But his work is really personant, when we're starting to think about who are the groups in society who are most marginalized, who are excluded and not brought into the mainstream.

There's been a recent book called, What Can a Body Do? And in this book, the author, Sara Hendren, examines the cultural histories of chairs. She said something really interesting. She says that, for most of human history, a mix of postures was the norm for a body meeting the world.

Squatting has been as natural a posture as sitting for daily tasks. And lying down was a conventional pose for eating, in some ancient cultures. So why has sitting in chairs persisted in so many modern cultures?

So, to think about the ways in which normative ideas and mainstream ideas are implicated in a chair, I've got minutes. We could maybe have a discussion about the chairs that all of us are sitting in. I'm assuming that most of us are sitting on a chair, as you're listening in on this talk today, and kind of what normative values might be embedded in those chairs.

So, for example, the chair that I'm sitting on-- I was just thinking about this before I was speaking today. It's got-- for example, it's got two armrests, here. So already, it's assuming that it's somebody with an able body that well, at least it's got two arms.

But it has got an adjustable height. This particular chair can go up and down. So, I was wondering if anybody else wanted to maybe unmute themselves and just maybe talk about their chair, or anybody maybe has a standing desk, for example.

So, I don't know if you want to use the hand. Raise your hand if you want to contribute to what chair you're on. Because I think the thing is, we take something as mundane as a chair, we take it for granted that it's going to have some legs, and when we start to-- the legs or arm rest or a back.

But when we start to really think about what a body is, it makes us kind of really challenge these assumptions. So, anybody want to? Katrina-- I mean, Katrina, would you like to tell? Oh, somebody has put their hand up. I'm not sure how we-- maybe if you just unmute yourself, you're able to just—

NICOLE: Yes, hello.

KATRINA: Yeah, Nicole, thank you.

NICOLE: I just wanted to participate, because I really like that question. I have, myself, many thoughts about various things before I tell you. So, for me, usually, I'm quite tiny, petite. So, for me, the problem-- I have a similar chair like you, I guess, you know, swiveling around, adjusting height.

But it never, ever, ever goes low enough so I can sit comfortably without the footrest, as well. So, I find it always really interesting and challenging. And that's not just office chairs. That's any kind of chair. Usually, my legs dangle in the air.

KATRINA: [LAUGHS] That's funny, yeah. I think that many people can empathize with that.

TANVEER AHMED: It is-- but it is true, yeah. It's really interesting. My parents are both from-- born in India. And in their wedding photographs, there were these very low seats. And I think when we start to think about the cultural factors that come into chairs, and the fact that Sara Hendren talks about squatting as part of the cultural history of chairs, it's really interesting.

So, these wedding pictures, they show these very low tables, and very, very kind of low seating. The almost kind of-- it's not on the floor. I thought they were on the floor, but they are very short.

Well, I'll move on, because it was just a small thing to make us think about something that we are all probably doing as we are listening here this morning, that we're all sitting on something. So, you know what my working from another perspective opened in how we think about-- how we think about design, and also make us think about how design is failing, really. And what Papanek had said is, if we combine all the seemingly different minorities and their special needs, we discover that we've designed for the majority, after all. So, in my own PhD research, I'm looking for ways to retell fashion design with more of a plural narrative, rather than a singular, dominant European and Anglo-American, the North narrative.

And to do this, I have been influenced by feminist theory, which has helped me better understand how these hierarchies are ordered and how they're being-- how they continue to

be applied in fashion and in design cultures. To help me challenge these inequalities and these exclusions in fashion and design cultures, the work of many Black feminists has been really useful to me, including the work of Bell Hooks.

This has been especially useful, because these feminists have opened up new possibilities, because they foreground issues of racial inequalities. They're starting from that point. And they often draw on their own biographies, as a way [AUDIO OUT] to do this. So, these [AUDIO OUT] writings have given me to draw on my own biography.

So, I'll quickly share a fashion project that I ran, using Bell Hook's concept of love as a starting point. So, Bell Hooks is an American author. And her real name is Gloria Watkins. She uses the pen name, Bell Hooks.

And the project was with second year undergraduate fashion design students in the UK. So, the book, All About Love, has helped me, because it emphasizes alternative and more equitable ways for how human beings can relate to one another. How might re-imagining human relationships full of love contribute to new forms of design pedagogies, design education and design cultures?

So, in contrast to the popular perception in society, that so states love as romantic, heterosexual and passive with a focus on individualism, Hook defines love as consisting of care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge. And it's rooted in both politics and society. And this definition gives agency to the [AUDIO OUT], giving it an active role to play as an agent for social justice, to help end oppression in society.

So how might Hook's notion of love be used to create a design process that resists stereotyping, appropriation, and racist forms of representation? We could have the next slide, please. So, to begin this fashion workshop, I asked students to think about five people that they loved.

And drawing on the concept of love, I asked them to think about love in the broadest sense, to challenge dominant and the natural hetero-normative concepts. So, students were asked to consider people they have loved from their family-- such as their parents and extended members-- to lovers and to friends. And I shared images of people who I love, including-- on the left-- my great-grandparents. In the middle is my mother-- me with my mother, and my friend's baby.

So therefore, I was presenting the bodies of the elderly, the very young, and women in hijab-- my mother and myself-- and these bodies and dress forms that do not necessarily subscribe to Western normative ideas of fashion culture. And I also made sure to say to students how

my great-grandfather wore the lungi and my great grandma wore a sari all her life, to challenge the domination of Western clothing in undergraduate [AUDIO OUT] fashion.
After, those students were led into a discussion about the types of bodies that they designed for as part of the undergraduate fashion education. All of them replied that their classes, so far, had predominantly focused on designing for standard size female mannequins. And a few students remarked that they had indeed design garments for friends and families, but that was never part of their fashion education. It was something they just did in their spare time.

Instead, the domination of the mannequin in fashion design education means that the design process, in this discipline, is dominated by female bodies that are size eight or 10. I then asked students if they'd ever design garments for any of the people [AUDIO OUT], as people that they loved. And a few students replied that they did, indeed, think about a lover or sister when designing.

But the majority fell silent, remarking that they'd never considered designing for grandparent or younger family member. When I asked why they are mostly designing for an imaginary size eight female, the room fell silent. So, the second part of the class then required students to work collectively in small groups, and to design for the bodies that they identified as ones that they loved.

So as students worked, I noticed that they were beginning to use an alternative set of design criteria, where aesthetics were no longer the most important feature in their designs. Many told really moving stories of the person who they were designing for, whilst they were manipulating the fabric. For example, here, one student thoughtfully considered the physical consequences of aging on her grandparent's body and started to use wadding to change the mannequin's standardized features. And they added layers to represent the folds of skin around the abdomen.

In this way, the group of fashion students began to develop creative ways to challenge the dominant ideas around body normativity in fashion. Although, there was the issue that they were still working on a standard size female mannequin. So, it meant that conversations about hierarchies, about gender and body able ism, were absent.

So, returning to Hook's decolonial framework of love, new ideas for fashion curricula could offer opportunities to interweave a different fashion histories, economies, and politics in alternative ways, to find commonalities. And I want to test whether this might offer a space to counter alternatives to hetero-normative, gendered, racialized and ableist normative context prevalent in most fashion and wider design cultures.

But it was interesting. After doing this project, I was called into a meeting by the head of the program. And I was told that while the student feedback for the project was positive, the head of the program felt that outcomes looked unfinished. And they were really difficult to assess.

So, she added that she wasn't going to run [AUDIO OUT]. So, this shows the kind of complexity of how you can explore these alternative design processes. So, this design process has a number of limitations, due in part to it presenting design as something awkward, and creating designs that sit uncomfortably within conventional fashion and other design pedagogies education for the participants, for the discipline, for the institution itself, as well.

For me, this design process creates what the authors Boler and Zembylas call a pedagogy of discomfort. And so, Black feminist thinking in design education is a challenge to neoliberalism, and the ideas of modernism and celebratory art design narrative. So, to conclude, why does design education need Black feminist thinking?

Because in this project, there wasn't any technical instructions in fashion. There weren't mood boards. There were no one-to-one tutorials. There wasn't any written work.

There wasn't a big lecture. There wasn't technical-- as I said, technical instructions in pattern cutting. There weren’t any visits to see a fashion collection. There wasn't an industry placement, none of the conventional elements of a typical fashion design curricula in higher education.

Instead, this project provided [AUDIO OUT] to resist the dominant forms of fashion design, helping students to develop critical consciousness around how systems of racism, patriarchy and capitalism operate in design. In this way, students are critically engaging with their own and their peers' concerns and experiences, rather than the conventional top-down curricula. And in this way, fashion designers are developing their own practice [AUDIO OUT].

But how does this challenge the conventional form of design education? Can I have the next slide, please? The sociologist, Gurminder Bhambra, argues that these challenges are urgent. She recently warned in her book, from 2018.

"At a time when right-wing forces across Europe contesting the rights of sexual and religious minorities and mobilizing against the teaching of gender studies--" and more recently, as well, this has been critical race theory-- "--universities must reinforce their public function to provide space for critical engagement. To decolonize the University is to contribute to its ability to perform that role by further democratizing it as an institution. And to fail to do so is to ensure

that certain sections of society continue to have their views ignored as we approach what could be a tipping point in history."

Thank you for that. That's the last slide, and the end of what I had to say today. I hope you found that useful.

[THEME SOUNDS]