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Book Review

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With the question 'Why are you single?' Sarah Lamb started her ethnographic journey into the lives of single women in India. The result is this first book-length academic study of singlehood in India, which will resonate with academics interested in singlehood, gender, and family in India, as well as with single women across the country whose lives are often mirrored in Lamb's thick description of her field. [Singles Studies](#) is an emerging discipline, but the bulk of research is about the lives of single people in a Western context. This book brings in the aspect of cultural specificity in thinking about singlehood. As an anthropologist, Lamb analyses singlehood through the lens of kinship. In India in particular, where kinship ties have great socio-cultural significance, being single is unusual because it means living outside of the habitus of kinship.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork comprising of participant observation with fifty-four never-married interlocutors, Lamb examines single, never married women across social classes in Bengal, ranging from the affluent elite to the middle classes, to the impoverished ones. Through the book she examines single women's lives in relation to education, work, care, love, sex, motherhood, pleasure, and friendships. Lamb notes that analysing single women's lives offers us a valid critique to many concepts such as life, family, gender, sexuality, kinship, propriety, respect, social class, belonging, and pleasure. Yet, this is not a portrait of the single woman as heroine or a lonely woman: the book strikes a balance between examining the challenges as well as the possibilities of being single. I find this productive since it does not render singlehood abject and does not feed into a [deficit narrative \(De Paulo 2020\)](#). At the same time, Lamb rethinks the autonomous individual and the ability to freely choose singlehood, a narrative that has also dominated Western scholarship on singlehood.

Examining the question of social identity and belonging, Lamb notes how single women are in limbo because of their existence outside kinship structures. Emotional security is predicated on kinship in the Indian context. Where then can single women, who are outside marital kinship systems and estranged from natal kinship systems, draw upon for their belonging? Lamb explores these questions both in regard to rural as well as urban women, who, even if they have all the material comforts and security, might lack in kinship relationships. This lack leads to fewer housing options beyond the family home. While urban professional women might find homes in high rises, in rural areas there is little to no housing option for single women to live alone. The few other options they have for their residence are working women's hostels and old age homes.

Lamb can draw on her decades of experience studying aging in India, to tease out the specificities of aging while being never married. In fact, as she notes (95), her interest in single women emerged from her decades long research on aged women in West Bengal. Old age homes here provide spaces for the articulation of legitimate singlehood. Unmarried women gain most respect and status in old age homes because they are legitimately there and are able to find a kinship of sorts and a renewed sense of belonging with other unmarried women. Older married women who live in a nursing home, on the other hand, are seen with pity and bewilderment because people would ask themselves, 'why haven't their children looked after them?'. Unmarried women after the age of 60 and 70, gain a renewed sense of respect from those around them. Lamb recounts how one of her interlocutors told her that she "openly admired the never-married women [they] met in retirement homes who had rejected marriage while dedicating their lives not only to careers but also to spiritual asceticism" (97). This dedication to spiritual asceticism renders their sexuality non-threatening, and being in an old age home finally confers on them a legitimate social place where they can rightfully claim to be looked after.

With the ubiquity of shows like *Indian Matchmaking* and *Made in Heaven*, Lamb's discussion of what makes a woman unmarriageable is both poignant and relevant. A single woman's disadvantages in the marriage market range from physical appearance, disability, being accomplished, and being highly educated. Throughout the book Lamb engages with interlocutors like Medha and Indrani who are highly educated with a PhD and remain single. The author for example notes that there is a common perception that through being highly educated – e.g., holding a PhD – a woman denies her femininity. Lamb examines the role of education in delaying the age of marriage for girls by giving the example of the Kanyashree Programme¹, started by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2012) has attributed the global rise of singlehood to [affluence, feminism, communication technology, and urbanisation](#). We can now add education to that list.

Lamb examines a particular kind of single woman, which in my understanding is not found in the West, but is culturally specific to South Asia. This consists of women who didn't marry because their natal families required their income and care. These families bank on the breadwinning capacities of unmarried daughters and sisters and prefer that they remain single so that all their income stays in the natal family. While the women who perform this specific act of 'sacrifice' take pride and pleasure in it, their families just see them solely as breadwinners. These are not the only hardships for these women. Alongside these hardships, Lamb also notes how their sexuality is seen as a threat which has the danger of spreading like a contagion within the family, in the community and neighbourhood, leading landlords to deny single women housing. In examining single motherhood (the unwed kind), Lamb notes that it disrupts patrilineality, and could be the reason for excessive pressure on men to marry and carry forward the lineage.

The most hopeful parts of the book come at the end, challenging the deficit narratives about single women. Here, Lamb narrates stories of single women's exploration of fun and enjoyment, which include navigating public spaces alone, traveling and hiking, decorating their homes, and meeting friends. Friendships, which form the cornerstone of Singles Studies (and even Queer and Feminist scholarship), are here extensively discussed. Lamb for example reflects on whether it is always easy for older single women to make friends, given that often there are differences due to age and social class. Yet, spaces such as working women's hostels and old age homes provide ample opportunities for new kinds of friendships.

Many women in the book claim a certain independence and autonomy by remaining single, where work becomes a means of livelihood and fulfilment beyond marriage. Lamb explains that the ability to choose to remain single is often linked to cosmopolitan upbringing and access to higher education. Reversing

the gaze onto married women (rather than solely unmarried ones), one might then ask of educated, cosmopolitan married women, 'why are you *not* single'?

Notes

1. The Kanyashree programme is an empowerment scheme for girl-children from economically disadvantaged families. It offers the girls a scholarship should they remain unmarried while going to school. As of 2017, seven million girls have availed of this programme (Lamb 2022, 51).

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