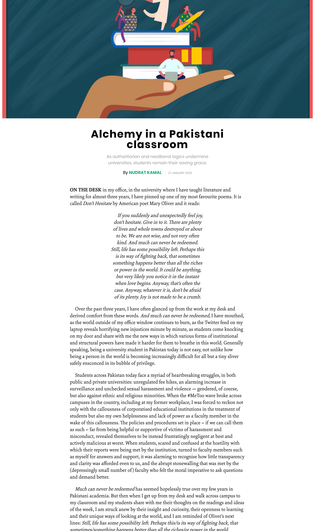

Alchemy in a Pakistani classroom

As authoritarianism and radicalism undermine universities, students remain their saving grace.

By **NUSRAT KAMAL** — 17 JANUARY 2022

ON THE DESK in my office, in the university where I have taught literature and writing for almost three years, I have pinned up one of my most favourite poems. It is called *Don't Hesitate* by American poet Mary Oliver and it reads:

> *If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,*
> *don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty*
> *of lives and whole towns destroyed or about*
> *to be. Nothing is exempt from time's*
> *wreckage. And much can never be retrieved.*
> *Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this*
> *is no way of fighting back, that sometimes*
> *something happens better than all the riches*
> *or power in the world. It could be anything,*
> *but very likely you notice it in the instant*
> *when love begins. Anyway, that's often the*
> *case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid*
> *of its power. Say it is not made to be a coward.*

Over the past three years, I have often glanced up from the work at my desk and derived comfort from these words. *And much can never be redeemed.* I have watched, as the world outside of my office window continues to burn, as the Twitter feed on my laptop reveals horrifying new injustices minute by minute, as students come knocking on my door and share with me the new ways in which various forms of institutional and structural powers have made it harder for them to breathe in this world. Generally speaking, being a university student in Pakistan today is no easy, not unlike how being a person in the world is becoming increasingly difficult for all but a tiny sliver safely ensconced in bubble of privilege.

Students across Pakistan today face a myriad of heartbreaking struggles, in both public and private universities: unregulated fee hikes, an alarming increase in surveillance and unchecked sexual harassment and violence — gendered, of course, but also against ethnic and religious minorities. When the #MeToo movement first across campuses in the country, including at my former workplace, I was forced to reckon not only with the callousness of corporatized educational institutions in the treatment of students but also my own helplessness and lack of power as a faculty member in the wake of this callousness. The policies and procedures set in place — if we can call them as such — far from being helpful or supportive of victims of harassment and misconduct, revealed themselves to be instead frustratingly designed to fail and actively malicious at worst. When students, scared and confused at the hostility with which their concerns were being met by the institution, turned to faculty members such as myself for answers and support, it was alarming to recognise how little transparency and clarity was afforded even to us, and the abrupt stonewalling that was met by the (depressingly small number of) faculty who felt the moral imperative to ask questions and demand better.

Much can never be redeemed has seemed hopefully true over my few years in Pakistani academia. But then when I get up from my desk and walk across campus to my classroom and my students share with me their thoughts on the reading and ideas of the week, I am struck anew by their insight and curiosity, their openness to learning and their unique way of looking at the world, and I am reminded of Oliver's words once more. *Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is no way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches* power in the world. As I've always believed, pedagogy would be beneath us somehow, as if teaching were an unpleasant inconvenience we have to get through but shouldn't spend much time thinking about. So I started my teaching career with no small amount of trepidation.

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It didn't help that, in my experience, people in academia usually don't seem to talk much about teaching at all, perpetuating the illusion that as academics we are supposed to always have our heads mired in Important Theoretical Abstractions — as if to reflect on the actual methods of pedagogy would be beneath us somehow, as if teaching were an unpleasant inconvenience we have to get through but shouldn't spend much time thinking about. So I started my teaching career with no small amount of trepidation.

Teaching combined all the things that scared me most: having an audience, speaking up in a crowd, being the center of attention. It is very much a performance. You have to command the attention of an audience for a significant amount of time every day, to communicate in a clear and comprehensible manner complex ideas, to make sure that your time in the classroom is valuable and meaningful for the students. But as much as those elements are vital for any teaching experience to be successful, I have also learnt that it is less about taking up space for myself than about creating a space where smart, articulate young people can together grasp and celebrate the way to a cleaner understanding of the complexities of our world, a space where students can engage with ideas with openness and curiosity. This is what makes the classroom experience, of course. There is still an unequal power dynamic between my students and myself, and not every class is an extraordinary revelation. So much of teaching is like alchemy: you walk into the classroom, well-prepared with an idea of how you want discussions to go, but after that it's a little like a leap of faith. Part of my teaching journey has been to accept that not every class goes well. Sometimes the overall energy levels are down, or I'm not at my best, or my students are distracted or tired or uninterested, and it just doesn't work. But when it does work, it feels like magic.

For me, a good class is where the discussion moves organically in directions that I hope and believe would be most helpful for students — it is always better, I think, once I have laid the necessary theoretical groundwork, for students to reach the conclusions I would ideally want for them to reach about certain texts or ideas by themselves, with me acting as a facilitator. Not only does that frequently happen, many of my classroom interactions have gone beyond that — students move discussions in directions I had not anticipated, or read texts in ways I had not thought of, expanding my own understanding in exciting ways.

In one of my courses on sci-fi and fantasy literature, when we were discussing *Bring Your Own Spoon* by Saad Hossain, a Bangladeshi-dystopian short story about a futuristic climate change-ravaged and class-divided Dhaka, students drew fascinating parallels between the world of the story and the ways in which we are burning, and want to be taught with respect and thoughtfulness. They are insightful and critical and delightfully funny. If you allow yourself to be open and humble and generous, they will bestow with you and keep on your toes with their wit and humour, and politely (or savagely) push back on your views.

I have frequently found my own worldview expand and be complicated in rich ways in my interactions with them in the classroom. I have had students explain to me the intricacies of the Kardashian-Jenner family tree in one breath and, in the next, present a thorough class critique using the Kardashians. I have had students read postcolonial theory and connect it to the video game they have been playing, students who read a sci-fi story set on a distant planet and, with no prompting, clearly and calmly draw parallels between the absurd inequities of the story and the real-life violence they see around them. I have had students who masterfully explain the nuances of critical theory using memes, who passionately argue about the evils of neoliberalism using analogies from superhero stories. Students are also much more adept at acknowledging nuance and complexity, and much more willing to recognise the ways in which their various privileges might prove them. They have been, in short, open to non-openly interrogating and challenging them, and even beneath the façade of cool detachment that some of them affect, I can sense a genuine desire to learn and know and understand.

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AFTER A NUMBER of years in academia, one can recognise the structural violence and inequities that permeate educational institutions in Pakistan, which affect both students and faculty members. In private institutions, there is the increasing neo-liberalisation of the educational model, which treats students simultaneously as customers to be fleeced and as bodies to be policed and disciplined. There are surveillance cameras to contend with, and regressive and misogynistic dress code policies, and absurd moral policing that can find arbitrary behaviours offensive — being a female student and lying on the grass, for example, or people of different genders sitting too close together.

There is also a damaging hierarchy within the faculty that reveres some while treating others as expendable, based on factors of gender and class and social capital: the PhD-level faculty versus the perpetually "junior" non-PhD-level faculty, for instance, and the faculty with the most foreign degrees versus the ones with mostly local degrees. This is how a unique characteristic of private higher education institutions and more part of the larger pervasive effects of late-stage capitalism, and its effects for faculty are in some ways similar to employees in other fields: there is often a wage gap between instructors, the convoluted bureaucracy frequently borders on malicious, the contracts are many times exploitative and unfair. In other ways, the effects of capitalism on academia are unique — the inherent conflict between the aims of academics and those of the profit-maximising corporate and administrative leaders has significantly shaped the higher education system everywhere.

There is also the matter of being young and a woman in a space that is structurally quite elite and male and old-school, and the quotidian discomforts inherent in occupying a space like this. A question — loaded and condescending and vaguely sexist — that is sometimes lobbed at me from colleagues and well-meaning acquaintances is "*A professor?* But you look so young to be a professor! Do your students even take you seriously?"

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All these factors manifest themselves in the classroom in various ways. For instance, unlike being a male professor — of any age, really — whose authority is assumed and unquestioned the moment he walks into a classroom, being a young female professor means I have to perform a certain kind of authority in the classroom in order to gain the respect of the students, especially at the beginning. It is a tricky thing to figure out how to embody authority as a female professor, much like how it is nearly impossible to perform the "right" kind of womanhood in all areas of life: you have to be nice so the students don't think you're a bitch, but not too nice or the students might attempt to push boundaries in various ways. You have to carefully calibrate the anger you sometimes feel, and think about the implications of expressing that anger in a particular way, both inside and outside the classroom. Outside the classroom, for example, if as a female professor you point out the flaws in institutional policy, you are quickly labelled as hysterical; the shows, for hartalia, the one who gets worked up over nothing. To paraphrase the great Sara Ahmed, the one who points out the problem becomes the problem herself.

This also complicates the student-teacher dynamic in various ways, because the hierarchy of power inherent in that relationship is by no means straightforward, although it is not destabilised completely. For instance, once in a class my students' request for an extension snowballed in a kind of badgering, where like twenty male students barred the exit and refused to let me leave until I relented. When I returned to class the next day and explained to them what the experience had felt like to me as a woman being surrounded by increasingly agitated men, the genuine shock and shame on many of the faces spoke to how unconscious these biases can be and how insidiously they can still affect human interaction.

DUE TO THIS structure that undergird undergraduate classrooms in Pakistani universities, it is easy enough to get disillusioned with the whole endeavour of being an academic and a teacher. It is hard work, often emotionally and intellectually draining, and at its worst moments can seem thankless and gruelling. But there are lessons other than the depressing knowledge of the structural problems of academic institutions that I learnt during teaching that are especially important — things which should be fairly obvious to anyone who has been a student themselves: that students want you to take your job seriously, to teach them conscientiously and with care; that students appreciate when you recognise that their views have value in the classroom and that this value deserves your respect; that it is on you as the one who has more power in the dynamic to establish appropriate and healthy boundaries in the classroom and outside; that it is overall better to err on the side of kindness when dealing with their absences or requests for extensions (there are always some students who take advantage of that, of course, but most students are trying their best and can use some empathy in their lives); that students, if given the space and opportunity to work and write on the things that matter to them, will produce passionate, electrifying work. Teaching is like anything else in life: a lot of what you get out of it depends on what you put in. If you approach the student-teaching interaction from a place of disdain or contempt (*ugi kal hye bachay...*), they are unlikely to offer you the best they have to offer, or to engage meaningfully with what you are trying to teach them. If, instead, you enter the classroom with open-mindedness and a certain amount of humility, they will recognise your effort and want to match it themselves. Students are much more likely to care about your course if they see that you care about them.

At various points in my time teaching, students have revealed to me, both in the classroom and outside of it, that they have experienced sexual violence. Sometimes they've been bold with me in my office, a student came to my office to discuss her being inattentive in class and explained that her cat had died, I could tell she fully expected me to be a jerk about it — to dismiss her genuine loss, to tell my eyes at her pain — but instead we bonded over our shared knowledge of what it means to love a pet. There was the time, after a particularly emotionally-fraught class on my course exploring representations of female friendship in literature, when a student wrote to me about how the reading and discussion had helped her understand her complicated grief at losing a close friend with whom she had a difficult relationship.

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In the same course, exploring the ways in which female friendship is often represented as a safe haven from the various daily violences of being a woman, a student shared how a reading one of the texts helped her recognise and make sense of the abuse she suffered in a past romantic relationship. In another course on cultural stories about demons around the world, students traced the ways in which good men told growing up, a student shared his own family's mythos which said that a djinn had been gifted to his great-grandfather, and the current of this power was passed down from father to son — we joked that he would one day have the dubious inheritance of a powerful djinn for his service. Another student shared his own family's djinn stories, using stories having taken place in his big ancestral *haveli* to poke fun at his privileged childhood. Another explained how her lack of interest in heterosexual marriage had been blamed by her family on the effect of a djinn-possession, leading all of us to explore the context in which cultural myths and folktales are used to police and conform to strict codes of gender roles and acceptable sexual behaviour.

There have been countless instances in which the storytelling and discussing various texts, when students have offered up part of their selves, both their sorrows and their joys. These instances have always reminded me that it takes a certain amount of bravery to open yourself up to the world in order to understand it better, to make yourself vulnerable so that you are able to look at others and engage with their joys — a bravery that students have gifted me with over and over, a gift that I would be foolish not to value.

I keep going back to Oliver's poem, and how she wants the reader not to dismiss the moments of joy and connection when they arise, even if they arise in small and unexpected ways. *Whatever it is, she says, don't be afraid of its power. Say it is not made to be a coward.* Whenever a class discussion is particularly electric, whenever students reveal facets of themselves and their thoughts and feelings in surprising and extraordinary ways, in the articulation of a subtle idea or a particularly sensitive reading of a complicated text or a witty remark that takes me by surprise, there is joy to be felt, and hope, and it would be a loss for myself to not revel in that hope, to not hold it close to my heart and carry it with me. *Joy is not made to be a coward.*

NUSRAT KAMAL writes on literature, film and education. She teaches at a private university in Karachi.
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