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Singh, S. (2020). *Red chilli pickle and moonlit terraces: The making of Indian woman hood*. Think Women Company. 139 pp. \$4.14 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1953428035.

Reviewed by: Aishwarya Bhuta , The University of Sheffield, UK
DOI: 10.1177/08861099221142036

Contemporary feminist discourses have been increasingly geared toward the understanding that women are not a homogenous category. From the author of the series titled *Plays of Women in Love: Marriage Mirage*, this book brims with characters in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Shweta Singh's fictional account of the lives of girls, women, and their transition from girlhood to womanhood, based in North India, is refreshing and relatable. With a myriad of characters of all age groups going about their everyday lives in the most mundane fashion, the narrative is simple, yet engaging.

Instead of a single story, several stories coincide across and within generations. We meet Pingala, a young girl sent to Banaras to study, and later cross paths with Laali, her daughter off to Delhi for the same purpose. While Pingala never wanted to go far away from home, Laali could hardly wait to move to a new city. Her sisters, Kaali and Rati, are nothing like her; and Pingala's three daughters scarcely resemble their mother. There are no superwomen fighting millions of battles and enemies single-handedly; rather, there are simple girls and women one sees everywhere and every day, with ordinary lives, dreams, desires, and destinies. Paradoxically, it is this everydayness that makes this book an interesting read.

Singh (2007) rejects the gender and development paradigm for its homogenizing and macro constructions of women, and proposes a framework around the identities of women. Instead of perceiving them as a subordinated group characterized by backwardness or deprivation, the author recasts them as individuals with agency. The same is reflected in her characters, none of whom are ideal daughters, sisters, mothers, or performers of any gender role. The men in their lives, as fathers, uncles, husbands, or brothers, cause them worry and stress, rather than providing comfort. They are too busy being the breadwinners to care for the women around them.


There is banter and playfulness among sisters, friends in school, young men and women, and women in the neighborhood. The dedicated homemaker, the educated and employed neighbor, or the caring aunt—the friendships and sisterhood of women cut across their disparate lives and situations. Despite their differences, they are there for each other to listen, help, and share joys and pain. There is conservatism (the liberated woman dressing in high heels and designer blouses is scorned at), and there is rebellion (the strict but caring aunt hits wayward men who assault the girls at night). Each character brings something new to the table, and the reader cannot have enough even when the last page is finished.

Traversing through semi-urban and middle-class Lucknow beginning in the late 1970s, the home, the ancestral home, and the school emerge as the key sites of socialization. The transition to womanhood is largely illustrated through Laali—her love-hate relationship with her siblings, her fragile friendships at school, the shift from one school to another, the feeling of not belonging in the former and the joy of being the center of attention in the latter, and her eventual coming of age make her story relatable to every other Indian girl. None of the characters is without her/his flaws. In being prone to insecurity, jealousy, anxiety and other emotions, each comes across as unapologetically real.

A common thread weaving the characters and story together is each one's agency to do and be herself. Be it in following or rejecting social norms, in clinging to books more than people, in dressing as per one's will, in being financially independent, in smoking and hanging out with boys, or in standing up for her sister and friends—Laali, Kaali, Rati, Pingala, Gauri, Amrita, and every other girl and woman in Singh's universe exercises her choices notwithstanding social pressures and constraints, sometimes openly and secretly at other times.

In a nutshell, this walk through Lucknow and its women's lives is enjoyable and worth taking. Any girl or woman from similar locations in India is certain to find her alter ego in one or more character/s. The book makes an attempt to portray the lives of Indian girls and women, and this effort is partly in response to Western theorization of feminism in the global South, which is ethnocentric and universalizing. The local context remains in the background but occupies the center stage throughout the book. This book is as much about girls and women from small towns as their aspirations. It ends on a hopeful note, with Laali set to embark upon the flight of her dreams. One hopes the same for girls and women all over the world.


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Smith, Judith R. (2022). *Difficult: Mothering challenging adult children through conflict and change*. Rowman & Littlefield. 280 pp. \$32 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-5381-3888-5.

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DOI: 10.1177/08861099221146152

Difficult focuses its readers' attention on a long-suffering population in dire need of definition, support, and services: the anguished, overwhelmed older mothers whose children "fail to launch." The book's title and subtitle reflect the critical necessity of active involvement by mothers in the lives of offspring who are chronologically adults but unable to carry out or sustain the tasks consistent with living an adult life. *Difficult* reads as a personal narrative of these mothers' lived experiences and is also informative for professionals and the lay public who may take interest in the lives of these women and their children. The real-life stories of the women chosen to illustrate the book's points are vividly and compassionately detailed by the author, Judith Smith, PhD, LCSW, therapist, professor, and gerontological researcher at Fordham University. *Difficult* serves to define the life dilemmas these women face. It also offers support through acceptance and recognition and provides a host of resources. Dr. Smith makes a clear case for the need for public policies that address the often overwhelming burdens of the mothers who are the subject of this book.

A feminist relational viewpoint suffuses the telling of these women's stories and recognizes the interdependence of parent-child relational dynamics across the life spans of both mothers and their children. Dr. Smith's research is based on interviews, supplemented by professional literature, the scope of which is skillfully limited to the issues presented. *Difficult* reveals Dr. Smith's devotion to providing a thorough examination of the various circumstances faced by mothers with chronically troubled adult children. She draws from a diverse literature, including social work, sociology, developmental and evolutionary psychology, the transtheoretical model of change (motivational interviewing), feminist relational theory, systems theory, the person-in-environment paradigm, and parenting education.

The three distinct parts that structure the book assist the reader's understanding of the problem and provide a roadmap for change and support. Part I—Through a Mother's Eyes—consists of the personal stories of women whose post-childrearing years have transitioned, with varying degrees of