

Singlehood: Exploring the Language, Culture, and Observations about Being a Single Woman in Indian Culture in Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's Nonfiction *Status Single: Truth about Being a Single Woman in India*

Mr. Shivaji K. Ingole

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Dr. Bharat A. Tupere

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sant Rawool Maharaj College, Kudal, Dist. Sindhudurg, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The idea of singlehood is not recent and somehow a little difficult to trace its origins because while studying the Hindu religious myths and narratives, the observation says that there are many examples of singles in the Hindu religious myths and stories. Many gods and goddesses are single and never married to anyone. Despite being married, Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, had to spend her life as a single mother. In today's time, there are thousands of single mothers raising their children. Some of them are divorced, some are widowed, and some are unmarried too. Research says that being single for most of them is not a choice, rather singlehood is imposed on them. But what if someone wants to be single by his/her/their own choice? Will that decision be accepted by the culture? What will be the perception of these singles? Whether they will get the same stature as married men or women, or will they be treated as queer only? This article deals with, Singlehood: Exploring the Language, Culture, and Observations About Being a Single woman in Indian culture in Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's nonfiction *Status Single*.

Keywords: Singlehood, Culture, language, Single Motherhood, Stigma, Shame

"I shall never marry, and I dedicate myself to a life of unbroken chastity." (C. Rajagopalachari) Bhishma took this terrible oath for the sake of his father's desire to get married to a fisherwoman, and thus he remained single for the rest of his life. There are numerous examples of singles in society, and the same is presented in fictional and non-fictional narratives. In this research, the term "singles" from now onwards will be used as never married single adults. The idea of singlehood is not recent and somehow a little difficult to trace its origins because while studying the Hindu religious myths and

narratives, the observation says that there are many examples of singles in the Hindu religious myths and stories. Many gods and goddesses are single and never married to anyone. Lord Hanuman is presented as the best example of *Bramhachari*, who remained single and served his master, Rama. Though according to *Parashara Samhita*, Lord Hanuman is married, when he was learning various vidyas from the Sun God, some of these *Vidyas* could be learned by only being married. Thus, to complete his education, Lord Hanuman married. In the Mahabharata, Devavrata is one of the greatest warriors and the only surviving son of Maharaja Shantanu,

who ceded his rights for his father's happiness and took the terrible oath of lifelong celibacy. Because of his sacrifice, he is known as Bhishma and is blessed to live as long as he wants.

Despite being married, Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, had to spend her life as a single mother. In today's time, there are thousands of single mothers raising their children. Some of them are divorced, some are widowed, and some are unmarried too. Research says that being single for most of them is not a choice, rather singlehood is imposed on them. But what if someone wants to be single by his/her/their own choice? Will that decision be accepted by the culture? What will be the perception of these singles? Whether they will get the same stature as married men or women, or will they be treated as queer only? Despite an increase in singlehood in recent years (www.naaree.com), single people today still face stigma and shame because they do not adhere to the traditional view that marriage is the only standard for living happily ever after. In the existing discourse of marriage-oriented culture, if you choose to be single, then you are a threat to society, and for the same, people may judge you. But still, the concept of Singlehood varies, and contrary to the above statement, some of these are not only appreciated but also glorified, and it is only because of the viewpoint of singlehood. Perceptions of singlehood vary in society, and these perceptions are based on some factors. Some of the important factors that affect the concept of singlehood are as follows: age, class, religion, gender, sexuality, etc.

Many men and women choose to be single to organise their lives. We say we are independent and can live our lives according to our choices and in our own ways, but are we really independent to choose whatever we want? Or is there something that determines what we should be—whether we should get married or remain single? The answers to these questions are uncertain. Research scholars Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson, and Bialeschki stated in their book *“Leisure, women, and gender”* that “in society, gendered ideologies determine the way in which women or men organise their lives, regardless of whether they're single or married. Gendered ideologies pervade men's and women's lives in unique ways and emphasise the importance of heterosexual couplehood, family relationships, and the necessity to biologically bear and raise children.” In society, singles are positioned outside the norm; those who choose to be single have an unusually insightful perspective on their wider society's values and institutions. Still, in many housing societies, single adults are not allowed to rent or own a house. The perception of singlehood in the predominantly marriage-oriented culture is quite dismal, and according to the research, the same is portrayed in some of the fictional and non-fictional narratives.

Sharada Ugra, a sports journalist, writes in her essay that “Single Indian women were usually housed [...] singlehood translates itself in the movies, books, television, across social whisper. It presented the woman as an entity unfulfilled, incomplete and, leading from there, eventually unhappy. [...] would be dark,

forlorn, gloomy, unkempt and of course, only half of what a home should be.” (14-15) That means the very understanding of singlehood is limited and biased. In this marriage-oriented culture, the image of a single woman is presented in a poor light. Furthermore, in her essay, she makes clear that singlehood is a desired way of life that she learned from her mother.

This article will deal with, Singlehood: Exploring the Language, Culture, and Observations About Being a Single Woman in India in Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's Nonfiction *Status Single*. NDTV Women of Worth awarded Sreemoyee Piu Kundu in the category of literature for her introduction of erotica into contemporary fiction. As well as receiving the United Nations Award for Best Young Writer in 2012, Sreemoyee writes columns on feminist issues for the Daily O, Yahoo, and Mail Today. Numerous publications have featured her novels and writing, such as TOI, HT City, Hindu, Indian Express, Vogue, Crest, Open Magazine, Andpersand, Marie Claire, Femina, and People Magazine. In addition, she runs a weekly column, 'Dear Shree' for Outlook that focuses on relationships. Among her notable publications are Faraway Music (debut novel) 2013, published by Hachette India, Sita's Curse (India's first feminist erotica), published by Hachette India, in 2001, and *You've Got the Wrong Girl!* (ladylit) 2016 published by Hachette India, *Cut: The Death and Life of a Theatre Activist* published in 2019 by Bloomsbury India, and *Status Single* (a debut non-fiction) was published in 2018 by Amaryllis.

Kundu's non-fiction *Status Single*, explores the truths and observations about

being a single woman in India. It starts with primary level shaming of the single women in question and moves through 'light-hearted' jokes to "concerning aunties" to graver statistics of the entire society in general that make it extremely hard to live. Whatever a woman does or shall ever do, from her sexuality to her job profile to her marriage profile, it's almost always scrutinized. Throughout this book, each aspect is discussed without sugar-coating.

The Culture of Marriage in India:

“Also, you see, this arrange marriage market is very cruel. It shatters your self-image. You are nothing but a product sitting on a shelf, waiting to be picked up, before your shit rots. An advertisement. An agony to your ageing parents. A Social Antithesis”.
(Kundu, 95)

The preceding words from Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's nonfiction, *Status Single*, paint a vivid image of the marital system in current Indian society, in which ladies are essentially objects. India has a rich cultural heritage, yet many of its traditional traditions are being challenged. Marriage is regarded as one of the most important institutions in India, and the marriage system's function is to provide stability to families. The Hindu marriage system is considered a method for connecting two households. Is this, however, the only function of the marital system? Marriage systems are also used to develop discourses about society and disseminate dominant cultural ideals that support the very concept of marriage. In fact, in today's society, marriage is used as a weapon to practice

numerous unnecessary rituals such as dowry and mental and physical harassment of both men and women. There have been several reports of physical abuse of daughters-in-law, and the number continues to rise. Girls do not have the same standing in Indian society as boys; they have more access to everything, including education, especially higher education, wealth, and privileges in most areas than girls. There are numerous examples in the literature that support the claim that girls are always the victims of gender bias. For example, in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Little Things*, she reflects on the gender prejudice that occurs to Ammu. Her brother Chacko, was allowed to continue his studies abroad, but Ammu was not. Discrimination is not limited to schools; it also exists in the marriage system. In most circumstances, males have a predilection, but females do not. A girl must obey her father or what her family decides for her, whereas a guy can choose his life partner and defy his family. No doubt, females have been given the option to choose their mates in some situations, but this is quite rare in Indian cities, especially among professional women who are financially independent. The following words from *Status Single* will help you understand how gender plays a significant influence in marital culture for both men and women:

“There is a latent patriarchy in the marriage institutions, connected to the larger man-woman equation here [...] “Gosh you’re 31 and still unmarried!” When I retorted, “Big deal!” You are single too,” he bragged, Well, I am a man.” that’s the standard answer of men because they can get away

anything in a country where “daughters are largely seen as a liability and must be wedded by a certain age.” (Kundu, 103)

Hence, the fact that girls have an age limit and boys do not have one is nothing more than the privileges that men have that women do not have in this patriarchal culture. Women will be questioned at every stage of their lives, and they will be forced to respond by default. But what if she wishes to skip these questions or the marriage system entirely? Will she be given the same privileges as a single guy or the same status as a single man? What will be the position of single women in Indian society at that point? Where there is a dilemma of not being at a so-called suitable age and not waiting to cross her thirties to find a suitable match, can our marriage-oriented society accept her choice to stay single forever? The response to this question will not be simply yes or no but will include numerous reasons and justifications. Sriram R., writes in his article "Family Studies in India: Appraisal and New Directions," published by Sage Publishers in 1993, that: “The marriage is the basic and important unit of society because of the role it plays in the generation of human capital resources and the power that is vested in it to influence individual, household, and community behaviour.” Where he emphasises the marital system as a fundamental and vital element in society, if this fundamental and significant aspect of society is questioned or rejected by women, it will be considered a terrible crime in Indian society. In the chapter, "Turning 30-Transition from Beechari to Bitch", Shikha Makan, a psychology graduate from Delhi

University, tells her experience when she had to travel to Mumbai for her further professional life. She explains:

After much searching, my sister and I located a flat which fit our budget and we moved in. but from the first day we were uncomfortable because the watchman, in so many ways a basting of morality, who guarded our entry and exit considered himself an authority to question us on our whereabouts.” (Kundu, 16)

Even being a watchman/man provides him with the authority and superiority to interrogate ladies about their whereabouts. There are many men in our society who wield unwelcome influence over women. When she is a daughter, she should be under her father's control; when she is a sister, she should be under her brother's control; when she is a wife, she should be under her husband's control; and ultimately, when she is an old mother, she should be under her son's control. Where does she get her-‘self’? What happened to her identity? In fact, when she is not marrying and becoming an independent woman, she is possibly attempting to avoid the control of her husband and son, but in a way, she is inviting the entire world to take charge and control her, including the building watchman, security guard, neighbours, relatives, the society chairman, and so on. Shikha goes on to say:

“Once when I returned home at 2 a.m., a male colleague accompanied me, since I mentioned being uncomfortable with the way the watchman looked at me. But as soon as we reached the gate,

he stopped us and called the society chairman, who started alleging that I was running a brothel. [...] The chairman even threatened to throw my sister and me out.” (16)

Is it a misfortune to be a single woman in Indian society? Single women in Indian society after the age of 30 would be like Sibyl at Cumae, mentioned in the epigraph to T S Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, and the same in the myth, when the children asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' 'I want to die,' she replied. (Eliot) Isn't society a curse in the case of Sikha Makan and many other Indian single women? When someone asks an unmarried woman, “What do you want?” Is this any less of a question than the one posed to Sibyl? And when a girl says, "I want to marry," Thereby she can avoid the questions that society will pose, just as, in the instance of Sibyl, death was the ultimate solution to her difficulty; is marriage the ultimate solution to all the problems girls are, and will be facing in Indian society? Ayandrali Dutta, a travel and food blogger and ex-editor of a digital platform in New Delhi, expresses herself in *Status Single* as follows:

“The Image of 30-plus women is pre-constructed, and a lot of married women are threatened by the idea of a bold, independent, headstrong single woman, just the way men are intimidated. Most assume we [single women] will seduce their husbands and lovers.” (12)

In Indian society, the woman is both the victim and the villain, as Dutta correctly stated; "I must admit here, woman are

woman's worst enemies and bad-mouth them much more than man!" (12) As a result, singlehood culture in contemporary Indian society is generally defined, especially in the case of women, unlike Satyakama, who had the freedom to remain without a husband while yet having a kid in the ancient time. When her son went to acquire some of the Vidyas from Guru, when the same Guru asked him about his lineage, he said that he is Satyakama's son, and she is her lineage. Nevertheless, in today's Indian society, having a child without marriage is considered a crime, a pang of severe guilt, or a sin.

The Role of Language in and out of Singlehood Culture:

As a social phenomenon, language, as a sign of a communication mechanism, is a set of distinct signs that serve to communicate and can express the entirety of a person's location in the world. Language's social functions as a medium of communication between individuals express the social requirement. Language, through discourses, plays a critical role in social formation. 'And when the language is prejudiced, it may be used as a tool to spread or destroy any culture. As we all know, it is widely held that in order to eliminate someone's hegemony, one must first destroy their language. As a result, eliminating someone's language aids the destroyer in destroying the target culture. Kundu begins the third chapter of her book with the question, "Baby-making Factory or Baanjh?" The phrase 'Baanjh' is politically loaded and discriminatory, and it is usually used in the

situation of women who are unable to bear children. Even if the blame is solely with the man, no one questions the male impotency and simply asks the lady to go through various pregnancy-related delicacies. If a woman is unable to bear a kid, the man is free to remarry and have a child with his second or third wife, but if the man is unable to bear a child, the wife cannot marry another guy in order to bear a child. Kundu discusses in this chapter how and what kinds of queries are asked to women in their 30s:

“Why are you single?
By when do you intend to get married?
Virgin?
When was the last time you had sex?
When do you wish to start a family
since you are already above 30? [...]
What do you mean you don't want
kids? Want or can't?
Have you ever had an abortion?” (48)

Terms like "virgin" and "Baanjh" are frequently used in both positive and negative contexts. If a girl is a virgin, she is regarded as the best girl to marry, and there are various ways to test her virginity after marriage, such as the 'white bedsheets scene' on the first night of marriage. If female bleeds while having sex for the first time and the same white bedsheets acquires a blood stain, then there is no stain on her character; if there is no stain on her bedsheets, then there are stains on her character. Language in mainstream culture does not intertwine with the culture of singleness, and hence it primarily attempts to diminish the standing of single women and men in society.

Work Cited:

1. Kundu, Sreemoyee Piu. *Status Single: Truth About Being a Single Woman in India*. Amaryllis-an imprint of Manjul Publishing House, 2018.
2. Patni, Gunja, and Rimika Singhvi. "From Subjection to Subject-Position: Celebrat-ing Singlehood through a Reading of Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's Status Single."
3. Samanta, Tannistha. "Living solo at midlife: Can the pandemic de-stigmatize living alone in India?" *Journal of Aging Studies* 56 (2021): 100907.
4. Rajagopalachari, Chakravarti. *Mahabharata*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2005.
5. Ramdas, Kamalini. "Women in waiting? Singlehood, marriage, and family in Singapore." *Environment and Planning A* 44.4 (2012): 832-848.
6. Sharma Kalpana, editor, *Single by Choice Happily Unmarried Women! Women Unlimited* (an association of Kali for Women), New Delhi. 2019.
7. Shaw, Susan M., Karla A. Henderson, and M. Deborah Bialeschki. *Leisure, women, and gender*. Ed. Valeria J. Freysinger. Venture Publ., 2013.
8. Tan, Chee-Seng, Siew-May Cheng, and Sanju George. "Development and validation of the Attitudes toward Singlehood Scale among undergraduate students in Malaysia and India." *Collabra: Psychology* 7.1 (2021): 24808.
9. <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/there-is-a-world-of-women-who-cant-write-their-own-stories-kalpana-sharma-5842927/>
10. <https://www.naaree.com/living-single-woman-in-india/>
11. <https://inspiringtips.com/asia/benefits-of-being-single/>
12. <https://study.com/learn/lesson/singlehood-state-psychology-statistics.html>
13. <https://www.indianwomenblog.org/sharda-ugra-recollects-the-struggles-of-being-one-of-the-first-women-in-sports-journalism/>
14. <https://www.gita-society.com/bhagavad-gita-section3/mahabharata.html>
15. <https://elinepa.org/jabala/>