



“Pluralistic Identity, Not Victimhood Culture”

a 5 star review by Dick Burkhardt of

Don't Label Me

How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Cultural Wars

By Irshad Manji (2020)

Introduction:

This outstanding book is a welcome relief from the nastiness of identity politics. Though Manji herself is literally “diverse” (female, lesbian, Muslim), she, along with her playful alter-ego, dog Lily, is out to directly challenge the toxic practice of “diversity, equity, inclusion” by followers of Critical Race Theory. She is a very worldly person, a global citizen who came of age in Canada, now in the US, born in Uganda, with parents from India and Egypt.

To me Manji comes across as a humanist, but she advocates for an ancient tradition of enlightened Islam, now hidden from the public eye by radical Islam. Burned out as a TV debater, by taking on atheists (from the Left) and Muslim fundamentalists (from the Right), she now teaches how to muster “moral courage” to revive the empathy, respect, and civility needed to heal the bitter divides of the cultural wars.

Manji has done her academic homework and knows that “cancel culture” is not just an excess of fervor or a lapse of ethics. It’s all about toxic ideologies of identity. Her solution is to replace the “binary” thinking of victimhood culture, such as presumed oppressor / victim relationships, by the realism of a plurality of identities in each of us, some better, some worse, but none defining our “essence”. This means rejecting customary labels. As she says, “labels eclipse truth” (p xii) and “people are getting gamed...by our leaders” (think Trump), which won’t end until “we stop gaming each other” (p xiv).

Real Diversity versus Labels:

First off, here’s Manji takes on “diversity”. “To do diversity honestly, we can’t be labeling all of diversity’s critics as bigots” (p 5). She reminds us that our national motto “E pluribus unum” requires a

“diversity of viewpoints” learning to coexist. “Hate gets turbo-charged when those of us who bang the drum for inclusion drum out *reasonable* folks – merely because their opinions don’t match ours” (p 9). “Much of today’s polarized politics stems from the shaming that the diversity movement’s been doing” (p 11), which flings a “double-dose of humiliation”. And I’d add that the consequence is the anger of the white working class at the “condescending elitism” coming from university culture, as revealed by studies by Rabbi Michael Lerner, described in his book “Revolutionary Love”.

The result is “negative polarization”, where people vote for Trump, “not out of faith in him, but out of fury with the others side” (p 12). A journalist attending Trump rallies heard people “spitting bullets about political correctness” (p 13). Manji reminds us that we need to “give respect in order to get respect” (p 14). Instead people feel they are “being scammed” (p 18), with good reason, given the severe impact of escalating inequality, long neglected by universities. In addition, “quota-driven diversity fails to love people for their own sake, and this signal failure has earned diversity a reputation for hypocrisy” (p 31). Instead she calls us to find a “common denominator” – “Call it the Tao. Call it evolution. Call it God” – fluid, not battle-hardened labels. (p 32).

Often Manji feels that when she’s labeled, instead of being treated as an individual, she becomes “an involuntary avatar of other people’s projections” (p 20), “a plaything of their broodings, the better to fuel their warring versions of reality” (p 21). She cites the philosophy of Bruce Lee: “If you attack the opposition head =-on, you harden its resolve to defeat you. But by developing harmonious individuality, both you and your opposition win. Think of it as self-defense without defensiveness” (p 22), or a “win-lose outlook, produces a lose-lose outcome” (p 23). Or “practice honesty diversity, listen without having to agree... act from a place of grace” (p 33). She reads the words of Barack Obama, MLK, Nelson Mandela, and more.

Manji’s conclusion is that “people have to risk giving offense” to “drill deeper than labels” – “Let’s equip a new generation to grow trust in relationships” (p 40). She says, let’s ask tough questions, such as “How can racism recede if we continue relying on categories invented by racists?” (p 51). Or, “for diversity defenders to shame cis, white, males, ...then accuse them of fragility when they fight back, or ...resent them for not being fragile enough..., is beyond passive-aggressive. It’s Trump-grade gaslighting” (p 55). She reminds us how “Humiliation can radicalize...ask young Muslim men across Europe” (p 56). In the US the alt-right “counts on recruiting kids being hunted by the liberal language police” (p 58), as she warns against “competitive victimhood” (p 60).

Integrity and Pluralism versus Victimhood:

Astonishingly “white people” are invisible in the new American tapestry (of Critical Theory). One girl said, “I’m white. I’m nothing.” Another, “I’m white. I have no culture” (in the context of multiculturalism) (p 69). Meanwhile “even highly educated people scamper into pods of purity, where they can bask in emotional warmth” (p 77). In reality, “empathy for the Other is compassion for ourselves”. Instead, “When liberators cleave to a rigid identity, they contort themselves into bigots” (p 109). In this situation, “Any threat to my view becomes a threat to me...that’s why the politics of identity – whether Trump’s or ours – devastates democracy” (p 117).

Manji opts for integrity: “I’m for exhibiting that our justice that is positive rather than punitive...that it’s doable on the ground, not pickled in the brine of theory” (p 121). She concludes that “puritanical

purity will destroy whatever it's meant to defend" (p 127). How? "White folks step back and stew. White nationalists step in and spin. Diversity's battalions fiercely condemn them but deploy rhetoric that feels to loads of white folks like they're being indicted for every one of the nation's ills" (p 128). My note: Some Critical Race Theorists actually do blame a supposed "white supremacy culture" for all oppression and indict all white people as complicit, leading some to "deaths of despair", others to the Proud Boys, others into anxiety or depression, others to simply vote Trump as an act of rebellion.

Proclaiming the virtues of pluralism of identity and thought, Manji says, "Committed plurals are conscious renegades... For plurals, free speech is more a gift to pay forward, than an inheritance to squander" (p 137). "Unlike dogma, faith breathes. It squirms. It holds tension" (p 169). In regard to "safe spaces", she cites how Google rethought psychological safety: "When project members trust that no one is going to jump down their throats for a hair-brained thought, self-censorship fades" (p 178). As to external censors, "Microaggression monitors speak for no one but themselves", to counter the trend that "Inside the diversity posse, it's cool to be offended". "A suggestion to the next generation: Unfollow the fad of taking offense as an avenue to power" (p 180).

As to "power": "A lot of people who think of themselves as marginalized actually wield power", even if unconsciously. "As a result, power is exercised poorly, even destructively" (p 189). Then, taking a swipe at Robin DiAngelo, "If you treat white students as individuals, not as avatars of racism, you'll set expectations that they'll be far more motivated to meet" (p 197). Moreover, abuse of power comes from Critical Theory, not just Trump: "When authorities assert what's true, they're exerting the raw power to frame reality and fake truth" (p 199).

Then Manji poses a daring question: "Did Women Co-Create the Alt-Right?" citing the work of Angela Nagle about how the alt-right spread in response to cyberbullying on the Left: "This virtual partnership of group and gripe germinated from the keyboards of young women more than anybody else" (p 200). Even more amazingly, these young women "added mental illnesses to their online identities" as badges of victimhood honor, attacking community members who showed a lack "of sensitivity" to their labels. This is also referred to as "cry-bullying", playing the "age-old game of abusing one's power while claiming powerlessness" (p 201). However, Manji missed the similar historical role of women in "gossip" – the social media of yore.

Boys actually get more sympathy: "Insecure boys can't become secure men if they are constantly being monitored and reprimanded" (p 202). About one boy, "Nobody knew that he had framed his white male privilege as a positive, as a blessing to do some good with" (p 203) – a time-honored response among "privileged" advocates for justice to the cynical label of "oppressor".

Honest Diversity versus Multiculturalism and Allyship:

Next Manji takes on "multiculturalism" and how it has ended up in Canada as a slogan to "preserve and protect" minorities, words that "freeze, not free, individuals... conflating diversity with labels ... rewarding cultural anxiety" (p 224). She also notes that in practice, the status of being "multicultural" is often extended only to certain "marginalized" cultural groups, excluding European and Islamic cultures, for example, and the cultures of competing geopolitical powers like Russia or China.

By contrast she cherishes Pierre Trudeau's championship of "individuality" - "the principle that by being myself I can enrich my society" (p 226). She notes that in America, "Diversity is a means to an end" -E pluribus unum - but that "neither multiculturalism or individualism" (p 228) serves that purpose. What does is "pluralism", citing Thomas Jefferson as a "provocative plural" - the champion of the form of civics known as "Jeffersonian democracy" – civic duty grounded in working men and their small holdings combined with enlightened leadership.

As to "cultural appropriation", Manji says, "Only a transactional mind-set would suggest that cultures can be owned and therefore embezzled from their owners...cultures are endlessly kinetic, combining influences from near and far" (p 273). As to "intersectionality", she says, "combinations and permutations of labels still leave labels calling the shots" (p 288). As to allyship, she says "allies tend to get valued only for their usefulness to the cause, not their intrinsic humanity" and an unspoken rule of allyship is "that listening means unquestionably agreeing with how victims perceive their situation", meaning "sit down, shut up, and follow the script" (p 270).

Manji develops the concept of "honest diversity": To achieve it, "gently offend yourself" instead of others by "breathing slowly" and resolving "to communicate in ways that at least some of your detractors can relate to" while "standing with reason" (p 242). She reminds us not to "confuse the proliferation of progressive terminology with empathy and engagement" – "we are nobody's savior except our own" (Payam Ahkavan , p 238).

Moral Courage:

To summarize, Manji teaches "moral courage" - *to engage with empathy*, and the consequences when we fail. That is, "If the Other doesn't feel heard, eventually he'll feel humiliated...Perceived humiliation fuels identity-obsessed warriors, whether they rampaging for the ethno-state or the caliphate" (p 251). Now dig deeper - ask not just "who's suffering and how do I help them?" but also "who benefits from the suffering and how do I reach them?" (p 255). And "to develop trust in a relationship, don't just stand ready to help; proactively ask for help" (p 262), and "to rumble effectively (for the truth), be humble immediately" (p 266). Developing these skills of justice can take years of practice and coaching.