**For Pakistan, a bell hooks**

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Readers may be surprised to see that the name of a person, bell hooks, is written in the lower case. Well, this is how she preferred it. The late African-American feminist writer bell hooks, who died in December 2021, wrote mostly slender books and essays. By doing so she transformed the way people look at their childhood, youth and adulthood in an environment that is mostly hostile to non-majority groups.

Looking back at my doctoral programme coursework in England some 20 years back, I thank my stars that I got to read the work of many such writers who are difficult to come by in a Pakistani educational setup. One of them was bell hooks whose writings drew my attention to what it is like to grow up as a member of a marginalised community. Her trenchant political and social essays deal at length with her and her people’s struggle to create an identity. Although she wrote mostly for the Black community, her lessons are applicable in all those societies which discriminate against and exclude certain communities from the mainstream.

In Pakistan, as a person belonging to a majority group – in ethnic or religious terms – one can only imagine how difficult it is for members of diverse ethnic and religious communities to create ‘self’ for themselves. And this is why we need a bell hooks for Pakistan – perhaps not one but many. When we try to develop an identity distinct from and yet inclusive of the world around us, we realise that – as if by magic – a terrifying world emerges around us. This is true for those coming from the margins. In brief vignettes, bell hooks tells her story, which is relevant to Pakistan too.

Such vignettes – or illustrations – are aplenty around us if we care to not just see, but observe and understand them. Stories from marginalised groups can illuminate elements that compose our society. In her book, ‘Bone Black’ (1996) when she describes her parents, she informs us how the pressures of society can tear a marginalised family apart, almost to the point of violence. Even though she had an extended family that offered her room to dream, she was also faced with a range of conflicting cues.

She teaches us how to live with, and within, subcultures that go through painful experiences inflicted on them by a majoritarian dominance. This majoritarianism instills a majority-driven evaluation of everyone in society as the majority culture dominates and even punishes those who are different. This discrimination leads to the making of a loner subculture. For example, a girl in a male-dominated family or office environment in Pakistan usually ends up as a loner or a child labourer looking at school-going children becomes a loner as well. Ahmadi, Hindu, or Christian business owners who face the boycott of their products or shops because of their religious beliefs are also classified as loners.

By cultivating a love for good books, bell hooks suggests, we can offer our children and young people a chance to come out of bigotry. We do not need spiteful children from both majority and minority communities; rather we are need sprightful youngsters who are animated and lively towards others. She herself was a role model and encouraged other women to be the same within and outside their majority or minority groups. Apply that to Pakistan and we can count such role models on our fingers: Amina Masood, Anis Haroon, Asma Jahangir, Asma Shirazi, Ayesha Siddiqa, Benazir Bhutto, Hina Jilani, Karima Baloch, Khawar Mumtaz, Kishwar Naheed, Mai Jindo, Malala Yusufzai, , Marvi Simad, Parveen Rehman, Sabeen Mehmud, Zohra Yusuf, Zahida Hina, Zubeida Mustafa, and perhaps a couple more.

And then people start thinking. They ask themselves how and why we treat our role models the way we do. These role models try to prepare us for life in a harsh world and end up getting harsher criticism for their work, let alone some appreciation from society or state alike.

Without knowing and reading much about such role models, our young people can hardly understand how the larger world works. They end up being disturbingly disengaged from real problems of society, and that’s what most states want – be it China, India, the US or Pakistan. Most states want to engage their children and young people in superficial activities like declamation contests on apolitical topics. Fundamental contradictions in society and the basic exploitative socio-economic structure are no-go areas for young people because that is ‘politics’, and ‘politics is bad’, they tell us. ‘Remain apolitical and thrive to the best of your incompetence’.

Of course, this formula does not always work, and there are moments of real force in the youth. The trick is to divert that force to matters such as chauvinism, cultural supremacy, diehard nationalism, enhanced pride in oneself, fake honour, gender superiority, hubris of inhumane practices, jingoism, killing animals and enemies; we witness all of this all around us. All this creates insensitivity to the pains of ‘the others’ especially of those who have been pushed to the margins of society.

And this is where writers such as bell hooks can come to our rescue. She was an activist and writer born as Gloria Jean in Kentucky, US. She placed a considerable stress on reading and understanding good poetry. By the end of her life, she had authored over 30 books. Her first major work was ‘Ain’t I a woman: Black women and feminism’ (1981). It was one of the most influential books in America in the last quarter of the 20th century. Next she wrote, ‘Feminist theory: from margin to center’ (1984) and ‘Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics’ (1991).

As an educationist, I found her book ‘Teaching to transgress’ (1994) to be the most inspiring. This book teaches us how to push against the boundaries of classism and challenge oppression in the world. It also explains the meaning of a fight against racism and sexism, telling us that it has to be a four-dimensional struggle in education. A class-based education –no matter how sugar-coated – is detrimental to children and to society at large. This perpetuates oppression at various levels to which our children and youth get accustomed, rather than fight against it. To bell hooks, a class-based educational system with racism and sexism within and outside it is at the root of most oppression in society.

A transgressive approach to education, she suggests, is when educators support their children and youth to achieve freedom to live fully in the world. This freedom is hard to achieve unless educators themselves become aware of it and learn to transgress the boundaries. In a class-based education system in which businesspeople run private schools and government schools are hidebound – children aspire to get admission in expensive and ‘respected’ schools – this becomes a lost cause. In this book, bell hooks encourages teachers to take risks and adapt to the needs of the learners.

Without a willingness to confront superficial constraints, transgression is not possible. ‘Teaching to transgress’ – a 200-page book which is available for free online – should be compulsory for all educators and parents. She even critiques Paulo Freire who was a huge influence on her work. She criticises him for not discussing pleasure in teaching as well as ignoring patriarchy and women. For pre-primary and primary teachers I would like to recommend bell hooks’ marvelous 35-page book for children, ‘Homemade Love’ (2002). Those who are dealing with four- to eight-year-old children should try this and see the children’s eyes light up when they read the book together.

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