

From Subjection to Subject-Position: Celebrating Singlehood through a Reading of Sreemoyee Piu Kundu's *Status Single*

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Abstract

Sreemoyee Piu Kundu (1978-), a proud-to-be-single woman, gives free expression to the idea of body and sexuality, self and identity, in her writing. She makes an honest effort towards bringing to light the pressure placed on a woman to curb her sexual desires. The Paper attempts to study Kundu's non-fictional work entitled *Status Single: The Truth About Being a Single Woman in India* (2018) so as to address the regressive stereotypes and stigma around single women and their differential treatment by the society. Single women are often thought of as unhappy and lonely, but this work endeavours to follow an entirely different narrative of singlehood. The authors try to explore and understand how single women perceive their status as well as experience and cope with society's perception of their identity. The effort is also to examine how such a parallel status of women's singlehood is approached socially in relation to the so-called/considered ideal construction of a 'happily single' woman as a mere myth in a nation that places the highest premium on marriage and motherhood.

Keywords: Gender; Identity; Marriage; Self; Singlehood; Subjectivity.

"Don't compromise on your dreams and instead of being a man in a woman's skin, be your own woman."

(*Status Single* 217)

The Marriage mechanism in India or elsewhere is the very keystone of the traditional kinship system and for a woman, it is even more obligatory/imperative and so not to be understood as a private and person-

alized sphere only rather it "... is a rat race, even amongst well-meaning friends. A social media spectacle. A sign that a woman is healthy, and all is well" (*Status Single* 7). Girls are programmed from the get-go to be perfectly primed for the inevitable married life and they who cross the socially demarcated age of marriage are seen as *Bechari*. It is considered that girls in their late 20s or early 30s should have their life revolve around husbands and babies. This explanation goes absolutely true in Indian society where sex is the sum total of birthing children and happiness to being someone's wife and singlehood equivalent to dull spinsterhood; for a single woman is seen no more as human but a commodity whose life is sheer waste and so becomes a laughing stock in the circles of family and well-wishers. "In big cities women who are not married, either because they have not found the right partner or are not married, often get a label as an old maid, not selling well and choosing a lot" (qtd. by NudharNabilah 92). Hence, individual agency is often overruled by parental sentiments, societal pressure, and outdated stigmas.

Sreemoyee Piu Kundu, brought up in Kolkata by a single mother is a novelist, journalist, and columnists who began her career in print journalism as a reporter in New Delhi and then promoted to the rank of Features Editor, writing chiefly on topics related to women, films, food, and popular culture. Kundu then turned to fiction and her works include: *Faraway Music* (2013), *Sita's Curse: The Language of Desire* (2014), *You've Got The Wrong Girl* (2016), and *Cut: The Death and Life of a Theatre Activist* (2019). Her first non-fictional work entitled *Status Single: The Truth about Being a Single Woman in India* (2018) - hereafter, *SS* - has added to her oeuvre. From its origins as a book, 'Status Single with Shree' is now a series of online conversations featuring inspirational women who challenge conventions and outdated stigmas. Besides this, she also writes a weekly column called "Dear Shree for Outlook" that centre on relationships. She is also a Community Founder of *SWIFT* (Single Women of India Forward Together) which is India's first and only community of 75 million single (Indian) women. Kundu is a recipient of the *NDTV L'Oréal Women of Worth Award* in the 'Literature' category for introducing the first Indian feminist erotica by way of her book *Sita's Curse*. She was also honoured with *United Nations Award for Best Young Writer* in 2012.

Singlehood, an emerging trend in India is challenging the age-old institution of marriage and therefore, family and society are under constant modification as women are seeking upward mobility and greater equality. The paper attempts to study Kundu's non-fictional work *Status Single* (2018) and endeavours to address regressive stereotypes and stigma around

single women and their treatment by society. The study has come out of the experience of 3000 urban single Indian women whom Kundu interviewed in a period of one year. Most of the women belonged to the upper class, working in software, marketing, IT, media, and the like, and were from the major cities of India viz. Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore. Those women were facing problems of discriminatory housing policies, financial management, mental and physical health, and the like in a multi-chaotic, opinionated, prejudiced country. Sarah Lamb quotes Leela Fernandes' contentions that when women seek housing facility and/or a job, they are seen with ". . . strongly gendered ideologies that construct them as a potential threat to the social order" (50). The book chronicles the stories and experiences of single women who revel in their singlehood and condemns those hackneyed ideas that regulate women's behaviour in terms of their appearance, job, and marital status.

Before the 1990s, singlehood was understood as an impossibility for women but significant changes in gendered norms can be perceived in recent decades of which expectations of early marriage, necessary marriage, etc. are few. Singlehood in India or elsewhere is a trait of a fast-changing society given the fact that they are "happy with their status and not wanting the burden of marriage on them" (qtd. by Sarah Lamb 49). Single women in India wish to re-frame new ethical imaginaries of valued personhood/selfhood beyond marriage. In such changing scenario 'Opting out theme' which implies opting out of the conventional femininity of marital life as a choice crafts a vision of the new breed of modern, professional, independent women who are geared with cosmopolitan aspirations and do not think of marriage. Because of their choice of pursuing education, career, or to shun the trappings of domesticity.

There is no denying the fact that the twenty-first century has witnessed a sea-change in various fields. We are seeking equality in almost all the spheres of life still, the experiences of being a single - male and female - are altogether different. A single man in society is never questioned on his not being married. He is judged not on his 'status single' but earnings and achievements. But the second gender 'female' cannot go about with this status. Two words- I'm single, spell a death sentence for a woman who does not have a man by her side. Moreover, a person is considered happy and achieves life satisfaction when he/she is married and has a family. It is regarded that marriage is closely related to happiness. But, the psychological study of the issue is altogether different from this. Based on researches undertaken by various psychologists, it is found that single women tend to feel happier than married women. The statement "My

life feels happy”, “I enjoy whatever happens in this life” is strongly agreed upon. The research says that optimal psychological well-being in single women is influenced by several factors, including higher education as well as the existence of permanent employment and financial independence. Cooper & Watson (1991) suggested that giving direct or indirect social support would improve psychological well-being, physical health, and constructive stress management (Nudhar Nabilah 93). So, it is believed that women with single status are happier than married women based on the factors that influence it.

The prologue to the book is powerful and at the very beginning, a personal anecdote, followed by a commentary from the author, gives the book more perspective and forces one to think whether it really is such a crime to be single. The lines read: “A sexless spinster living with her parents. Successful, maybe, but not quite in the way women have been conditioned to measure their self-worth” (SS xiv). Lisa Lau in an article brings to the fore that, “for most Indian women, the family alone represents their economic and psychological source of security” (271). It is noticeable that a woman’s marriage and her body are somehow a time bomb ticking for society and so she paraded at marriage markets to find a partner to which she may hook her life. Besides, the well-meaning advice which comes in as a life coach viz.: No one is perfect. Everyone has to compromise. You are so pretty! If only you’d lose weight, you’d get snapped up by a great guy in no time. You should go to the gym. You’re too opinionated. Color your hair, lose weight, get a facial done, banish those dark circles, get a job, learn cooking, in order to attract suitors, and so forth. Holland observes thus in the context of fitting inside the mould:

Young women are under pressure to construct their material bodies into a particular model of femininity which is both inscribed on the surface of their bodies, through such skills as dress, make-up, dietary regimes, and disembodied in the sense of detachment from their sensuality and alienation from their material bodies. (24)

The female body is not merely a physical object but is constructed by – and derives its meaning – from situating itself within fixed social, cultural, religious, and economic practices. Judith Butler maintains that: “. . . ‘gender’ is not the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given ‘sex’. Rather, it is a way of thinking and, as a concept, pre-exists the body; it is the gender that produces the category of biological sex through a series of performances” (Menon 70). That is why Kundu was lectured on marrying soon

and not to delay things further for: "Having a child will inevitably get tough soon and then no man will ever touch you. What can you possibly give him (SS xii)?"

No matter how successful a woman is – professionally and financially – she is always seen against her marital status. A woman who decides to stay single by choice or circumstance (such as widows, divorced), has to endure tones of taunts, concerns, worries, advice, stress, and little sympathy too (ironically) for being 'single'. Beyond that she is darted with sharp observation, invasive scrutiny, and pervasive criticism; always reminded by relatives, neighbours, and friends of her biological clock and the thinning prospects of getting a boy after she crosses over to the other side of the acceptable age. Indian society finds it easy to dissect their life and tag them as slut, shameless, ambitious, or eccentric. The work highlights the structural violence in the form of gender inequality, social isolation, economic vulnerability, and most importantly not being recognized as a social body but an abnormal person for a single woman is not counted as a social body but a problem to be fixed – a dried-up spinster. Kundu takes this as inhumanity towards women and so attempts to humanize them through her evocative portrayal of a single woman. It is true that 'Single' cannot be anybody's primary identity. Though they are without men but that does not steal them of their personal identity for "Single is not a state of life. But a state of mind" (SS 230). Besides this, there are narratives of those women who find pride, fulfillment in one's strength, education, and career. Kundu in an interview with Kavi Bhandari for *The Asian Age* discloses the fact of her own life. She says:

I feel women need to be economically and financially sound and supported by their families when unmarried. It is an uphill task to struggle daily in a country where the highest validation of one's gender remains marriage and motherhood. I am a single woman and 40 years of age, so I know how it feels. (Bhandari, 2018)

Another issue that Kundu raises is the idealization of motherhood which re-establishes the patriarchal hegemonic framework. Hindu texts and rituals sing paeons to motherhood, but that is strictly monitored within the framework of marriage. Child-bearing is looked at as a woman's destiny and the sum total of her well-being and personhood. Socially, a woman's acceptance in her husband's family depends on her ability to bear a child and a male offspring at that. Radha Chakravarty aptly paraphrases Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah's contention that, "In India, women's self-worth and value is usually dependent on their reproductive

functions” (34). Kundu vociferously questions that: “What is it about our power to procreate that gives a complete stranger the license to dent our self-worth?” Truly, it is ironic in a land of goddesses that a woman is not seen as an individual, a worthy person but judged only on the basis of her roles of caregiving and child-producing abilities, the failing of which is a death sentence to her.

But, if we go back to the mythology we will find that in ancient India the idea of single mothers and single childless women was acceptable. Gargi, a scholar, was a single woman who refused to be curtailed by marriage. Shakuntala, Sita, and Hidimbi all brought up their sons alone and lived a life of dignity and honor, with attained subject-position, guided wholly by themselves and not others. Another reference of empowered single woman named Jabaal we find in mythology wherein Jaabali, her son, on asked about his father, by Rishi Gautama – religious guru- dictates the answer given to him by his mother that: “I do not know who your father is. I gave birth to you, I am your mother. You are Jabaali, the son of Jabaal” (*The Print*2019). This response shows that ‘single women’ were strong enough in the past too and this reply does not dictate suffering and sacrifice but strength and conviction that defines single women.

Even the control of female sexuality in terms of productiveness/ unproductiveness is grounded in mythological tales, religious beliefs, and popular cinema. Violence against women is depicted uncritically in cinema and classical dance forms which provides a kind of social sanction on the injustice to them, indirectly giving the message that the safety of women – and her sexuality – can be ensured only under the protection of a husband or by following the patriarchal rules. The classical dances represent the longing of the female body to be united with the male lover’s showing spiritual unity in deities such as Krishna and Shiva. Disempowering folktales and woman-hating proverbs add more to the plight of women. The story of Sita and Draupadi, in one kind of reading, highlights them as symbols of female strength and power whereas, in another reading, they are looked upon as suffering souls. Katrak, in this context, opines that:

Such cultural modes express a culture’s ways of controlling female life-giving potential, most commonly not by denigrating it (since it is highly valued and necessary), but ironically by venerating, even glorifying female fertility. Such idealization is one way to contain its mystery within patriarchal boundaries that tries to limit its possibilities and power. (164)

Kundu thus explores multifarious strategies of subsisting against traditional restrictions; viz. the act of writing itself, particularly personal and autobiographical experiences. While it is true that several literary texts bear the heavyweight of scriptural and patriarchal authority vis-à-vis women, *Status Single* explores complex deliberations and negotiations that women have undertaken to demystify female sexuality and to realize their selfhood; to make their identity, and to acquire a subject position.

Women chose to be single some by circumstances and others by choice are actually driven by the idea of accountability to one person – oneself. They aspire to live life, make decisions, build a career only for themselves. In all, they do that what they want from life. Kundu who announces herself as a proud-to-be-single-woman has in fact through this work – which is a personal testament – led to the flowering of an online community of women – India’s first and only community for urban single women – giving them a platform for voicing their experiences on the facets of being single. Kundu scathingly dissects the kind of single shaming that exists into an empowering account of selfhood for she sees singlehood as not a sign of being lesser, being a failure, being rejected, and not validated, not being too ambitious professionally or not being a certain sort of person – usually ascribed stereotypically to label and box a lone woman in India rather she celebrates it and believes that: “single is not turning cynical, but opening our hearts instead to the infinite possibilities of strength, sexuality and survival” (SS 227-28) and firmly considers it as a new normal way of life. So, in the *Epilogue*, she writes:

...where the new ‘normal’ is a woman who chooses to remain single because she won’t be pressured into marriage or motherhood, where her sexuality as a birthright, and not a squeamish, sullen compromise; not something that she must camouflage constantly and convert from, to please and placate others. (SS 226)

Probably, the values of men and women concerning life as well as art are quite different. What appears to a woman as serious might be insignificant and trivial to a man. Thus, when a woman embarks upon the task of writing, it is quite certain that she wishes to alter and re-define the established values. Indian writing in English today has come to occupy a respectable position and the credit for it goes to a good number of women writers whose writings have brought to light various aspects of their lived experience that were left untouched and ignored by their male counterparts. Widely considered as feminist writers (perhaps some may deny their association to the feminist movement but their works are *about* women),

most of such women writers have laid bare the heart and soul of their women characters, each of whom feels a longing to claim her own space and to realize her self-worth.

Many women writers in India have addressed the taboo subjects and the cries of agonized ranging from personal to public experience in their works. Writers like Mrinal Pande and Kamala Das wrote their autobiographies which gave a blow to existing ideologies as they tread on dangerous ground that exposed themselves as desiring and suffering subjects. Another book entitled *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!* (2019), an anthology of essays edited by Kalpana Sharma brings a range of issues and perspectives that accompany the lives of single women in India and she too puts to rest the presumption that marriage and family is the only fulcrum of a meaningful life and a lack of it must have been borne out of a tragedy.

The book *Status Single* too is an autobiographical work and stands as an icon of modern emancipated women asserting their individuality and exercising their agency by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. It seems to answer the question that is posed by Anita Nair's protagonist Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* (2001) whether a woman can stay single and be happy, or does she need a man to feel complete? The book narrates the experiences of some strong women who are battling and managing to live their life despite all the blockers society puts in their way. Besides evoking a sense of solidarity and empathy, it also reveals some startling insights and techniques to navigate through life-personal and professional spaces as a single woman. From frustrations and despair to freedom and empowerment, from emotional struggle and loneliness to realization and wholeness, from torments and nightmares to dreams and fulfillment, the work scathingly attacks hackneyed conventions and rudimentary traditions. The 21st century, therefore, has been about women who are trying hard to assert their identity, giving literary writers and critics the potential for re-theorizing subjectivity as voice, agency, and empowerment.

Hence singlehood should be seen as celebrating/ prioritizing one's own choices, decisions and living a life on one's terms. Kamla Bhasin, who is a hard-core feminist feels a need to empower single women and so penned down her thoughts in a poem she wrote for National Association for Single Women announcing:

We are single, but not alone.

Since the time we've united with each other,
Our hearts have become lighter, the burden of being alone is gone.
We are not defeated, we are not lonely and we are not helpless.
In our association of single women, we have done promises together with amazing dreams,
to fly to rise, we are the new hope.
We will give a new definition, we will speak a new language,
We will dream new dreams, we will go forward. (YouTube 2020)

Kamla Bhasin, who became a part of "Status Single Season 2", finds affinity with Kundu's aim of empowering women for she too believes that the feminist movement is much bigger than equality. It is about human rights for all, peace everywhere. Bhasin's views on Single women throws light on the possibility for women in male-dominated societies to line in ways that reflect their genuine needs and concerns. It empowers them to criticize and fight against sexist social and political institutions and to mount active resistance by claiming their space and realizing their selfhood.

In the Acknowledgments of the book, Kundu reiterates the story of Neeti (whom Kundu fictionalized in her fictional work *Sita's Curse*); a woman who arose from a victim of marital rape to a position of resilient crusader and wishes to fly, to be enough, sending across a message that being single does not mean averse to marriage and motherhood and men but "...a real-life person, and not just a body, a womb to produce kids..." (SS 232). Kundu has adopted a conversational tone, just like a casual chat between two friends. The text is coated with humour and sarcasm unfurling the heinous faces and dark side of society especially for 'women'. The reader is hooked through the pages, reading stories of women of various shades. The author throughout the book has maintained an unbiased and non-judgmental tone herself; without being preachy she instills in the reader a point that to be single is not cynical but empowering. This hard-thing work actually, gauges on the need for single women to own their decisions, their bodies, and live life on their own terms without fear of judgment.

Kundu is progressive in her approach to the woman question and her

writings precisely and positively showcase the challenges Indian middle-class women face. She portrays fictionalized yet real characters whom she has met or heard about and sources her fundamental knowledge from everyday contact with people, movies, newspapers, magazines, letters, etc. She writes because it is the language through which she measures the truth. She shared during an interview that: "The lens through which I feel I can make a difference. It is the reason why I am not attached to, or intimidated by, the publishing industry. No one can teach me how to think, and how to feel..." (*Kitaab* 2015).

Hence, the work discuss those women who are sensitive to the changing times and situations, unabashedly revolting against the patriarchal norms that try to suppress and extinguish their identity thereby making their own space and developing their identity. They are new-age women who decide to undertake a glorious journey of self-discovery, something that is now their calling, the finding oneself, the art of healing oneself from within as Kundu says: "For, make no mistake, we are not going to bow down to society's diktats. We are 74 million strong. And we will live - make choices and our own decisions - on our terms, with our heads held high" (*Women's Web* 2018).

In a personal conversation between the researcher and Kundu and in response to being asked whether she is consciously "feminist" in her approach when writing, the latter affirmed that she does not consciously approach a 'feminist' form of writing but since all writing is an extension of the writer's personality, politics, and world-view, her work, therefore, reflects her pride in her kind of feminism which is a battle for human rights and not mere sloganeering or something else that it has been reduced to. In sum, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu writes with an astute understanding of the inseparability of the aesthetic from the political, and the political from the personal. She is the true image of a modern woman or the new 'New Woman' who is born out of the abuse and psychological tortures of society and transforms into a more confident, bold, and self-guiding persona re-writing her own rules and scripting her own life-story.

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