When art schools fail their students

| *The Walters Art Museum*

THE tragic death of a student associated with the theatre and performance studies department at University of Dhaka has opened a wound that extends far beyond a single campus. What followed the incident was not merely grief, but an extraordinary outpouring of testimonies from former and current students describing years of humiliation, fear, emotional pressure, abuse of authority and alleged misconduct within the department. Some spoke of verbal degradation presented as discipline; others described unsafe power dynamics, favouritism, intimidation and inappropriate boundaries. Whether each allegation is ultimately verified through formal inquiry remains a matter for due process. Yet when so many voices emerge with strikingly similar experiences, the issue can no longer be dismissed as rumour, personal grievance or social media frenzy. It points instead to a deeper institutional crisis — one in which

students increasingly feel unheard, unprotected and abandoned by systems that were supposed to nurture them.

Geographic Reference

This is what makes the incident so unsettling. A theatre department is not simply another academic unit. It is a space built around vulnerability, expression and trust. Theatre education demands emotional openness, collaborative intimacy and prolonged interaction between teachers and students through rehearsals, productions, tours and workshops. The relationship between faculty and students therefore carries unusual psychological influence. In such environments, ethical responsibility becomes inseparable from pedagogy itself. A teacher may shape not only academic performance, but also confidence, identity and creative self-worth. That authority can inspire, but it can also wound. When institutions fail to regulate power, protect boundaries or establish transparent accountability, the educational environment risks mutating into something coercive. Students may begin to internalise humiliation as ‘training’, silence as ‘professionalism’ and fear as the cost of artistic growth.

The most alarming aspect of the testimonies circulating publicly is not simply the allegations themselves, but the apparent normalisation of harmful behaviour. Many students seem to suggest that degrading treatment had long been framed as part of the department's culture. Such claims deserve urgent scrutiny. Across the world, arts education has often romanticised the myth of the tyrannical mentor — the supposedly brilliant instructor whose cruelty is excused as a pathway to excellence. Theatre, cinema, dance and music institutions have repeatedly struggled with this toxic inheritance. Shouting, belittling, public humiliation and emotional manipulation are frequently defended as methods for producing 'discipline' or 'authentic performance'. Yet research and experience increasingly demonstrate the opposite. Fear may produce obedience, but it rarely produces genuine creativity. Students working under intimidation often become anxious, withdrawn and psychologically exhausted rather than artistically liberated.

This is particularly dangerous in Bangladesh, where educational culture remains deeply hierarchical. Students are raised within systems that discourage questioning authority. Seniority is frequently treated as moral legitimacy in itself. Teachers are expected to command deference, while students are often conditioned to tolerate mistreatment quietly. In such environments, abuse can hide behind reputation, ideology, artistic prestige or institutional loyalty. Even where misconduct is visible, students may hesitate to speak because they fear retaliation, academic punishment or social isolation. In performance-based disciplines, this fear becomes even sharper. Faculty members may control casting opportunities, grades, scholarships, festival participation, recommendations and future professional networks. The imbalance of power is immense. A student who refuses inappropriate

behaviour or criticises a faculty member may reasonably fear long-term consequences. Silence therefore becomes less a choice than a survival strategy.

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This helps explain why so many students chose public platforms rather than internal complaint systems to express their experiences. Universities often ask why students did not report abuse earlier. The answer is usually straightforward: many do not trust institutional mechanisms to protect them. Complaint procedures may appear opaque, biased or controlled by the same authorities being challenged. Students may fear disbelief, reputational damage or subtle retaliation disguised as academic evaluation. Some may also gradually normalise harmful treatment because it has existed for years. When institutions cultivate cultures where complaints are quietly discouraged, public disclosure becomes the only remaining route for visibility.

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One recurring issue raised by students relates to verbal humiliation and emotional pressure. Such behaviour is frequently minimised in academic settings because it leaves no physical evidence. Yet psychological harm can be profound and enduring. Persistent ridicule, intimidation, arbitrary treatment

or public embarrassment can erode confidence and create lasting anxiety. In creative disciplines, where students are often emotionally invested in their work and identity, such damage becomes even more severe. The line between rigorous critique and personal degradation is not difficult to recognise. Serious artistic training may challenge weak preparation or flawed creative choices, but it should never attack a student’s dignity. The notion that cruelty is necessary for excellence belongs to an outdated and authoritarian understanding of education.

Equally troubling are allegations relating to sexual misconduct and boundary violations. Wherever unequal power exists, the possibility of coercion follows. In teacher-student relationships, the issue extends beyond formal consent. Genuine consent becomes difficult to separate from dependency when one individual controls academic outcomes, artistic visibility or career opportunities. Many universities internationally now prohibit or strictly regulate staff-student relationships involving direct supervision precisely because power imbalance compromises freedom of choice and damages institutional trust. Allegations involving inappropriate behaviour, suggestive interactions or exploitative mentorship therefore require independent, confidential and professionally conducted investigation. Silence, denial or attempts at institutional reputation management only deepen harm and further alienate students.

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The discussion surrounding the department has also exposed wider concerns about favouritism and exclusionary culture. In many arts institutions,

opportunities such as casting, scholarships, festival participation or international exposure are often perceived to circulate within preferred inner circles. Whether every such perception is fully accurate is not the only issue. Once students begin to believe that merit is secondary to loyalty or personal proximity, institutional legitimacy deteriorates rapidly. Cynicism replaces trust. Students outside favoured networks disengage emotionally and academically, while those inside may feel pressured into conformity. Departments cease functioning as educational communities and begin operating as closed patronage systems.

The mental health dimension of this crisis cannot be treated as secondary. Prolonged exposure to humiliation, emotional instability, exclusion or harassment can produce severe psychological consequences. Anxiety, depression, hopelessness and emotional exhaustion often develop quietly. Universities in Bangladesh remain profoundly underprepared in addressing such realities. Counselling services are limited, inaccessible or distrusted. Faculty members frequently lack training in recognising psychological distress. Crisis response systems remain weak or symbolic. Yet universities are not merely examination centres. They are communities with a duty of care toward young people navigating intense academic, emotional and social pressures. When students repeatedly signal distress and institutions fail to respond meaningfully, the consequences can become devastating.

At the same time, public outrage must not replace procedural fairness. There is an understandable tendency during moments of collective grief to demand immediate punishment based solely on testimony. Yet institutions must balance accountability with due process. Fair investigation protects both complainants and the accused. However, due process cannot become a bureaucratic shield for delay, silence or institutional self-protection. Universities often invoke ‘ongoing investigation’ while taking little substantive action. Credibility depends not merely on announcing committees, but on ensuring independence, transparency, confidentiality and timely outcomes. Students will not trust processes that appear designed primarily to protect institutional image.

What is unfolding at the University of Dhaka should therefore not be understood as an isolated departmental controversy. It reflects a broader structural problem within higher education in Bangladesh. Many universities continue to operate through cultures of unquestioned authority, opaque governance and weak accountability. Students are expected to endure rather than challenge. Faculty expertise is too often treated as immunity from scrutiny. Safeguarding policies remain inconsistent or poorly enforced. If Bangladesh genuinely aspires to build internationally respected universities, it cannot avoid internationally accepted standards of accountability, transparency and student protection.

Geographic Reference

Meaningful reform would require more than symbolic statements of concern. Any allegations connected to the recent case should be examined through a genuinely independent and trauma-informed process involving external

oversight, confidentiality protections and clear procedural timelines. Departments involving close mentorship, rehearsal practice or intensive supervision should establish binding codes of conduct covering bullying, harassment, conflicts of interest and staff-student boundaries. Universities must create confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms so students are not forced onto social media before being heard. Counselling services need urgent expansion and professionalisation. Selection, grading and casting procedures should become more transparent and involve multiple evaluators where possible. Safeguarding and ethics training must become mandatory for faculty and administrators alike. Subject expertise alone does not automatically qualify someone to exercise authority over vulnerable students.

The response of the University of Dhaka now carries significance beyond one department or one tragedy. The institution occupies immense symbolic importance within Bangladesh's intellectual and political history. Its actions will signal whether the country's higher education system is capable of confronting uncomfortable truths about power, hierarchy and institutional failure. Leadership is tested not during ceremonial speeches, but during moments of moral crisis. Universities must decide whether they will minimise, delay and protect reputations, or whether they will confront structural problems honestly and courageously.

No reform can reverse a life already lost. But institutions can still decide what meaning that loss will carry. Students enter art schools seeking voice, imagination and freedom. They should not have to sacrifice dignity, safety or psychological well-being in exchange for education. If creative institutions cannot guarantee those minimum conditions, they betray the very ideals they claim to defend. The former and current students who spoke publicly have already challenged the old culture of silence. The question now is whether university authorities are prepared to listen before another tragedy forces the same conversation again.

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