IMPACT: International Journal of Research in
Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)
ISSN (P): 2347–4564; ISSN (E): 2321–8878
Vol. 11, Issue 3, Mar 2023, 29–37
© Impact Journals

Refiguring Singleness

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Received: 17 Mar 2023 **Accepted:** 18 Mar 2023 **Published:** 20 Mar 2023

ABSTRACT

The discussions surrounding the term "single" are mostly superficial, dating it back to patriarchy, the new feminist paradigm, diverse types of singlehood, and so on. This begs the question as to how the single lady is positioned in the modern Indian reality. The constrained gender constructions that can be found around serve as the foundation for common social understandings of what constitutes appropriate gendered behaviour in personal life; and hence regulate how gendered behaviour is held accountable. This paper attempts to approach singlehood as an unpartnered identity, the roots of which are inherently heteronormative and do not present an open-ended alternative..

KEYWORDS: *feminist paradigm, modern Indian reality, heteronormative*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian (primordial) mythological characters continue to determine the constraints of feminine experience in Indian reality (substantial feminine archetypes). To grasp the essence of the phrase ‘singleness,’ one must study it in the context of the country. The majority of cases have been handled in limited situations (overwhelmingly) with a 'feminist' perspective, but have always been confined to patriarchal concepts in the country. Even in modern times, concepts of individuality cannot be adequately expressed or theorised. What exists primarily is a homogenising tendency that attempts to theorise it in either a feminist or a patriarchal paradigm. The discourses surrounding the term ‘single’ are primarily superficial, tracing it via patriarchy, the new feminist paradigm, tracking different sorts of singlehood, and so on. This begs the question as to how contemporary Indian reality ‘position’s the single woman.

Women are stratified socially; therefore they do not share the same set of material situations or experiences. The fact that they are subject to idealised hegemonic gender norms, albeit varied in their abilities to 'perform' those ideals, reflects their differential access to power. The different placement revealed here is related to being 'unpartnered,' not race, caste, sexuality, or other factors. At the same time, the norms of intersecting spaces apply. Though experiences differ, dominant gender relations have an impact on all aspects of singlehood. The most obvious ideal that circulates within post-feminist culture is a distorted representation of actual women. Even though single women are diverse and cannot be characterised as a monolithic group, the portrayals that circulate are limited in their diversity. The restricted gender constructs seen around serve as the foundation for common social understandings of what constitutes suitable gendered behaviour in personal life, and hence govern how gendered behaviour is held accountable.

Numerous things can influence one's status as a single person. Regardless of when it is thought socially acceptable to remain single, it is a widespread assumption in the majority of cultures (unavoidable in Indian) that women will partner. It is commonly referred to as a period of 'waiting' (for the clichéd 'prince charming') that may or may not result in

protracted singlehood. Various types of ‘unmarried’ contexts are frequently grouped together. Widowhood, divorce, single parenthood are all typically considered under the generic 'singlehood'. There are clearly numerous shared discursive patterns connecting these categories together, one of which is 'choice'. Choice is commonly associated with the concept of individual rights and is viewed as a positive aspect of an open and democratic society. Many of Sartre's sociological contemporaries were interested in the issue of choice in modern society; however, some, such as Zygmunt Bauman, emphasised the inequality of choice—the reality that some people have more freedom to choose than others. According to cultural sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, culture forms and moulds individual decision. People develop specific preferences, values, desires, affinities, and tastes as a result of cultural socialisation. As a result, any seemingly free choice is influenced by some degree of pre-determined inclinations originating in society, social structure, and, in particular, membership in a specific social class. Free will is nearly a mirage. The concept of choice is a socially and culturally produced phenomena that is both enabled and constrained by the setting in which it occurs in various socio-historical circumstances. Despite shifting definitions, singleness remains a 'deficient identity' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). The literature on singlehood contains major concerns like stereotypes of singles, the stigma of being single, discrimination against singles, single as a deficiency, social identity, singlehood as a lifestyle, singles' social surroundings, social norms, and the benefits of marriage/coupledom etc. Gender schemes are a criterion for regulating individual behaviour, and they serve the aim of analysing and assimilating new information by defining persons, their attributes, and their behaviour as generally feminine or masculine. They are the foundation for judging one's behaviour and applying the dimension of femininity or masculinity to personality features.

One must distinguish between the experience (and subject position) of singleness and the identity of singlehood. Singlehood is commonly thought to be the status of not having a male sexual partner. Spinster and bachelor are mainly used as gender-specific synonyms. Within it, multiple identities form, such as widow, separated, abandoned/deserted, divorced, never-married, and so on. Multivocality is also involved in the articulation of the experience (and subject position) of singleness. The condition of singleness 'stereotypically' depicts lone-liness, includes exclusion, perpetual states of emotional and financial insecurity, a work burden that falls entirely on the shoulders of the woman, and is subject to various forms of socio-political discrimination, marginalisation, and violence. Redefining singlehood is about more than just reclaiming spaces, as the platitude rhetoric goes, but also about co-creating a personal-political-collective space of their own on par with the 'paired'. This emerging area then becomes a vital venue for conversations, articulations, analysing, and theorising both women's broken oppressions and means of resistance in hetero-patriarchal frameworks. These processes may require opposing and confronting not only the greater world (class/caste/gender, rural-urban, citizen-state divide), but also hierarchies and distinctions at several levels, including the socio-political and personal. Single can be single deliberately or involuntarily (i.e. temporarily) or not currently looking for a spouse (actively seeking mates but not able to find the right person). Alternatively, people may be either deliberately individual (choosing to be individual and rejecting weddings) or inadvertently (i.e. permanently) single (wants to marry but will not find a mate for physical, psychological reasons). While discussing single and women the space held by the widow is to be considered, for this opens up the prospect of assigning 'agency' to her (seen in contemporary films like *Pagglait* 2021 and *ramprasad ki tehrvi* 2019). It is necessary to discuss this 'backbone' (of the space that is ‘home’) who runs the household show 24/7, slogging and supporting even the next generation of grandchildren while her existence is taken for granted by even the son who goes all crazy and equitable over empowerment for his wife.

Individualization and de-traditionalization processes within society have encouraged the realization of new domestic and family paradigms, new methods of living in an metropolitan setting, and new ways of forming identities, among other causes, explaining single status tendencies (that are more flexible, diverse, plural, and even fluid). These new 'democratic paradigms' (as they are growing now, in tandem with the newly transformed gendered arenas) present the potential of making decisions on an individual basis. Sociological theorists associated with the 'reflexive modernisation' thesis (Adkins, 2002), including Giddens (1992, 2005), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), and Bauman (1998), have highlighted the individualised nature of contemporary identities and the reflexive project through which each of us constructs a self-identity. Identity has evolved from a "given" to an individual task. People no longer need to work on conforming to an imposed societal identity; instead, they can create flexible identities that are easy to rearrange (Bauman, 1998: 27). Concomitant to this transition relationships become de-traditionalised. According to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995), family interests have been supplanted by individual interests as the dominant motivator for decision making. According to Walkerdine (2003) and Rose (1996, 1999), the concept of the reflexive project of the self emphasizes choice and agency (Taylor, 2005). While the definition of 'single' has expanded to include men and women in a range of living together or apart settings, singleness for women is still generally described negatively and in terms of deficit or what is missing (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). Along with traits of independence and autonomy, single women are frequently portrayed as being outside of typical family life and ordinary romantic relationships, as well as enduring some stigma. Single women must confront two powerful ideas of womanhood in terms of social identities: 1) a patriarchal conception of womanhood as heterosexual, married, and fertile, and 2) a conception of single womanhood as lack, deviance, and a danger to the patriarchal order. The stigmatisation of solitary women's hesitation or failure to construct their femininity on the basis of a recognised, enduring socially sanctioned heterosexual connection underscores the prominence of heterosexuality in dominating forms of constructing womanhood. While the difficulties of managing alone are part of the negatives of singleness, the positive repertoires centre on liberation and autonomy of choice. Singleness discourses have moved and changed over time (and place).

Multiple views and theoretical frames are required to express the diversity of Indian experiences and shifting sexual relations. Marriage is viewed as the daughter's social obligation to respect her parents' wellbeing in a traditional environment, like the Indian. The term 'unmarried' emphasises the desire to be alone (never and formerly married). Spinsterhood (a derogatory epithet in any traditional context) is frequently both a choice and a stigmatised position. Outside of the family framework, the single woman has a complex interaction with her family and the outside world. Her position in the family hierarchy is determined by her independence, as well as her personal riches and familial circumstances. The woman has to explain and support her not-being-married status. It is regarded as 'unnatural,' resulting in familial and community pressures. Family status is a vehicle for upward mobility as well as a 'socialisation-cum-sex-provision unit' (J Devika). Matrimony is about neighbours, making social connections, and obtaining free homework to supplement the ability of the older mother to work through legalised sexual partnership, enrichment by obligation, retaining (patriarchal) lines, and property protection.

The prospect of an alternative space (to compulsory 'marriedness') is seen as an offensive move in common. The single working woman is perceived as an important indicator of modernity (the 'new woman') and the 'new freedom' she has. A modern woman with an economic independence and sexual trust simultaneously is carefully feminised to avoid threatening the conventional notions of femininity. People choose for themselves, though they are always in a social

context. It is not about taking power out of male hands because it does not change the world, but precisely about destroying the very idea of power. The individual woman's independence is juxtaposed against the wife's 'bondage,' which serves to maintain that marriage is an 'ordained career' for her and will free her from the necessity to partake in collective life. The married woman is dressed with more 'social dignity' than the spinster. The woman is 'available' until she loses her 'single' status. Despite its ostensible development, the hierarchical Indian system leaves little room for female identity. The woman conundrum must be theorised in time and place from a new perspective in the 'Single landscape'. The lone women oppose a hetero-patriarchal cultural imaginary that does not recognise their manner of being in the world. The experience of singlehood differs qualitatively from that of each single woman. Social identities for solitary women mostly revolve around stereotypes of selfish, choosy, something-wrong-with-them and the like. Singleness is still stigmatised and marginalised in many communities because it is considered a violation of the conventions of femininity—marriage and motherhood. Culture continues to support a patriarchal structure that limits women's freedom through gender-based behavioural norms.

Despite greater recognition of gender equality as a societal good, there are certain areas where women's autonomy appears to be at odds with the normative prescriptions of a new 'empowered' form of femininity. Sexuality and personal relationship status are sites where women are positioned within neo-liberal and postfeminist discourse in such a way that their choices are called into interrogation. Deciding to be single still constitute a 'problem' for women, despite the escalation of communications which address women as autonomous, sexualized subjects. The 'empowered, autonomous'/single woman stands out because she accepts and implements characteristics traditionally associated with masculine subjectivity Some view it as evidence of feminist success because it appears to indicate that women now have more options for living their lives outside the constraints of traditional gender roles and norms. Regardless of the growing recognition of women's right to autonomy, the decision to remain unmarried continues to be viewed as a problem for women. Their choices are subject to social expectations and constrained as a result. The repertoire of relationships reflect the contradictory nature of present-day femininity and demonstrate how choices about women's personal life are regulated and accountable according to heteronormative gender standards that are being rebuilt against the backdrop of broader social change. One needs to analyse why electing to be single may still constitute a 'problem' for women, regardless of the intensification of messages that address women as autonomous, sexualized subjects. The existing accepted 'ideology of marriage and family' prescribes matrimony and parentage as central to a blissful and meaningful adult life (also exemplified by the 'Couple Affect' selfies of today). Marital and family ideology has historically channelled feminine existence. Because they 'missed' the culturally anticipated transition to pairing and hence did not orient their identity to gendered life course norms, unpartnered women face gender accountability on a frequent basis, necessitating the development of tactics for explaining their situation. Norms linked with the ideology of marriage and family make single women both more and less visible, because this dominating ideology casts them as outsiders who may/may not fit into a particular setting. These social encounters must be 'managed' on account of disrupted normative expectations. Single women's lives are rendered incomprehensible by dominant patterns of relationality that centre on the heterosexual pair and ignore the experiences of un-partnered women. While the stigma of 'failure' plagues women's negotiations, masculinity is viewed as a preference for 'autonomy.' The dominant heterosexual discourse has prescribed distinct and opposing sites for masculine and feminine desire, shaping subsequent identities and activities in agreement with a binary logic in which women are passive. While this is changing, a more active and independent femininity will allow women to orient themselves (actions and identities) towards a non-heteronormative ideal that does not place 'coupledom' at the centre of social life but recognises other forms of personal associations; potentially validating the decision to stay single; and

endorses the pursuit of a life course not built around privileging a bond to a man. Amplified female sexual agency (and recognizing female desire) may affect the destabilisation of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in several ways.

Media representations of women that include sexualized imagery and an accompanying message that women are now sufficiently 'empowered' to practise consciously active sexuality (Gill, 2008b) challenge conventional representational codes that position women as objects of masculine desire—an edifice that tells women to experience their sexuality through the desire they elicit from men—by presenting women as fully sexual. These constructions, however, place the duty for satisfying intimate relationships firmly on women, implying that traditional gender and sexual standards no longer apply, thus freeing women from previous societal and/or material restraints. Individuals show their autonomous identity through their choices, and they are not only 'free to choose,' but also 'obligated to select.' The structure of 'modernized' empowered womanhood is intrinsically contradictory. Femininity is offered as a location of individualised possibilities, but it must be performed within certain limitations. Marriage and family ideology continue to have an impact on the construction of the feminine biography. The rhetoric of choice cannot easily be reconciled with an ideology of marriage and family that appropriates some lifestyles while marginalising others—that they (women) have mishandled their freedom and squandered their chance for a happy personal life, and that single women are unfulfilled and incomplete. The contingent of 'empowered' singleness goes away from a 'asset identity' and toward a 'deficit identity.' Because it is assumed that women are empowered, their choices become a site of accountability expressed through the dissemination of neoliberal notions of self-responsibility. Gender is a feat attained when 'done' in accordance with 'current cultural concepts of conduct becoming to—or compatible with the 'fundamental natures' of a woman or a man. Otherwise, it is labelled a 'pariah' and is excluded from the range of proper gender performance. Gender is a regulated property of behaviour performed in light of the fact that others will judge and respond to us in specific ways. Remaining single after the stage of acceptability, especially when regarded as a 'active decision' made intentionally by women, is nevertheless deemed a violation of the standards of gender complementarity provided by the heteronormative ideology of marriage and family as a compulsory order. The disintegration of gender's regulating functions in many crucial domains of social life has not been fully accompanied by the reordering of gender binaries. Singleness is a difficult category to traverse. On the one hand, women can construct singleness in a very positive manner through repertoires of choice and independence, self-development and achievement, making it impossible to discuss movement out of the category. On the other hand, women can openly express their desire for a relationship and risk being constructed as deficient and ''desperate'', and marked by their failure to already have a man. (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003, p. 506)

Singleness is a declaration of an unpartnered positive identity. Their respective roles within heterosexual economies of sexual desire put them (male-female) against one another. In light of this tension, McRobbie contends that some women may perform traditional femininity as a type of masquerade in order to escape stigma; a highly stylized disguise of womanliness now embraced as a matter of choice, which ultimately helps to take the 'edge' off female emancipation and reinstall heteronormativity while stabilising the heterosexual matrix (2007, p. 725). Sexual agency is being offered to women as a necessary component of empowered femininity, but the foundations upon which it is based are fundamentally heteronormative and do not provide an open-ended alternative.

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