

## **RACE, CULTURE AND CLASS DISCRIMINATION IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *BEADS***

**Padma Rampalli \***

**Dr. Hampamma Gongadi \*\***

---

### **Abstract**

God has created every living being with perfection. His creation is precious, ultimate and gorgeous despite different colours, sizes and shapes. People are born with different features and colours in tune with the climatic conditions. People of different races acquire their own uniqueness'. Nevertheless, they take it in different ways and create differences; the fair races try to dominate those who look dark or brown. Indian society has come under the powerful web of discrimination and has created the gap between the rich and the poor. Fair skin people treat the poor as low class. Social inequality is found in almost every society. Manjula Padmanabhan through "Beads" shows how the lives of people are affected by cultural, social and racial discrimination prevailing in Indian society and questions the system in her short story "Beads".

**Keywords: Racial; Social; Cultural; Discrimination; Indian society.**

---

**\* Doctorate Program, Indian writing in English, Sri Krishna University, Machilipatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India.**

**\*\* Professor of English, Madanapalle Institute of Tech & Science, Madanapalle, Andhra Pradesh, India.**

## 1. Introduction

India's richness lies in its multi-lingua, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-racial system which is based on the concept that differences like colour, caste, creed, cultural and religious practices are not looked upon as conflict; or maybe these distinctions are looked as assortments that improve the general public and the country overall. Since times immemorial, different races have relocated and settled in India, and in due course of time they are absolutely absorbed in the Indian society. The modern Indian has been developed and nourished by multi-racial contributions. However, racism, classism and cultural differences deeply rooted during Colonial era are continuing in Postcolonial India also. This complexity is increasing day by day in the modern India. Manjula Padmanabhan shows through "Beads," a short story from *Kleptomania*, how racial and social inequalities affect the lives of people in the present Indian society.

Manjula Padmanabhan, born in 1953, is a short story writer, Cartoonist, Journalist, Illustrator, Playwright and Novelist. She won the world's richest Play script award - Onassis International Cultural Prize in 1988 for her play *Harvest* and became famous internationally. Her famous works are *Lights Out* (1984) *Harvest* (1997), *Kleptomania* (2004), *Hot Death, Cold Soup* (1996), *Getting there* (1999), *Escape* (2008), *The Island of lost girls* (2013) and *Three Virgins and Other Stories* (2013).

## 2. Review

Farida as the eldest daughter of her father inherits not only the ardent skill in using her father's sewing machine but also the responsibility of the entire family when her father becomes crippled in a road accident and gets confined at the house. She joins as a seamstress at Mary's house for stitching embroidery on kurthas and blouses. Mary, a foreigner, appreciates Farida's dainty work. Her sister Jenny and her daughter Mickey are guests to Mary. Farida sits in the veranda with her father's old hand-operated sewing machine and beads stuff to stitch the blouse of Mickey, Jenny's daughter. Jenny showers all the praises at Farida's outstanding embroidery skill. Pleasure at the praise flushes through Farida because she never had heard such accolades in her life. With embarrassment, she simply says "thank you" in a very low and respectful voice. Jenny's use of the remarks, "extraordinary" and "quite a little beauty" fill Farida's mind with a sensation so warm and light that she almost ceases to breathe. In all her fifteen years, no one at

home or outside had said that to her. Jenny admires Farida's talent and decides to give more work to her. Jenny's daughter, Mickey (Michaela) finds the embroidery work on her blouse fascinating but her keen observation makes Farida nervous. Westernized Mickey has white hair, absolutely short and she looks like a boy. Her eyes are like blue glass marbles outlined in thick black make-up and her lips too are painted black. She has silver rings pierced through the skin of the eyebrows, two on the right side and one on the left, and her skin looks translucently pale.

In the evening at 7 o' clock, Farida leaves for her home. Unlike the luxurious flat of her employer Mary, Farida lives in a clumsy area, in old Delhi, with narrow lanes where only four people can walk abreast. Farida's father owns three tiny rooms in the second floor of the area. Farida conveys her experience at employer's house, captivates description of Mickey and her physical appearance to her four siblings, gives her earning to her step-mother, Salma-bi and says that there is a possibility of securing her services for a larger commission of work. She is very conscious of the honour being shown to her. Farida lost her mother at the age of five, from then, Salma-bi is the care taker of Farida and her two sisters. She knows only the continuous 'jibes and jeers' of her stepmother. Salma abuses her all the time and reminds her that she looks "black as a buffalo" and threats that she never finds a husband, so she has to accustom herself to earn her own living. Salma-bi shows imbalanced love towards Farida and her sisters. Grandmothers of the locality murmur that Farida's siblings look fair and it is easy to identify future suitors among the eligible boys for them. But for Farida, no one shows interest in her. Farida intentionally avoids describing Mickey and her style of wearing skimpy top and scandalous shorts to anyone at home, especially to her stepmother because she may declare that Farida has got corrupted and forbids her from going to work at Mary's house. Farida also hides about Bahadur, a Nepali, who works as a domestic helper at Mary's house. Farida is afraid of him due to his thick set and tough looking with Mongolian features. Bahadur suggests her not to work at Mary's house: "Better you don't work here, girlie!" he tells her, in his Nepali-accented Hindi. 'Better for you! Hard to explain. The young mem- the white-haired one - she's not...good! Stay far from her.'" (41) Farida does not mind his words. She feels that job is her only chance of bettering her prospects, which have grown, dim indeed ever since her mother died. Farida decides to face the situation alone whatever may happens. She feels bold enough to hide many matters she has come across at Mary's house. Situations make Farida to learn, to think individually with bold mind and to face

the real challenges. Manjula Padmanabhan, through the character of Farida describes that a female can set her own rules to adjust herself in society and at home.

From her second floor terrace, Farida glances at the modern and brightly lit areas of the city where her employers live, a deep orange glow visible for miles around like a festive umbrella. Manjula shows the life-style of poverty ridden people with meagre facilities in slum areas of big cities. In Farida's area, electricity is a rarity and most people depend on kerosene lamps inside their homes even though they all have power lines snaking across the walls of their dwellings. Water is collected in buckets from the nearest standpipe and stored in earthen pots. Even toilets are rarely equipped with a functioning water connection. Her neighbour has a toilet-stall equipped with functioning water; this facility is used by the inhabitants in the vicinity by paying a modest monthly fee. Inside Farida's home, the kitchen area is at one end of the main stream. A single tap in the kitchen produces a steady stream of water for one hour every morning and another hour every night. All around, Farida hears the diesel-generators powering the all-night workshops with a continuous thrumming din. She is fed up of that sound and finds tranquil environment at her workplace. She notices that her employer's life is a 'bed of roses' as they do not work. Mary and Jenny do nothing except talking, shopping, eating and laughing. In Farida's world, everyone squeezes every minute of the day bone dry for earning potential. Even so, all they can afford is three small rooms with its single tap!

Farida is astonished to see Mary's husband and the two women sitting together at meal - as if there is no difference between men and women. Farida thinks that mingling of male and female is a specific thing to the fair-skinned foreigners. In her world, that mingling is repugnant; she rarely speaks alone even to her own father and never with any other men. She covers her face with a head-scarf at all times and always conscious of the need to keep her voice low and her face politely averted. She never laughs out louder except in the company of children. It is highly impossible and unthinkable for her to wear western style garments like her employer. Manjula shows how culture and traditions in the society rule the lives of the people. Every religion has its own customs and traditions. People follow food and dressing habits strictly in accordance to their religion. Western culture is different and it is hard to compare the western to Indian culture. It is unimaginable of such behaviour for a girl like Farida, in whose community anything less than

absolute propriety is like “Sun setting in the East!” Manjula shows the deep rooted age-old customs and traditions in the Indian society. It is the first time Farida is meeting foreigners with fair hair and large limbs that seem to breathe a very different air in her. According to her, such people are no different from the characters in the bed-time stories told to children, to frighten or amuse them. Farida is surprised to see people whose lives and customs fundamentally different from those of her own.

Mickey takes interest in Farida’s work and appreciates her. She takes pity at her sitting in the veranda and argues with her mother that it is inhuman to make Farida sit in the veranda and work in the burning heat. Since her divorce Mickey has been angry and resentful at her mother. She invites Farida to her room: “You’re going to work in my room today. I’ve moved your things in there already.” Her tone softens as she asks, “You...do understand me, yes?” (45) Farida nods her head mutely and concentrates on her work. Mary interrupts and advices Mickey not to disturb Farida. Mickey becomes more outrageous rebukes her mother on her giving extra work to Farida and treating her like a slave labour by paying low wages in return of expensive handcraft. One’s social location is a society’s overall structure of social stratification and is affected by almost every aspect of social life and one’s life chances. The absolute best indicator of an individual's future economic well-being is into which they are conceived. Gender based discrimination and prejudice are major contributing factors to social inequality. In all sectors, women’s participation in the work has been expanding universally, yet ladies are still confronted with wage disparities and it is common in all countries. Manjula shows the exploitation of labour with low wages in “Beads.” It is quite common in highly populated countries like India to get labour in cheap. For three decades foreign companies showed a lot of interest in invest and starting their companies in India to manufacture their products at cheaper cost. They flourished year after year with high profits. However, the economic conditions of the workers stand still with no change in their status.

Mickey invites Farida for lunch on the dining table along with her uncle’s guest, Mr Neelkant. She threatens her mother that she would skip her lunch if Farida does not eat lunch with everyone else. Farida becomes dumb at Mickey’s disrespectful behaviour towards her own mother. Farida feels nervous to eat lunch with strangers and fears that she might encounter

forbidden substances in the meal. However, she decides to face the hurdle. In the afternoon, Mickey forces Farida to the dining table for lunch. Four adults, Mary, her husband Andrew, Jenny and their guest Mr. Neelkant occupy their places before the girls arrive. Andrew sits at the head of the table and Mickey offers her seat, beside Mary's, to Farida and sits at the foot of the table. Mary introduces Mr. Neelkant to the girls. He smiles at the little Muslim seamstress and asks in Hindi if she understands English. On hearing from her an answer in assertive, he exclaims: "An educated girl! A rarity in her community."(48) When the soup is served, Farida feels nervous to start. Mr. Neelkant assures her in English that the soup is not made of Pork. He feels uneasy to have a guest with food prohibitions and expresses it as a curse of religious fanaticism and as a Hindu he is not fastidious about such things. Farida hears Mr. Neelkant, twice, commenting 'she looks beautiful.' But he compares his colour with 'milky tea' and of Farida's with 'strong coffee'. He says he is acceptable and in contrast Farida is not acceptable as she looks dark. He strongly stresses that the fair coloured people belong to upper class and dark skinned people associate with toiling under the hot Sun, belong to the labour or low class. It is a sign of social deprivation. Through Farida, Manjula questions, how the colour of skin could make such a difference in a person's behavior. Manjula clearly exemplifies the deep-rooted class discrimination that prevails in the Indian society. Even in the twenty first century advanced world, people give high priority to class, religion and race!

Mr. Neelkant comments that it is tough to find a suitable husband for Farida due to her dark complexion. Mickey feels bad and insulted for his rude comments on Farida. Everyone at the dining table demands Mickey to say apology to Mr Neelkant but she denies strongly. Farida maintains silence and remains as a spectator with lot of patience despite the matter in the discussion is focused on her colour and poverty. All at the dining table feel that Farida does not belong to that table. Mickey on the verge of tears shouts, 'there's something wrong with all of you. You too, mother – you, especially! Or else you'd see it for what it is – Farida's really poor! (49)

Andrew feels bad for Mickey's words to the guest, orders Mickey to leave the table and suggests Mary to send food to her room. Mickey leaves the dining table with gasps and cries at once. Farida runs away from the dining table after Mickey. She feels that it is inexcusable and rude

towards her employers and expects eviction orders. She goes directly to Mickey's room and returns to the veranda back to her original place with her stitching stuff. She opens bead cases and begins to work. Her needle moves like a steely bee, back and forth with all the hardest, darkest and shiniest coloured beads. Her mind tumbles with hot and angry thoughts. Farida becomes furious and feels as if one layer of her skin has been ripped away by the words of Mr Neelkant and others, and feels tough to bear comments, as if she is a lizard on the wall with no thoughts or feelings. However, Farida is amazed at her own daresness: eating food that has been prepared in ways forbidden by her religion, with no idea of using the armoury of utensils and to be in the presence of strange men without her father's knowledge or permission. Later, Mickey emerges out of her room with bare feet and sits on the mat beside Farida. Mickey observes the stitching pattern and asks Farida if it is for her. In response Farida says in English, "Yes for you. You like? You want? I teach you? Its easy"! (53)

Farida exclaims at her own handwork as if she saw it for the first time. She finds, she has stitched in a reckless, asymmetrical manner, in anger after the lunch, using beads of all colours - dull and shiny which has finally resulted in an extra ordinary design. She decides not to reveal the new pattern to her step mother, who instantly destroys the reckless asymmetry. Farida feels proud at that asymmetrical design with higgledy-piggledy arrangement of all the beads in her collection, still looking, in an unlikely way, harmonious in the higher pattern. She firmly decides not to fear there after: "If He, in all His perfection, were capable of such pranks, well then! She, Farida, need have no fear! (53)

### **3. Conclusion**

The Earth, with all its living and non-living things, is the most wonderful and aesthetic work of art created by God. But God Himself was not satisfied with His own work until He created man. It is man who is able to understand, with his intelligence, the essence of the creation. In fact, the Earth is a precious gift to mankind with an expectation to live in harmony with all the other creations. But in reality man has drawn differences among his own species in terms of region, colour, race, caste, creed, gender, religion etc. In the basic social orders, where the individuals have limited social roles and statuses, social disparity might be low, but in urban societies the gap between rich and poor is wide. One section of the society enjoys every luxury and the other

suffers to meet even the basic needs of the livelihood. One enjoys by seeing art or handicrafts but the person who do that, struggles to face the challenges to get better livelihood. For one, it is pleasure and for the other it is need to sustain life. Manjula Padmanabhan's "Beads" presents the mortals, created by the Supreme Creator, as fashioned in a range of different colours, shapes and sizes like assorted beads. Yet, the same air threads equally through all, stitching everyone into the cloth of reality with randomness and in its own way beautifully!

## References

1. Padmanabhan Manjula, *Kleptomania*-ten stories, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2004.
2. Banerjee, Laksmisree. "Indian Women's Voices: The Postcolonial and Post-Modernist Era". *Postcolonial Discourse: A Study of Contemporary Literature*. Ed. R.K.Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000. Print
3. Agarwal, Malti, *Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature Redefining the Self*, Ghaziabad, Atlantic, 2011.
4. Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1962.