

The Mother of All Questions

Rebecca Solnit. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017. 176 pages

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In the twenty-first century, many people are concerned with surviving globalization and preparing for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. More specifically, they are interested in knowing how they can make money, because they believe that the rich are happier than the poor. However, not all the rich feel happier than the poor, as there are many different formulas for happiness. Therefore, people who want to learn how to be happy and want to find the right way to achieve happiness must confront some very hard questions. In her latest book, *The Mother of All Questions* (2017), Rebecca Solnit, a writer, historian, and activist, asks what happiness is for women taking into consideration both the views of women themselves and of those who have ignored feminist activities and arguments.

Solnit has gained international fame since writing *Men Explain Things to Me* (2015), a book that played a key role in the spread of the neologism mansplain. Although Solnit herself has said that there are few links between her 2015 book and the precise term “mansplain,” the implications of “mansplaining” are exactly the same as what she wanted to share with readers in *Men Explain Things to Me*. Mansplaining indicates a social phenomenon in which men attempt to force women to internalize the discrediting of their abilities and the dismissal of their opinions and feelings—by minimizing women’s abilities, men who mansplain instead celebrate and consolidate their own power and positions in society.

In her subsequent work, *The Mother of All Questions*, Solnit displays various instances in which women have been silenced; criticizes the false perception that women lack valuable, important abilities; and analyzes how gender concepts have thrived on the intricate connections between fixation on a category system and the lack of empathetic imagination in patriarchal societies. Thus, Solnit suggests that women move forward by abandoning the conventional response to men’s unreasonable oppression that demands women remain silent and by breaking the fixed idea that silence is an es-

sential virtue for women. In short, she resolutely asserts that, in this way, women recover their own voices.

First of all, in order for a woman to become an independent subject who denies the conventional response to men's interference, Solnit says that women have to understand the difference between *silence* and *quiet*. Disagreeing with the aphorism, "*silence* is golden," she emphasizes her distinction: "*Silence* as what is imposed and *quiet* as what is sought" (Solnit, 2017, p. 17). According to Solnit, not only does *quiet* come from the individual's free will, with which she decides whether to say something or not, but also it gives a chance to listen to others' stories. Silence, however, comes from the threats that a patriarchal society uses to forbid women from communicating with each other, and it propagates the idea that vulnerable women are not able to create their own stories. Solnit presents *Tess* and *Lolita* as those who "have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story" (2017, p. 146), and as those who provide the seamless myth of masculinity created by the omnipresence of men raping women and children.

Moreover, in *The Mother of All Questions*, Solnit calls attention to the serious problem that women's creations are often seen as inconsequential or private things. Women have to consider their concerns and works as public issues, not as private and unprofessional works. Moreover, women, regardless of their beliefs, have to clarify the focus on patriarchy as a problem for treating women's problems as unimportant. For example, some admonish women to change their clothes or stay at home in order to avoid sexual harassment in the work place or in the street, never contemplating the present women's demand.¹ Finally women must believe that there are others who are willing to share their experiences and feelings and speak up about their stories and problems in public.

How do women regain their voices? By keeping women in already fixed categories, the patriarchal society can share "a mindset, beliefs, [and] eventually culpability" (Solnit, 2017, p. 124), which upholds its tendency to discriminate based on gender, race, and class. Therefore, in order to advocate for women's voices, Solnit insists that women should break the fixed cate-

¹ On October 23, 2016, more than 300 people, decked out in yoga pants, gathered to protest in a Rhode Island town in response to a local man calling yoga attire "the absolute worst thing to ever happen" in women's fashion. Jamie Burke, one of the parade organizers, said "women are fed up with the policing of our wardrobe" (Konstantinides, 2016). The protesters felt anger at being constantly told what to wear, prompting them to advocate their right to wear what they want.

gories created by the gender norms of patriarchal ideology and establish new categories. Solnit presents several female figures who articulated their thoughts and desires as women.

Solnit, however, does not describe these women romantically. Rather, she stresses how tough their lives were; because they were not silent, they were regarded as outliers, sorceresses, and threats, according to cultural conventions. Unlike Lolita, Leslie Lynnton, played by a young Elizabeth Taylor in *Giant* (1956), represents a remarkable character who sticks to her own categories to define the world and so effects positive change in others, including her husband, Jordan Benedict (played by Rock Hudson) (Solnit, 2017, p. 164). Although she does not belong to the standard category of a good wife, Leslie exists as a determined subject with agency. Not only does Leslie inspire women with her enthusiasm and agency, but she also offers another way to think about certain categories and definitions. Because of Leslie's initiation, we can recognize that being based on broad assumptions, certain categories cannot offer concrete truths or answers for us. There are always so many exceptions to any given category that each is full of "leaks" from the outset (Solnit, 2017, p. 129). Such leaks make room for women to think about their own problems differently and to create their stories.

Solnit understands the meaning of the movie *Giant* as emphasizing "how little you grasped at the start, even when you thought you knew. We move through life mostly not seeing what is around us, not knowing who is around us, not understanding the forces at play, not understanding ourselves" (Solnit, 2017, pp. 164-165). According to Solnit, even as more people believe that cutting-edge science and technology will free them from class, gender, and race prejudices, we are still standing on the starting line of thinking about a gender problem, which takes the shape of misogyny, rape culture, and violence. Therefore, one of the most important issues that women face is that they have to protect their right to move safely and freely in the world, unafraid of violence based in gender prejudice.

Solnit emphasizes the problems of the basic conditions for women in a patriarchal society, presenting countless examples of silenced women in *The Mother of All Questions*. She urges people to become a Leslie or a Jordan, mature adults who "quarrel, make up, endure, adapt, beget" (Solnit, 2017, p. 164). She, therefore, concludes that such adults are willing to cooperate with women's revolution to join the cause regardless of gender, for this revolution is necessary for all people, not just women.

References

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