

THE POSTCOLONIAL UNIVERSITY

The argument I want to develop in this lecture is that universities, as we know them, are on the edge of becoming irrelevant to the mayhem unfolding around us (disappearing work, digital dictatorship, failing democracies, rising tribalism, and nobody knowing what the next disaster will be), and therefore the only way institutions of higher learning will make sense is through revolutionary redesigning of core activities so that students and faculties can find their way in a desperately unpredictable universe.

I have tried various titles for this address –post-truth university, post-human university –and finally settled for The Postcolonial University, something close to home. Nonetheless post-truth and post-human are significant strands in the discussion in the presentation.

I want to begin with mimicry and how that has been a strategy for establishing and reforming not only the universities but also the affairs of the state. In simple terms, by mimicry I mean copying, borrowing, and what we grandly call ‘learning from others’ which is really imitating and transferring knowledge from the former colonialists. If we scrutinize closely what the state and higher education are doing; it is precisely what other governments and universities have done. The very first university in the country was established in a similar manner by

professionals who had experience of what they called underdevelopment (the indigenous cultures of the Pacific have their own epistemologies and cannot ever be called underdeveloped). And so the function of the university was transferred from the metropolitan institutions, with a doze of African experience. We implemented the inherited disciplines which have eventually become barriers in finding wholeness and meaning. It gave us good feeling we were conducting research associated with those disciplines but little that was meaningful for us came out of our inquiry so that when 1987 happened we had no idea what calamity had descended upon us, and students and faculty ran helter skelter, some even got themselves captured. It was like apocalypse in our paradise. I have this cruel imagination: our universities in Suva are sitting smugly on a fault line, our scientists, with all their knowledge of ecology, cannot tell us if we will be running helter skelter again one day. I know this is very bad dark humour; however I just wanted that metaphor of fault line to draw parallels with our systems. What distresses me is that the trauma that our men, women and children had undergone and carry in their psyche caused by coups (now a perpetual fear), cyclones (category 5 is becoming almost the norm), uprootings from the farms where the umbilical ties are buried, and personal violations (not many students or academics are drawn to read Larry Thomas's soul shattering play *The Visitors* written in 2016 -- the universities have given up on reading, I shall talk about that a little later); these calamities do not feature in university's curriculum or any

debriefing programs. The problems are interlocking, affecting the social, moral and psychological well-being of our society, and we do not know enough about them. The universities have medical schools attached to them, and research is given high priority, yet it is left to newspapers to figure out the cause of crime and misdemeanor in society.

Let me take a moment to talk about reading then. I have touched briefly on reading in the context of tragedies in our country; a lot more has to be said on what the universities have done to reading. The universities were established historically for students to come and read books, listen to good minds, join in the common pursuit of truth, and learn how to live a worthwhile life. These demands haven't changed substantially. But modern universities have allowed the demise of reading as a deep, disciplined and contemplative activity without instituting a program of resistance; they will not be forgiven when the backlash takes place. They assume all reading is now online ignoring the fact everything on the internet is fleeting, unfocused and distracting. There is a good reason why Fiji ought to be particularly worried about the state of reading. Reading and writing came to Fiji relatively recently around 1835. We had a short spell of literacy and just when the written word was beginning to take its hold on the Fijian imagination, evident is spurts of creative activities, the younger generation changed its mind about books. There are regular reports of

decline in reading: the vernacular language teachers will tell you their students can barely read and write in their mother tongue; undergraduate tutors are known to complain frequently that a large proportion of students in their classes are semi-literate in the English language. Sceptics might dismiss these claims and point out that we have always said these things. Let's not mislead ourselves because things are very different in the 21st century.

It is not an exaggeration to say, in a real sense, we are at the dawn of an age of new illiteracy. What compounds the problem is literacy is not just reading and writing: a truly literate society derives pleasure and fulfilment from the written word in all its form: social, educational, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual. The universities are bound to be asked what they are doing to address these new forms of illiteracy. Some educationists are already warning that the students coming out of the universities are our new philistines; others more generously call them 'The Shallows'. A disillusioned philosopher of the internet surfacing from the Silicon Valley warns us: 'You are not a gadget'. Some sort of backlash is imminent and our universities will do well to become a force in the counteraction. One who knows what the internet is doing to our brains, the author of *The Shallows* (2011) brings a ray of hope when he says: "We are wary of what our devices are doing to us, but we are using them more than ever. And yet, history tells us, it's only against such powerful cultural currents that countercultural movements take place."

Universities have become feeble in the face of the overwhelming certainly of social media and technology; they have become enfeebled mostly because of their half-committed love affair with technology. The universities have adopted educational technology that has a lot of benefits in pedagogy, but there is no extensive or deep research on its unmistakable effect on students who have become captives in the digital landscape which, incidentally, provides the infrastructure for Post Truth, the word of the year for 2016.

I have identified two fields, very much on the periphery of universities thinking, yet crucial to our survival as vital communities and democratic state: the psychic wounds of our traumatized population and new forms of digital dictatorship. Our critique of the latter is not to decry educational technology, rather to see all it uses, appreciate its magic, and social benefits of all the blogging, facebooking, texting, tweeting and trolling; however at the same time the postcolonial university, which should understand all types of enslavement, has the responsibility to protect its students from the spell of conjurors of algorithms. We are small universities and we do not have great material resources to build large scale resistance; however we have the human resources to increase self-awareness, and forge counter discourses against the hegemony of the digital media. The signs are it is more likely technology will soon know more about us than we will know about ourselves. Philosophers, modern and ancient, have been telling universities to teach their students the mantra: Know Thyself;

the universities have now given that responsibility to algorithms. The postcolonial university, too earnestly devoted to training manpower for the state and power elites of industry, have the dilemma of negotiating its own autonomy. In the meanwhile it will go on doing what it has been always been doing – preparing students for the workforce -- oblivious of the fact that the work or professions the students are being trained for may not exist anymore. The mounting number of reports on the future of work reveal not just anxieties about employment but more importantly human beings without meaningful pursuits losing control of their lives. In choosing utilitarian objectives universities are losing the opportunity to educate students in another dimension of intelligence linked to living a worthwhile life in the midst of unpredictability.

I think I have hinted enough at some of the things that have gone wrong in our institutions of higher learning with their borrowed disciplines, regarded sanctimoniously as academic tradition. Academics who are colonized by their own disciplines do not easily give way to any dissenting philosophy. Yet dissent is what shaped the universities in the West after the 1968 student revolution. That episode brought to our attention the fact that disciplines and programs in universities are born out of particular historical moment, some going back to the middle ages, and they are subject to change depending on the compelling needs of the society.

As for the mission of higher education authority, it appears to have become a bureaucracy fortifying outmoded disciplines, regulating minors and majors, fixing credit hours, finding the perfect template, which like the holy grail, will give us everlasting happiness. Much of this activity again falls in line with my thesis of mimicry. This is what the well - endowed metropolitan universities habitually indulge in. Our task in education ministry or commission is more basic, of first enquiring what constitutes knowledge, whose knowledge is it, who is the knower and what is worth knowing; and then the archival work of sorting out the existing epistemologies, diverse forms of knowledge – eastern and western and Pacific, local and indigenous, philosophies, cartographies, vernaculars, and repressed knowledge -- and articulating a distinctly Fijian epistemology. It is inevitably a daunting undertaking but this is precisely what is involved in decolonizing the curriculum and pedagogies to liberate us from categories that imprison.

Educators sometimes joke that ‘higher education hasn’t changed since Socrates’ Academy two thousand years ago’. This is not an entirely truthful statement. We have tried at various times what we call ‘modernizing education’. In 1970’s, at the time of Fiji’s independence, the UNDP tried to help us decolonize our education by making it what was called more ‘relevant’. The outside agencies continue to offer advice on new knowledge and educational processes, flow of information, what good educational practices are, and how to implement life-long learning. Nothing they instruct us to do is

too deeply rooted in local context of various transgressions we have experienced, beginning with hurts of colonialism and indenture, and recent catastrophes. It was always been mimicry, trying to learn from foreign models, so little has evolved from within. There have been insignificant forays at reform periodically. The last attempt to conduct a comprehensive assessment of our education had to be aborted in the middle because of another coup in the year 2000. The higher education bodies talk about modernizing but do not take into account the cost of simply assuming that modernism is progressive, liberal and emancipatory. For us in Fiji, the pursuit of progress lead to creating a handful of rich and majority of unrepresented subaltern poor without a voice. And instead of liberty and emancipation we have had cycles of coups and authoritarian rule, thus ending any hope of continuous democratic nation-building.

The university academics of course are devoted to bookish modernism until they discover, at an international conference most likely, that modernism is dead, overtaken by postmodernism.

Postmodernism is a fanciful sounding word whose principles are more a part of our daily life than we realize. They come to us through entertainment, the internet and educational texts. Postmodernism is connected to post-truth, an important thread in our discussion; it requires a bit of attention. For academics, the postmodern appeared to be an attractive idea at a

particular moment in our history. We know from experience how political events can make reality unstable, and postmodernism says that is fine because then reality can be made, unmade and re-made, at least theoretically. Nothing is permanent according to postmodern thinking: government, institutions, language, texts, beliefs, meaning or truth. Implicitly or explicitly this view has penetrated academic disciplines. The culture of the postmodern embraces ambiguity and the notion of game or play in literary and academic creation. That is also fine because using subversive laughter of game we can unmask authority and self-righteous bigotry.

It is not easy to represent the absurd and cynical side of academic life when you are part of it. David Lodge (who came to Fiji some years ago), an English academic, finds himself in a similar situation when he sets out to write a farcical novel about campus life in *Small World* published in 1984. The novel is like a soap opera about high-minded academics spouting lofty intellectual theories, in real life they are cynical careerists whose true concerns are jobs and appointments, cuts and grants, travel and conferences. It is daring for fiction to show how those who should give society so much have abandoned their life to egotistical pursuits and following undisguised worldliness. One of the recurring metaphors for academia in the book is wasteland. Lodge's is a more positive accomplishment of postmodern writing; the novel is full of self-reflexivity, allusions and theories employed to parody or mock aspects of academic life. This is kind of brutal self-criticism that

is required in our academia to redeem our work. Nothing like that about campus life exists here either in form of fiction or non-fiction though a couple of academics at the University of the South Pacific attempted a series of subversive underground leaflets, probably lost forever, to satirize the management of the university in the 1980's.

I have introduced David Lodge as a route to my own incursion into postmodern writing. It took the shape of a novel in Hindi that has as its background, in a kernel chapter, the mess left by the events of 1987. The political leaders fail to find their way out of the quagmire they themselves have created. During the protracted period of unpredictability, priests, academics, jurists, and informed public, coming from different directions, strive for the survival of democracy. The subaltern hero of my novel also conceives an idea in his untutored head to heal the nation. At that very moment, from a far corner of Macuata, a bull begins to speak; it sounds like he is whispering a deep and profound message: Do something. The news jolts the protagonist of the novel into action: he vows to do something. He summons a conference of the district's sorcerers, black magicians, quacks, necromancers, occultists, charmers and, of course, the bull. There are three days of fierce debate, and midnight hoodoo. It is not known if there is an official communiqué; anyway the delegates abruptly decide to go on a tour of the nondescript rural sites, and come together again for the culminating moment: a group photo. Unfortunately for posterity, the photo session has to be aborted because the bull,

sitting in the front row ejects such an evil mess, so toxic that the delegates have to scramble away post-haste without ceremony.

This is the more trivial and inconsequential aspect of postmodern writing where irony and cynicism takes over the responsibility of real engagement, to find counter narratives . Postmodernism taught academics that it was intellectually clever to cultivate cynicism and language of irony; that is, to say one thing and mean another (as I have been trying to do this afternoon). Irony and cynicism takes away the responsibility of finding real solutions and answers to perverse problems of postcolonial life. An American author justly berated postcolonial intellectuals for this, saying: “ Third world rebels are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative ... make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us”.

The kind of thinking I’m trying to define is conveyed to vulnerable undergraduates through a modernist curriculum and current pedagogy that says to them that the old school pursuit of truth has little practical value in real affairs of life, so do not expect your political leaders, who are already baffled by thoughts of a multitude of impending disasters, to always take truth into consideration in decision-making, or trust the media to be reliable storytellers. They are all like the students themselves who are suffering the ailment of selective attention

and not able to handle truth in their blogs and messages. Truth is in retreat in the world of the internet anyway. Our scientific education affirms that everything is relative, and the humanities find there is a thin line between fact and fiction. They all agree having doubt is a virtue, and therefore we should go on arguing without hope of any conclusion. These claims suit bureaucrats of all types who have to routinely fabricate information with an illusion of truth.

Clearly the problem identifies itself: the issue is epistemological and the first business of universities is epistemology.

The local minds have never come together in Fiji to determine what the postcolonial education, or the postcolonial university, ought to be. We have left that to experts and professionals. Fiji has produced, within the short period of political independence, an incredible group of academics, scholars, intellectuals, some of them residing in the diaspora who should be part of the collaborative consultation. In 2004, Thabo Mbeki made a statement at the Association of Commonwealth Universities in which he said: “ Our entire continent remains at risk until the African University, in the context of a continental reawakening, regains its soul ...The new Africa can only be a product of the creative interface between the public, private and civic sector domains. At the centre of this interface is education.”

A term that universities would like to stay clear off is Soul, just as they would like to sidestep aims and goals. These are

problematic issues. Higher Education is more at ease with the down to earth, mundane matters like funding of programs and widening access. Because the problematic issues are fudged doesn't mean the debate has ended. The collaborative group I have identified of Fijians and diasporic intelligentsia will understand why it necessary for postcolonial education to engage in difficult conversations like regaining Soul and understanding the soul's version of truth. These subjects have to be brought to the forefront of our dialogue, and a language needs to be forged to articulate the nature and work of the postcolonial university. One should be wary of the charge of mystification when the word Soul is mentioned; let's define what is involved here. It entails what we have set aside as problematic. Apart from the matter of aims and purpose, the problematic is the university as site of contradictory developments: serving the nation's workforce needs; paradoxically, it also facilitates very effectively the penetration of transnational capital, with drive for ever expanding profit, consumerism, homogenizing or leveling of cultures. The universities are tangled in all this through adopting the corporate model –the Vice Chancellors performing as CEOs, advocating entrepreneurship, marketing the institutions, giving students the demeaning status of clients.

There is a bright side of course: universities are also the location of emancipatory projects. We saw this happening briefly when the first university was established; there was something like a Pacific-wide renaissance (it was recognized as

such by the media and by scholars). The group that will undertake this emancipatory role, with the higher education commission as the nerve centre, has a formidable task. It can take inspiration from Margaret Mead who knew this part of the world well; she wrote: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, organized citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that has.”

Time is running out for reform. But time is also right for collaborative work: out of the rubble of discredited, insidious theories is arising a call for end of cynicism and absurdity, and instead a leadership for radical change that will bring back the focus on what is truthful and on meaning of existence.

Whatever the new movement is called – New Realism or Positive Realism -- we have to align ourselves with that call, and heed the words of Vaclav Havel, once the President of Czech Republic, who taught us so much about dissent, he wrote: “The deeper the sense of absence of meaning –in other words absurdity -- the more energetically meaning is sought.”

We have to believe the postcolonial university will somehow find the meaning of its existence.

