
Sarah Lamb’s ethnography White Saris and Sweet Mangoes uses the category of age as an analytical lens through which to view constructions of gender and the body in the village of Mangaldihi in rural West Bengal. Age, Lamb argues, is a variable often rendered invisible or benign in anthropology and (South Asian) gender studies, as a result apparently “freezing” the lives of those studied in conditions of perpetual youth. Her writing addresses this somewhat typical conceptual oversight by asking how social relations are formed, taken apart, and re-formed by processes of aging; how genders and bodies and persons are “made and remade” over life courses. The approach is invaluable for its treatment of gendered identities, people and personhood as all constantly in flux, impossible to fix in essentialised forms of knowledge about what it is or is not to be a “man” or “woman” in rural Bengal. And it is an approach enabled largely by the Bengali conception of maya, usually translated to mean “illusion,” but which Lamb defines additionally as a “web of attachments, affections, jealousies and love that in Bengalis’ eyes make up social relations; a ‘net’ of bodily-emotional ties, ‘pulls’ or ‘connections’ that make up people and their lived-in worlds” (28, 37). Maya is itself the result of what Lamb calls “mixing”—of foods and fluids, people and places, objects and emotions—a process that needs constantly to be renewed, celebrated, remade. This construct becomes, then, a central preoccupation of the ethnography, for tracing the transformations of the “web” of maya through the life-course allows the transformations of social relations and specifically gender to emerge in relief.

Gender, as Lamb points out, however, is too often used as a code-word for “women,” and she seeks to remedy this once again typical conflation by focussing on men and women as gendered beings who are both equally—but differently—affected by the shifts of maya brought on by aging. To this end, the ethnography explores father-son relations alongside those of mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law; it includes several rich accounts of the life-experiences, words and views of older men, their perspectives on begging, pilgrimage, and ties to the world (maya), amongst the other topics that Lamb uses to recreate the contours of aging lives in Mangaldihi. Men, like women, we are told, also move from the centres of households to their peripheries and beyond as they age, their bodies too undergo processes of “cooling,” and they too sometimes seek the transcendence of selfhood and family through religious practice and pilgrimage. Yet, as Lamb notes at several junctures through the text, although both genders may share a view of aging as a “paradoxical time of life, when relations are the most fragile but the pulls of maya the strongest,” women are affected far differently, and often with far
more painful consequences by transitions brought on by aging than men (115). This is especially evident in the sections and chapters that deal with marriage and widowhood: two critical transitions in a woman’s life that significantly reshape her person, the former by distancing her from one set of familial relations and embedding her almost simultaneously in another, the latter by transforming the very nature of her gender. Neither of these transitions in a man’s life course have the same effect on shaping male personhood, which appears in Lamb’s account to remain relatively stable until very old age (and that more so amongst the less wealthy). Within this framework, women are, by definition, transient beings in a fluid world: temporary residents of their fathers’ households (since they must be given away in marriage) whose positions in their affinal homes are forever tied to the living or ancestral presence of their husbands. Women come and go from the lineage (bansa), Lamb tells us, “but fathers and sons extend it” (79).

The transience of women in a sense produces the gender modulations that are the subject of White Saris, though Lamb does not speak of the concept as such. It restricts possibilities when the women are younger, still bound by the expectations and responsibilities of family life (samsar), but then becomes enabling in later years, allowing women to come and go from samsar, almost at will, if they are widowed in their post-menopausal years. Samsar continues to be, however, a centering device and grounding factor: without it, the elderly are faced only with the possibilities of begging or, in larger cities, entering old age homes. Transience can be freeing, in other words, only if it remains in some form tied—paradoxically—to family, a place, the web that is maya.

As a theme that recurs in much writing on gender in South Asian contexts, much of this is familiar, though Lamb’s use of age as a device to explore constructions of personhood provides important insights into the processes by which genders are made over lifetimes. As such, her writing refuses easy generalisations that obscure the effects of caste, class or age, while emphasising still the overarching presence and impact of dominant cultural ideologies. Her explorations of the making of the gendered body, however, though relatively unfamiliar in South Asian gender studies, manage to reproduce a kind of knowledge about gender and South Asia that is (perhaps inevitably) typical: focussing exclusively on such themes as sexuality, fertility, and menstruation as the modes of understanding embodiment. Indeed, Lamb admits as much when she remarks, somewhat critically, that “ethnographies of gender in South Asia (including the earlier pages of this chapter) have tended to give the impression that local definitions of female embodiment revolve centrally around sexuality, fertility, childbirth, and menstruation,” though she then proceeds to explore much the same ideas in greater depth, albeit with a focus on older men and women (198). The absence of sections that reflect on her own role as ethnographer in constructing knowledge about the body in these terms further complicates matters, as it is never entirely clear if these
are the vocabularies that Bengali villagers use to "self-consciously represent themselves" (244, sic), or if Lamb has cut through their own evident embarrassment in talking about certain bodily processes with her own pre-constructed interpretations. Given that she recognises her own reliance on the dominant discourses of embodiment in South Asia, does her analysis imply that there are no other suitable categories by which to study embodiment? How do the religious and ascetic ideals that become more important in old age and widowhood themselves transform the gendered body? How does the concept of dharma—one that is far more complex and intricate than Lamb would have us believe—itself address processes of aging and bodily transformation? These are questions that the ethnography addresses only in passing, if at all.

Modernity, too, makes only a cameo appearance in Lamb's writing, and that in a chapter dealing with inter-generational conflicts where it is explored predictably in terms of the deep ambivalence it generates. And yet, we are told that this is a "multiethnic, postcolonial and increasingly globalized rural Bengal" where "BBC programs play on the local radio, Oprah is a favourite on television, and people, including social scientists, tourists, and kin, come and go across national borders" (244, 5). That this Bengal is virtually nonexistent in the text (except in brief but telling discussions about old age homes and their residents), that this globalized culture—not to mention the Communist/Naxalite-influenced culture that Bengal has long-since nurtured—hardly seems to play a role in Mangaldihi despite its overwhelming presence, leaves readers with the sense of a timelessly traditional India in which people and bodies exist in all the expected ways. Lamb's greater concern with "the dominant forms that people must contend with within cultures" as opposed to "heterogeneity, difference, contest, and the like" precludes any systematic exploration of contestations from within, but then neither is modernity—surely a dominant form in any context—systematically mined for its potential to transform, in multiple ways, the experiences of aging (243). We are left with the implicit opposition of "tradition" to "modernity": an unfortunately flattening undertone in an otherwise insightful ethnography.

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Last school year I was a visiting professor at Illinois College, Illinois, U.S.A. As such, I taught a course on gender issues in Central America. Looking for