

## The Centre and the Margin Indigenous Life in the City and the Village

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"He must expose to his European audience the naked reality of the relationship between Europe and the Third World. He has to show to his European reader that, to paraphrase Brecht, the water he drinks is often taken from the mouths of the thirsty in the third world and the food he eats is snatched from the mouths of the hungry in Asia, Africa, and South

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Barrel of a Pen

**Centre and Margins are of human construct.** Margins are drawn to signify the centres. Margins are kept as margins to keep the centre intact. If there are no margins there will be no centres. In the same manner the Subalterns are kept as Subalterns so the Masters can rule as Masters. To break this hierarchical order the axe of literature is needed. Testimonio is the literary genre, the thunderbolt of subaltern. There is no better medium to the Subaltern to vent his anger, sufferings and anguish than testimonio. This paper titled The Center and the Margin, by taking three chapters from the renowned testimonio of Rigoberta Menchu, analyses the life of indigenous people and the exploitation to which they are subjected.

**Key words:** Testimonio, subaltern, Hierarchy, indigenous

In our community we are all equal. We all have to help one another and share the little have between us. There is no superior and inferior. But we realized that in Guatemala there was something superior and something inferior and that we were the inferior.

(Menchu p.145)

Rigoberta Menchu is the indigenous Mayan social activist from Guatemala. She is the much acclaimed winner of 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. "I, Rigoberta Menchu," is her internationally celebrated testimonio. Its popularity is such that it

has been translated into more than 22 languages throughout the world. The controversies around the accuracy of her testimonio are recently proved to be null and void. She stands single as the beaming human light of hope in the war torn world. The reading of Menchu's Testimonio is both heart wrenching and soul sensitizing experience. Reading her testimonio gives an immense satisfaction and pleasure of enjoying a literary feast. It is in the strictest sense an enlightening, educating and eye opening Master Piece.

The testimonio of Menchu titled "I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian woman in Guatemala was edited and Introduced by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. It was first published in Spanish in 1983. The year is unforgettable as it ripped open Guatemala with the climax of brutal civil war. The more striking feature of the testimonio is its candidness and ease with which it carries the readers along with ebb and flow of an indigenous people's life.

A Testimonio requires the combined efforts of a narrator, a facilitator and the readers. The Testimonio of Menchu was dictated to Elisabeth Burgos – Debray. She was director of the Maison de l'Amérique Latine in Paris and of the Institut Cultural Français in Seville. As stated by Menchu in the book that she couldn't read or write in Spanish very well she sought the help of Elisabeth Burgos. As a Quiche she cherished her native Indian tongue but compelled to learn Spanish as a weapon against her exploiters. The original language of the testimonio is so beautifully simple and soulful that her translator Ann Wright says

Rigoberta has a mission. Her words want us to understand and react. I only hope that I have been able to do justice to the power of their message. I will have done that if convey the impact they had on me when first I read them. (Menchu Translators Note viii)

Menchu has survived and stood as a silent mourning witness to the death of her brother, mother, father and her communities' genocide and

by her survival became a privileged victim. Her suffering and voice is metonymical. Her voice is the voice of a privileged victim. The burden of her being a privileged victim is so heavy that she learnt Spanish to break it. Her facilitator and interviewer Burgos writes

She refuses to let us forget. Words are her only weapons. That is why she resolved to learn Spanish and break out of Rigoberta learned the language of her oppressors in order to use it against them. For her, appropriating the Spanish language is an act which can change the course of history because it is the result of a decision: Spanish was a language which was forced upon her, but it has become a weapon in her struggle. She decided to speak in order to tell of the oppression her people have been suffering for almost five hundred the linguistic isolation into which the Indians retreated in order to preserve their culture. .... (Menchu p. xi)

There are thirty four chapters in the book. The chapters include personal, social, political, economical and cultural aspects of indigenous life to which she stands as a representative. The opening lines of Menchu have become a classic. She makes it clear that her testimony is not only a testimony of her life story but the testimony of her nation and people. Her testimony speaks so loudly and strongly about the silenced universal suffering of the innocent victims that no one can evade it.

In this paper titled *The Centre and the Margin*, three chapters viz. chapters IV, VIII, XIV are chosen for analysis. The chapters with their captions are given below:

IV FIRST VISIT TO THE FINCA. LIFE IN THE FINCA

‘This is why there is no hope of winning the hearts of our people.’

—Rigoberta Menchú

VIII LIFE IN THE ALTIPLANO. RIGOBERTA’S TENTH BIRTHDAY

‘We Indians never do anything which goes against the laws of our ancestors

--

Rigoberta Menchú

XIV A MAID IN THE CAPITAL

‘I was incapable of disobedience. And those employers exploited my obedience. They took advantage of my innocence.’

—Rigoberta Menchú

The purpose of selecting these chapters is they clearly show the difference between a self sufficient life lead by the peasants when they are owners of small plot of land and the misery they are subjected to when their resources are exploited

by the power centres. The Centre and the Margins are exploitive constructs of cunning wolfish minds. The peasants lead a happy and contended life when they till and toil in their small piece of land. They are self reliant and their self respect is intact. Their happiness is corrupted and converted into misery when they are compelled to go the fincas and the cities in search of livelihood. Their personalities are warped and their self respect is mangled by the power centres and by the people who control it.

Menchu and their people are forced to go to the fincas when there is no work in the Altiplanos. The journey to Finca is as horrible as the life the finca. It is as horrendous tale that could be equaled only with the narrations of the galley slaves. Fincas are coastal estates of coffee or cotton. The indigenous population is the cheap labour force exploited by the finca owners. They are hard working, illiterate, non-Spanish tongued and gullible. The indigenous peoples are taken to the fincas in a covered lorries. The capacity of the lorry is about forty. But it is crowded with people, dogs, cat and chicken. The journey was two days and a day’s distance. The lorry was not stopped anywhere in the midst of the journey. The people and the animals dirty the lorry and the stench of the filth is unbearable. The travel is much hated by Menchú because they were denied even the fundamental thing as urinating. Menchu says in her anger she felt like burning the lorry. This horrible journey to finca is just the beginning of more horrible experiences.

They are taken to the fincas by the recruiting agents called Caporales. They are indigenous people like the peasants. But they are well paid and their jobs are permanent. They are loyal to the finca owners and forget their community. They ill-treat the workforce because they are filthy and sun burnt. Their sole duty is to stand and watch the work done by the form hands. They are authorized to punish the slow workers. The tortillas served for the workers but the children are not served with any food as they are not working. The parents have to share their food with their children. The food is free but it is rotten. The days are hot in the coastal fincas and exhausting. The nights are mosquito filled and restless. The working people

I remember that from when I was about eight to when I was about ten, we worked in the coffee crop. And after that I worked on the cotton plantations further down the coast where it was very, very hot. After my first day picking cotton, I woke up at midnight and lit a candle. I saw the faces of my brothers and sisters covered with

mosquitos. I touched my own face, and I was covered too. They were everywhere; in people's mouths and everywhere. Just looking at these insects and thinking about being bitten set me scratching. That was our world. I felt that it would always be the same, always the same. It hadn't ever changed. (Menchu p.24)

The owners run a small shop inside the fincas which are called as cantina. It is the Vanity Fair of the Fincas. The children are sold there sweets, cakes and soft drinks. Everything they buy there is marked upon and on the day of pay the parents find more in debt than they earned. The men are sold their alcohol and that results in piling up of debt. The month's hard work never gave them any relief as they are caught up in the vicious circle of debt. Menchu's father is so depressed by the condition of his family that he is forced to forget his worries by drinking. By drinking the debts get accumulated along with the worries. The indigenous people are kept in perpetual debt; only death could relieve them.

With what they earn and what they steal from our people, the overseers buy lovely houses in the Altiplano and have houses in other places too. They can live wherever they want to; in the places they like best. (Menchu p.27)

This chapter shows the exploitation of the indigenous people's workforce. They are taken like cattle and treated like cattle and die like it. Their blood and life are sucked mercilessly by the finca owners as the mosquitoes do it in the night. Their body and soul is exploited and the only reason is they are poor. They work so hard but that can't even fill their stomachs with decent meals. But the exploiters become fat with the toil of the poor working force.

Chapter XIV narrates Menchu's experience as a maid in the capital. She was sent to the finca owner's house as a house maid. Menchu arrived there in her traditional dress. She was dirty with all the hard work in the finca. Her dress was dirty with travel, toil and sweat. She was detested for her dress, appearance and race. Menchu observes: "My corte was really dirty and my huipil very old. I had a little perraje, the only one I owned. I didn't have any shoes. I didn't even know what wearing shoes was like." (Menchu p.108)

She was received with cold indifference and accommodated in the room where rubbish was kept. She was given a little bed and a blanket to sleep. The food served was very hard tortillas and stale beans. Menchu compares the food served to her with the employer's dog. The dog's food was rice with meat. Menchu very painfully observes

There was a dog in the house, a pretty, white, fat dog. When I saw the maid bring out the dog's food—bits of meat, rice, things that the family ate—and they gave me a few beans and hard tortillas that hurt me very much. The dog had a good meal and I didn't deserve as good a meal as the dog. Anyway, I ate it, I was used to it. I didn't mind not having the dog's food because at home I only ate tortillas with chile or with salt or water. But I felt rejected. I was lower than the animals in the house. . (Menchu p.109)

There was another servant in the master's house. She was given the leftovers of the master's to eat. Menchu was not permitted to touch the dishes as her dress was very dirty. She was given the task of washing, sweeping and watering the plants. After all the works were done she was given the breakfast which was nothing but the left over. She was given a pay advance of two months to buy a decent dress. It was done with mercy or concern. The Mistress found Menchú dirty and she wanted her to make decent enough to let her inside the house and do all the work. Menchu was taught to wash and iron. The three children of the mistress dressed several times a day.

And that was when I discovered the truth in what my grandmother used to say: that with rich people even their plates shine. Well, yes, even their toilets shine. . (Menchu p.111)

Menchu brings a comparison between her dress and the way the masters dressed. The dress, plate and even the toilets shined because of Menchu's hard work. But she was treated less than a dog. The class disparity is so glaring that the people of the center consider the marginalized lesser than their pets.

The mistress used to watch me all the time and was very nasty to me. She treated me like. I don't know what... not like a dog because she treated the dog well. She used to hug the dog. So I thought: 'She doesn't even compare me with the dog.' (Menchu p.111)

On Saturdays she was compelled to go out of the house and asked to return only on Sunday night. Menchu didn't have anyone to depend on and could not convey her helpless condition as she didn't know Spanish. More than all these inhuman treatment the way she was treated by the boys of the house was painfully remembered by her.

They were petty bourgeois youths who couldn't even pick a duster up, or clear anything away. They liked throwing their dishes in our faces. That was our job. They threw things at us,

they shouted at us all the time, and treated us very badly. (Menchu p.111)

They would shout for their shoes from the bed. They would make a big fuss if their favourite food was missing on the dinner table. The mistress could not even get up from the bed to wash her hands. Above all the maids are expected to initiate their boys into sex. Menchu knew very well the exploitative nature of her mistress. But she could not ditch and get away from her because she was not brought up by her parents to be disobedient. The incident of Christmas was more disheartening to Menchú and she decides to leave. The other maid servant was dismissed before Christmas. Menchu was compelled to shoulder all the cooking and cleaning. She helped in preparing hundreds of tamales. But she was given only single tamale to eat. But that too was not eaten given to one of the guests when tamales are finished. She was not given any food to eat for three days. But she was compelled to clean up the mess created by the guest of Christmas party. When she declined to clean it she was derided. The harsh prejudiced criticism against the natives shows how colored their views are.

And they started discussing the Indians they had at home, saying: 'Indians are lazy, they don't work, that's why they're poor. They're always making trouble because they won't work.' (Menchu p.111) She couldn't continue work there and returned home much disillusioned.

Contrasting to the two experiences of Finca and the Capital is their life in the Altiplano. Life in Altiplano was not much easier. They had to till the land, axe the wood and fetch water from four kilometers away. They sowed their bit of maize and harvest it was enough to maintain them for a period. Better yield meant escape from Finca. The beans they harvested were sold and things of necessity like soap and chile were bought.

They are not people who are dependent on machines. They never use machines to grind maize or ovens to bake them.. The grinding stones are passed from the ancestors and wood fire is used to cook. The women usually get up early morning three 'o clock. Men get up at the same time to mind their business. The tortillas are made eaten with chile. The dogs are fed with the food made up of the maize cobs. Spare time is used by weaving. Life is communal and sharing. They go to work as a team of twenty or thirty. They walk great distances. Their working timing extends up to evening six. Their life doesn't have much chance for entertainment. They work very hard for sixteen hours a day. They work and sleep in the same

dress. That's why they are considered to be dirty. Menchu regrets that

We slept in the same clothes we worked in. That's why society rejects us. Me, I felt this rejection very personally, deep inside me. They say we Indians are dirty, but it's our circumstances which force us to be like that. For example, if we have time, we go to the river every week, every Sunday, and wash our clothes. These clothes have to last us all week because we haven't any other time for washing and we haven't any soap either. That's how it is. (Menchu p.55)

The house of the indigenous people is usually of single room. All the members live in the same house. The same room is used as living dining and bed room. There are no cots or mattresses. There is no such thing as privacy even to the newly wedded. They don't even need it as they don't have enough time to enjoy life together. Their life is spent in hard toil every day that when they return from their work they don't even eat but go straight to sleep.

The houses are built with cane tied together with agave fibers. They sometimes thatch the roof with cane leaves but that is very costly. They go the mountains and cut woods to make houses. They believe any wood cut on the day of full moon will do well to make a house. Some houses are two floored. The top floor is used to store corn cobs. The houses are not very tall as the winds are very heavy. Tall houses are very easily damaged or carried away by the wind.

This chapter also tells how a child is imitated into the society. The children are considered to be the property of the community. They are taught the meaning of life and responsible living. The girl child is insisted to be loyal to her community and to her parents. They are taught to respect the Omni present eyes of God. They are given freedom and taught to respect that freedom and never to misuse it.

My father said: 'You have a lot of responsibility; you have many duties to fulfill in our community as an adult. From now on you must contribute to the common good.' (Menchu p.56)

When we compare the life style of the White Ladinos and indigenous people as Menchu describes them the difference is very glaring. On one side we have the indigenous people who are simple, honest, and hard working, self-reliant and poor in modern terms. They don't have multistoried concrete houses, titled lands are asserts, cars, bikes modern gadgets and machines to help and entertain. All they have is some pieces of land cleared in the mountain forest, river water, dogs to watch their sheep, pigs and chicken. They

don't employ anyone to do even their basic dirty tasks like washing the dishes, clothes and toilets. On the other side we have the Masters who are fair skinned, fat, live in luxurious houses, wear costly dresses and change them multiple times in a day. Their food and bed is "the other's" toil. They never move a muscle to earn their bread. The only work they have mastered is exploitation. Their dictionaries don't have the semantic field called labour, respect, gratitude, mercy and concern for fellow beings and the beautiful earth.

The question is not paying and demanding somebody's service but how the money has been accrued. The question that stands unanswered is who gave some the rights to enforce "the others" to shoulder the difficult nasty jobs. The answer is very simple. It is the result of man constructed ideological exploitation. It is the result of some diabolic, fair, tall, blue eyed people's ingeniously formulated evil laws and lopsided theories to enslave and exploit. These theories and laws are obnoxiously contrary to the laws of Nature. They have converted the complementary binaries found in nature into opposites.

Centres and Margins are our artificial constructs .Circle is a unique geometrical structure. It doesn't have the beginning and the end. Every point on the circle can be the first as well as the last. Life is like that. The society is a circle where every human life is equally important. This

universe is a circle where every creature's life and existence is equally important. Rigoberta Menchú has through her testimony conveyed this noble truth of life. If literature doesn't teach this simple noble truth what else can do it?

Isabel Allende is right when she writes

I feel that writing is an act of hope, a sort of communion with our fellow men. The writer of good will carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more — a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if possible, a change in the conscience of some readers. This kind of writer is not seduced by the mermaid's voice of celebrity or tempted by exclusive literary circles. He has both feet planted firmly on the ground and walks hand in hand with the people in the streets. He knows that the lamp is very small and the shadows are immense. This makes him humble. (Allende p.2)

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