

# Life in Fincas An Intersectional Analysis of Indigenous Life in the Coffee Estates of Latin America with Reference to the Testimonio of Rigoberta Menchu

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## Abstract

The social structure of Latin American countries is constructed in such a manner that hierarchical differences have driven the indigenous people beyond the margins. Their muted voices are very rarely heard. The testimonial writings become the space of freedom and expression to the marginalized. Their voices are being heard and the justice of their action is being recognized. Rigoberta Menchu has created a rare space of active freedom in her testimonial writing "I Rigoberta Menchu." The Testimony of social activist and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu is a beacon light for the marginalized. The testimonio is a record of the violence by the brutally empowered heartless Government Engine. The Testimonio requires a multi-pronged approach of intersectional analysis an approach that uses race, gender, socio-cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic, Intersectional Analysis, Testimony

## 1. Introduction

The indigenous people have been exploited by the parameters of race, gender, language, institutions of government and land. Their life has been suffocating under the strangling iron clutches of hegemonic powers. Their suffering requires a new language of expression. Such a language takes the form of a literary genre - Testimonio. A testimonio is an agonizing cry of a tormented soul: it is the manifestation of the mutilated bodies, maimed souls and denigrated lives. Literature has the power to revolutionize, reform and rectify the blunders of human society. Testimonio the Literary genre of the subaltern proves it again and again. Such Testimonios cannot be studied by any particular literary theory. It requires the probing force of multipronged approach called Intersectional analysis.

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social

and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (p.2 Hill)

In this globalized world individual life is no longer an isolated phenomenon. It is very delicately caught in the vicious web weaved by the money and power hungry corporate culture. The self reliant life of the indigenous life is shattered by the obnoxious intrusion of globalization and liberalization. Inequality is the bitter fruit the marginalized indigenous people are compelled to eat.

The neo liberal world order relies on a global system of capitalism that is inflected through unequal relations of race, gender, sexuality, age, disability, and citizenship. This global organization of power also operates through increasingly repressive nation-states. (p.139 Hill)

This paper analyzes the Testimonio of Rigoberta Menchu with the help of intersectional analytical theory.

## 2. The Testimony of Rigoberta Menchu Tum

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I Rigoberta Menchu is a testimony, a testimony about the genocide, torture and agony of the Guatemalan people. The polyphonic testimony not only represents what happened in Guatemala and other Central American countries but also what happens everywhere to the marginalized people in the name of growth and development. Menchu's testimony is set in the context of the beautiful and rare culture of the Maya Quiche. She is a member of marginalized society which is coerced into giving up their cultural heritage as part of an effort to assimilate.

The testimonio of Menchu is a counter to the official western version of the indigenous life on this planet. It talks about the pain from the heart of the a fortunate, privileged survivor, who was not only alive but also got a favorable circumstances to be heard as Tuhiwai says,

This collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized. Edward Said refers to this process as a Western discourse about the other which is supported by 'institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. (p.2 Tuhiwai).

## 3. The Indigenous Life

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There are twenty-two indigenous ethnic groups in Guatemala, twenty-three including the mestizos or Ladinos as they call them. These twenty-three groups have a separate language of theirs. Rigoberta belongs to one of these groups known as the Quiche. She belongs to the Municipality administrative San Miguel Uspantan in the north-western province of El Quiche. Her Village is named as Chimel, in Rigoberta's words "Where I live is practically a paradise, the country is so beautiful."

The village is situated on the top of a mountain. The mountainous settlements are so high in altitude and so commutation is very strenuous and it could be reached

only by on horseback. Rigoberta's parents' adverse fortunes threw them out of the small house of their own in the town and they moved to the mountainous residence in 1960's. They began to cultivate the land. No one had lived there before Menchu's family because it was so remote and mountainous. Their house was snatched for a meager debt by the Ladinos. Menchu states; the rich are always like that. When people owe them money they take a bit of land or some of their belongings and slowly end up with everything. That's what happened to my parents. (Menchu p.3).

The life of the Menchu's community is so miserable that the Mayan children don't enjoy their childhood much. They are denied the right to be a child in their childhood. They become the member of the adult society when they are around twelve. They have to share their parent's hard lot of life. They were forced by the circumstances of their parents to do hard works like picking coffee or cotton and to work in their own small plot of land. They had to take care of their younger siblings in case both of their parents are working. They were not given western education rather it is an education that teaches them to be one with nature. The number of children born is quite high. But the death rate of children is higher. The main reason is malnutrition. "Most Indian families suffer from malnutrition. Most of them don't even reach fifteen years old. When children are growing and don't get enough to eat, they are ill." (Menchu p.5).

## 4. The Life in Fincas

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The women's life is the most pitiable on earth. They are the victims of race, gender, class and politics. Menchu who has been the witness to their sufferings from her childhood days is psychologically much affected by that. Their misery affected Menchu so much especially the loss of children by the mothers of her community made Menchu never to marry. Every day of their life is filled with nothing but toil. They have to tend the family and the farm. If work is not available in the farm they have to work as the wage earners in the coffee estates called fincas. The life in the fincas is hell on earth to them.

The fincas are nothing but rich coffee estates owned by the Ladinos. The soil is rich there and naturally the yield was very rich. Poor people can have only poor quality of land. The horrible journey and the more horrible working conditions detailed by Menchu is one of the

pathetic passages in all literatures. It reminds the African-American's journey to the Americas. She says:

The lorry holds about forty people. But in which the people take animals as well. They have to take their animals. The travelling time was longer, it took two nights and a day from their village to the coast. During the journey children and animals dirty in the lorry itself. Added to it was the stench of vomiting and urinating. The lorry was covered with tarpaulin and they could not see any beautiful scenery and when they reached their destination they came out of the lorry like Chickens coming out of pot. All the people in the lorry were stupefied at the end of their journey. (Menchu p.23).

Life in the fincas was the cruelest and it depicts the degradation to which a fellow human being could be taken to. They were made to stay in the shack which didn't have any doors. Hundreds of people with their children and animals were made to stay there. In the fincas more than four hundred to five hundred people were compelled to occupy the same house along with their cats, goats and hens. Their house is nothing but makeover shed and all the time it is open and animals just came and went. They could not protect themselves from the chill air as they were no proper clothes. They are given a ration of tortillas and beans. That was meant for the workers. The children have to share the food with their mothers as they didn't work. There were proper water points or latrines for the workers. The basic amenities were very deplorable. More than four hundred people had to relieve themselves in the same place. The filth was covered by flies and the condition was very dangerous. There was only one tap to wash their hands. They have to fill water for drinking from waterholes meant for irrigating coffee plants. Menchu says:

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 mosquitoes. I touched my own face and I was covered too. They were everywhere; in the people's mouth and everywhere. Just looking at these insects and thinking about being bitten set me scratching. That was our world. I felt it would always be the same, always the same. It hasn't ever changed. (Menchu p.26).

## 5. Fincas the Hell on Earth

There was no rest for the workers. They were continuously under the watchful cruel eyes of the overseers. The overseers come and insult the workers and punish them for even trivial things like breaking a tender branch by chance. Menchu and her people were caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and debt in the fincas. There were two ways of paying the wages in Finca. They are paid either for a day or for the amount of the work done. But on either way they are paid less. They got separated in search of work in the fincas depending on where labor was needed. Rigoberta's father might be needed on a sugarcane plantation, cutting and cleaning the sugarcane. Her brother might be sent to pick cotton, whereas Rigoberta and her other brothers and sisters would stay with their mother, picking coffee. They would only be reunited when the work was finished; sometimes they were separated for one, two, or three months at a time.

The fincas were maliciously planned set up in which the natives were compelled to lose all the money they earned. They were manipulated to work more and earn very meager. Caporal or recruiting agents are in charge of forty people. They become overseers when people work in the fincas. They are local men but assume importance because they learn Spanish and could communicate with the finca owners. Their exploitative activities could not be complained to the owners as the native people didn't know any Spanish.

The cantina or the small shop was the place in which the children were tempted with all sorts of eatables like sweets, cakes and soft drinks. It was the greatest trap to the workers of the plantation. It was owned by the plantation owner. Here, alcohol was served - again, at exorbitantly high prices - to workers who did not realize how high a debt they were accumulating with every drink. At the end of their labor on the plantation, the workers would go to collect their pay. At that time, however, they would also be presented with the debts they had incurred on the plantation - debts for food, alcohol and medicine. Often, at the end of a month of grueling work, the laborers would find themselves with no pay. In Fincas,

The children who were hot and tired and hungry are always asking their parents for treats and it makes parents sad to see their children asking for things they can't give. But everything you buy is marked up on your account, and at the end when you get your pay, you always owe so much for food, so much at the shop, and so much at

the pharmacy. You end up owing a lot. For example, if a child unintentionally breaks a branch of a coffee bush you have to work to make it up. They deduct for everything and you end up having to pay debts before you can leave. (Menchu p.26).

The men either by dejection or by temptation drink in the cantinas. They drink with the hope of forgetting their sorrows and for temporary happiness and the result is they lead a life of pain and sweat for nothing.

Menchu hated their work in the fincas. Especially the three deaths, of her two brothers and a friend called Maria makes her hate the fincas. One of Menchu's elder brothers Felipe died off pesticide sprayed on coffee plants. The child couldn't stand the intoxication. The second one Nicolas when he was two died off bloated stomach caused by malnutrition. When the child died they were unable give a decent burial and have to wait for the permission of the agents and overseers. The permission was denied as they owed a lot of money already for medicine. The boy's corpse was asked to be carried away. The tax to be paid would make them work for more than one month. Other workers staying in the galera, the shack house didn't want the smelling corpse there. There was no coffin to be buried the body was buried in a little box provided by a fellow worker.

## 6. The Life of Marginalized Woman

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Menchu's views on life as marginalized woman were reshaped at the moment of sorrow. Though the views are pessimistic they tell us how they are driven to the edge of life by exploitation and poverty. She was compelled to take the hard decision of not having a personal life of her own. Life becomes meaningless to people when their toils exceed human endurance. Life itself becomes meaningless. She claims,

From that moment, I was both angry with life and afraid of it, because I told to myself: 'This is the life I will lead too; having many children, and having them die.' It's not easy for a mother to watch her child die, and have nothing to cure him with or help him live. Those fifteen days working in the finca was one of my earliest experiences and I remember it with enormous hatred. That hatred has stayed with me until today. (Menchu p. 47).

The death and mourning didn't permit them to work the whole day. The next day they were asked to get out of the finca as they missed a day's work. They have to fend for their travelling expenses. More than that they her mother, brother and herself, had to forego their fifteen days wages in the name of pharmacy debts.

The people there didn't speak the same language and they couldn't get from the fellow workers and if they communicated it was only by signs. Though they wanted to communicate with the other groups they could not. Though they followed the same customs and tradition they were divided by the linguistic barrier.

Maria's death made her depressive. She started to hate life. Questions like what would be life when she was grown up and meaning of this life started to haunt her. She decides to never get married because she couldn't see her children suffer and die in poverty. She was angry and compelled to enquire her parents,

"Why do we go to the finca? And my mother used to say: 'Because we have to. When you're older you will understand why we need to come. I did understand but the thing was I was fed up with it all. When I was older I didn't find it strange any more. Slowly I began to see what we had to do and why things were like that. I realized we weren't alone in our sorrow and suffering, but that a lot of people in many different regions shared it with us. (Menchu p.27 ).

## 7. Conclusion

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The intersectional analysis of the testimonio shows how the indigenous people are exploited at every level. They find no respite as children, adults or aged. The simple reason for this is that they are economically weak. Their economy once self reliant and self sufficient is shattered by the deadly norms of the new laws of LPG. The western myth of racial superiority makes the existence of the indigenous precarious.

The indigenous people's connection with the land is not materialistic. Their bonding with the land is spiritual, cultural and emotional. Their tradition of collective rights to land is contrary to the highly exploitive individual ownership. Land is a fundamental asset for the existence and economic development and extension of life of Indigenous people. But they disproportionately continue to have a small, fragmented land base, with limited

commercial and residential use, limited natural resources, far from urban exploiters of land resources.

'Without the land and the knowledge that comes mainly from use of the land, we as Indigenous peoples cannot survive.' This statement from Lars Anders Baer, a well-renowned Indigenous activist, highlights how land is central to Indigenous peoples' cultures. (Baer 2002: 17). For indigenous peoples, territories and lands are the basis not only of economic livelihood but also are the source of spiritual, cultural and social identity. While Indigenous communities certainly represent the world's most diverse population, most Indigenous cultures worldwide share a similar deep-rooted relationship between cultural identity and land.

The most marginalized among the marginalized and the vulnerable are the indigenous women and children. Gender and age make them dependent and vulnerable. They are exploited beyond limitations. But the future of the world is dependent on both women and children as on Nature. If Nature, Women and children are in threat, it is a threat to the existence of the human life on this

planet. The testimony of Menchu conveys equivocally this message to humanity.

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