

Constructing And Deconstructing Ethnic Identity: Reading Rigoberta Menchu Through Retamar's Caliban

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"I know that millions of people would like to speak the words I speak, but they do not have the chance. They know their own reality, and I know the things I have related. I stand as a witness and, if I do not speak out, I would be a party to great injustices."

- Rigoberta Menchú, 'Crossing Borders'

Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous woman and a prominent member of the struggles of her community in Guatemala is the writer of the book titled *Yo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. It is among the most famous testimonies written by Latin American writers in the last twenty years of the 20th century. In her book Menchú gives us a vivid account of the hardships and exploitations faced by her, reflective of the situation of her community at large. In her testimony she also gives detailed account of the customs and traditions highlighting the unique cultural identity of the indigenous community of Guatemala. Despite being a sizeable population wise indigenous peoples have no decisive role in political-economy of the country dominated by a small number of wealthy elite classes called "Ladinos" (White skinned people).

I propose reading of this testimony as a document of a struggle which I believe, merits to be considered as a post colonial one and the problems associated with this text in the context of question regarding the genre and veracity and readability of the same. In highlighting cultural peculiarities of the indigenous communities of her country the author questions the notions of cultural supremacy of the ruling class which essentially means a culture of cultural homogenization based on values of consumerism, individualism and profit. Post colonialism is understood to have emerged as a counter-discourse to the Eurocentric notions of history and development articulated and promoted by the ruling class of the newly independent countries of the Third world. In Latin America in general, Argentina under Sarmiento, Mexico under Benito Juárez for example, were some examples of the ruling elite's embrace of positivist ideas such as industrialization, urbanization, education based on European and American model ignoring the traditions, needs and desires of the indigenous population. This colonial mindset of the ruling elite was contested in the post colonial writings which articulated the historical agency of the

marginalized people in contrast to the imposition of categories like 'undeveloped' 'backward' 'illiterate' by the ruling classes on these people. Thus the post colonial writings also contested the developmental policies of the state which was using the indigenous people merely as 'labor force' and displacing and even killing them at its will.

This testimony accounts one of the forms of Latin American Literature, which took a prominent shape after decade of 80's in 21st century. Menchú's urge to speak out on behalf of her community people, about the atrocities they had faced, massive genocide which the Guatemalan army committed in the 1980's in its counter measure against the poor peasant movement. So, in the testimony the protagonist had shown, how her flourishing Indian culture was crushed under the repression of the country's governing class with its brutal force.

Testimony as a genre which had developed during the course of time put forward the struggle of the masses, the oppressed and the most marginal people. Its veracity and historicity is a point of research of the social scientists and literature community. I would like to say few points in the consecutive paragraphs about the testimony and likewise take up the issue of the protagonist.

If we consult the theoretical texts, we do not have the reference named 'testimony' genre. It doesn't exist there. Those literary works dominated the form of testimony- which had taken place during the time when there were revolutionary actions in the ignition mode particularly in Latin America- excluding all the possible confusion with the Essay, the Historical narrative or the Autobiography. In this, the protagonist may be a journalist or a writer, he/she may be a participant in the struggle, the main protagonist or the secondary one to whom the original incident was related to, or simply an intermediate so, that the testimony communicate her/his words to the listeners and readers.

Referring directly to the 'Testimony genre', we can understand it as defined by Margaret Randall¹:

- "The use of direct sources.
- In the historical context, but not in terms of the general things which characterizes the conventional texts, but

through ant particular individual's story or that of the whole community to explain a subject.

- The intermediary (somebody who relates all things which he has lived, a lively account of the happenings, which nobody can explain etc.)
- The use of secondary materials (an introduction, interviews, documents, graphic materials, chronology and additional materials which would help in creating a live picture)
- A high aesthetic quality."

Generally, one technique called interview, figure prominently in the testimony. There is a very symbiotic relationship between history and testimony. From time immortal, we have the knowledge of oral history, which had transmitted in the village community passing through the ages. Likewise, we have the example of 'El Cantar de Mio Cid' in Spain, in the medieval history, which glorified the Spanish history and civilization. In today's world there is a very distinguished value of this type of history. Here, we don't have to consult the archives etc. it combines the live testimony to give us the detailed of an incident, a group or a place. In the course of time, the history evolved and took the shape after the first written Latin American history as said by many, was the diary written by Columbus after the conquest of America and his daily account of the things observed by him, considered as the history. More or less, we can say that written history was once again in the hands of the elites.

As said by Margaret Randall², one who wants to figure out the crux of testimony, one should focus on:

- "The deep notion put inside in the terms of ideology of the oral narrator.
- The knowledge of the topic explained.
- The human sensibility.
- The mutual respect to the informer and her/his life.
- The persistence."

So, resuming this, the testimony genre is a very new literary category, different from others. There are the ideas which provoke a kind of discussion, debate and interchange of ideas.

Coming back to our discussion where Rigoberta is representing her ethnic Mayan community. By giving a human face to her community struggle, her testimony *I Rigoberta Menchú: An indian women in Guatemala*, got international support and huge sympathy, putting her on the pedestal of Nobel Peace prize in the year 1992. Through her account, she has used the colonial language "Spanish"

to raise voice of the voiceless against Ladinos; who were the oppressors of her family, her community and the marginal people at large. Here, I would like to portray the story of *Caliban*, a protagonist in the novel written by Shakespeare in 1612, *The Tempest*; in which he had been represented as a native of that invaded land. Prospero 'the colonizer' enslaved and used him as a servant to put his things in order. He made him learn his own colonial language. During the course of time *Caliban* was portrayed as a Cannibal (Man eater) along with his own community people, in the diaries of Columbus as native of the Caribbean island were referred to. Prospero had given orders to him to do all his menial works but the time saturated and *Caliban* was realizing the situation by his own and started speaking against Prospero- his master, using the same colonial language, which his master had taught him. Written by Roberto Fernández Retamar in his book *Caliban y otros ensayos*, that *Caliban* was now heading against the master, becoming a spokesperson for his community people. Here, I would like to quote *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, written by Paulo Freire³:

"This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power; cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity", the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source."

In this particular reference Freire said that oppressors not only liberate themselves from the colonizers but colonizers were also given freedom, exactly similar thing had happened with *Caliban* in his own land. Though Roberto's *Caliban* was published in 1979, after the much talked about the book *Ariel* by Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodo in 1900, who had given all credit to *Ariel* as a representation of Latin America. Rejecting *Caliban*; Rodo says about *Ariel*⁴:

"North American civilization is implicitly presented there as *Caliban* (scarcely mentioned in the work) while *Ariel* would come to incarnate- or should incarnate- the best of what Rodo did not hesitate to call more than once 'our civilization'."

Retamar ⁵says:

"Our symbol then is not Ariel, as Rodo thought but rather Caliban. This is something that we, the mestizo inhabitants of these same isles where Caliban lived, see with particular clarity: Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancestors, enslaved Caliban, and taught him his language to make himself understand. What else can Caliban do but use that same language- today he has no other- to curse him, to wish that the 'red plague' would fall on him? I know no other metaphor more expressive of our culture situation, of our reality".

Putting Rigoberta Menchú in this context again, she is doing the same thing, what *Caliban* did in his time to save his countrymen. But the world was not able to see marginal. Ethnic Indian women representing a huge population and something uneasy occurred when the image of Menchú was put forward as a liar, with the publication of American anthropologist, David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the story of all poor Guatemalans*, which contested claims made by Menchú and charged her of giving false information in her above said testimony, which led her to the Nobel peace prize. It created a kind of sensation in the international arena. Mainstream Newspapers put it like, "Nobel Prize winner accused of stretching truth", "Nobel Prize for fiction?" But Menchú defended her account and countered her critics in her next book *Crossing borders*⁶:

"They did not understand that the Nobel Prize was not awarded to Rigoberta Menchú. It was given in recognition of a people's wisdom and of the reading of their lines. I carry that like a precious burden".

So, she had tried to deconstruct the notion of ethnic identity stereotyped by oppressors as someone who cannot climb the ladder, cannot speak against them, cannot raise their voice of their own, because they always need a kind of spokesperson from literate community to put forward their sufferings and struggle but I think that ethnic people are mature enough to take their decision on their own and raise their voice; as Menchú is raising, she says⁷:

"My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life; it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people."

Through this, we can see that knowledge of language or education in general, always plays a important role in

putting down the words in front of the masses either orally or in the written form. In my opinion the testimony of Rigoberta would not be so powerful if it had not represented her community or said orally, because it is a question of time and space; how many people she would be able to cover globally and also the language plays a very crucial role, she had dictated her words to a translator who had put down in the form of a book; 'Spanish', which she had learnt simply to fight against Ladinos, in one of whose house she was working as a maid, to put forward her struggle and sufferings, but also of her community at large. Similar thing had happened to *Caliban*, written by Retamar; who had used the same colonial language imposed on him, to fight against those colonizers. So, here I want to quote Angel Rama who said in *The Lettered City*; put down by Brian Gollnick⁸ in his Essay:

"Taking the elitist nature of education in the region as its starting point, *The Lettered city* questions the humanist tradition. Far from being the progressive force of integration and stability which Henriquez Urena had imagined, Rama sees literacy as a crucial form of privilege and domination. However, education, with literacy and literature as its key expressions, has not simply functioned as the servant of power. Instead, Rama suggests that the dominant classes in Latin America have needed man of letters, writers and the like to spread their message to the people. In the light of that mutual need, the educated elite- the *letrados*- developed as a semi- autonomous guild which mediated between the elites and the general population. At the top of this guild, Rama identifies intellectuals with an explicit awareness of education as a mechanism of exclusion. These cultural directors constitute 'the lettered city': the ideologues charged with ensuring the continued interdependence of education and privilege. A large portion of *The Lettreed city* traces this sector through its origins in colonial Latin America. However, Rama demonstrates that the lettered city's hold was difficult to overcome, even for radical or revolutionary intellectuals. In contrast to the optimism of *Transculturación narrativa*, *The Lettreed city* thus explores how the relationship between literacy and power remained largely unchanged until the 1960s, when the mass media introduced broadcast forms of communication capable of mediating between the elites and the masses without recourse on the written word."

Therefore, here we can have the implication that marginal/ oppressed people can also raise their voice, provided that there should not be any repressive force acting from the above.

Conclusions:

In becoming a spokesperson for indigenous communities of her country and of herself Rigoberta Menchú her testimony raises important questions. Some of these questions are concerned with epistemological in the context of testimony as

a genre or as source of knowledge and truth. Despite attempts to question veracity of facts documented in the testimony the same has been accepted by scholars and indigenous peoples alike as true documentation of sufferings her communities endure even if she herself has not suffered much. Moreover her testimony written in Spanish, after she chose to learn it considering it a necessity to achieve a more engaged understanding of political system surrounding her, validates what *Caliban* could manage to do. In replying back to colonial masters in his case and to the neo-colonial ones in case of Rigoberta the utilization of language of ruling class and thus registering their voices in the 'lettered city' people like Rigoberta deconstruct the 'other' imposed on them by ruling classes. Through celebrating cultural peculiarities of indigenous people Rigoberta Menchú unsettles the stereotypes imposed on them and she does it through Spanish.

Footnotes

- 1 Randall, Margaret. *Revista de Critica Literaria latinoamericana* Ano 18. No.36. *La Voz del otro: testimonio, subalternidad y Verdad Narrativa* (1992). p25
- 2 Randall, Margaret. *Revista de Critica Literaria latinoamericana*. Ano 18. No.36. *La Voz del otro: testimonio, subalternidad y Verdad Narrativa* (1992). p28
- 3 Freire, Paulo. "Chapter 1", *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2006. p 1
- 4 Retamar, Roberto Fernández et al. *Caliban: Notes towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America*, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, *Caliban* (Winter - Spring, 1974) p 19
- 5 Retamar, Roberto Fernández et al. *Caliban: Notes towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America*, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, *Caliban* (Winter - Spring, 1974) p 24
- 6 Wright, Ann. *Crossing Borders*. London New York : Verso, 1998. P20
- 7 Burgos - Debray, Elisabeth. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchu y Asi Me Nacio La Conciencia*. Barcelona: Editorial Argos Vergara, S.A., 1983. P 1
- 8 Gollnick, Brian. *Approaches to latin American Literature: Chapter 6*. p 111.

The Crisis in Political Economy

The crisis in contemporary bourgeois political economy is deepening in a complex, often paradoxical way. Bourgeois economists use this to deny the crisis situation in bourgeois political economy. Keynesian economic theory may serve as an example. The very fact of its creation being portrayed in bourgeois literature as a revolution" in political economy bears witness to the complete futility of the pre-Keynesian neoclassical theory of reproduction which burned out to be utterly incapable of explaining the crisis nature of capitalist development in this century Keynesianism also fails to provide a scientific answer to this issue. Not only is it incapable of altering the course of twentieth century historical development, which has been so unfavourable to capitalism-and that is what bourgeois ideologists and politicians had been banking on-but has been totally unable to explain it in any realistic way.

-Bourgeois Economic Thought 1930s-70s, 1983, P.9.

Villagers to meet today

Protesting against the proposal of the Hindu, Mahasabha to build a temple for Nathuram Godse, the Uttar Pradesh Mahanirman Sena will organize a Mahapanchayat of nearly 40 villages in Meerut on Sunday.

Amit Jani, who heads the fringe group, said that the Mahapanchayat was an attempt to initiate a movement against the glorification of Godse through construction of a temple dedicated to him.

"The arguments of the Hindu Mahasabha is ridiculous and anti national. Nothing can justify the killing of the Mahatma," he said.

-The Hindu, 4, January 2015, P.11.