



Uncomfortable Truths

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ABSTRACT: As a postcolonial scholar and professor from more than one postcolony, the author knows the British colonizers’ “Divide and Rule” policies and their use of colonial binaries disseminated through the English education system continue to haunt the postcolonies and the diaspora even today. Therefore, awareness that decolonization has been successful only to an extent, as we continue to have internalized racism and oppression, and knowing that pandemics, like COVID-19, will continue to decimate humanity while the former colonizers, in the form of globalism, will continue to exploit and destroy humans, nonhumans and the earth, the author argues that we need to redefine knowledge so we may learn to speak in altered ways to create change. She shares her stories of struggles and attempts at resistance to colonialism, ideas of modernity, and globalism to speak to generations to come, so that humanity may become interconnected and compassionate in our love for each other and work together toward justice for all through new decolonial epistemologies and ontologies.

KEYWORDS: decolonial epistemologies; exiles; intergenerational memories; pedagogy of the stupid; postcolonial narratives; transnationalisms

I was kept back in kindergarten for years. When I was but six years old, I was beaten black and blue by my teacher Preety Das—a westernized and modern woman from Burma where I was born in 1951—for coming to school without my school bag. Next year, my father, after consultation with her about my stubbornness and dullness, put me in private tuition with her. When I was eight years old and was held back again, the nuns would periodically parade me around the school with a paper bag hat or dunce cap with STUPID written on

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it. All the children laughed at me. I laughed along with them, but I knew in my heart something was not right, something small but puzzling. It made me think of uncomfortable questions. As I progressed in the Convent school in the 1950s, I learned uncomfortable truths.

I learned the difference between different “kulas” from my third-grade teacher, Maggie. It was just before the military coup that toppled the democratic government of U Nu. The year was 1961. My teacher implied all Indians were dirty and greedy. Trying to use humor to address the issue (as I had seen my father, who was born in the mountains of Shan States and had Shan humor, do on most occasions), I said: “Teacher, if there were no kulas, we wouldn’t have *kulathaing* [chairs] or *kulaga* [curtains].”

She looked at me with, dare I say, venom, and said, “Those are the Kula phew, the white foreigners, not like you, the black ones. You are so stupid!”

My smile dissolved as the rest of the class tittered with laughter. I thought about it for years, hearing her words in other classes, whenever I tried to ask a question or contribute my two cents worth in a discussion. However, having inherited an indomitable spirit from my Punjabi and Sikh ancestors, I continued, learning from my experiences. One day, when I was old enough, I learned to embrace differences and have gone on to teach what Sayan Dey calls the “Pedagogy of the Stupid” by “embracing stupidity.” Dey states: “Given that stupidity is a systematic process of dehumanizing and derecognizing the diverse indigenous systems of knowledge production, ‘embracing stupidity’ is the honest self-reflective process of identifying ourselves as stupid which pushes us towards a de-hierarchical, plural world in which knowledge is horizontally produced rather than vertically.” I have learned from my own age-mates as well as from my teachers, but mostly from people that have, like me, been marginalized and othered, and who have embraced the “Pedagogy of the Stupid.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on into 2021 and uncountable lives—particularly those that are poor and those that are predominantly black and persons of color—are continuing to be lost, one searches, once again as one did when young, to figure out ways to understand the meaning of one’s existence, seek out interconnections, and see how one has or can make a difference. It has been more than a year now, and I still can’t wrap my mind around the loss of lives and the pain and suffering of loved ones and complete strangers, not only in the United States, but also around the world. Why the suffering? Yes, to be born is to suffer, as the Buddha said, but this amount of suffering and death—how do we make sense of it? How do we write about it in a way that provides an acceptable logic within the global context of this pandemic? Why write at all? What do I know about the pandemic and the violence occurring within the

U.S. and the world that many already don't know, and how would my knowledge and learning add anything of significance? Who am I to think that what I say will matter, especially as I've been told, throughout my life in the U.S. that my knowledge is moot, as an immigrant and a woman who happens also to be a senior citizen, that my thoughts are not my own but only a shadow cast by western knowledge? That the knowledge that I accumulated over the years in Burma, India, Iraq, and finally in the U.S. is not as good or up to the standard of people from the west?

I want to make sense of it, even if in a small way, and the only way, as a professor and scholar of postcolonial world literature, is to write about it, even if in the form of a journal or an essay. But:

- What do I know about the pandemic that thousands upon thousands of people don't already know?
- We have been inundated with the news of it through the visual representation of death and dying, of the colorful blooming image of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, which appears fascinating and dangerous.
- Why does it matter what I think?
- Why write about it?

I think, if I write about it and the results provide a tiny bit of wisdom, then maybe it will be helpful to someone else who is in the same boat as I, an immigrant from a small, troubled country glancing back to her homeland of Burma, who sees an infinite amount of suffering and deprivation from the comfort of my Upper Peninsula of Michigan home. My extended family members and friends are huddled in tiny homes and apartments in the metropolitan city of Rangoon as well as in the small town of Taunggyi in the mountains of Shan States; others are watching with worry from their home in Punjab, India. The news media is not reliable. The government is not reliable. Leaders, like Aung San Su Kyi and Narendra Modi, have muffled voices or have muffled their own voices in the face of atrocities toward minorities and the marginalized and as I write this, Burma is brutalized, once again, by a military coup. Locally and globally, things don't seem to make sense anymore.

Along with the pandemic, we are seeing not only horizontal hostilities, but also immense violence and racism and deaths of black men and women due to police and state violence leading to the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement; the protests against police and state violence in the U.S. and the world are unprecedented and humanity is moved by the sight of activists marching in the street in thousands. That these protests are being brutally put

down by federal law enforcement agents in the U.S. at the time of the writing of this essay is unpalatable and incongruous. Humanity is in danger not only from the natural world, but also from our own politicians and law enforcement agents.

I saw media images of migrant workers in India who were rushing to go back to their homes in rural areas after the trains and trucks started moving again on the 12th of May 2020 after more than a month of lockdown. Tens of thousands of workers moved across the states of India in excruciating heat in any kind of transportation they could access—trains, buses, trucks, or they simply walked or used odd transportation; a migrant laborer built a “thela,” a wooden bed attached to a motorcycle and made his way, along with his extended family, only to get into an accident on the highway home. He ended up dead. Many others in the extended family were injured. Stuffed to the gills in trucks like pickled French beans, hungry and thirsty, many women, pregnant and with young children, waited for hours to make it home. Railway stations were packed and so crowded that the people moved as if they were one organism, crushing bodies to get into the moving trains. Did they want to leave or were they forced to get out of the cities so that the middle class and the elite would be saved, as their departure would stop, or at least slow, the transmission of the virus? Many say they were forced to leave while others simply left as they didn’t have money to pay for rent or for food. Early in May 2020, a group of workers, tired from their trek and having fallen asleep on the train tracks that they were walking on to reach home, were crushed to death by a train. Trains were not supposed to be running then; it was a freight train. Trucks were smashing into each other with migrant workers packed in them.

I think back to the days when I lived in Delhi and had to travel over two hours one-way to get to college in buses stuffed with men and women. In the heat and dust, poked and prodded by lustful young and old men, there were plenty of times when I was almost crushed between or beneath bodies and the metal rails of the seats, nearly fainting, but wanting to be educated I made the effort every day. I was an immigrant, a stateless citizen from Burma in New Delhi, an exile, a refugee, and we were eleven people in the extended family living in a small apartment, sometimes going to bed without food. My parents, victims of the brutal military regime in Burma, had to send us ahead to try to sell our house so we would have some money in India. They couldn’t make it out, as their visa was refused, time and again. Stateless and nearly homeless, I survived hunger and poverty, got a free education as a refugee, made it in India, one way or the other. I can think back to those days and feel the pain of the people suffering in India, Burma, and every part of the globe, as if I am being

crushed in an overcrowded bus at this time of the pandemic: *Am I feeling people's pain in a heteropatric or idiopathic way, as Marianne Hirsch writes regarding the survivors of the Holocaust and intergenerational trauma? Am I over-appropriating the pain of others and saying I feel the pain, I am the victim, or can I still feel the pain of others and empathize? What do I know about the pain of others?*

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are thoughtful, scared, and pensive. As I walked on Lake Superior in the evenings when the sun was setting or in the early morning when the mist was rising on the surface of the cold water, I thought of globalization and interconnectedness. So many questions and hardly any answers. But one must ask, and one must try to make a difference for those without a voice. As a professor at a university, I do have a voice, even if small, and I must attempt to find interconnections with the marginalized and disenfranchised, as I am privileged and have plenty of food, a warm and solid house, and friends and family who care.

I live alone and think I may die alone.

For now, I am safe.

For now, I have questions:

1. What is of global significance for me?
2. How am I in this world?
3. Why am I in this world?
4. Do I come to this earth for a period of time and then, suddenly, one day just disappear? What is the significance of my life?
5. What is my contribution in making the earth and its inhabitants, human and non-human, better?
6. What kind of knowledge am I receiving due to the Covid-19 pandemic?
7. Are my knowledge and understanding useful even when I have been told throughout my life, in implicit and explicit ways, that it is not good enough?

I think about my parents, both born and raised in Burma, who gave birth to six children: What is their contribution to the world? How did they live? What did we learn from their lives and have we, their six children, added anything of value to the world? What knowledge did we receive from their example of living in Burma and India? What does value mean in this context? Does it mean how we value life? Does it mean how we value each other? The family? The community? The earth?

Both my parents were born in Sikh families, although my paternal grandmother, a farmer's daughter from Punjab in pre-partition India, was from a Hindu family. After her marriage, my grandmother converted to Sikhism. However, in our household, we practiced a hybrid of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism (as both my parents and all but one of my five siblings were born in Burma, where Buddhism is practiced and not preached, so we imbibed it in our daily practices) while in the Convent school run by Italians and Irish Roman Catholic nuns, where all the eleven siblings and cousins from the joint family—consisting of my parents, aunts, uncles, and grandmother—studied, we learned to pray to Jesus and the Virgin Mary. In fact, all my early prayers were to Our Father and to the Virgin Mary, as I couldn't quite understand my grandmother's recitation of the Ramayana, nor could I fathom the Sikh prayers of my mother. When not praying to the Christian God and Saints, I learned to meditate quietly at the Buddhist pagodas, as I would see the Burmese people do in their daily prayers. Going to the Sikh temples each Sunday was a treat, as I would meet other Sikh agetates, help prepare the food for the Sikh communal kitchen, help distribute the food to the congregation, and partake of the delicious, vegetarian food. My paternal grandmother would take me to the Hindu Mandir on Friday evenings where I would hear beautiful bhajans and chanting, but the best was to get the prasad of fresh fruit or panjeeri flour browned in ghee and sweetened with sugar. Yet, sitting at the Standing Buddha pagoda on top of the Taunggyi mountain and simply observing my breath and the interconnections to the people and the earth around me was a lesson I never forgot.

But why does it matter what sort of cosmologies and religions impact us, what sort of knowledge and learning we incur in life, if we are asking about value—about how we value each other, the earth, communities, people who are marginalized and oppressed, not conforming with mainstream ideas of being valuable and esteemed?

When did I realize these questions were important to me? As a child in Burma growing up in a Sikh family surrounded by Burmese Buddhists and being taught by Christians in the Convent school, I didn't realize I was any different from others except to know that I looked different from my neighbors and friends. But that didn't bother me, or so I thought. I loved going over to my next-door neighbor's house and sitting with the elders while they talked, simply soaking in the sun in their large wooden sitting room. The place belonged to two sisters in their middle age who never married and who taught at our school. I remember the peace I felt falling asleep on the chairs while they talked. When they moved away, and the Inlay Lake dwellers, the Nyeins, moved in with their two sons and one daughter, we all became schoolmates.

Their house was another place to go to and sit in tranquility with the elders while the children played outside. Their maid, a young cousin of the children, cooked food from the lake area, which, whenever I was hungry, was provided for me in the kitchen. The taste of garlic chili fish lingers to this day. I learned from Ma Ma, the Intha maid, about catching fish, making fish paste, cleaning rice, and cooking Shan food.

When I was about five or six, I realized that the neighbors across the street, Mr. and Mrs. Pu and their children, were beautiful and that I wanted to become like them; having heard them call me Kula, the foreigner, I began noticing our differences. The sisters had short, straight hair with bangs while all my siblings, including my brothers, had long uncut hair, which we used to wash with homemade soap on Sundays. We would all sit in the sunshine to dry our hair while mother would give us peeled oranges to eat as we soaked in the sun. We saved all the peels. Mother dried them. She would then pound the dried skin, mix the powder with curd, and apply it to our skin before our communal bath in the outdoor bathroom where metal barrels were filled with water and left out in the sun to warm for our baths. Although I loved combing my siblings' long and lustrous hair and applying warmed coconut oil to it and the long braids that mother made for us or the knots on my brothers' heads, I grew conscious of the greasiness as I grew older, especially when my neighbors told me I had "kula" smell. I didn't want to be different from the Burmese people anymore, so one day, I went across the street to the Pu's house and, while we were sitting in their kitchen munching on raw mangoes and fermented fish paste with crushed chilis, I asked the Pu sisters, four of them, how they were so beautiful and had such small noses and slanted eyes when I had such a large nose and such googly eyes. The third sister, the mischievous one, who was a few years older than me, suggested to her older sisters that, maybe if they did a ritual, I could become like them. Laughing silently, the older siblings sitting in a circle, took the mortar and pestle, sat me in front of it, asked me to close my eyes, and, hitting the mortar seven times with the pestle, they gently tapped my nose with it. They asked me to go home, make a wish at night to have a small, flat nose like them, and when I woke up, my wish would be fulfilled, if I was a good girl. That I never became like them, even after a few such rituals, and that disappointment filled my young heart is another story in my journey to adulthood, but I became much more aware of my differences, my skin color, my hairy arms and eyebrows, and more specifically, I became conscious of my father and brothers' long hair and turbans. I learned a valuable lesson about differences and about exclusions.

And so—what? What happened to my psyche as I heard my neighbors' children chanting racist songs about Indians and “kulas,” the black foreigners, about the “kulas” who ate beans and levitated, about the Sikh boys who went under a castle and lost their turbans? Or was it when the kindergarten teachers selected me for special punishment as a distraction during the long days of teaching? I enrolled in kindergarten when I was five at St. Anne's Convent High School. Five years before, my oldest sister was denied admission by the nuns when my turbaned father, speaking broken English, went to the school to enroll his firstborn. Humiliated, he asked my maternal uncle, a clean-shaven Sikh, fluent in English (as he worked for the British administration), for help, as his daughter was already studying in that school. He succeeded. Thereafter, all of us became students at the school. The nuns were extremely strict with us, but they were especially strict with day scholars—students who lived at home and commuted to the school (as opposed to the rich borders who lived in dormitories throughout the school year)—orphaned Christian children from the Orphanage, and Indian and Chinese children.

How did I learn the “Pedagogy of the Stupid” as a child growing up in a working-class family? My mother was from what my paternal grandmother derogatorily called the low-caste tailoring community, although Sikhs are not supposed to believe in the caste system. My father was a son of immigrants from the poorer section of Punjab in colonial India from the farmer's (caste) community. His father, at the age of thirteen, became an apprentice to his maternal uncle who drove a lorry/truck from India to Burma, first becoming what is known as a “spare,” then becoming a driver, and then becoming a helper in a bottle shop that produced fizzy green drinks that his uncle opened deep in the heart of the Shan States. My maternal grandfather, an orphaned son of tailors, also became a tailor's apprentice to his uncle in colonial Burma—first as a dishwasher, then learning to make buttonhole eyelets for shirts, and finally learning how to sew. Both as young men went back to Punjab and married and lived in Burma under British rule. Although many Burmese people hated Indians (as most of them came as administrators working for the British), in the Shan States, where the Shans were favored by the British, where they worked hard to earn a living for their families, they were tolerated. My father, when he was just thirteen years old with a long sideways braid (as he didn't know how to tie a Sikh turban), ran away from his village and enrolled himself at the Taunggyi American Baptist Mission school. That is where he learned that the British were superior to the Burmese and Indians. His parents, too, eventually moved to Taunggyi, the capital of Shan States, where my maternal grandfather and his family lived. One day, a few years later in 1939, while he was helping out

in his father's petty trading shop, a Shan royal, a Sao Bwa, came to shop and, after purchasing some fabric, gave a torn ten Kyat note to my father. When he refused to accept the note, he was brutally beaten, his turban, which he had newly learned to tie, knocked off, and his long uncut hair unraveled. His Sikhness was always a threat. It was a threat that his sons would carry with them as young men growing up in Burma, then in India, and finally in the U.S. In this final "home," they eventually sacrificed their religion for the sake of "civilization," or to be considered "civilized" and more like some of the racist white people they worked for or had run-ins with in New York and Texas. They eventually would cut off their long hair and their beards.

My parents married during the Japanese occupation of Burma. One day, my father was beaten by the Japanese soldiers for refusing to continue to do manual labor for the whole day. His younger brother was forcefully recruited as a "coolie" into the Azad Hind Fauj, Subas Chandra Bose's Indian National coalition army with the Japanese forces, and almost died on the march to India called "Delhi Chalo." My mother's older brother, too, was recruited, but became an interpreter for the Japanese as he spoke English, Japanese, Hindi, and Punjabi. He, too, escaped being killed by the Allied bombs on the way to India. After my eldest sister was born, and my mother was pregnant again, the whole family had to hide in the jungles of Burma as the Allied Armies were bombing Shan States incessantly. They went into hiding by the Inlay Lake, having taken a few bags of salt to barter for food. One day, the boat in which my mother was taking a bag of salt to the floating market in Inlay Lake overturned and she lost the bag. She couldn't speak for over a month. It was only as she sat at the Buddhist monastery with her infant daughter, listening to the monks' chat, that her speech returned. I have only felt this silence once from my mother. When she finally came to Delhi from Burma after we were estranged for over three years, seeing how her daughters had suffered in the harsh city of Delhi, she became childlike and clung to me for days like a baby. Her younger sister was both my aunt and my "milk mother." She had a baby thirteen days after I was born and had ample milk while my mother, who was weak from having me, her fourth child, became anemic, so my aunt took me to her breast. She would become mentally ill in India after we lost our home in Burma. As a nineteen-year-old college student, I would have to take her for her electro-shock therapy in the Delhi Government hospital. Yet, she, along with my mother and father, would travel for days in dirty trains and on rutty roads in trucks to make a living in the border towns of Burma and India to sell goods in order to feed us in Delhi, but that was much later, and in another country. Still, the dislocations and exiles due to colonialism will haunt us for decades and generations. British

colonialism dislocated my family from Punjab to Burma and then back to Punjab and then, decades later, to many other parts of the western world where we were marginalized and seen as stupid due to our accent and our skin color. Yet, the lessons we learned from our marginalization were either to adapt, as many of my siblings did, or to resist and relearn. I did the latter.

For example, after World War II, my grandmother, who was born in Punjab, took her family back to the land of her birth. My mother was pregnant with her second child. After my parents, my grandparents, and my sisters arrived in grandmother's home and, on the piece of land they called their own, my second sister was born in December of 1946. However, they couldn't stay in Punjab for long, as the riots between Hindus/Sikhs and Muslims began in early March due to the imminent partition of India. As the violence escalated, they had to leave their home in the middle of the night with just the clothes on their backs and a few valuable possessions. My sister slid from my mother's nerveless hands and lay on the earth for minutes before she was discovered by my father's younger brother, who took her back to my dazed mother. They walked for miles before they got on the train to Lahore that narrowly escaped becoming a ghost train, although their train was attacked. They escaped somehow but over ten million became refugees and almost two million died. My grandfather had refused to leave his home in India for the second time. He saw his first departure as voluntary, although colonialism had a hand in it. He regarded the second time as forced. Again, colonialism had a hand in it. This time, he had stayed back while the others left. Two days later, my father went back to fetch him with an army truck; he was hidden in his Muslim neighbor's house, as the rioters came to attack his home. He left the key to his home with his neighbor, promising to come back soon to reclaim it. They went all the way back to Burma and began life from scratch. Grandfather began going to the Thailand border to purchase goods with the little money he had, which he brought back to Taunggyi to sell and feed the family. He died within a few months from a broken heart. Or that's what Grandmother said. Many Muslims and many Sikhs killed each other during the Partition, but many, like my grandparents' neighbors, saved Sikhs.

My father became the head of the family, taking care of not only his two children, but also his mother and his three younger brothers. We all, the rest of the four siblings and five cousins, were born in Burma. Father wanted us to succeed in life and enrolled us in the local Convent school. He urged us to learn English and become like the nuns. He wanted us to learn, to be smart, and to be like the former colonizers who had taught him how to be "civilized" by teaching him English at the American Baptist Mission School. Western education not only alienated us from our own language, Punjabi, but also our

hybrid Punjabi and Burmese culture. However, even though alienated and dislocated from both Punjabi and Burmese cultures due to our altered psyches, something must have remained for me to learn to question my teachers when I was but ten years old. Why were the black foreigners less than the white ones?

In 1962, when the Ne Win government toppled the democratically elected U Nu regime through a military coup, the brutal Burmese Way to Socialism commenced. All businesses and schools were nationalized, demonetization led to vast chaos and deprivation, and ethnic divisions and civil wars ensued and continue to this day, leading to loss of land, mass migrations, and a refugee crisis in border towns. Thousands of Karen, Karenni, Shan, and Mon people are displaced due to the civil wars that began after the independence of Burma in 1948. The areas that the Shans and Karen inhabit are rich in natural resources. These people are regularly bombed by the Burmese military. Shan States, which are part of the Golden Triangle, the area which borders Thailand, Laos, and Burma, the world's highest producer of heroin until the twenty-first century (now, it is Afghanistan, although Burma is close to reclaiming that ignoble title) was "protected" by the British colonizers. In fact, in 1958, it almost seceded from Burma, but then the government took back its promise to give greater autonomy to the Shans.

Similarly, the Karen (from the Karin State), protected by the British colonizers, in fact supported the British in their war efforts against the majority Burmans, so that when Burma became liberated in 1948, the Karens, who were abandoned by their colonial benefactors, began a long revolution against the Burmese government. It escalated into brutal armed struggles with the Ne Win military regime. The majority of the struggle was about land use. Karen land is being forcefully confiscated by the ruling government through one ruse or another, often through violent measures. Routine military raids and bombing of the villagers occur, leading to a refugee crisis with thousands living in dismal conditions in the Thailand/Burma border camps. Thousands upon thousands of ethnic Burmese refugees from the Karen, Karenni, and Shan communities, among others, are living in abject conditions. The people are displaced from their home and their ancestral lands due to the Burmese government's confiscation of much of the land in these states for mining and for development. Many of the projects belong to Chinese companies. Thus, colonialism morphed into neocolonialism and neoliberalism, and the poor people of Burma continue to suffer untold miseries.

Similarly, my community, the Sikhs, who were used by the British colonizers to wage a war against the colonized Hindu and Muslim majority (consider, for example, the 1857 Indian Revolution, when Sikhs protected the English from

the ire of Hindus and Muslims), were abandoned by the British after the independence of India. The violence that the Sikhs faced during the Anglo-British wars of 1845 and 1846 and that continued through being made a subject people of the British, and especially “favored,” led to fragmented psyches of a people that still haunt them in postcolonial India and the diaspora. Punjab, where my grandfathers and grandmothers lived and where the majority of Indian Sikhs still live, was once the land of the 1960s Green Revolution. This was due, in large part, to British intervention in Punjab’s agricultural “reforms” through which smallholders were encouraged to commodify their products, leading to land erosions due to the building of massive canals for irrigation. The green revolution, according to Vandana Shiva, while touted as a great technological accomplishment, in fact left the land and the people of Punjab brutalized. Punjab, once seen as the “breadbasket” of India, is now a region of drugs and violence, of poverty and disenfranchised youth, of rampant suicide by farmers, and of some of the highest rates of femicide. The violence, unleashed almost a century ago, continues in a cyclical fashion, leaving the most vulnerable populations and beings on the earth in peril. Capitalism, with its profit motive, continues to ravage the earth’s inhabitants, the “wretched” or the “damned,” as Frantz Fanon put it. While the violence of poverty in the former colonies continues in the neocolonial era, and many continue to be wretched, the myth of the American Dream is slowly, but surely, being dismantled in the time of the novel coronavirus, and the gap, racialized and classed, is being further cracked open, leading to violence and brutality against immigrants and people of color, especially when they are black.

COVID-19 comes from the exploitation of the animals and poor people, which globalization has exposed to us and which spreads the virus around the globe. While the majority of the vulnerable—old people, people with preexisting health conditions, people of color, black and poor people, “migrant” laborers from rural areas from around the world—are dying in disproportionate numbers, the politicians, be they in India or the U.S., continue to think of profit and, due to their greed, allow thousands upon thousands of people to perish. While, in earlier times, we didn’t have the science to cope with pandemics, we do now, but, as can be seen from the poor response in 2020 to the pandemic by the U.S. federal government and the President of the so-called “Richest Nation on Earth,” U.S.-Americans are dying in droves. While the deaths are visible and the dying are counted in numbers (although some deaths are not added in the COVID-19 count, as the patients weren’t tested), the deaths of Indians in India and poor and marginalized people in Burma are not seen or are rendered invisible due to the caste and class components of many of the afflicted.

What do all these deaths mean to me? Why, when only one or two people that I know have been impacted by the virus, does my heart feel so heavy? Why do my thoughts turn constantly to all those people dying and left alone in morgues for days and then buried in unknown graves? Where is the consciousness of the leaders who continue to talk about the economy? How do they separate themselves from all those beings whose lives are lost? Is this globalism? Is this the capitalist world economy?

While we are sheltering in place, the earth and the environment are healing, which means we are so interconnected that when one is sick, so is the other—when humanity is sick, it is because the earth has been sickening from our actions. We face no longer being interconnected with each other, nor with the environment. We are each left for ourselves.

I came to the U.S. so that my then husband and I could offer a better life to our children who were tiny babies when we immigrated. My sister was a citizen, so we obtained a green card to come. We were not hungry in India. My husband had a job as a research chemist in a paper mill. We lived in a rural area of Bengal at the paper mill colony. Why did we leave everything we knew in India and travel across the world to come to the U.S.?

My husband had received a grant to study abroad in Norway. There, in a highly technically advanced university, he learned to make paper. When he returned to India, the work environment was not good enough anymore. He had become inoculated by the western bug, just as my father had when he enrolled himself at the American Baptist Mission School in Taunggyi. My father's teacher Mr. Brown taught him about "civilization" and the advancement of the United States; my father had a dream that one day he would be among the "civilized." When he was sixty years old, his dream became a reality. In the U.S., he couldn't get a job in a Seven-Eleven in Plano, Texas, as he had a beard and turban, even though he had been a shopkeeper in Burma and engaged in trade in India. His sons encouraged him to cut his hair and reapply for the job. He became a night manager at a Seven-Eleven for almost a decade and, even though he faced racism due to his broken English and Burmese accent, he was proud to have made it in the U.S. Yes, it was always with things, with facilities, with air-conditioning and central heating, with cars, with malls, and with material goods that we were enticed to come to the U.S. Two of my siblings were already settled in the U.S. and they recounted its marvels. When I was at the University of Delhi, as I mentioned earlier, I travelled two to three hours each way in dusty transport buses where I would be groped and touched and molested. I would dream of the U.S. and its predominantly white, predominantly male "civilized" people, as seen in all the movies I would watch. I recalled the movies my father used to take us to watch in Burma and remembered movies

like *How the West Was Won* or *Comachi Station* and dreamed of being rescued from our misery and poverty by a cowboy. This was even though my father had a nice house and we had good food to eat, good clothes to wear, and even a car that my father bought in Rangoon and learned to drive in Burma. The onslaught of both the materialism and the ideology of the west was too much of an allure for us. Although, of course, we lived and loved and laughed and danced in the monsoon rain and ate mangoes soaked in rain waters, we also emulated the nuns and the Anglo-Burmese teachers and looked down upon most Burmese and Indians who couldn't speak English.

It has been almost thirty-six years since my migration to the U.S. on a green card and almost thirty years since I became a U.S. citizen. It has taken this long to realize that one becomes "stupid" sooner or later. I hope my embrace of "stupidness"—as a teacher who continues to learn—has not come too late to make a small difference to the world we are living in now.

The fight continues to be about the individual and the collective, which colonialism used to divide us and which neocolonialism continues to exploit, particularly within the U.S. The success of decolonization has been incomplete, as the tropes used by the colonizers continue to haunt us. Obviously, decolonizing victories have been limited in the U.S. due to its continued colonization of Indigenous peoples and exploitation of the earth in all parts of the globe. As long as colonization remains internalized, pandemics like COVID-19 will continue to decimate us while the former colonizers, in the form of globalism, will continue to exploit and destroy humans, non-humans, and the earth.

In order to change the thinking of those who have internalized oppression and to work toward the healing of the earth and its inhabitants, we *need* to work harder and speak louder, asking questions with and to the next generations and all the generations to come. We *need* to speak and rewrite and rethink like we've never rethought before. We *need* to let go of the veneer of politeness when it comes to bullies and oppressors, although we must be strategic in our actions. We must use all the avenues available to us to spread the message of love and interconnectedness; we must ask questions, even if we appear soft and gentle or even stupid, or especially stupid, even if we feel our words are falling on deaf ears, even if we feel helpless tears at being rejected by the next generation, for it is our duty to speak truth to power and hope that, when we are gone, we have left a legacy for one or two who will hear and heed us. Otherwise, we might as well pack up and say goodbye to the hope of ever making the world a better place for all human and non-human inhabitants. Maybe I am naïve. Maybe I'm stupid and am teaching the wrong way, but, as Sayan Dey says, we must practice the "Pedagogy of the Stupid," for "teaching stupidity as

a pedagogical journey toward epistemic diversity” is the new paradigm for a truly anti-colonial milieu in the time of the pandemic and in the time of the continued violence against diverse and marginalized bodies by the former colonizers, the settlers, and the neocolonialists.

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