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**Why, Why Not:
I Will Ask Till Death**

Taboo is a strict prohibition of behaviour, an important part of social and individual identity. And sometimes, taboo is a conflict between these two. To start this article, I find myself with this conflict.

As a child, I always asked my mom: why, why not? “Don’t laugh loudly, don’t shake your legs, don’t ask questions,” she said. “Obey your elders.” But I never stopped asking why. I ignored all the rules society and family laid down for me. So what if I wasn’t the most adorable child? My younger cousins viewed me as a hero. I attended a coeducation school, and had many friends who were boys. I didn’t mind their sex. But I was always scolded. Mom was also scared and ashamed on my behalf; the relatives used to come up to her, taunting that the fruit that ripened quickly was also the first to rot. Mom would beat me with the stick, berating: why are you so argumentative, arrogant, and stubborn?

I just wished for an explanation of why I shouldn’t have male friends.

My mom is not a prejudiced woman. She was pressured to raise me this way. I was brought up in the countryside on a tea plantation, which was beautiful but provincial. When I left for higher studies in Kolkata, I was surprised to see that many different taboos existed in city life as well, like casteism and the belief in superstition. I joined a theatre group as a social revolutionary, unconcerned about my career. Theatre became my passion.

I married when it was time for me to marry. When I did so, my parents and relatives felt relieved. But that’s when I was beaten for the first time. My in-laws prohibited me from going to the theatre, and forced me to stop communicating with my friends. Because I was completely against dowry, they tortured me like a slave. I’d always heard about domestic violence. Now I was experiencing it. I realized I had to make myself financial independent. My voice choked. One day, my poems started asking: why, why not? No one supported me because I was argumentative, soon ‘rotten,’ always asking questions at the wrong time. But were I modest and obedient, no one would have helped me, since it’s taboo for girls to live away from their in-laws. Since taboos are also intertwined with finance and power, girls are reduced to financial burdens and boys financial assets.

Caged for 8 years, I finally left penniless to support myself with a temporary job and writing.

My mom was helpless defending me—being a divorcee is taboo, and writing about controversial issues in society as a woman is criticized. I suffered with my first husband, and witnessed lethal taboos, like the forced abortion of female fetuses. I wrote about these problems. How could I ignore them? My novels were about homosexuality, incest, sexual exploitation, prostitution, gigolos, and other social problems. I used the language of the slum dwellers. People kept coming to my helpless mother to call me pervert or crazy. But she never tired of saying, “My daughter writes the truth.”

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 6, 2017
Ramsha Ashraf (Pakistan), Maung Day (Myanmar), Santiago Giralt (Argentina), Tilottama Majumder (India),
and Subraj Singh (Guyana)

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I believe there is no issue in this world that can't be literature. A writer's pen goes with the times, even when they are paradoxical. We believe in global citizenship, yet fight with each other over uncountable social issues. These issues are deliberately used for political and financial gains, but also for controlling social boundaries. For instance, what is taboo for one class is not taboo for another. Politics, finance, power and taboo are inextricably intertwined.

Even our epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, contested socio-political taboos. What Krishna and the Buddha tried in 5000 years BC, what Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore tried in the past half century—we follow in their path. We ask feebly, why, why not, but together we roar the question against the evil. Literature inspires questioning and liberates the mind, leading civilization towards progress.

Taboos remain, but are being reshaped. In the 18th century, Hindu widows were burnt alive alongside their husband's corpse, and education for girls was prohibited. Today, government signs read "Save the girls, educate them," and women fight for women with the rest of our country. A war is being waged against abominable taboos. I am a warrior with a pen in my hand, and will remain, till death.