Being single is not being solitary

LAILA TYABJI

WANDERING AROUND INDIA AS I DO, THE FIRST QUESTION I am asked is how many children I have. Whether the question is posed in a village gathering, a railway carriage, a college cafeteria, or a conference, nobody questions for a minute that a respectable-looking 71 year old MUST be married, and therefore a mother. When I reveal that I am single, and always have been, the reactions are varied—compassion, astonishment, blank disbelief and, occasionally, envy.

Some years ago, a young journalist came to see me for a story on my work. As she concluded the interview, she said, 'Ma'am, I know you said no personal questions, but I just wanted to tell you how much I admire you.' She was under the illusion that I had selflessly sacrificed marriage and children for a life devoted to Dastkar and craftspeople. When I laughingly pointed out that being single didn't mean being sad or solitary; or, for that matter, celibate, she seemed shocked out of her wits and rapidly exited, dropping her pad and leaving her pencil behind. The vision of Saint Laila, vestal virgin in the cause of craft, had gone up in smoke.

I didn't actually ever take a decision that I wouldn't get married. For people of my generation, even those educated

on western lines in liberal non-convent schools, it seemed the obvious finale to growing up. We were all set on going to college and planned to work for a while afterwards, but marriage and a family was always the final piece of the picture. Practically the end of the story. The books we read, whether Jane Austen or Mills & Boon, all had the same trajectory.

For me, growing up with three brothers plus many male cousins and their friends, the opposite sex were neither the heroes nor the heartthrobs my classmates fantasised about. I was too much at ease to be easily enamoured. It was disconcerting, though, to discover that while teenage girls spent inordinate amounts of their time talking about boys, how little we seemed to figure in theirs! And a surprise that their schoolboy jokes about sex seemed to mean something quite different from our own roseate visions of romantic 'love'!

Leaving school in 1962, only one of my classmates had a clear career plan—she wanted to be a doctor. We were 15 or 16, and most of us were pretty hazy about the options. I remember my friends vacillating between advertising, being teachers, UN translators, or even air hostesses (in those days of foreign exchange shortage, it was the only way to go abroad!). But at the end of this brief bout of independence was always a husband. Dim, undefined, but definitely the dominant presence.... The more daring said, 'I'll never have an arranged marriage' or, even more boldly, 'Race and religion no bar.' but NO ONE (even those who seemed to prefer the company of girls) said, 'I am not going to get married.' This despite the shining example of our Headmistress, Miss Grace Linnell, who'd come out to India after World War 1, lived with her best friend, and was instrumental in teaching generations of Indian girls, first in Hyderabad and then at Welham, how to think for themselves; to be fearless, independent, and questioning.

Like my peers, I, too, took marriage as something that would happen eventually: spontaneously, inevitably, and without much effort on my part. Since I had neither social nor economic pressures egging me on, I put the matter on the back burner. Meanwhile, I spent a happy time at art school in Baroda and another two years in Japan, and then, with another year-long interval in Japan, life as a free-lance designer in my barsati in Defence Colony. Shy and painfully conscious of being the plain Jane daughter of two very good-looking parents, I was relieved to find that I wasn't totally unattractive to men! Artists had their attractions, but I didn't want to marry any of them. I knew that I didn't want to be a diplomat's wife either, like my mother. Nor, despite succumbing briefly to the beguiling charms of first an Englishman, and then a young Frenchman, did I want to marry and live abroad, a perpetual foreigner. Moreover, life on my own terms seemed increasingly delightful and, gradually, the compromises and adjustments of marriage seemed more and more claustrophobic. My idea of bliss became 'a lover who lived down the lane'.

Kalpana Sharma has written about 'the rocky terrain that every Indian woman must traverse as she approaches the inevitability of marriage'. Mercifully I never encountered any rocks. My parents, possibly recognising my maverick views on the matter, never took it for granted that I would or should marry. I don't know if they had anguished midnight conclaves on the subject, but they seemed remarkably relaxed, concentrating their efforts on my eldest brother, born to be a family man but diffident about achieving it.

Nor was there pressure or social opprobrium from the extended family. Luckily, I had some formidable aunts who had led the way. One, Raihana Tyabji, was a Sufi mystic who was part of Gandhiji's inner group. She remained single all her life,

living in an ashram, singing Mira bhajans in her beautiful voice, and writing a book, *Heart of a Gopi*, in which she described her experiences as a Krishna devotee. I would visit her with my parents on our trips to Delhi, and loved the way she combined a matter-of-fact but intense spirituality with a passion for chocolates and detective novels.

Closer to us, and a trailblazing icon for any adolescent, was my father's younger sister, Kamila. According to family legend, despite also being ferociously intelligent, Kamila's flirtatious ways had been a great worry to her parents in her teens. She went off to Oxford and then joined the Bar, the first Indian Muslim woman to do so. She then settled in London to practise law, becoming the first woman ever to plead a case in the Privy Council. Much courted by many, including a Sinhalese prime minister, she remained resolutely single, with a lifelong attachment to an eccentric Sri Lankan with whom she and a group of equally unconventional friends—artists, actors, and other professionals—shared a home for over three decades. She only left London and 'The Family', as they called themselves, in the mid-1960s, to join Jayaprakash Narayan's Sarvodaya Movement in Bihar, after the great Famine. Finding him inspirational but the movement chaotic and muddled, she moved to Bombay to start the Women's India Trust (WIT), getting the famous underworld Don, Haji Mastaan, to give her a donation for sewing machines. He apparently admired the way she drove her sky-blue Rover into the narrow slum lanes and chawls of the city, looking for needy housebound women to train. Kamila Phupu loved the company of men, but felt women were far more sensible, down-to-earth, and competent!

Apparently, my mother (whose best friend she'd been, growing up) predicted from my infancy that, 'Laila is going to be another Kamila'. Certainly, my first conscious view of this glamorous aunt in London, when I was 10, made me her lifelong fan. Six-foot-

eight, dressed always in flamboyant saris and jewellery, witty and successful (Sean Connery was one of her clients), a wonderful speaker, but also a superb cook and seamstress, casually writing a landmark book on Muslim law in her spare time, she seemed such a fun role model. Although I never had her self-confidence and brilliance, the exuberant assurance with which she lived her unconventional life certainly inspired my choices. Even in her mid-80s, she would lie in her ornately carved white bed, early morning, and scan the financial pages of the *Times of India*, then ring up her broker and play the stock market with extraordinary acumen; WIT and the women it supported survived through the success of her investments.

So, were there moments of insecurity and loneliness? My early 30s, with my mother no longer there as a supportive buffer, all the desirable seeming men married, and all my friends absorbed in parenthood, had their spasms of self doubt. Was I always going to be the singleton, the odd one out? The one who drove home alone on my motorbike, while others got into cars with their husbands? The one with no baby stories or mother-in-law jokes? This sounds shamefully feeble, but I think it would have been much more tedious if no one had ever wanted to marry me! The confidence of having been wanted tided me over the trying times dealing with curious impertinent queries of, 'So when is it your turn?' or 'How come you haven't married…?' or even more crassly, 'It's not that you're bad looking…' The implication always was that anyone who could marry, would. It's a rare married woman, however unhappy herself, who can believe a single woman doesn't pine to be married. I sometimes fantasised about a T shirt emblazoned with the message—'I've had 15 proposals. I am single by choice!'

Meanwhile, looking at relationships all around me, and even my parents' long, supportive and happy marriage, it seemed that

marriage was inevitably a compromise, with the give and take disproportionately weighted in favour of the male. It was men's jobs that decided where couples would settle, what share they would take in household chores and childcare, whether their wives could work, travel and have independent lives. Adding to everything was the conflict between my predilection for brilliant, creative, complicated types, and my equally strong desire to be my own person!

The men I fancied were wonderful, stimulating company, but were also pretty demanding: clearly not ideal marriage material. The thought of living with them forever gave me pause! Once the intense give and take of early courtship was over, it was a shock that even the most unconventional of Indian men had in mind relationships that were very conventional. I found jealousy and possessiveness unattractive rather than flattering. Being naturally monogamous by nature I had no desire to be unfaithful, but I did want the freedom I had of picking up my jhola and travelling the world, of crafting the multicoloured jigsaw of my life as I chose. I didn't want to 'follow' my man, I wanted us hand-in-hand; and the opportunity to occasionally lead! At the same time I didn't want a doormat as a husband. There was the paradox. Liberated though I was, I still needed my husband to be my intellectual equal if not my superior. The social conditioning of the time made it difficult to change established mindsets.

My father adored and admired my mother, often citing her as the perfect woman. He loved that she painted so well, had such sparkling wit, intelligence and subtle aesthetic, ran a beautiful home, was an admired hostess and ambassador's wife. He trusted her implicitly, and happily handed over the family finances to her care. (She gave him Rs. 100 as pocket money!) But he took it for granted that she would follow where his career took him and make his ambitions her own. Someone for whom family

and friends were the centre of her existence, she moved house twenty-three times in their married life. In those early years of the Indian Foreign Service, she was separated for most of the year from her children. Disliking the formal, artificial minuet of diplomatic life, she nevertheless ran an embassy effortlessly, mugged up on wines and European etiquette, learnt French, Farsi and Indonesian; on occasion cooking a sit-down five-course state dinner for thirty-five, singlehandedly, at short notice (the cook and his assistant had overdosed on the brandy!). Her one concern was that the hand-kissing German dignitaries would smell garlic on her fingers. But it was only after my father retired to Hyderabad that Amma was able to do what she'd always wanted—design textiles and crafts and work with poor women.

Much later, in the lonely years after her early death, Abba admitted that he had selfishly taken advantage of her unconditional love. He told me, 'I didn't take your mother for granted, but I did take it for granted that she was there primarily for me.' It was this realisation that made him bend backwards, even in extreme old age, not to impose his needs on my life. Meanwhile, my mother's brother, much loved and indulged, a high-flying future air marshal, laughingly admitted that he thought himself very liberal in allowing his wife to take up work assignments 'as long as she is home when I return from office'. My aunt quite happily accepted this as a loveable proof of his affection!

Even though educated, well read, and coming from progressive westernised families, my mother, aunts, and their friends and contemporaries considered themselves lucky to have companionable, appreciative, caring marriages. Surrendering their own independence and aspirations seemed a more than acceptable return. Marriage was their career of choice, a mindset that continued well into the next generation.

As late as the 1960s, my views on marriage and an equal partnership were considered unconventional, and I heard later that in Hyderabadi circles, my living alone in a barsati away from my parents, determined to live off what I earned, was considered quite weird. A nice young man, coming to check me out as a prospective bride one Sunday morning, was horrified to find me in my dressing gown, without even a maid as chaperone. He had to sit and wait while I ran down to Defence Colony market to buy milk to make him a cup of tea—I didn't have a fridge those days.

Stereotypes change, but a fondness for stereotypes does not. Once it was accepted that I was not standard marriage material, the next assumption (both by those who disapproved and those who envied my lifestyle) was that, as a liberated single girl living alone, I must be wildly promiscuous! In reality, in my 20s and 30s, I lived mostly in my head and in the books I read. Though certainly not frigid, relationships began for me first as an intellectual affinity, then an emotional one, only culminating later into physical bonding. I occasionally admired, but could not emulate, the lighthearted way some of my friends regarded sex. 'Like a fabulous meal—you don't have to fall in love with the cook…' said one. I also had old-fashioned views about messing with other people's marriages, which further curtailed the field!

Family has always been important to me, despite my not opting for marriage. I was fortunate in the security and freedom of a mutually loving, mutually respectful relationship with my parents, who influenced my life and thinking in more ways than I can mention. My cherished mother, the centre of our home, died unexpectedly when I was 30. She was only 58, and my youngest brother 20. I shared our home with my father for the next 17 years, till his death at 87. It was very much the family home; my three brothers, all unmarried at the time, came and went.

Abba remained the most interesting, unexpected, multifaceted, endearing man I knew.

All my life my brothers joked that I was thoroughly spoilt as the only girl among four siblings, a position I greatly enjoyed but hopefully never exploited. With my mother gone, being the only woman in the family took on a different dimension. Totally unlike Amma in temperament, I unconsciously took on some of her roles—hostess, homemaker, letter writer, recipe book, agony aunt, arbiter and adjudicator, an oft-referred to data bank of our extended family relationships and history. I'd always enjoyed cooking and decorating, but (thanks partly to working with craftswomen) I took to embroidery and needlework which I'd previously strongly resisted. I always regret that Amma never saw this, she herself was such a star. I was moved when I found my father, in his late 70s, cataracts in both eyes, sitting on his bed, laboriously but exquisitely darning one of his socks. When I urged him to give it to me to do, he firmly refused, saying he was doing it in Amma's memory; a small acknowledgment of the endless unspoken things she'd done for him over the years.

What happens to other less privileged women without my freedoms? As I work with communities all over India, I meet so many who are trapped in unhappy, often abusive marriages, and others who have sacrificed huge talent and dreams to be at the beck and call of a tyrant mother-in-law,

Over the forty-five years that I have worked in the craft sector, countless young women, whether in Lucknow, Rajasthan, Bengal or Banaskantha, have seen me as a role model for being single. Many have impulsively declared they intend to follow my example. I have needed to gently curb their enthusiasm. The situation for unmarried village women is very different from my own effortless journey. Few can escape from the prejudice and stigma attached to being unmarried, the inevitability of becoming

unwanted, unpaid, unvalued domestic labour. Tragically, social freedom for women seems mainly dependent on their ability to be economically independent.

There are some happy exceptions: Archana Kumari who, aged 16, told me one winter night in rural Bihar that she wanted to be just like me. Barely literate at the time, she taught herself English and drawing, joined the National Institute of Fashion Technology, and today runs her own *sujni* embroidery business; single by choice and no longer the talk of her village. Zahida, in Kashmir, took a similar decision. There is Shanta Bai, a young Lambani tribal, who left a loveless, violent marriage and used her extraordinary embroidery skills to carve out a career for herself as a master craftswoman, had an affair and bore a child as a single parent, and has travelled the world exhibiting her art. For most rural women, however, marriage is an inevitable part of life. Like the women of my parents' generation, a kind husband and healthy happy children is their ultimate goal. Most find my singlehood inexplicable and rather sad.

The craftswomen I worked with (though they seldom had a good word to say about husbands), also felt children were a good, indeed necessary, thing. For matter-of-fact practical reasons: 'Who will look after you when you are old…?' Somehow, marrying as an insurance policy against old age was not my idea of career planning. It was never an option. My life was rich and full and certainly not solitary. My mother did tell me that while finding a man who shared my iconoclastic views on marriage might be difficult, I should not miss out on having a baby. According to her, it was the most creative experience one could have.

Despite my mother's encouragement, I was nervous of having a child. I come from a family that would have taken single parenthood in its stride, but I funked it. With husbands you

can choose to part company, but with a child who is boring or criminal, you simply have to love and lump it! There is no exit option. What an earth would I do with a child who had no sense of humour?

Fate plays its own tricks, however. I was 51 and long past the thought of either marriage or babies, when a daughter fortuitously came tumbling into my life. We connected quite at random through email (she had a question re Welham, where we'd both studied, though over 25 years apart). This kick-started a voluminous correspondence, after which we eventually met. It seems now as if she has been a part of my life forever. Though Urvashi has her own wonderful mother and family in Madhya Pradesh, she honoured me by declaring me her Amma and coming to live with me. Born a Rajput princess from quite a traditional family, she herself is as unorthodox as this decision. Her father philosophically said it was fated. She came to me, readymade and more or less grown up, so I didn't go through teething and wet nappies.

It's been a fun and (as my mother said) intensely creative time. When Urvashi unexpectedly became part of my life, I absolutely loved it, and took the occasional storm as a challenge. Obviously I had over-thought the burdens of motherhood far too much! Sharing one's life with someone completely different turned out not to be claustrophobic or conflicting, but actually adding an exciting element of surprise and delight.

I have reached that old age now that loving friends feared for me. Life still seems pretty good and not at all lonely. Marriage is not the only form of relationship, and I have had much richness, joy, and companionship over the years, of many kinds, including the surprise package of a entertainingly congenial, incredibly caring daughter (much to the relief of my craftspeople!) As an added bonus, there are dozens of other surrogate children and

now grandchildren all over India, who've sat in my lap, imbibing gyan and rejecting it over the years; each teaching me about India's multiple lives and our ever-changing world in their turn.

Meanwhile, as the traditional structure of marriage seems increasingly fragile, fraught, complicated, and often still very unfair, I find it wonderful that concepts of sex, gender, and matrimony are being shaken up well and truly; with both men and women looking at new ways of interacting with each other. New legislation reflects these new mores, just as new combinations of sexes and partnerships are also slowly infiltrating the social status quo, all adding their own spice and variety.

Life is a lengthy business these days, and however one lives it, should be fulfilling and fun, not a cage.

Happily unma… ever after!

FRENY MANECKSHA

I DO NOT KNOW HOW MA… swallowed before well-m… on me. This was rice that … by the matriarchs from am… wedding, and distributed … Folklore has it that these g… during the blessing ceremo… other young Parsi maidens …

I would hear the priest … sprinkling of Sanskrit phra… inevitable *putra bau* (child… influence of Indian custom… signifying the intermingling … did Parsis frown upon those … why did a 'progressive' com… and male bloodlines when it … Why were these notions used … children of Parsi women, who … from being brought up as Zo…

I did not have a typical P… was a government officer, p…

Single by Choice
happily unmarried women!

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