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Reclaiming the Second Phase of Life? Intersectionality, Empowerment and Respectability in Midlife Romance

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Abstract

bell hooks has written approvingly of the 'second phase' of life as a time, in midlife after divorce and relationship breakdown, when women may move from a place of dependency and intimate inequalities towards stridently asserting their needs and desires. This article interrogates these claims about the 'second phase' of life through qualitative empirical study. The article builds on our earlier work critiquing narratives of reclaimed control and self-development in the so-called baby-boom generation, showing how the compounded forces of ageism, sexism, classism, and racism are ever-present in mid- and later life romance. We juxtapose two separate ethnographic studies of middle-aged women's post-divorce moves towards repartnering, one with middle-class White British women and one with working-class British South Asian women, to break open questions of empowerment in mid-and later life. Narratives and practices of self-discovery and renewed independence were common in both our studies, but the motivations for and consequences of these moves were differentiated by intersecting power relations. Narratives of newfound independence did not translate evenly into intimate lives and dating practices, where respectability remained vital and obdurate. Friendship groups diffused sexual agency and worked to maintain traditional practices of femininity. At this juncture of life many types of complicated and often contradictory femininities were played out, and were refracted through differing generational, diasporic and kin moralities. Empowerment in midlife can be ambivalent, laced with continued vulnerabilites and is implicated in a range of intersectionalities.

Keywords

ageing, femininity, friendships, intersectionality, intimacy, respectability

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Introduction

The 'baby boom' generation, born between the 1940s and the 1960s in Britain is often credited with pioneering creative ways of relating, doing intimacy and making families. With this cohort of people now entering mid and later life, ageing and the life course on the surface appear transformed, from a linear to a flexible process with more choice available at every phase. These demographic and cultural shifts have triggered a range of societal discussions, from the 'individualization' of intimate life (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007) to the 'greying' of sexual health (Marshall, 2011). With the trend towards dissolving conjugal and other long-term relationships that might have been endured by the generations before them, we see increased numbers of people who are single in midlife and potentially contemplating repartnering. While feminist theory has celebrated this, as a 'second phase' of life, when women may move from a place of dependency and intimate inequalities towards more stridently asserting their needs and desires, empirical studies are more equivocal. This article departs from our earlier studies documenting the ever-presence of ageism and sexism in mid and later life romance, and how age and gender inequalities may be co-constituted by class and 'race/ethnicity' (see, for example, Milton and Qureshi, 2020) to break open questions of empowerment in intimate life. We juxtapose two separate ethnographic studies of middle-aged women's post-divorce moves towards repartnering, one with middle-class White British women and one with working-class British South Asian women, to ask whether the 'second phase' of life is really a time to reclaim power. We compare how the women in our studies navigated their newfound independence and considered the possibility of new relationships, how they rebuilt their social lives in such a way as to meet single men, and how they negotiated dating alongside discourses of respectability, which emerge to be surprisingly obdurate in women of this generation.

The 'second phase' of life is a term referring not only to the second half of the life course – beginning in midlife – but also, in this socio-demographic context, acquiring more specific connotations connected to the historical moments through which this generation of women have lived. This is the generation of women who were born into the relatively stable nuclear families of the mid-20th century, whose youths passed through second-generation feminism and the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s. They have been presented in much sociological commentary as revolutionary, transforming sexual mores dramatically and in a short period of time (Giddens, 1992; Weeks, 2007). Alongside legal reforms such as the Divorce Reform Act in 1969, single parenthood and living singly became increasingly widespread in the 1970s and 1980s, surpassing nuclear family units (Szreter and Fisher, 2010). By the 1990s, nearly three quarters of divorces were initiated by women (Simpson, 1998). Sociological research on intimate life has examined decentering of these changes, including the sexual/love relationships, the centrality of friendships in satisfying needs for intimacy (Morris, 2019; Roseneil, 2007; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004) and the rise of seemingly non-normative ways of doing relationships such as 'living apart together' (Duncan, 2011, 2015; Duncan et al., 2014; Upton-Davis, 2015). The baby boom generation is seen to be the vanguard of these changes.

Bringing together these two senses of the 'second phase' of life – midlife and beyond, and the rejection of the traditional norms of intimate life – feminist theorist bell hooks

(2002) has written approvingly of the 'second phase' as a time in midlife, after divorce and relationship breakdown, when women may acquire newfound independence and develop new, more loving intimate relationships: 'now mid-life and thereafter has become not only a time to reclaim power but also a time to know real love at last' (p. 7). In hooks' oeuvre on love, she contends that if founded on mutuality and reciprocity rather than seen as given by one party and received by another, love can disrupt interlocking systems of oppression – patriarchy, capitalism, and racism – and be powerfully transformative. hooks tracks how her own feminist awakening as a young woman did not rupture her attachment to the heteronormative version of romantic love, based on traditional gender roles, with which she had grown up. It was only in midlife, the illusion of romance broken by a disappointing long-term heterosexual relationship, when she sought out a feminist meaning of love. She argues that conjugal intimacy can be replaced by romantic friendships and also affirms the choice of celibacy and loving, platonic communion. The book is a celebration of such a communion of older women, 'gathering together wisdom gleaned from women who have come to know love in mid-life' (hooks, 2002: xix). This narrative of the 'second phase' of life as offering new possibilities for the fulfilment of individual intimate desires has not been fully interrogated through empirical study, however. Is the 'second phase' of life really a time to reclaim power? If so, by whom?

Gendered, classed, and raced/ethnicized intersections in the second phase of life

Communion is hooks' reflection on her own life history, and clearly, it is a hopeful work. But to what extent are these arguments about the 'second phase' of life reflected in other women's life experiences? In a body of work on 'living apart together' relationships, Duncan et al. (2014; and *inter alia* Duncan, 2011, 2015) show that ways of relating and living outside of or beyond traditional coupledom are not necessarily revisions of normative ways of doing family and relationships or forms of 'undoing gender'. While living singly or in unconventional relationships, people often refer to, adapt, or reserve tradition, and even as they create something new, normative expectations remain important. Budgeon (2015) adds that heralding choice and freedom can leave under-theorized the impact of normative expectations around relationships and families and therefore fails to embed women's choices within the emergence of specific gendered subject positions associated with late modern socio-historical conditions. In her study of singlehood, Lahad (2017) challenges us not to fall into binary ways of thinking about singlehood and family life – for example, loneliness and togetherness, health and pathology, choice and non-choice, free and contained – warning that binary thinking can obscure and de-legitimize dualities, contradictions, and complexities, leading to a conceptual dead-end and, worse, preventing us from developing political and nuanced understandings of single (and by extension, dating and relating) lives.

Divorced women have been described in some scholarship as becoming more independent, in control of their lives, and acquiring greater self-esteem (Baum et al., 2005); going through a process of 'finding themselves' (Gregson and Ceynar, 2009). These studies of reclaimed control and opportunities for self-development have been powerful in contesting representations of divorce in terms of loss. However, this literature is equivocal on the

question of whether a divorce in midlife really enables women to make more satisfactory intimate relationships. Empirical work indicates that the compounded forces of ageism and sexism significantly obstruct middle-aged divorced women in finding heterosexual partners (Alterovitz and Mendelsohn, 2013; Carpenter et al., 2006; Malta and Farquharson, 2014; Rowntree, 2014; Samanta and Varghese, 2019; Watson and Stelle, 2011).

In addition, not all women have the same experiences of divorce in midlife, and subsequent trajectories are differentiated by class and 'race/ethnicity' (Balachandran and Jean Yeung, 2020; Lawson and Satti, 2016). Skeggs (1997) theorized in her seminal work that being, becoming, practicing, and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, 'races/ethnicities', ages, and nationalities. Skeggs shows how White, middle-class femininity is the silent norm, associated with respectability, and often works through comparing the self to 'less respectable' others (p. 98). As we have previously argued, the differentiation of class and 'race/ethnicity' is relational, operating through the affective aspects of class relations and racism, through contempt and distancing from various kinds of undesirable others (Milton and Qureshi, 2020, and see also Morris and Munt, 2019). Furthermore, in considering ageism and sexism as co-constituted by classism and racism, we have argued that there is an unstated White normativity at work in characterizing the baby-boom generation in terms of liberal feminist values and lifestyles (Milton and Qureshi, 2020, see also Smart and Shipman, 2004). For example, studies of British South Asian women track how valued freedoms may be acquired through divorce – the freedom to earn and control money, freedom of physical movement, domestic arrangements, and social networks – while women remain constrained by gender and sexual ideologies expecting them to be contained in heterosexual marriage and exposing them to sexual predation as lone women (see Qureshi, 2016: 217–222; and also Guru, 2009). In emphasizing choice and romanticising empowerment, sociological work on the pioneering intimacy of this generation conceals the pragmatism and piecing together of personal lives, bounded by circumstances and in connection with other people, relationally and institutionally (Duncan, 2011). Thus, assertions about divorced women reclaiming power in mid- and later life need to be interrogated and a critical eye must be cast towards how these claims are socially located.

Such studies suggest the need to re-consider hooks' (2002) work on love and the 'second phase' of life by invoking the insights of wider feminist work on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990), especially concerning the exercise of interlocking systems of power in the domains of family and personal, intimate relationships (Collins, 2000a, 2000b). In juxtaposing our two ethnographic studies of middle-aged women's post-divorce moves towards repartnering – with middle-class White British women and working-class British South Asian women – this article critiques claims about mid- and later life being a time for love and reclaimed power from an intersectional perspective. We explore how normative expectations surrounding femininity may remain pervasive and long-lasting, managed similarly in our different groups of women, but be refracted through different material conditions, and with different motivations and consequences based on women's social locations.

Research settings and methods

Sarah Milton's study was conducted between 2011 and 2013, and Kaveri Qureshi's between 2012 and 2014. Sarah sought to explore the day-to-day experiences of ageing, femininity,

and heterosexuality among middle-aged women who were deciding to, or were dating again after divorce or separation. She used salsa classes as a space of entry to the field, learning the dance herself, and as a 'way in' to meet, informally discuss, and interview participants. Twenty participants were interviewed more formally, purposively chosen to include age and experience of life stage. The participants lived in the south of England. Almost all of the participants, formal interviewees, and people Sarah worked with more informally were in their 50s and 60s, heterosexual and single, dating, or in relatively new relationships at the time of fieldwork. Although this was not a deliberate decision about the study design on Sarah's part, all of the interviewees in Sarah's study identified as White, and the salsa classes generated a largely middle-class circle of women.

The social setting of the salsa classes contrasts with Kaveri's study, which explored marriage breakdown in British South Asian families, particularly among Pakistani Muslims. The study was based in East London and Peterborough, in historically working-class localities that are extremely diverse in 'racial/ethnic' terms as well as transnationally connected. This wider study involved participant observation over a period of several years, enabling Kaveri to chart the complex developments in people's marriage careers, from privatized attempts at family and religious mediation to interactions with religious law and civil litigation, to separation, divorce, solo life, remarriage, and children. More formal interviews were carried out with 74 participants, of whom 51 were women and 23 were men. The interviews drawn on in this article are with the oldest cohort of divorced/separated women who were heterosexual and contemplating new relationships, or in a new relationship. Almost all these women described their first marriages as coming about through the selection and involvement of their parents. There were also, of course, other older women in Kaveri's study who expressed great resistance to the idea of repartnering (Qureshi, 2016: 222–227).

To write this article, we went through an intensive reading of one another's work, attending to common threads and divergences. To understand these commonalities and departures, we applied an intersectional approach, as in Twamley and Sidharth's (2019) recent cross-study comparative analysis, examining how our interlocutors positioned themselves and others across the two studies. Finally, we lifted off from this intersectional analysis of individual interlocutors, to analyse the accounts in relation to the broader ethnographic contexts of our studies (see Milton and Qureshi, Forthcoming, for further methodological reflections on our approach).

In what follows, we work through empirical material from both studies, contrasting first how the women negotiated their newfound independence post-divorce, and how this influenced their motivations towards repartnering, then examining women's reflections on seeking out single men and the values they sought to embody through their pursuit and practices of new relationships.

Newfound independence and new relationships

In Sarah's study, women regularly mentioned that they were dating 'the second time around'. The women offered many comparisons with experiences of dating at younger ages, pre-marriage and during a different era, in the 1970s. Jemima, for example, who

was a single mother of three and in her fifties when interviewed, spoke of how she and other women of her age were brought up to keep things 'smooth'; 'I wasn't told in my upbringing that I could say no to people, you were always told to comply, don't make a fuss, go along with things, don't challenge'. Jemima had married at the age of 22 and reflected that the pressure for her and her generation of women to keep things 'smooth' had prevented her from feeling she could make an informed choice about her marriage:

> I wasn't bold enough to actually, I wasn't bold enough to say no or to have more awareness [of choices] . . . you know that's how I was brought up . . . I was there to please and I was there to make things smooth. And that's how, that was a whole generation you know.

With the end of their marriages, similar to bell hooks' narrative and the positive studies of divorce heralding a time of self-actualisation, many spoke of a newfound independence which they both valued and enjoyed, compared to the 'compromise' they had experienced within their former relationships. An increased consciousness of their ability to make deliberate choices that were in their own interests was linked to a feeling that they had become more aware of 'knowing' themselves. Molly had just started divorce proceedings with her husband of 16 years. She felt happy about these changes: 'it's a new chapter, it's like chapter two of my life really'. She described an active process of rebuilding a social life that had been lost during her marriage; 'I pushed myself to go out'. Molly spoke passionately about the changes in her life that had made her feel empowered and creative again; 'the whole point was about me having some independence and getting to know who I am and doing all the things I wanted to do'. She had embarked on further education and felt like she was now able to choose her friendships, adamantly repeating how she wanted to savour and maintain her independence and not let any future possible relationships get in the way of this:

> I went back to uni last year and since then I haven't had any relationship, but I've achieved . . . I'm the sort of person who gives a lot to the other partner but I think, for me, I don't wanna do that anymore . . . I don't need to cook for anyone and see that they're ok, I'm just doing everything for me and on my terms . . . I've passed my singing level one or I got a couple of firsts in my first year . . . I'm more thrilled about achieving for myself . . . And I do find men a bit of a distraction from getting on with things.

Molly reflected that the achievement she now desired, as well as the increased activity of her social life, did not seem to fit naturally with her experiences of relationships:

> I'm going to be more, I'd say, selfish – I'm going to be more, not take any crap . . . someone who can fit around me for a change, instead of – usually I've been the one to fit around them and you start kind of, it's like it's when it's convenient for them to see you, not the other way around and I want it to be about me in a way. It should be a two-way street . . . I'm still going to be going out, I'm not going to stop my singing or my dancing or my friends.

Piquing women's difficulty in squaring their desire to maintain their newfound independence with their longing for new relationships was the complaint that so many of men

they encountered when socializing and dating appeared to be so 'needy', as Sally Ann commented: 'I don't want to be somebody's mother'. Rosie felt the problem was that the eligible men she met seemed to have experienced the opposite trajectory after the breakdown of relationships in midlife – not gaining in self-confidence but losing in it, becoming 'fragile' and uncertain of themselves:

> I think that men, especially in the last years are going to be very fragile. They're very fragile inside out. They're not so self-confident. They're not so secure of themselves . . . We're more independent. We know what we want . . . then on the other side men . . . less know what they want.

The importance of newfound independence, and concerns about how future relationships might compromise this, was echoed in Kaveri's study. In Kaveri's study, however, women's investment in protecting their independence came from a less privileged fallback position. The women in Kaveri's study described their sense of empowerment about their lives after divorce or separation through the metaphor of learning to 'stand on their own two feet', a phrase which was a ubiquitous leitmotif in conversations about the personal transformations they had undergone after separation and divorce (Qureshi, 2016: 219–220). 'Standing on their own two feet' described something valuable that they felt they had gained out of separation and divorce *despite* the emotional distress, financial hardship, and the practical, legal, and bureaucratic difficulties involved. After ending her 15-year marriage, Samia, a migrant woman in her late 40s, had had to acquire anew everything she would need to live independently – a British passport, a National Insurance number, a bank account, child benefit, income support and tax credits, council housing, and legal aid to apply for the divorce, navigating paperwork and state institutions. She returned to adult education, initially as a necessary condition of her receipt of income support benefit, but she also found this deeply fulfilling:

> It was in my mind that I wanted to study, so after the divorce, I did these courses one by one. Now when my husband sees me, he's surprised. He's thinking 'what happened? She was totally dumb and she didn't know how to do anything. Now she's learnt a lot' . . . He says, 'at what level I left her and now at what level she became?'. I proved it to him, I have stood up on my own two feet. Even my family, my parents, they are very happy about me. They say ke 'hamari beti apne paon pe khari ho gayee' (our daughter is standing on her own feet).

Like Molly, Samia had discovered a newfound freedom to pursue her ambitions and savoured her achievements. But unlike Molly, Samia's commitment to studying and acquiring professional skills was not just for self-fulfilment or self-advancement, but also for survival, in a context where she had been economically dependent on her husband during her marriage. This was characteristic of the women in Kaveri's study, who offered more ambivalent stories about empowerment and independence, laced with interweaving family relationships and continued vulnerabilities. A complicating factor was their natal families, upon whom most depended – as single women, for emotional support, material, and practical assistance. They described power asymmetries as a corollary of this dependence on their natal families. Nusrat, for example, a migrant woman

in her 50s, relied on material support from her brothers and could only contemplate a new relationship when she would be independent from them:

> Sometimes, particularly at night, I feel – I wish that somebody should talk to me with love (*yeh cheez sata rahi hai ke koi mujhe piyar se baat kare*) . . . . I think, I never had the chance to enjoy love before, but this is my right . . . I think this idea they [her brothers] have somewhere in their mind too. They always tease me about it and discourage me. They might think that I might look for such a relationship, look for freedom.

Like in Sarah's study, Kaveri's research participants also expressed apprehension about new relationships because the eligible men they encountered appeared to be so 'needy'. However, rather than 'needy' men being merely a drag on their empowered self-identities, the women in Kaveri's study were concerned with being taken advantage of by men who might, for reason of immigration insecurities or unemployment, be in 'need' of a visa or of a financially secure woman. Naheed, a migrant woman from Pakistan, had been separated from her husband for 17 years and was now in her 40s and with three grown-up children. The examples of remarried older women that Naheed knew of were all unsuccessful. They were all of women remarrying men from Pakistan whom she called 'needy', men who had immigration insecurities, she believed, and treated marriage as a way to get permanent settlement in the UK but without real 'commitment'. As a result of her newfound independence, she had no need for a man to support her, she said, and she did not have to take that risk:

> I feel like, because I'm financially stable, I've got a job, I've got money, I can
> support a man. What can a man give me? A roof over my head? If any man
> wants to marry me, I can support him! [Laughing] . . . I'm not interested in that kind of rubbish, if they're thinking they're gonna gain from marrying me. I'm not interested. If I can't find anyone, then so be it . . . you see so many bad examples in front of you . . . I don't mind if someone needs a visa, then I don't mind giving it, but if he's just using me for the visa, then that's not nice. And that's the thing I'm scared of . . .

Their hard-won independence could thus also mitigate against new relationships, although not in the same way as for Sarah's interlocutors. In keeping with other work on British South Asian women, this suggests a more ambivalent and uneven kind of empowerment than has been reflected in Euro-American scholarship on post-divorce transitions and trajectories. Intersecting the power relations of class and 'race/ethnicity' meant that although these contemporary ways of talking about and doing independent femininity seem on the surface similar in both studies, the motivations and consequences were quite different.

(Re)building friendships and managing respectability

Turning now to reflect on seeking out new relationships, for the women in Sarah's study, there was a consensus that the spaces they were used to socializing in now made it 'much harder' to meet single people at their age than when they were younger (see also Milton,

2017; Milton and Qureshi, 2020). The participants talked therefore about trying to (re) build a social circle so as to make it possible to meet other singles. The salsa classes fitted in here and an integral part of the experience of attending the classes were the friendships that were made. Jemima talked enthusiastically about her increased independence and ability to attend the classes alone, but also of a sorority that had developed, which had helped her to build confidence. Part of Jemima's pleasure was in sharing experiences with other women who were also in a similar life stage of 'relearning':

> . . . we'd all meet up and travel in the car together, there was four or five of us and we were all dressed up . . . we'd all comment on how each other looked and we'd sort of buoy up our confidence, it was great . . . the nice clothes and the make up and going out as a bunch of girls and just laughing on the way there . . . we all just keep an eye out for each other.

The cherished sorority in the salsa classes was also found in Kaveri's study, where women told stories about not going out alone but in group situations, with friends or with other family members. British-born Saima, who had been separated from her husband for 10 years, described how her first moves towards meeting single men had been through family and friends. She had been introduced to a few potential new partners that way, and then went out on 'group dates', as she described:

> I met a couple of men . . . The first one, he's got a pharmacy up the road from here [laughs]. My brother-in-law introduced me to him . . . And then there was another guy who was nice, but his mentality and mine were just totally different. But I didn't have a relationship with these people [said with emphasis]. We went out socialising in groups of people, we talked, got to know each other and stuff like that. It was nothing like boyfriend/girlfriend thing.

Despite the similarities of friendships and group dating, in her rejection of 'boyfriend/ girlfriend' relationships, Saima captured a key distinction between the two groups of women. Group dating for the women in Kaveri's study was not about just building up confidence, but about negotiating a morally acceptable approach to repartnering in a context where romantic intimacy was expected to be bound to, and held to the standard of marriage. Fitting with this search for a morally acceptable way to date was many participants' preference for Islamic dating sites and marriage events. British-born Rani, in her 40s, was introduced to her second husband through an Islamic Society dating event at the university she attended as a mature student. Rani's concern was with religiously appropriate dating, by which she meant meeting eligible men specifically with a view to marriage, not 'boyfriend/girlfriend stuff', and getting to know one another in the presence of others:

> The intention was always, when the introductions were made the intention was always to have a marriage Islamically, that's the correct thing to do, so the teaching was there. I'm only interested if you want to have a long-term relationship as in marriage. Otherwise I'm not into boyfriend/girlfriend stuff, basically.

While the women in Sarah's study framed their experiences as groups of women 'relearning' or 'rebuilding', most of Kaveri's participants did not have earlier experiences against which to compare dating spaces in this 'second phase'.

Narratives of respectability were obdurate in both contexts, and groups of women friends worked to help our interlocutors in both studies to date in 'respectable' ways. One of the main ways to practice respectability was in avoiding a display of agency, or active desire, in seeking out new relationships. Despite the importance of their newfound independence, narratives of independence did not translate then into all areas of life. When it came to dating, friendship groups diffused responsibility and agency in dating practices, allowing the women to take up more passive, and therefore respectable, subject positions.

While talking about popular online spaces, such as dating websites and group networks such as *meetup.com*, for example, there was hesitancy and often embarrassment among Sarah's interlocutors when discussing online ways of meeting potential partners. Sandra described herself as being very hesitant towards Internet dating. She strove in her interview to ensure that Sarah was aware that other people, particularly those she assumed were 'valuable' people, also were using these websites, and that this made it ok to do so herself: 'a few friends who were absolutely lovely girls, one was 28 who was in London . . . all lovely girls . . . I looked at them I thought oh well if they do it, it must be ok'. She described how a friend had directed her towards Internet dating, 'told her to do it', and indeed took control of the whole process, filling out her online profile and putting her photo up onto the site:

> . . . one of my friend's daughters who put me on it . . . she wrote my whole profile for me, everything –my hobbies, what I liked because she knew my whole character so I let her do it. However I didn't act on it and I didn't put a picture up . . . So earlier this year, my friend's daughter decided to put up a picture of me. And again I seem to be taking things slowly. Rather than get like stuck in I was its sort of going bit by bit and just feeling my way.

Nearly all of the participants who had experience of Internet dating began their narratives with similar descriptions of the many reservations that surrounded their decision to join an Internet dating site and of 'eventually' being persuaded, and pressured, into joining the website by friends – whom would often write their profiles for them. The interviews with Kaveri's participants were similar on this point. British-born Shanila signed up to the website singlemuslim.com because a friend took control: 'she's the one who came round and on my laptop said, 'You're registering' and she registered me'. Although she denied playing any active role in getting herself onto the website, confusingly, Shanila also saw it a way of being more assertive about finding and choosing eligible new partners. At the same time, she strove to present her use of the website to Kaveri in a very passive way, downplaying her choice in meeting men and stressing that despite her hope that she would be the chooser, it was always them choosing her:

> they all just pick on me, they all find me, you know? That's how I've always been in my relationships . . . they find me, and I think that's where I go wrong 'cause I sort of attract the wrong type, instead of my choosing. That's why I went on singlemuslim, 'cause I thought it'd be me choosing but then I don't like none of them.

In the introduction we discussed hooks' celebrated groupings of women in mid- and later life, and our findings echo empirical studies of the importance of intimate non-romantic friendships (cf. Jamieson et al., 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). However,

rather than replacing or decentring the traditional couple, these friendships worked – successfully or not – to help each other find romantic partners. The ways in which women looked for new partners were infused with gendered heteronormativities, despite the stories of independence and empowerment, and friendships helped to maintain these norms, especially surrounding respectability – as we now detail further.

Doing dating and disaggregating respectability

From stories of complicated independence, to the trouble with seeking out new relationships, we now turn to 'doing dating'; how the women talked about what actually happened while meeting with potential new partners. In Sarah's study, the enduring narratives around femininity and respectability followed through from seeking partners to doing dating. Sarah commonly heard about desires to be treated on dates in traditionally gendered ways. Denise, for example, described herself as 'quite old fashioned in a way' and desired 'someone that treats you nicely yeah, definitely, yeah, a gentleman'. She had found that dating male partners of a similar age to herself made it easier to negotiate these expectations of conventional dating behaviours:

> I know girls nowadays don't expect that, it's just probably the way I was brought up and that's the way it was. And like I say with my partner now, he's the same age as me, so he's like that as well . . . in the beginning I think yeah they should pay and treat you like a lady, take you out.

Furthermore, many of the women in Sarah's study described the delicacy of negotiating which understandings of femininity were seen to be attractive by potential partners. Maureen, who described herself as independent and strong in her work life in an accountancy business, and presented herself in her interview as confident and loud, described enacting a deliberate pretence of passivity while trying to attract men. In her narrative, she directly associated this passivity with what she saw as a 'normal' femininity, despite it not being a 'normal' way of acting for her. However, a male friend had pointed out to her that not all men would find this attractive:

> He said because I'm being that feminine, I'm gonna actually lose some guys who are looking for an intelligent woman. So, it's a fine line between being feminine and then also appearing stupid. Cause the last, one of the aspects of femininity is, you don't have your own opinion, because someone else gives you your own opinion. That is an aspect of femininity . . .

In Sarah's study, the concern with respectability and with embodying a rather traditional, passive femininity was explained with reference to generational norms. Kaveri's participants shared some of Sarah's interlocutors' concerns with avoiding narratives of agency and of 'voraciousness', and with traditional narrations of passive femininity, but with often a more pronounced commitment to religious sensibilities, diasporic moralities, and the moralities of extended families with whom they lived closely. Naheed had been put up on a Muslim dating website by a friend, and been to a Muslim marriage event, but regretted that the only interest she'd had through these dating fora was from men whom she suspected of seeking out divorced women for sexual pleasure, a

possibility against which she recoiled, speaking to her concern with her vulnerability as a single woman:

> With one or two people I did make friendships with, but then I found out that apart from talking they want to do cuddling and kissing. 'You just want fun! You don't want to know me', you know? If you feel physically comfortable with someone, then you trust them, only then you can make a relationship with them. These people, they're not interested in knowing you, they're just thinking – straight into bed. I'm not doing that.

For Naheed, a very important consideration was the potential threat to her reputation in her extended family, where she was seen as a devoted mother, and the impact such immoral behaviour might have on her children – perhaps even causing them to stop respecting her:

> I'm too scared! [clasps her face] 'cause I'm scared of one thing – for my kids, that my kids don't get disturbed. You know? Even, you can lose everything, all your respect and everything, 'hamari maan admi ke piche ro rahi hai' (our mum is crying after some man).

For women in both studies, it was important to maintain a socially validated version of femininity, a huge part of which was not being seen to be overtly sexually desiring. For Sarah's interlocutors, this was integral to 'being attractive' for men, and fitted with their generational ideas about gendered interactions – although both of which were complicated and not without contradictions. For Kaveri's research participants, among whom these narratives were also found, this was in addition to a need to maintain their reputations among kin. In their important work on single motherhood, Morris and Munt (2019) theorize that White British femininity, with its notions of respectability, and the shame and shaming associated with non-heteronormative ways of living, is informed by its Judeo-Christian history and traditions. Acknowledging the historical layers of contemporary femininities and gender relations is an important step in destabilizing and making visible the too often assumed and taken-for-granted normativity of White and middle-class practices.

Concluding discussion

We began this article with bell hooks' (2002) up-beat writings about the potential for middle-aged single women to reclaim power and find more satisfying relationships. hooks celebrates the 'trickle-down' of antisexist ideas about how we think about and experience mid-life, offering 'new possibilities of self-actualization in both our work lives and our intimate lives' (p. 2). Our empirical material offers some critical reflection on these hopes about the trickle-down of feminism and about intimate desires in the 'second phase' of life, arguing for a more disaggregated approach.

While many of the participants in our studies did describe a newfound independence, which they prized and enjoyed, and divorce as heralding a process of self-actualization, this regained control had complicated implications for and did not necessarily translate into their intimate lives. They felt their newfound potential for self-development to contradict with couple relationships, which inherently involved compromise, particularly

given that the single men with whom they interacted were so often injured by their own relationship histories, uncertain of themselves and dependent. Furthermore, our juxtaposition of White middle-class and working-class British South Asian women demonstrated the intersections of age and gender with class and 'race/ethnicity', showing how investment in protecting their independence may stem from different fallback positions. Where one woman might seek to protect her capacity to fulfil her creative potential through education, another might educate herself for survival, and fear that her hard-won financial assets would be jeopardized by a grasping second husband. For the women with whom Kaveri worked, empowerment could be laced with continued vulnerabilities, making them wary of the wisdom of repartnering or unable to upset their natal families. Narratives of independence co-existed with interweaving family relationships, which both materially sustained them and shaped their expectations.

These differential motivations, values, and commitments were reflected too in our research participants' navigations of new relationships through dating fora. While in Sarah's study women compared socio-sexual dating spaces 'the second time around' with experiences of dating in their youths, in Kaveri's study most women did not have earlier experiences against which to compare dating in this 'second phase'. In both our studies, an intriguing theme in women's efforts to rebuild their social lives in such a way as to meet single men was sorority, not going out alone but with friends from the salsa classes, or group dating, with friends and family members present. Rather than replacing or decentring the traditional couple as some studies have suggested (Jamieson et al., 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004), these friendships worked – successfully or not – to help each other find romantic partners in respectable and morally appropriate ways. Through practices such as filling out dating profiles for each other, friendships diffused responsibility and agency, allowing women to take up more passive, and therefore respectable, subject positions. Extending Morris' (2019) work on single mothers and friendships both being 'beyond' the family, yet not displacing the 'ideal' of the romantic couple relationship, the sororities in our studies helped to maintain traditional practices of femininity and the ideal of couple relationships in different social spheres.

Narratives of respectability followed through from the stories about seeking relationships, to what was done on dates. For the White British middle-class women, this was explained by references to their generation – and seemingly multiple, complicated, and contradictory notions of femininity were often played out during dates. For the British South Asian women, a primary concern was their reputation alongside religious, diasporic, and kin moralities. While wider repertoires of choice may now be available to certain women, our findings warn us from falling into binary ways of thinking about choice/non-choice, single/coupled, traditional/non-normative ways of living which preclude the discourses on inconsistency, hesitation, ambivalence, and confusion (Lahad, 2017).

hooks' (2002) vision of middle-aged women emerging from heteronormative relationship ideals, of self-actualizing and of seeking to repartner with an insistence on fulfilling and gender-egalitarian 'real love' and 'real relationships' (p. 7, 215), does not quite capture our research participants' experience. The women in our studies sought to blend their post-divorce independence with acquiescence, with passive feminine roles expected in dating, and concerns with reputation that were pinned to women's sexual

respectability. Within hooks' feminist framework, these dynamics appear to be disappointing, but it is important to bring in wider insights from intersectional feminist scholarship, which critiques how dominant imaginaries about the revolutionary social mores of the baby-boom generation are deeply classed and raced/ethnicized (see Milton and Qureshi, 2020).

On one level, our conclusions are in keeping with recent work on 'living-apart-together' which has pushed back against claims that women can now strategically exercise control and undo the gender inequalities of heterosexual conjugality. Duncan (2015) observes rightly that 'this is not any simple subversion or undoing of gender, but a more complex development where new autonomies can at the same time incorporate old subordinations' (p. 600). He argues that we need to be able to conceive of variable gradations of gendered agency and of how this agency is 'differentiated in various social contexts and with diverse types of agent' (p. 605). Rather than broad assertions about women reclaiming power in the 'second phase' of life, we need to consider this differentiation, and how the intersections of gender and generation with class and 'race/ethnicity' may shape women's desires and moves at this juncture; how perceived vulnerability may intertwine with purposeful action and intimate desires may remain relational and bonded even as women assert their emotional and sexual needs more stridently. We also need to consider diverse types of agent, following Mahmood's (2005) formulation of agency inhering in 'the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated' (p. 23) and not only in resistance to norms. At another level, then, our study joins with others who have sought to problematize the uncritical acceptance of liberal expectations of love à la Giddens. As Lahad (2017) argues, images of liberated, empowered, freely-choosing women can work to essentialize women's lives and create new hierarchies between those who can and those who cannot afford to live in certain ways. By contrast, we underline the need to recognize and do justice to forms of women's selfhood that may 'accept, contradict and even transgress' the mythical, 'emancipated', individual (Ali, 2004: 140).

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