
Barbara Delinsky's *Family Tree*: Race and the American Family

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ABSTRACT

It is known that racism affected black people and the minorities for centuries. Those people suffered the miseries of racial distinction without any hope to get rid from the torture of being different, poor, weak, and powerless. Above all, they suffered the pain of slavery and its humiliation at the hands of merciless masters.

Barbara Delinsky (1945) is an American novelist. In her works, she handles the problems of the modern people who look like persons the readers know. Sometimes, the reader identifies himself with her characters. However, Delinsky presents the issue of racial prejudice in a different way in *Family Tree* (2007). She depicts the effect of racism upon the people who have honey white complexion. She narrates how a couple's life is disturbed because of their newly born daughter who does not look like either of them.

The present study sheds light upon the effect of racism upon the American family in contemporary time. It also deals with the author's life and career as a contemporary novelist.

1.1. Race Problems in American

For along time racial distinction bothered humanity because of the control of some people upon others. White people in Europe and America oppressed people of African origin for centuries. They deprived them from their humanity. They dehumanized them: lashing, working the day with the night, humiliation, and sometimes starving to death are the usual acts in the lives of the black people. The Africans were imported to Europe as slaves to work in the farms and houses of unjust masters. Then they were sold again like possessions of their original owners.

The earliest references to Africans in mainland British America do not show for certain their long-term status. But, they suggest that most were servile laborers at first, perhaps for the remainder of their lives (Vaughan: 129). Vaughan states that in the records of the seventeenth century, there is

evidence that blacks continued to enter Virginia, perhaps at the rate of two or three per year, and on English ships that also carried free and indentured whites, thus presumably coming from England and either bringing a black or two from there, or stopping at the Caribbean islands where a few Afro-West Indians may have been purchased for importation to Virginia (Ibid.: 133).

Vaughan gives an account of the servants brought to the United States of America and their status depending on the records of each period of time. He suggests that in Virginia the black servants probably suffered worse than their white servant counterparts, at least in length of service. There are strong hints from the census of 1625 that they were already a different category of labor: witness the absence for most of the blacks of age and date of arrival—crucial data for white servants since terms of indenture usually stipulated service for a specified number of years or until a specified age.

Furthermore, although most of the blacks of the 1625 census had been in Virginia for six years, none of them is shown as free; all are either specifically listed under the heading of "servants" or are included in the holdings of free white men who held white as well as black "servants." In most cases the blacks are at the end of such lists of "servants." Their anonymity, of being servants or slaves, is telling too (Ibid.).

Racism may be defined as:

the hatred of a person by another or the belief that another person is less than human because of skin color, language, customs, place of birth or any factor that supposedly reveals the basic nature of that person. It has influenced wars, slavery, the formation of nations, and legal codes

(www.adl.org/hate-patrol).

Surely, the most inhuman example of racism by the West has been slavery, particularly the enslavement of Africans in the New World. In fact, slavery dates back thousands of years. But, the enslavement of the Africans was accomplished because of the racist belief that Black Africans were less fully human than white Europeans and their descendants (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, cries were raised aloud against the torture of human beings who were born free just like their oppressors. Racism means the belief

that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others. It is discrimination or prejudice based on race (the Free Online Dictionary.htm).

However, The exact definition of racism is controversial because there is little scholarly agreement about the meaning of the concept "race". There is also little agreement about what does and does not constitute discrimination. Some critics argue that the term is applied differentially, with a focus on such prejudices by white people, and defining mere observations of racial differences as racism. "Racism and **racial discrimination** are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis, independent of whether these differences are described as racial" (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia).

In history, racism was a driving force behind the slave trade and behind countries based on racial segregation such as the America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and South Africa. In fact, racial practices and ideologies are universally condemned by the United Nations in the Declaration of Human Rights (Ibid.). However, racism till nowadays influences people of racial differences from their surrounding majorities. Literature takes the greatest share of condemning this ugly dehumanizes discrimination.

1.2. Barbara Delinsky: the Artist Beneath

Barbara Delinsky (August 9, 1945) is an American novelist. She says that she was born and raised in Boston. Her mother died when she was eight. She explains that it was the defining event of a childhood that was otherwise ordinary. She went to summer camp through her fifteenth year in Maine, which explains the setting of so many of her stories. She spent her sixteenth summer learning to type and to drive two skills that have served her more than all of her other high school courses. She earned a B.A. in Psychology at Tufts University and an M.A. in Sociology at Boston College (www.barbaradelinsky.com).

Delinsky writes about the emotional crises that people face in their lives. She believes that readers identify with her characters. She indulges her opinion in her works in the following words which explains her attitudes towards both her work and the readers:

They (the readers) know them (the characters). They are them. I'm an everyday woman writing about everyday people facing not-so-everyday challenges. My novels are character-driven studies of marriage, parenthood, sibling rivalry, and friendship, and I've been blessed in having readers who buy them eagerly enough to put them on the major bestseller lists.

(Ibid.)

In 1980 Delinsky read an article about three female writers. She decided to try putting her imagination on paper. After three months of researching, plotting, and writing, she sold her first book. At the beginning, she published under the pen names Bonnie Drake and Billie Douglas. Now she only uses her married name Barbara Delinsky. Besides, some of her novels published under the other pseudonyms, are being published under this name (Wikipedia). The awards she got are Romantic Times Magazine: Special Achievement (twice), Reviewer's Choice, and Best Contemporary Romance Awards; from Romance Writers of America: Golden Medallion and Golden Leaf Awards (Ibid.). In fact, her simplicity and attempt to address the hearts of common people help to make Delinsky one of the contemporary wide read American novelists.

Delinsky makes use of her information about genetics in *Family Tree*. All of the arguments about race, in fact, are based on a false understanding of race. Contemporary scientists are not agreed on whether race is a valid way to classify people. What may seem to be significant "racial" differences to some people. The colour of the skin, hair, facial shape are not of much scientific significance. They believe that genetic differences within a race may be greater than those between races (Www.adl.org). It seems that Delinsky believes in this when she writes *Family Tree* because she draws her African characters as superior as the other races in the novel.

Delinsky's *Family Tree* (2007) takes the issue of racism from an angle differs from the usual prejudice against the African citizens in America. The sufferers are white couple who get a black daughter. The birth of their first infant cause a lot of questions about the origin of her colour. Dana's husband and his family suspected her fidelity and accused her of having an affair with

an African-American man. However, at the end the problem between Dana and Hugh is solved after the astonishing discovery of the real source of the infant's colour.

2.1. The Birth of Problem

Family Tree opens with Dana and Hugh Clarke who are awaiting the arrival of their first child. Hugh is from a family that has heritage and its own line traced back generations upon generations. His father, Eaton Clarke, has even just written a book about his family tree that is about to be published. Dana knows almost nothing about her family. Her mother died when she was five. She is raised by her grandmother, Ellie Jo, the owner of a yarn shop. Dana is always told that her conception was based on a casual relationship her mother had while away at college (About.com.)

Though her husband tells her that it is necessary to know who never her father is, Dana has not had much interest in finding her father or worrying about what he is like. But when the baby is born, it becomes interested to know Dana's history. Dana named her daughter after her mother, Elizabeth, Lizzie. Hugh is not happy and the mother is upset because of her husband's reaction. The problem is that though they are white, their child clearly has African American characteristics. The trouble is no one knows where they might have come from. Hugh's family, especially his father, immediately suspects that Dana has had an affair and the child does not belong to their family at all:

“she isn't mine.”

Dana nearly laughed. “That's ridiculous. No one will think that.”

“My parents did.” Her jaw dropped. “Are you kidding?”

“No. And don't knock that one, either. It's a logical possibility.”

(Family Tree: 39)

However, for the most part Hugh trusts his wife and urges her to do all she can to find her father to find out if he's black. Dana becomes upset and her feelings towards Hugh become colder and colder. Her marriage seems to fall apart. While Dana tries to unravel her family secrets and care for a new child

the only comfort she can find is in spending time at the yarn store with her grandmother and other friends.

Hugh's father thinks that Dana has had an affair with Hugh's neighbour David, a respected American-African who was married to a white woman and has a daughter who has American-African features. Soon everybody start to point to the dissimilarity between the girl and her parents. Therefore, Hugh decides to make a DNA test to prove that Lizzie is his daughter:

"I want DNA tests made. There's been one remark too many."

"DNA tests?" she asked, unable to grasp it.

"To prove I'm Lizzie's father."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking," he said grimly, "about David. His name keeps coming up. I want it decided."

(Ibid.: 105).

However, the tests are made. They prove that the baby is Hugh's daughter. But, his father never accept it. Though Eaton defends the minorities in his books, he can not accept a granddaughter who has African features. He is a hypocrite. But, what is worse for Dana is that the trust between herself and her husband is shattered.

Dana starts to argue the issue of being black with American-African people. One of them is David himself. He explains for her that when he was a child colour never matter because his father is white and one of his brothers looked exactly like the father. But, when he became four years old things changed because other children started to call him names which he could not understand.

David explains to Dana the reasons why people treat those who are not like them badly:

That people gravitate towards those who are like them-that they're threatened by people who are different- that, as differences go, skin color is the toughest because it can't be hidden. I worked twice as hard in med school, and I still

do it now, as a doctor. Even after all this time, do you think I can just sit back and relax? Think again.” He pointed to his face. “When things go wrong, this is the first thing they cite.”

(Ibid.: 121-22).

However, when the DNA tests prove that Lizzie is Hugh' daughter, Hugh changes his attitude towards David. Dana is still angry because her husband suspects her fidelity and chastity as a devoted married woman. She feels that there is something has broken inside her. She never expects her husband to have such uncivilized mind. Though he is a lawyer and most of his clients are from the minorities, he shows a different face to his beloved wife.

2.2 Expect the Unexpected

One of the women who work in the yarn shop of Dana's grandmother is an elegant African-American woman. Sandra Belisle is a retired nurse. In fact, Delinsky presents the opinion of a black man about his position in a hostile society through David. She presents the opinion of an African-American woman through Sandra. Dana discusses race with Sandra. She tells Dana that one of her brothers loved the company of white women. He was attractive and white women were easily fall for him. He loved them because he thought that white had more status than black. When Dana asks her whether she has the same opinion, she says:

I think higher percentages of poor people are uneducated and criminally disposed, and more poor people are black than white. I don't necessarily buy into the stereotype, but I understand its source.

(Family Tree: 153).

When she was sixteen years old, Sandra worked as a maid. She cleaned toilets and washed clothes. Sandra makes it clear that there is a difference between a white woman and a black one even if they do the same work in a society which is supposed to be open and democratic:

I didn't feel superior to anyone then, but would it have been any different if I'd been white and doing those things? Being a maid brings with it a certain mind-set, regardless of color. The one advantage a

white maid has over a black maid is that going back and forth on the bus, no one guesses the truth of what she does.

(Ibid.: 154).

Saundra's speech reflects the general basis of racism. Wilson suggests that racism is overt when individuals of some group consider another group as inferior. Members of the first group have created stereotypical beliefs

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about those in the second group. These beliefs have no bases in reality. But, they insist that these stereotypes are true. For example, in America specifically in the past whites defined blacks as being lazy, violent, or morally bankrupt. But, such characteristics were unfounded. Yet these whites treated blacks with disdain because they convinced themselves that blacks were thus corrupt. However, prejudiced whites would locate one example of an inhuman black and use that example to make a sweeping claim against all blacks (Wilson: xii).

However, Hugh urges his wife to track down her father. At the beginning, Dana is reluctant to do this and is not concerned about what people are saying regarding Lizzie's heritage. But, for the sake of her beloved child, she starts her journey of discovering the reality of her family. "As they gradually piece together the facts, a shocking truth emerges that will forever change this family—while opening their eyes to the real meaning of identity and unconditional love" (www.barbaradelinsky.com).

Dana's father turns to be a priest in Albany. His name is Jack Jones Kettle. He loved her mother but she refused to marry him because she did not really love him. Moreover, he never knows that he has a daughter from her. When Dana finds his address, she visits him with Hugh. He is surprised to know that Dana is his daughter. He wants know her more but she refuses. However, he finds her number and calls. The real surprise is that he has no African ancestors. The couple goes back to the same circle of dismay.

Once Dana and Hugh take Lizzie to the pediatrician to check her. The doctor tells them that Lizzie is a carrier of the sickle-cell disease trait. Dana's heart nearly stops when she hears this. The doctor explains that most of the people affected are of African descent. A test is made to Dana to see whether she is a carrier of the sickle-cell disease. If she is a carrier, then the

source of Lizzie's African feature come from Dana's side. The test is negative. But, Hugh's test is positive. This unexpected result shocks Hugh. He hurries to face his father. His meeting with Eaton reveals the truth and the source of Lizzie's African features. Eaton is the illegitimate son of an African American man. When Hugh knows the truth, he starts blaming his father for ill-using Dana while he knows the reality of the child's heritage:

I started thinking about the way you attacked my wife the day Lizzie was born_ the way you were so quick to accuse her of having an affair. I started thinking about the way you didn't want to see my child....you who have always been respectful of people of color.

(Family Tree: 288-89)

The other unexpected thing in *Family Tree* is that Saundra is Eaton's aunt. Her late attractive brother is his real father. This is ridiculous. The one who attacks fiercely the black colour and the African features of his innocent granddaughter himself is half African. He knows the reality of his heritage. Yet he hides it and attacks the innocent for having the same origin. This is the ugly face of racism. People who do not want to be discriminated, they prejudice against their own origin in a society which assumes that to be its members are open and free minded.

CONCLUSION

Barbara Delinsky presents her views about racism in her society in a new way. American couple are eager to have their first child. After the birth of their daughter, they struggle for stability. The girl has African characteristics. Questions start to be asked. Who the father is. However, *Family Tree* reveals vital issues in the American society. Black people and minorities are not the only victims of racism. All the Americans may fall into the injustice treatment of this inhuman discrimination.

Dana the heroine of *Family Tree* always dreams of stability with her husband Hugh. The birth of her daughter disturbs her life. But, she loves her child. Therefore, she starts to reveal the hidden secret of her colouring. Though her father-in-law writes about the rights of the minorities in his celebrated books, he attacks her as well as the innocent child. However, Dana

and Hugh discover that Eaton is the source of the girls features. Eaton's attitude shows the dilemma individuals like Eaton who struggle to hide their real identities because they live in a society full of racists. He is not able to tell even his wife that he is an African American. He is ashamed of this truth. His youngest son does not accept this discovery because he cannot face his friends.

It is painful to see that even today people hold prejudices against others simply because of the colour of their skin. *Family Tree* helps readers to realise that racism is still very much present. *Family Tree* is not just a story about racism, but also about trust, discovering who you really are and doing the right thing.

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