

## **Fraudulent Storyteller Still Praised** by Dinesh D'Souza

I confess to having been mildly embarrassed when Rigoberta Menchu, Guatemalan political activist and author of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The Chronicle of Higher Education called the very day her prize was announced and reminded me that in my book *Illiberal Education* the year before, I had harshly criticized Menchu's autobiography as a sadly typical example of the bogus multi-cultural agitprop that was displacing the Western classics on the reading lists for undergraduates at elite universities like Stanford.

"Now that Rigoberta has won the Nobel Prize," the reporter asked, "what is your reaction?"

"All I can say," I replied, "is that I am relieved she didn't win for literature."

For Rigoberta, the Nobel Prize proved to be a canonization in both senses of the term. This obscure Indian woman who published her 1983 autobiography when she was still in her mid '20s, suddenly received worldwide recognition as a leftist icon — a modern-day Saint Sebastian, pierced by the arrows of racist discrimination and colonial exploitation. She received several honorary doctorates and in 1992 was nominated as a United Nations goodwill ambassador and special representative of indigenous peoples. Her book, hailed as a first-person account of Guatemalan bigotry and brutality against native Indians, spread from cutting-edge curricula like Stanford's to become part of the canon of required and frequently assigned readings in high schools and universities around the globe.

Then, just last week, the New York Times revealed that much of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is a fabrication. Times reporter Larry Rohter corroborated the research of an American anthropologist, David Stoll, whose interview with over a hundred people and archival research during the past decade led him to conclude that Rigoberta's story "cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be."

For example, in one of the most moving scenes in the book, Rigoberta describes how she watched her brother Nicolas die of malnutrition. But the *New York Times* found Nicolas alive and well enough to be running a relatively prosperous homestead in a Guatemalan village. According to members of Rigoberta's own family, as well as residents of her village, she also fabricated her account of how a second brother was burned alive by army troops as her parents were forced to watch.

Central to Rigoberta's story — and the supposed source of her Marxism — is a land dispute in which her impoverished family, working for slave wages on plantations, is intimidated and oppressed by wealthy landowners of European descent. Those nefarious oligarchs supposedly manipulated the government into forcing the Menchu family and other poor Indians off unclaimed land that they had farmed. According to the locals, however, this dispute was really a land feud that pitted Rigoberta's father against his in-laws. "If was a family quarrel that went on for years and years," Efrain Galindo, the mayor of the town, told Rohter. "I wanted peace, but none of us could get them to negotiate a settlement."

Even on small matters, Rigoberta's account turns out to be unreliable. On the very first page of her autobiography, Rigoberta says that she "never went to school" and only learned Spanish as an adult. In fact, she received the equivalent of a middle school education as a scholarship student at two prestigious private boarding schools operated by Catholic nuns. Her half-sister Rosa Menchu confirms that since Rigoberta spent much of her youth in boarding schools, she could not possibly

have worked as a political organizer and labored up to eight months a year on coffee and cotton plantations, as described in considerable detail in her autobiography.

None of this is to deny that Rigoberta's family, like many Guatemalans, suffered greatly during that country's long civil war. Both her parents were killed in that bloody conflict. But Rigoberta's account of the tragedy can no longer be trusted. "The book is one lie after another, and she knows it," Alfonso Rivera, a municipal clerk who kept all official records for the area for three decades, told the Times.

No less interesting than these revelations has been the reaction to them by Rigoberta Menchu, her champions and advocates. Rigoberta herself senses a racist plot and denounces her critics for "political provocations." The Nobel committee, having found Rigoberta a suitably obscure and politically correct candidate for its peace prize in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing in North America, said that it will not rescind the prize even though her only credential for winning was her life story, as narrated in her autobiography.

Equally recalcitrant is the academic community that enshrined, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* in the multicultural canon in American colleges and universities. The Rigoberta Menchu Foundation, based in New York, boasts that her book is one of the most widely read in classrooms in American and Europe. My cursory check at such leading universities as Stanford, Columbia and Princeton shows that *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is still widely assigned. So many high schools use the book that there is even a textbook, *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchu and the North American Classroom*, about how to teach Rigoberta Menchu's life story.

According to reporter Robin Wilson of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, who has been calling professors around the country who teach *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, most of them are outraged — not with Menchu for making things up, but with anthropologist David Stoll for exposing her fraud. Virtually all of the professors Wilson contacted defiantly told her that they would not stop assigning *I, Rigoberta Menchu* to their students.

Some of this may be the defensiveness of those in shock. But still it raises the question of how universities, supposedly dedicated to truth and critical thinking, can continue to teach a book that is full of falsehoods. For now, Rigoberta's academic fan club resorts to what may be termed the Tawana Brawley defense, named after the New York teenager who faked a racially motivated rape. The lawyers and civil rights activists who defended Brawley said it didn't matter that she had concocted her tale, because a racist society causes such desperation. As legal scholar Patricia Williams put it, "No matter who did it to her, and even if she did it to herself, Tawana Brawley has been the victim of some unspeakable violation."

In a similar vein, Rigoberta apologists like Marjori Agosin of Wellesley College now argue that whether or not Rigoberta's autobiography was faked, the native Indians of Guatemala have endured unimaginable hardships, the death squads of Latin America were a reality of the 1970s and 1980s, and so despite a few inconveniences of detail, the general message of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is essentially true.

But of course the legitimacy of teaching Guatemalan social and political history is not in dispute. The issue is whether *I, Rigoberta Menchu* deserves a central place in the liberal arts curriculum. Even Rigoberta's strongest defenders, like Stanford anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, have never maintained that this young woman's autobiography is great literature. If it were, then the claim of factual inaccuracy might be beside the point. *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway's memoir of his life in Paris,

would remain a minor fictional classic even if it turned out to be an unreliable account of that phase of Hemmingway's life. Rigoberta, though, does not run the risk of being confused with Hemingway.

Rather, the argument for teaching *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is based on the claim that, for all its literary flaws, the book is an accurate and authentic representation of the sufferings of a people, perhaps of all oppressed peoples. Rigoberta Menchu's translator and literary collaborator, the French feminist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, recognized this fact in her introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchu*: "Her life story is an account of contemporary history. ... She speaks for all the Indians of the American continent. ... The voice of Rigoberta allows the defeated to speak. She is a privileged witness. ... Her story is overwhelming because what she has to say is simple and true." By the same token, if what she has to say is neither accurate nor representative, there can be no possible case for teaching the book, unless one wants to include it in a survey of celebrated hoaxes.

As I pointed out in *Illiberal Education*, there were plenty of reasons to be suspicious from the outset of Rigoberta Menchu's credibility as the spokesperson for oppressed indigenous peoples. She met her feminist translator in Paris, not a venue to which many of the Third World's poor routinely travel. Rigoberta's rhetoric employs a socialist and Marxist vocabulary that does not sound typical of a Guatemalan peasant. These jarring elements in her story have now been accounted for. David Stoll's study shows that Rigoberta's life story was "drastically revised" to reflect the ideological perspective of a revolutionary left-wing organization she joined and on whose behalf she made the fateful tour of Europe that led to the publication of her book.

So what explains the continuing allegiance to her autobiography among Western academics? The answer is even if Rigoberta does not accurately reflect the experiences of oppressed people in Guatemala, she does reflect the political ideology of American professors who came of age in the 1960s. She embodies a projection of Western Marxist and feminist views onto South American Indian culture, which is manipulated and distorted to serve Western political objectives. Her radicalism provides Third World confirmation of Western progressive ideology. She is in fact a mouthpiece for a left-wing critique of the West that is all the more powerful because it seems to come from an "authentic" Third World source.

Rigoberta thus provides a model with which American minority and female students are meant to identify: They, too, are oppressed like her; they, too, can make victimology a basis for group solidarity. And if they spend their precious college years reading this stuff and thereby waste the opportunity to have a genuine liberal arts education? Well, that's just too bad. For Rigoberta's admirers to renounce her now would be to give up a standard-bearer of progressive grievance and alienation.

Rigoberta Menchu has all along been a willing and crafty accomplice in this cultural transaction. With extraordinary canniness, she presented herself in her autobiography as the consummate victim, a quadruple victim of oppression. She is a person of color, and thus a victim of racism. She is a woman, and thus a victim of sexism. She is a Latin American, and thus a victim of European and North American colonialism. She is an Indian, and thus victimized by the Latino ruling class of Latin America.

For such ingenuity in seizing the bottom rung of the ladder, who can doubt that Rigoberta Menchu deserved a prize?

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