

Once Upon a Tomorrow

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At the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, much before viewers stand in front of Rembrandt's incredible *The Night Watch*, a painting that takes over an entire room, is a still life that hangs unobtrusively in one of the alcoves of the grand central gallery. At first glance, it may seem rather unremarkable compared to some of its esteemed neighbours but an entire world is contained in Willem Claesz Heda's *Still Life With a Gilt Cup*. Painted in 1635, the table in the frame is stacked from end to end with the remnants of a somewhat lavish meal: atop a silken tablecloth there are oysters on pewter plates, some vinegar to go with them; bread; a half-peeled lemon; some salt and peppercorns; gold and silver vessels, some white wine in a Venetian glass and a half-full glass of beer.

Heda, a master realist of his time, offers a glimpse into what a certain kind of life looked like, and once we're done marvelling at the precision and faithfulness with which he has painted what appears to be a breakfast scene, we might wonder: do all these items belong in the first meal of the day? Well, for 17th century Holland and its Dutch East India Company, well on its way to becoming an imperial power after Great Britain and their East India Company, the world had become its oyster. And these components that formed Heda's still life came from different corners of the globe. The lemon, although grown in orangeries owned by the rich, had made its way to the north from the Mediterranean, or even as far as Brazil; gold, silk and muslin from Bengal, India, salt and pepper from the Sumatran

islands in South-East Asia – here is a painting that shows us the complicated politics of unbelonging and belonging. Advancements in science brought about colonialism, a history of violent conquests that divided the world into Us and Them, but one conveniently exploited the other and their produce to carve out cultural and socio-economic identities in their respective homelands.

Identities and practices don't appear from the ether; they are formed over time by constant reiteration of certain thoughts and ideas. They are manifested in the notions of nationality, the rules surrounding gender; food and religion, to objects and spaces that are turned into markers of right and wrong. The idea of the Self, as we have learned, emerges from its relation to the Other: in the gaps between them lies the terrain of belonging and unbelonging. And what storytellers and those in the business of sharing stories are constantly attempting to do, is to narrow those gaps – not by erasing the differences but by acknowledging them and recognising the ways in which unbelonging occurs.

The team of narrative experts at *Once Upon a Tomorrow* have shared examples of unbelonging, both personal and otherwise, to talk about the kinds of practices that have become normalised over time, and offer us a 'hack' to combat those experiences. Will they work? Maybe and maybe not, but we will never know if we don't try to change the status quo.

The Museum of Unbelonging

NOT JUST CHILD'S PLAY

When I am a part of events around books and literature, they always seem to focus on books for adults. As someone involved in the world of children's literature, I feel a sense of unbelonging because children's books don't enjoy the same importance. The same goes for the literature festival – most people confuse a children's festival with a book fair. That there could be an event where authors, illustrators of children's books get together to participate in a setting that is non-academic, and promotes reading for pleasure, is often lost. This perception affects funding as well. One school of thought is that funding should be a function of learning outcomes. The expansiveness and fun associated with a children's festival should not be limited by this. On the other hand, if it is seen as a general entertainment event, funders demand a huge footfall. There is a sense of unbelonging vis-a-vis the media too. While there is a 'books' beat in most publications, not enough coverage is given to children's literature. There aren't enough interviews of children's writers or illustrators unless they have won an award. The same goes for book recommendations and reviews.

The hack:

Start conversations around this subject. There cannot be any quick-fix solution. A change of mindset is required.

NO KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

In a country like India, there is a general expectation that after a certain age, it is time to settle down into married life – a part of that life includes children. In a patriarchal society, women's lives mostly revolve around the family, especially their husbands; later, that focus shifts to their children. So it is no surprise that the conversation centres around one's offspring: "How many do you have? How old are they? Where are they studying?" and so on. It eludes many people that nobody everybody has children and that not everybody wants them. The latter is sometimes considered blasphemy in a society that values children as "god's gift." This sort of belief system that permeates into daily life often results in alienating those who may not have children, either by circumstance or by choice.

The hack:

To keep the conversation light and inclusive with those who don't have children, one could select a number of throwaway sentences that will allow one to gauge the mood and emotional state of the person they are talking to, and converse accordingly. A few examples below:

*"I love other people's children so much."
"Do you have kids of your own or would you like to borrow mine?"
"You look like a great aunt/uncle!"
"Don't you get bored when we show you photos of our kids?"
"Please don't tell me you have contributed to the population too!"*

Q&A

To many people, it will seem like an innocuous question: "Where are you from?" But when the question is asked to those who don't visibly look like they belong to the same ethnic community or race as you (in this case, German) the question acts as an exclusionary device, festering feelings of unbelonging.

The hack:

If you are the recipient of these enquiries, may we suggest responding with: "I'm from Earth. And you?" If the seeker of this information remains persistent, try: "No, really, I mean made from earth, at least that's what the Bible says."

MEAT ME IN THE MIDDLE

When I used to work in a restaurant kitchen, the cook would serve us all the same lunch; he never asked any questions about restrictions or allergies. Hasan, the Turkish dishwasher, didn't eat meat. That is, if there was meat, he asked for something without meat. He was also very shy when it came to this request. The cook shrugged his shoulders, he couldn't be bothered. One day, the cook gave Hasan a lunch with meat. Hasan ate the vegetables and returned the plate. I asked the cook: "Have you ever asked him why he doesn't eat meat?" The cook answered: "No."

"Why not?"

"He must know himself!"

That was it.

So I asked Hasan: "Don't you eat meat?" Hasan replied: "I do eat meat. But I don't know what the cook serves me. I am not allowed to eat pork. I am a Muslim. He doesn't care. I can't trust him." I went back to the cook and asked him, "Do you serve him pork?" He answered: "I serve everyone the same."

I insisted: "Then is pork served sometimes?"

"That can happen," was his answer.

This conversation took place 20 years ago; today, there is greater sensitivity about religious identities.

The hack:

Ask someone what they need in order to feel seen. Ask, what are your basic needs that I can respond to? What can I do to make you feel included? One can also point out that they may not be able to anticipate everything but they are open to receiving information and inputs to ensure that the person feels accepted.



X MARKS THE SPOT

Ever since I hit puberty, the size chart at a clothing store has been an object of unbelonging. My chest remained small but my waist expanded and my hips positively exploded. Suddenly, my body could no longer be easily slotted into S, M or L. Back then there were only physical stores to buy clothes from, it was nearly impossible for me to fit into anything that was in the women's department because if one wanted to buy ready-made clothing, one had to come in a ready-made size. Showing beyond that was unacceptable. Sometimes, somebody would offer to throw you some items from the men's section, because men are allowed a little more room in terms of size and fabric.

What has changed today is that more sizes have been included in the size chart; the moment the alphabet X shows up, people with rounder bodies are afforded a sense of hope. Now it is a question of how many Xs show up on that chart.

The hack:

Platforms such as Instagram are flush with information about brands that are either size agnostic or cater to larger people. Body positive influencers provide fashion tips for a number of sizes and can direct one to affordable online stores that deliver worldwide. If shopping online is not your scene, then head to your trusty tailor with designs that you would like them to replicate. The clothes should fit you, and not the other way around.

HOMEBOUND

I was born and raised in east India in a city called Kolkata. Ethnically, my family is from the north Indian state, Haryana. There are plenty of differences between these places but I am mostly influenced by Kolkata. The city's culture resonates with me, I speak the language like a native, I can read and write in it too. But that is not enough for some of the local artists I work with. They judge me by my name, they don't consider me to be a part of their culture. There is a term they use – "Aw-Bangali" – meaning "Non-Bengali." The word throws up an invisible wall between us and I am left to stand on the outside.

The hack:

Talk to people of the community as often as possible. Most of the time, their responses are conditioned and can be overturned by telling your own story about your identity. It might not work with everyone, but there are many who will accept you and recognise the patterns they have perpetuated that resulted in a feeling of unbelonging.

SOFA, SO GOOD

"Sit like a girl."

When the grandparents are away, the girls will play. Feet up, hair down, snacks on the sofa. My back for working around being told to "sit like a girl" was to evade the attention of those that didn't approve and anticipate the reaction of who was in the room until I was old enough to make a fuss when the same instructions were given to my nieces.

Eventually, the 'rules' changed to disapproval and later to indifference. I can't say not sitting like a girl was ever fully accepted, but the sofa certainly wasn't a source of discrimination in the house anymore.

The hack:

When we learn the difference between decorum and discipline, it allows women to question gender roles. Men can take up space but women are told to accommodate everyone. Raise the issue of the double standard in society as often as needed, and stand your ground.



A WOMAN'S WORK

After completing my Bachelor's degree in Communication and Journalism, I was hired at the largest circulated daily in Maharashtra, India. And while it was a dream come true for me, as the paper's first full-time female journalist, I found that I was kept away from the real grind. In that male-dominated office, I was too different for them; I was judged for the way I dressed, the way I spoke, I was kept away from more exciting beats because I was considered a liability by some of my editors. I gathered more courage to fight for my place in the newsroom and be treated in the same way as my male colleagues were. In a few years, I rose to the position of the Chief Editor of the Sunday edition and the Features desk. I demanded to belong and in time, I did.

The hack:

Discrimination on the basis of gender at the workplace is frighteningly common and rampant on a global scale. The willingness to go beyond the comfort zone, readiness to accept challenges, speaking up to be seen and heard, and completing tasks efficiently can help women break the glass ceiling; it is a slow process so resilience and patience is key.