Living (in) Singleness:  
darkness, deadness and the screams of silence  

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After a long day of hard toil, on a hot summer evening in 2013, a group of Kondha adivasi women gathered in a dark and isolated corner of a village named Emaliguda in distant Odisha. In the gathering, prevailed a disturbing 'silence'; 'silence' hinting at loss of words. This silence was the result of what an aged single woman, Tulsi Pulaka, had just shared; an instance from her life she believed she could never forget; and yet she did not want to recall. This happened a few years ago when she was accused of theft in the neighboring house where she had been invited to perform a religious ceremony; when she was humiliated in front of the whole village. While narrating the incident, she got up in a haste, threw open the end of her saree, and revealing her bare fallen breasts, she cried in pain,  

I stood before them like this and said, look for your money. Later I went inside that house and forcefully took a handful of rice as my remuneration for performing the pooja. I know I should have refused any offerings from the house where I was insulted, but, then I would have slept empty stomach that night. In that moment, I was forced to place my helplessness above my humiliation.  

A frail, thin and 'pained' body was trembling with anger in front of the other single women listening to her. And there was silence all around. The single women in Emaliguda had gathered that evening. This was the first time they had gathered to share with each other their experience of living (in) singleness and holding each other in silence.  

Deep into the darkness of the night, as women shared their lives with each other, I was told, “the night shall end, our stories will not”. Many nights have passed since then and many stories continue to unfold — stories of loss, pain, suffering, abandonment, rejection, violence, stories that have been buried deep inside, as also stories of defiance, struggle, everyday resistance and a collective journey in the making. This paper narrates some of these stories, stories not just of darkness and deadness that the experience of singleness harbors but also stories of that which is 'living' in this deadness and thriving towards building a shared life. These stories of adivasi single women are thus stories of the dead buried in the living and at the same time that of the thin stream which is living in the dead. On the one hand, it is about individual lives rendered dead, rendered silent by deep and long-drawn experiences of pain, violence, of Otherness; the subtle and surreptitious, yet ubiquitous violence of capital, of displacement-dislocation, of being-adivasi in a so called developing world; of being-woman, being a sexuated object, being-a-single-woman in the world of a largely polygamous patriarchal culture,. On the other hand, this paper also attempts to reach and bring to ‘life’, even if tentatively, (a) the resisting rem(a)inder of that which is still alive in the dead — the narratives of everyday negotiations
and battles that often accompany the narratives of deadness, the varied forms of struggles women have face(d), their disparate ways of coping, the inner strength that has sustained them through the deadness and the possibility of resistance therein; in other words the possibilities of living, even if minimal amidst the deadness and (b) the process of collective living (living as a continuum), of a living hope even in the dead-ness; the living (of the) Eka Nari Sanghatan (Single Women’s Collective) – in the largely dead(ened) world of the adivasi single woman.

Finally, this paper asks whether this reaching out to the living in the dead, bringing it to life and recovering the loss, even a possibility? How far can we reach? What all can we recover? Eka Nari Sanghatan has been an attempt in this direction. Can we in this journey reach the being/language/logic/ethos of those who have not found themselves speaking/living in the so called developing world. Can the trace of the living in the dead, speak, in the last instance, for the dead(ened)?

**Singleness**

The unfolding of the stories from 6 different villages, over the last 5 years has helped us (single women and I) arrive at a two-fold understanding and script of singleness: (a) singleness as a condition depicting loneliness and alone-ness, including economic, political and cultural othering and exclusion, perpetual states of financial and emotional insecurity, life devoid largely of relationships and care, a huge work burden residing entirely on the woman’s shoulder, and the everyday life of a woman subjected to varied forms of socio-political discriminations and violence, and, (b) as also a condition that has enabled women to lead at least a negotiated gendered existence in comparison to women under the strict control of the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage. In other words, singleness is as much about negotiating, and coping with, as also resisting patriarchal structures, as it is about everyday pain and suffering.

How to ensure survival, how to ensure a roof over one’s head, including a bar of soap, a bottle of hair oil and a pair of slippers is an everyday question to these women. Trunji Pedenti, with tears in her eyes, once said,

> I think it has been 7-8 years since I have bought anything for myself. I get whatever my brother thinks appropriate for me to have. I have no say and I not allowed to make any demands. Who will believe I have not used soap in a long time? I do not even have oil to comb my hair and a pair of slippers to wear.

Hidden in this narrative of apparent poverty is also a sub-narrative of choicelessness and an inability to make demands on the world, singleness that defies standard experiences of loneliness that Male Pedenti talks about, she says,

> ... it feels sad to return to an empty house. To come home, open the lock and enter
into a pitch dark house is like entering into the abyss of loneliness.

The life of a single woman is, as if, lived between sadness and silence, pain and perseverance, in a word between an unlivable life and a death deferred. There are stories of single women dying alone as a result of acute hunger, illness, homelessness, unwantedness. There have been times their dead-bodies have been found, a few days later, in the midst of the forest; dead-bodies left unclaimed, after the gold worn by women had been ripped off their bodies, mostly by their own families. This imagery represents extreme forms of cruelty subjected to not only living bodies but even to the dead-bodies. It marks the never-ending nature of brutality and ruthlessness which is a part of a single woman’s everyday living in this context and continues to haunt her till her death and at times even after death.

However, the condition of singleness is not an experience of victimhood alone. It forms a complex web of varied ‘subject positions’, that holds experiences of deadness and living, of suffering and perseverance at the same time. Arnalu Miniaka (Aiya) a 45 year old woman lives alone in a small self constructed house. She was 15 years old when she was forcefully married to a much older man who used to repeatedly abuse her verbally, physically and sexually. As her husband’s brutality increased, she left his house with her six month old son and returned to her parent’s house. Soon after this her son was taken away from her by the husband. Her parents did not take the separation very well. She was forced time and again to go back, make peace and live with her husband. But, Aiya was determined not to go back. Even after about thirty years of separation from her husband, the scars of the violent marriage continue to haunt her. Seven years later, she fell in love with another man and decided to re-marry. However, this time again her experience of marriage was no different. This time when she returned to her natal family, her brother abandoned her. Since then Aiya has been living alone. She cultivates a small piece of ‘encroached’ land to ensure her everyday survival. The never-ending struggles have shattered Aiya time and again, but in her words, these have also paradoxically made her stronger and more independent.

The way singleness got conceptualized through/in these stories, it marked its shift from the usual understanding of singlehood as a particular social positionality given the absence of a husband – the identity of a widow, separated, divorced, never-married woman. Rather, singleness slowly surfaced as a condition/subject position, as an experience of living singleness in the absence or even in the presence of a male sexual partner. It was expanded to include conditions of singleness that are lived within marriages and necessary coupledom, involving women who are married and have husbands, yet face conditions that are similar to those faced by women who do not have or live without male partners.

Aunla Kadraka whose husband works in the railways earns a monthly income, but he brings nothing home. He spends all the money on consumption of alcohol. Aunla is old and lives alone in a small dilapidated hut in the corner of the village, in spite of having a husband, four sons, two daughter-in-laws and grand children. She shared, “he does not come home for months. When his money is
spent, he comes back to me. I then have to take care of him, feed him, service him. I am old and have to work all day in other people's field to be able to manage one time meal. But my husband does not care for any of this. He keeps complaining that I can't provide him with proper food. The first time he left home was when I was pregnant with my first child. He returned after 4 years. I raised my son with so much difficulty. Now all my sons refuse to look after me. They live in the same village with their wife and children, but I can't live with them because my daughter-in-laws and my husband accuse me of sexual involvement with my own sons.”

A man, who works, earns, and does not beat his wife, is considered a “good” husband. But Basanti who is 22 years old, asks if that is enough. Basanti lives with her husband who does masonry and brings substantial money home. She shared, “He is a good husband. He does not beat me like other men beat their wives. But, there is no happiness between us. He goes for work in the morning and comes back late at night. There is no problem as such but we never spend time together. He does not even talk to me.”

These stories are not stories of poverty alone; they speak of many lived psychological experiences that do not find much space in the usual developmental work focused heavily on the economic interests. What gets obscured in the excessive focusing upon “developmental issues” is a question worth asking. What happens to manifold experiences of hurt, loneliness, insecurity, humiliation, envy, loss of dignity, desire and life beyond material interests? Singleness remains foreclosed in the apparently woman-centric developmental work in Rayagada. Women are collected into groups to promote micro-finance, livelihoods and other so called “developmental agendas” that claim to “empower” women, but the 'reality' of their lived life and their nodal experiences is largely kept outside of these interventions. Even when they are visibilized they are seen as poor third world victims in need of state-support or World Bank benevolence. Third worldism around the individual victimhood of the single woman is, as if, a certain organization of signifiers “designed to lead [us] astray” (xxxvi); Derrida calls such a displacing organisation of signifiers crypt. For Derrida “the crypt hides as it holds”; third worldism – i.e. the presencing of parts of the South as lacking – hides as it holds the narrative and pain of the adivasi single woman.

In the context of Derrida’s invocation of the crypt and of cryptonymy, a lingering kind of self-doubt begins to take shape: is ‘development’ itself a cryptonym? Does it shroud the language of the adivasi single woman? Do certain words – in the adivasi woman’s world – suffer an extraordinary exclusion? Is it because a given word or some words in the adivasi single woman’s world are unutterable – unutterable not as such, but unutterable in the Capitalocentric and Orientalist imagination of development? Is the adivasi single woman the living dead of the developmental Indian state? Do we then need psychoanalysis to make sense of development? Can developmental work begin to account for psychological processes and resonances that form part of the adivasi woman’s everyday?
The Living in the Dead:

The continuous articulation and analysis of oppression and resistance within singleness has however connected women in a kind of collective form, called the Eka Nari Sanghathan. The forging of the Sanghathan has been a form of presencing, a presencing of the long drawn silence that the experience of singleness inhabits. The death of language or the deadness of language in the individual living gives way, as if, and somewhat paradoxically to the collective language of living where single women together envisioned what could be called as an ongoing ‘social dream’, a social utopia. The Sanghathan as a response to the condition of loneliness and socio-political exclusion urged us to work through existing and (im)possible forms of relationality and relations of affinity rethought beyond repressive structures of family. Can the working of the Sanghathan take us to newer modes of “becoming with” and “becoming towards” the other? What can be the multiple modalities of different body-beings in touch with each other sharing an “affective social field” is an ongoing enquiry of this work. The meaning of transformation for us lies in this process of immanent thinking and praxis.

This work thus, builds upon the ‘uneasy’ interaction and relationship between being single (which is ‘read’ here as the figure of the ‘living dead’ - a psycho-social gendered existence which is also a possible political subject position) and a contingent-emergent- 'being-in-common' – the Sanghathan (which is evolving as a socio-political space working through psychological and subjective states). Does living in ‘singleness’ transform as women co-create possibilities for alternative affective becomings that inform relations of personal and political intimacy, desire and sexuated existence. This relationship between the psycho-social and the political (between singleness and the Sanghathan) though not clinical in the strict sense of the word, nevertheless takes us to analytical collective spaces and processes of social ‘healing’ as we work through our gendered and sexuated (lived) experiences of the everyday.

In the words of Ruayi Pedenti,

No one believed my story and no one ever understood my pain. I had no choice but to keep my sadness to myself. I could not share it with anyone, so I never shared it with anyone. … But now I share my feelings with my Sanghas in the Sanghathan because they believe what I say and they understand my pain …

The Sanghathan got forged as a space of friendship and belongingness for women who have been either abandoned by their families or are treated as burdens and liabilities. The Sanghathan hosts companionship and a sense of care for women who experience 'singleness' as a result of social/familial othering. The coming together of women in the Sanghathan is not seen as a means to attain some common/shared goal but as an end in itself. However, it functions not only as a support group but also as a transformative space that can move beyond the standard models of addressing (single) women as victims to making sense of singleness as a process – as also a response and
challenge to hetero-patriarchy. Women in this collective journey engage and (re)think questions related to development, well-being, solidarity, rights, feminist consciousness and politics. Thus, the Sanghathan is both a politics of friendship and a form of a collective struggle and action.

Since the Sanghathan belongs to the adivasi single women, the questions concerning women, gender, and hetero-patriarchy as well as the other collective endeavours that the Sanghathan undertakes, are all placed well within the particularity of the adivasi context. Moreover, building heavily upon the cultural resources, ethos and spiritual systems that tie them together, single women in the Sanghathan have been re-creating new relationalities, ethico-political companionships and redrawing old ones (those engrained in hetero-patriarchal systems). Moreover, the collective repeatedly undertakes several processes in order to analyze and reflect upon group behaviour, group functioning, communication patterns, power dynamics, external/internal influences etc. The members labour together and simultaneously work towards mitigating power relations within the Sanghathan in order to arrive at a common and a non-hierarchized space.

Can these reflections and reworkings premised upon Guattari’s idea “we are all groupuscules” take us towards “the search for a new subjectivity, a group subjectivity”? The Sanghathan in this sense becomes a struggle between what Guattari calls “subjugated groups” and “group subjects”. “Groups are subjugated no less by the leaders they assign themselves. The hierarchy, the vertical or pyramidal organization, which characterizes subjugated groups, is meant to ward off any possible inscription of non-sense, death or dispersal. Their centralization works through structure, totalization, and unification”. Group subjects on the other hand are defined by “coefficients of transversality” that ward off totalities and hierarchies. The question of transference is treated as vehicular and takes away from dual relations to group relations, as also from that of vertical hierarchies to horizontalities. The question to us is how and whether Sanghathan will become group subjects? What would its relation be with subjugated groups? How will analysis and desire come to be on the same side, with desire taking the lead? How would we constitute in the group the conditions of an analysis of desire, on oneself and on the others? These questions become important for this work.

To conclude, can adivasi language in general, and the language of adivasi single women in particular, search for a signifier for pain in practices of psychoanalysis? How far can the question of the political, the question of transformation avoid registers of the psycho-social processes and experiences? Moreover, can psychoanalysis make sense of pain and trauma that is not necessarily individual; pain and trauma that is not necessarily emanating from childhood familial experience; pain and trauma that is social, is of adult-onset and is crypted in the long-drawn histories of socio-political violation-subjugation-othering and marginalisation?