



illustration & narration: **AMRITA DAS**

Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit is a reflective account of a young woman's thoughts and feelings as she comes into contact with the larger world. This enlightening visual tale is gentle yet resolute, treading a fine balance between tradition and innovation.

Mithila painting or Madhubani painting has a long history dating back to at least the 14th century. Women in the Mithila region of Bihar in north India have painted colourful auspicious images on the interior walls of their homes on the occasion of domestic rituals. This ancient tradition, especially elaborated for weddings, continues to this day. However, in 1960s, in the midst of a severe drought, a few women began to paint on paper for sale, as a new source of family income. At first, they simply transferred onto paper the traditional images—gods and goddesses and symbolic icons—from the wall paintings. Since then, however, they have also explored and experimented with new subjects, including local, national, and international events: floods, terrorism, global warming, and most recently, feminist issues such as patriarchy, dowry, female infanticide, etc.

Amrita Das was born into a community where the lives of girls and women are defined and oppressed by males, who hold the primary power. She has always been interested in portraying the realities of a woman's life. Her story offers a fresh perspective on Indian women's mobility where she uses the traditions of Mithila art to question the traditional confines of women's lives.

Below are a few talking points and exercises to explore with the students some of the complex ideas brought to light in this book.

Talk about the story

- The idea of movement is everywhere in the book. There are trains, scooters, cars, train tracks. Compare and contrast how the three girls of the book are moving. Where to and where from? Why?
- “I knew at that moment, how I was going to tell my story. It is her story too!” Right in the beginning, the author explains how her story was the story of the girl on the train as well. What are the qualities that unites the author, the girl on the train and the girl selling fruit?
- “If you dream for a moment, you’re asked why you’re twiddling your thumbs.” What does this mean for the author? Look through the book and look for instances of what she may be dreaming about and what her reality is.
- “Freedom. What does that word mean to us? Going to school? Learning? And then? Marriage? Does that set you free?” The ideas of ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ are explored by the author. Discuss if the girls of the book are ‘independent’ or ‘free’. Are these the same thing? Make a list of 10 words or phrases that mean the opposite of ‘freedom’, ‘independence’ and ‘dreams’.
- Epiphany is the point in a work of literature where a character has a sudden insight or realisation that changes his or her understanding. Epiphanies can be found throughout the book. Take the second image, for example, of two girls playing under a tree. At the end of the page, she asks, “But was my childhood really like that? Was this the truth?” This is an epiphany where she realises that she was not being real about her childhood and shows its reality in the next page. Find any two other epiphanies in the book and discuss it.

Talk about the art

- Look up other examples of Mithila or Madhubani art. Refer to *Following My Paint Brush* and *Waterlife* for more examples of this style.
- Amrita Das has used the traditional form of Madhubani to portray very modern items. There are scooters, ATMs, and people wearing modern clothing. Look through the book and find at least 10 other objects she has drawn this way.
- The borders are of special importance to the Mithila style. All of these patterns in the borders, represent something important to the art form. See how these decorative borders are used to denote a difference in space. The artist has drawn these around doors and windows, even separating different train compartments.
- Look at the last painting. The large lotus motif is an auspicious one used especially during wedding and childbirth rituals in the Mithila tradition. Why has she used these symbols here?

Activities

- Think about your last long distance journey. How did you travel? What did you do? Did you eat, sleep, read, play games, talk to other passengers? What kind of life do you think a stranger observing you would imagine of you? Have you ever met a stranger on such a journey who has left an impression on you? Has someone made you think, made you happy, made you angry? Write about such an encounter.
- This book is a good introduction to explore the concept of privilege. All the three girls in the story are 'underprivileged'. It is important to understand what that means. Privilege is a special right or advantage available only to a particular person or group of people - this is not something a person has earned, but something that he or she enjoys because they belong to a social group that is powerful and considers itself superior to all others. There are many such groups around us - and their power and sense of superiority may come from belonging to a particular race, religion, caste or simply because they are wealthy. There is also another sort of privilege - this has to do with being male. Within any social group, even those that are not privileged, men are more privileged than women. They are usually better educated, work at better-paid jobs, are more mobile and possess the power and authority to decide things not only for themselves but for women and children.

Young people have an innate sense of justice and fairness and so it is important to help them understand the idea of privilege and how it is one of the chief causes of inequality. Here are a set of questions to help unpack the idea of privilege or the lack of it in our own lives.

1. Who was the first in your family to get school education? You, your parents, your grandparents?
2. What is the highest level of education that your mother has received? What is the highest level of education that your father has received?
3. Would you or brothers or sisters be able to study subjects of your choice, later in your life? If so, why, if not, why not?
4. Are you able to do all that your brother or sister does? Are you allowed to do all that your brother or sister does? If so, why, if not, why not?
5. Do you assist with housework at home? Who else does housework?

These questions could be used to focus on how privilege - with regard to gender and education - produces inequality.