

Facing the horror: becoming an “old maid”¹

The blatant contradiction that exists between the terms “old maid” and “young single woman” is not merely anecdotal data from the flippant lingo of contemporary popular culture, but rather a significant cue for understanding the tenor of our times. Despite dramatic changes in family lifestyles coupled with growing numbers of single women, the well-worn myth of the aging single woman as a miserable yet terrifying old maid appears to have resisted these trends. Rather, the myth persists, as a naturalized, undisputed, and insoluble cultural trope. Indeed, cartoons, jokes, and horror stories about “old” single women are widely accepted and disseminated, a cautionary reminder for women concerning the specter of being single in old age and what looms ahead for them. In that light, single women are often the subject of caustic remarks, sardonic humor, patronage, and scorn, because they are seen to pose the constant threat of pervasive perversion to the normative societal order.

This chapter asks what gives this powerful stereotypical image so much discursive force and makes it so defiant to resistance and deconstruction? Addressing recent literature on age, feminist theory, and singlehood, I investigate the ways in which ageist and sexist constructions of age form prevalent understandings of lifelong singlehood. It is my contention that single women above a certain age are faced with a triple discrimination, based on their age, gender, and single status. In this chapter I examine the manner in which the language of age guides common-sense understanding about single women. Specifically, I explore how the predominant cultural perceptions of age appropriateness, age segregation, age norms, and ageism play a crucial role in the construction of lifelong singlehood and gendered timetables in general. Ageism and age-based discrimination, I argue, do not necessarily apply merely to the social category of old age, but are practiced at different stages of the life course.

A new analytical perspective will allow for prevalent perceptions on age identity, age norms, and age relations to be placed in context. This chapter considers, in particular, where identity vectors like age, gender, and relationship status converge, and notes that questions such as “Why are twenty- and thirty-plus single women depicted as old?” and “Why are thirty-plus married mothers represented as ‘young mothers’?”

emphasize that single women are aged by societal norms determined by culturally framed expectations.

In what follows, I attempt to unpick the discursive process which causes single women to "age faster": why do single women age differently from coupled and married ones? Indeed, ageist assumptions also tend to prevail in popular discourses about late singlehood and the categorization of the "aging single woman." This is why this chapter proposes an analysis of the aging process of single women as a socially situated symbolic practice and not—as it is customarily grasped—as a given biological category.

Age and singlehood

In her analysis of single women in popular culture, Anthea Taylor (2012) proposes that the study of single women opens a window on how heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks operate in new and sophisticated ways. Inspired by Taylor's study, I contend that current categorizations of the "old maid" are deeply embedded within the context of heteronormative culture. According to Berlant and Warner, heteronormativity is:

The institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548)

The privileging of heterosexual and familial bonds has the pro-active force of structuring normative understandings about single women and aging. In this manner, as Taylor (2012) writes, single women are situated in relation to, and as against, the married/single binary, and are construed as figures of profound disparity. These sets of assumptions become ever more unforgiving as single women age. In their discussion of single women's accounts of their single status, Anna Sandfield and Carol Percy (2003) note how references to older single women are generally derogatory, as well as how older single women are perceived as lonely and isolated. According to Sandfield and Percy, all the participants in their study demonstrated an awareness of the status-related expectations associated with age (*ibid.*, 480). I concur with Sandfield and Percy's findings, and stress that socially produced consciousness is embedded in the age conventions guiding mundane social interactions, and plays a key role in the discursive construction of thirty-plus single women.

Scholars such as Hazan contend that the omnipotence of age is revealed in the fact that age is perceived to be an objective, universal, natural fact, and beyond dispute:

Age is mistakenly considered to be a universal category. Although it is often endowed with the analytical status of a "variable," it appears as something which could not be

explained ... This mistake stems from a lack of critical deconstructive thinking about the concept of age. The identification between biological, social, psychological and chronological age is affirmed in developmental psychological theories which constitute age clusters at different stages of the life course and bestow age with features which are beyond its classificatory marker. (Hazan 2006, 82)

In his writings on the reasoning of bureaucratic logic, Don Handelmann discusses the effectiveness of age as a taxonomizer which constitutes the temporality of the individual, “smoothing him into the bureaucratic order” (Handelman 2004, 88). Accordingly, each life phase defines its own age-appropriate behaviors, and serves as a key tool for producing knowledge, coherence, and meaning. As Handelmann suggests, “Knowing one’s own numerical age—one’s exact location in time, synchronized precisely to all other individuals—is considered an elementary index of competence” (ibid., 59).

Prevalent images of single women suggest that passing, or being around the age of thirty demarcates a crossover zone. In this sense, the knowledge of one’s age discursively constitutes the single woman’s status, and provides allegedly significant evidence for determining who the single woman is and what she ought to be. This also stands in tandem with Cheryl Laz’s (1998) research on the performative aspects of age. Laz views the category of age as an accomplished one, or as she puts it: “We collectively do it right” (ibid., 99). I can locate my book within the broader visions of feminist theorizing about aging. A common-sense view embedded within our patriarchal and youth-oriented culture is that as women age, they move away from current beauty ideals, and accordingly need to develop age concealment techniques.

As Catherine Silver observes:

Older women’s bodies are more likely to be perceived as deformed, ridiculous looking, and desexualized. They become frightening, “crones” and “witch like,” as imagined in children’s books and fairy tales. The language that describes older women is indicative of deep-seated, unconscious fears and a rejection of the ageing female body, with its connotations of danger and contamination that need to be kept separate and isolated. (Silver 2003, 385)

Silver’s reflections accord with Susan Sontag’s statement in her celebrated essay, “The Double Standard of Aging”:

[Women are considered] Maximally eligible in early youth, after which their sexual value drops steadily; even young women feel themselves in a desperate race against the calendar. They are old as soon as they are no longer very young. (Sontag 1983, 102)

Here, Sontag gives us insight into the deeply ingrained symbolic order that defines a single woman from a certain age as “no longer very young.” Sontag’s explanation is also especially relevant to understanding the gendered aspects linking aging and singlehood. The single woman’s aging process is a marker of her gradual withdrawal from the market, signifying her diminished sexual and reproductive value and functions.

Debating the thirty-plus-year-old "old maid"

In what follows, I seek to understand some of the discursive mechanisms by which the pejorative "old maid" label continues to be reproduced. The following analysis shows that the well-worn trope continues to prevail, in contemporary Israeli culture as well as in many societies where singlism reigns supreme.

Orit Gal, a single woman writing on the *Ynet* portal claims:

From a certain stage, every single woman will be tagged as a shriveled old lady. She will be pitied by her surroundings including her friends, family and colleagues for being an old hag. She will pass her nights by watching television, eat without control and share her bed with cats as no normal men would want to touch her. (Gal 2010)

Gal refers to the transition point through which women turn into old maids. The very process by which single women "age faster" than their married counterparts is loaded with sexist and ageist assumptions. Deeply entrenched within these presumptions is the perception of the single woman as a site of danger and contamination:

[The image of an "old maid"] is a warning signal that embodies the cruel destiny which awaits a woman who remains single. She might find herself cast as the "crazy cat lady"; this aging, solitary, poor woman who hangs around the neighborhood with her night gown on and feeds all the neighborhood cats. (Banosh 2011a)

As Noa Banosh, the single woman whose column was published on *Ynet*, comments, the image of the single woman as the "crazy cat lady" is one of the more common stereotypes that crosses cultures and time. Therefore, it is not surprising that columns and commentary like the above turn to this specific image when predicting the future awaiting single women. The common reference to cats is worth mentioning; indeed, as single scholars like DePaulo (2006) have observed, the unmarried woman is regularly stereotyped as lonely, miserable, and with no alternative but to fill her empty life with cats. Thus, the presence of cats have come to symbolize the lack of men in single women's lives, as by this point in their lives they only have cats to keep them company. Moreover, this could be seen as a metaphorical representation of the inferior status bestowed upon single women by society at large. As feminist scholars have argued, this association of women and animals resides within a patriarchal, heteronormative conceptual framework, one which justifies the domination of women and the superiority of men over them, as they are presumed to be more primal and animalistic than men (Donovan, 1995; Spelman, 1982).

These accounts provide insight into the ways single women internalize widely held views about single women. Although often executed with humor and irony, by referencing this set of images, many single women embrace the typical image of the aging spinster living alone with her cats; to a certain extent, they even participate in keeping this image alive. By doing so, they also observe themselves through a patriarchal and sexist gaze, through which they become dominated and objectified. Hence, even though they realize that this image functions as a disciplinary mechanism, they cannot resist the cultural scripts which refer to long-term singlehood in terms of emptiness, loneliness, and loss. This formulation conveys a horrendous future: if they don't find

a partner at the right marriageable age, they will end up living a lonely, mentally unstable, and socially marginal life.

The image of the crazy cat lady also represents the pathologization of older women in our society, women whom, as Silver (2003) notes, should be isolated because of the fear of contamination. The above quotations also exemplify the process through which women internalize the normative gaze to which they are subjected. This is reminiscent of Sandra Bartky's explanation concerning how women subject themselves to the normative gaze and judgment of men:

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. This is a process through which they become isolated and self-policing subjects which internalize the male normative gaze and are controlled by it. (Bartky 1990, 72)

Through an adoption of the male connoisseur's panoptical gaze, the loss of youth, beauty, and reproductive power turns women into social rejects. Within the context of this study, single women can be expected to experience relentless anxieties about their age, beauty, and reproductive abilities. Clearly, single women above a certain age cannot possibly compete with younger women, given that they are on the verge of losing what are considered women's most important social assets: their appearance and their reproductive potential. This particular form of age hierarchy will be further explored through what I describe as the single woman's accelerated aging process.

Accelerated aging

Central to our discussion is the manner in which sexist and ageist beliefs produce a particular kind of accelerated aging. The data analysis indicates that to a certain extent, single women "age faster" than married ones, and it is this very symbolic social process that contributes to the stigmatization and devaluation of single women. This analytical concept demonstrates how we are aged by culture and narratives about time (Gullette 2004), and sheds light on how perceptions of the aging process are determined by age-appropriate behavior and age norms. My use of the term "accelerated aging" draws from a study about aging among gay males, conducted by Keith Bennett and Norman Thompson (1991). In their study, they argue that:

Homosexual men are considered middle-aged and elderly by other homosexual men at an earlier age than heterosexual men in the general community. Since these age-status norms occur earlier in the gay sub-culture, the homosexual man thinks of himself as middle-aged and old before his heterosexual counterpart does. (*ibid.*, 66)

In a similar vein, Julie Jones and Steve Pugh (2005) contend that in a society where ageism and homophobia are endemic, to be old is bad enough; but to be old and gay is to double the misery. Jones and Pugh's observations can be extended to the study of single women: *to age as a single woman triples this misery*. Bennett and Thompson's research joins other studies that have analyzed different forms of premature aging, such as with ballet dancers, table dancers, and athletes (Ronai 2000; Turner and Wainwright

2003). For example, Carol Ronai's (2000) study of "aging table dancers" examines the social process through which table dancers are perceived as being older at a relatively young age.

As chronologically young as she [the dancer] may be, she can be old. Her body is not as supple and her dance not as animated as it once was. Her gestures toward customers are construed to be abrupt, demanding, nagging, less patient than before. A dancer's sexual utility and the sincerity of her presentation come into question. (ibid., 315)

Drawing on these observations, I found that the concept of the thirty-five-year-old single woman is a vivid expression of accelerated aging, which in turn construes different timetables and rhythms for single women. This process is vividly exemplified in the next column, written by Tal Hashachar, a single woman and columnist on the *Ynet* portal:

You are already twenty-three years old, you better not rest on your laurels—beauty does not last. You should begin to compromise ... You better understand honey, that women age and men grow up. Very soon you will be considered an old maid and you ought to begin to think about a name for your cat ... If you don't compromise, and as soon as possible, it will be catastrophic. And if you're not married or on the path to marriage by the age of twenty-five in a magic spell you will realize that you have turned into an old and ugly maid and feel remorse about all the ugly ducks that you have rejected in the past whom by now have turned into swans without you. (Hashachar 2011)

This account illuminates how the process of accelerated aging takes place even when one is twenty-three years old. To some extent, the author echoes the feminist critique on age and aging when she states that "women age, men grow up." She is very much aware of the gendered process of aging and the hierarchical relations that this produces. In this context, her analysis is reminiscent of Susan Sontag's (1983) and Judith Gardiner's (2002) observations, that the aging processes of men and women are culturally marked in highly asymmetrical ways. This process of devaluation is based upon the premise that a woman's value is dependent on her appearance and reproductive capabilities. Hence, the warning addressed to single women is clear: they cannot rest on their laurels, as evidently they are in danger of losing their ability to perform as objects of sexual desire and to fulfill the role of future mothers.

For that reason, single women are obliged to compromise.² As Tal explains above, the men whom single women rejected in the past have now "turned into swans": that is, as the "market value" of a single woman decreases, that of a single man increases. According to this perspective, men age well and younger single women possess a natural superiority merely by virtue of their age and gender status. Giga, another columnist writing on the *Ynet* portal, also reflects upon the stigmas attached to her age and single position:

I am thirty-six; the truth is that I'm almost thirty-seven. So come on, you enlightened men; hang me at the outskirts of the city and don't forget to hang above me a sign denoting that I am an old single woman, a "rotten tomato," "damaged goods," or something similar. I am sure you have an abundance of nicknames for girls my age. And to the

women who have not experienced the dubious pleasure of being single above the age of thirty-five: continue nagging me with fertility tests and stories of single motherhood, menopause, and the state of my ovaries. This will definitely help me find a groom tomorrow. (Giga 2007)

Being called a “rotten tomato” or “damaged goods” alludes to the age-based market from which single women are in danger of exclusion. This perception of “the single woman’s short shelf-life” will be further developed in the next chapter. However, within this context I wish to stress how the cult of youth is given absolute priority. Accordingly, women are socialized from early stages in their lives, to be wary of losing their beauty, sexual desirability, and reproductive functions. Such a loss will most likely disqualify them from competing in the heteronormative dating market. The temporal logic of the market is articulated as an absolute, timeless truth, one which abolishes all other social experiences. These claims are cast as deterministic, whereby single women have to adjust to laws of supply and demand. A single woman within or beyond the marriageable phase should be particularly cautious about her aging process.

In this light, the continued presence and threat that the “old maid” represents in the public imagination reaffirms the heteronormative, familial, and age-obsessed ethos. The fear which this image evokes can be linked with what Sherryl Vint (2007) describes as a new kind of backlash, one which frightens women into accepting traditional gender roles and convinces them that their lives should be focused around heterosexual marriage and motherhood. In fact, the construction of the old maid as a source of collective fears bestows more ideological force to the idealization of the conjugal and maternal bonds, and construes neo-traditional models of the post-nuclear family.

Complying with the heteronormative and familial models represents successful timing. This perhaps can shed some light upon why thirty-plus mothers are called “young mothers,” while single and childless women of the same age are termed “old.” The label of “the crazy old hag” or “aging old maid” is another indicator of how the chronological aging process of women is embedded within heteronormative, ageist, and sexist assumptions, through which they are devalued and socially marginalized. In this context, this stereotype designates the social death which awaits them, a conceptualization which will now be further developed.

Social death as a solution to the insoluble

David Sudnow (1967) described social death as a prelude to biological death, which usually begins when the physician gives up all hope of a patient’s recovery, and puts a time limit on the patient’s survival prospects. At this point, the institution loses its concern for the dying individual as a human being, treating her as if she were already dead.

Several of the single women columnists on *Ynet* identify themselves as approaching what may be considered as their own social death. In this case, social death denotes the single women’s diminishing market value, through which they cease to be worthy sexual subjects and in turn gradually lose their value in the dating marketplace. In this

context, Merav Resnik, a regular writer on the *Ynet* portal, explores her experience of visiting Israeli and American internet dating sites:

Beauty is irrelevant; the world belongs to the young. Whoever told me that I'm still young was a big liar. On this American dating site there is an age limit, but as opposed to the age limit we are familiar with from clubs and pubs, here the upper age limit is the one that counts. Anyone above thirty-five does not exist. I have two more years to "live." It does not interest them that they could be missing out on someone who can be beautiful. If she's "old," she's out. (Resnik 2007b)

The aging process, as Merav asserts in the above quote, is reminiscent of social death: the "upper age limit is the one that counts" and according to these age norms she only has two more years to "live." This age-stratified boundary indicates the writer's risk of future exclusion from the marriage market. In addition, these rules of supply and demand are beyond her control; as Merav declared, "If she's 'old,' she's out." According to this socially determined timetable, the thirty-plus single woman is "left on the shelf," and ceases to live; she is out of the game. According to the logic of this particular market, single women must be careful managers of their time, and this objective can only be achieved by abiding to patriarchal, ageist traditional discourses. In this undisputed economic rhetoric, the categories of age, gender, and one's relationship status trivialize and denigrate the lives of single women.

These discourses are closely connected within the general perception of old women. As Diane Garner puts it, women lose their social value simply by growing old (Garner 1999, 4). This contention is further developed by Silver:

The female body, which no longer reflects reproductive abilities nor attracts "the gaze" of men, has become a reminder of death to come. The fears of ageing and death have to be controlled and kept at bay, especially in a society like the United States, which is obsessed with youth images, narcissistic gratifications, and the prolongation of life at all costs. (Silver 2003, 386)

The next writer, Lotti Kremba (a pseudonym), a thirty-nine-year-old single woman and columnist on the *Ynet* portal, unfolds this process:

I am a thirty-nine-year-old woman. I live in an allegedly Western modern society in the new Middle East. I live in Tel Aviv and not in a remote religious village. Yet, I'm surrounded by a substantive number of people who believe that being almost forty years old without a husband and children is tantamount to having one foot in the grave. Am I being too extreme and dramatic? Am I overreacting? Not at all, in fact, on dating websites men stopped acknowledging my existence when I turned thirty-five. It's hard to see the people behind the number ... In the real world things are not much better. Men treat me nicely only to take me to bed, as you know what they say about "experienced women" my age ... According to common knowledge, older women are great in bed ... in this and other senses, the talkbacks mock single women who have passed the age of thirty and have remained single. (Kremba 2009)

This account corresponds with parallel experiences of older women, whose invisibility is symbolic of their social exclusion and isolation (Woodward 2006). Indeed,

the two accounts above reveal how the writers experience their singlehood as a form of social death, through which reaching this age without a husband and children is “tantamount to having one foot in the grave.” As Merav Resnik (2007b), the previously quoted columnist, declared, “anyone above thirty-five does not exist,” given that she has only “two more years to live.”

The experiences of invisibility described by these single women also resonate with Goffman’s (1959) definition of “non-persons.” Goffman viewed non-persons to be “a standard category of people that are sometimes treated in social interactions as if they are not there” (ibid., 152). According to these narratives, thirty-plus single women gradually become such persons. Although they wish to participate in the dating/marriage market, they are ignored and rendered invisible.

The writers place much emphasis on their age, and are highly aware of the manner in which they are evaluated and objectified in accordance with their age. Both writers referred to being thirty-plus or approaching the age of forty as a crucial age marker separating the visible from the invisible, social life from social death. Their age becomes their *indivisible master status* (Becker 2008) or their *master determining trait* (Hughes 1971), which tends to overpower the other characteristics which run counter to their biological age. In this manner, they defy the prevailing age norms and societal expectations through which a woman’s role is pre-determined: marrying and having children at the right age.

Age-appropriate expectancies

Occupying the position of a single thirty-plus-year-old marks a transgression of age-appropriate behaviors and expectations. It appears that single women are classified and stratified by their age rank, which places both the twenty-something single woman and the thirty-plus married one higher on the normative social scale. These cultural assumptions corroborate Marlis Buchman’s (1989) assertion that age creates different social categories, defining qualities, rights, obligations, and motives associated with members of a given age group and forming hierarchal relations between them.

The transgression of age-appropriate expectations could be traced in the next passage, written by Inbal Bli K’chal Vesarak, a single woman and a columnist writing on the *Ynet* portal:

I have decided that until I have a steady partner to show up with to Friday dinners, I’m not going near my family’s house. Although they don’t ask, I can see the question marks flickering in their eyes: “Well? When? You are almost thirty-seven!” (Bli K’chal Vesarak 2008)

The age thirty-seven, in this case, is constituted as a symbolic checkpoint introducing new tensions between the writer and her family. Inbal writes that being a single woman who is almost thirty-seven requires a “special travel permit”—in this case a date, a boyfriend who may signal a potential promise of a husband and father-to-be. The above passage is another illustrative example of how age norms are entrenched in everyday life, forming rigidly age-scripted social expectations and interactions. The

required injunction to successfully adjust to these age norms can also be found in the next extract:

Oh how much I feared this age, thirty years old. I stopped breathing every time I thought about it. So far I'm thirty years old and one month. With hesitation, I can say that this is not such a bad experience. Yes, I reached the age of thirty as a single woman and I'm still alive. The only marks of scorn arise from my family, who have already begun to question my sexual preferences. I hear nasty remarks such as "Even your cousin found someone, why can't you?," "Nothing is ever good enough for you," "Why are you not ready to be fixed up?" I am ready, I'm definitely ready but why should I date someone who is fifteen years older than me? The fear from my age and staying alone freezes me and often makes me lose my capacities for logical reasoning. [These fears] also make me forget who I am, to stand up on my own and be respected. (Or 2011)

Most of the writers understand the significance of their changing age status, and are aware of its attendant social ramifications. The extracts above highlight the manner in which one's age identity, after a certain point, becomes a potent mode of regulation, a disciplinary mechanism which evaluates the single woman's behavior, personal attributes, and social worth. Thus, what is often a socially acceptable status in one's early twenties rapidly transforms in into a category that is subjected to increased social scrutiny. Rotem Lior, a single woman writing for *Ynet*, is also aware of this transition and its ramifications:

It seems that men [who are thirty-plus] do not consider in any way women of that age as eligible, calling them instead "flattering" names such as "bitter" and "uptight" ... What men run away from, according to their own accounts, is the desperation that those women express and not their age or biological clock. This very desperation is what makes them run—screaming—straight to the young breasts of twenty-year-olds. (Lior 2007)

As these extracts demonstrate, the value of single women is determined by the evaluative gaze of men, a gaze which objectifies them according to their age. Moreover, the ageist and sexist market rules of supply and demand produce hierarchical age relations. The cultural preference for younger single women is also set in commonplace preconceptions about the preferable age gap between men and women, and reflects a sexist and ageist gendered social order.

Another example can be found in the next column, written by Sivan Stromza and published on the *Saloon* portal:

My name is Sivan Stroumsa, I am a thirty-year-old single woman, almost thirty-one. Why am I single? Because. That's where my life has led me to, fate, circumstances etc. No, I have nothing "wrong" with me. Everything functions properly (apart from my BlackBerry). No, I'm really not a model, I am five feet and have small breasts, but I dare I say I am quite a catch, perhaps even much more than many women who are younger than me, the "normal" kind, who married at the "right" age or at least have a partner. (Stromza 2012)

Singlehood is conceptualized through the polarized terms of young versus old, women versus men. In the column quoted above, Sivan is fully aware of the privileged

category of normative youth. The accounts above also confirm another social convention often taken for granted: it is acceptable for older men to date and marry younger women, but not the other way around. This “common knowledge” reflects how age and gender are fundamental organizing principles which still place substantial limits upon the life trajectories and options of single women. It also explains why so many fears, anxieties, and social pressures are endemic to the aging process of single women.

Age, then, is perceived as an essential trait, an absolute status that defines its own expectations and capabilities. As such, each life phase designates its own age-appropriate behaviors, and serves as a key tool for producing knowledge and stereotypical labels. Age appropriateness norms serve as a crucial parameter for constituting one’s persona and life trajectory. The single woman is depicted as living outside the normative life cycle. Instead of moving ahead in a linear and a sequential fashion, she is moving “over the hill.” Late singlehood symbolically draws single women closer to the life stage of old age and death. In some respects, they metaphorically skip “mid-life.” Their singleness ages them exponentially and prematurely. In many ways, according to traditional discourses on the single woman’s life-course from now on, their life span is endowed with clarity and certainty: aging alone and dying alone.

The tyranny of age

The data analysis thus far demonstrates the power of familial, heteronormative, ageist, and sexist norms in construing the category of the “aging single woman.” However, some of the single women writing for *Ynet* do not conform to these hegemonic discourses, instead challenging them in various ways. One apt example is a text written by Rotem, one of the columnists mentioned above, who defines herself as “a thirty-something content single woman” (Lior 2006). In her column, she describes what she terms as the hysterical behavior of her friend Maya, a thirty-plus single woman who is eagerly looking for a husband:

My friend Maya is a single woman, a thirty-plus that has turned into a minus. People raise their eyebrows and she plucks them ... Maya is a member of the “groom sect.” At this rate she will become a nonprofit organization and start looking for funding. I reminded her that I’m also a thirty-plus single woman but I’m pretty much enjoying it ... she lost her temper and threatened to hospitalize both of us in a mental institution; she would be hospitalized for her singleness and I would be hospitalized for my unstable mental state. (ibid.)

Attesting to the powerful force of binding age norms, Rotem first situates herself as a thirty-something content single woman. By this, she acknowledges the stigma of the thirty-something miserable single woman, and aims to defiantly subvert this age-based symbolic order. Furthermore, the stigma is transformed in her case into a positive form of self-identification and alters the controversy surrounding that very symbol. Rotem’s statements pose an alternative to the prevailing image of the thirty-plus “cat lady”; she makes it clear that she enjoys her status. By this very statement, she unsettles the basis

of hegemonic heteronormativity, which assumes that the joy and meaning of life can only be found in getting married.

In another column, Hadas Friedman, also a single woman and a writer on *Ynet*, makes a similar point:

I carry with pride the title of a thirty-five-year-old single woman who lives in Tel Aviv (but with no cats, as my dog won't allow them). I must say that it's pretty nice to be a thirty-five-year-old single. What is less pleasant are the stereotypes about the aging single woman. If you meet three different thirty-five-year-old single women and ask them to tell you about their romantic life stories, every story would be different ... You would meet very different women with regard to look, character, personal taste in men, and plans for the long and short-term. Not all of them are obsessed with marriage and having children. (Friedman 2009)

Both columnists challenge some of the dominant beliefs regarding the thirty-plus single woman. Hadas stresses that she is proud both of her age and single status, and in this way resists dominant images of aging, femininity and singlehood. However, she is aware—as are most single women—of the stereotypes that single women are subjected to. Within this context, she notes that singlehood is more diverse than its stigmatized images so deeply rooted in the attitudes of her surrounding social environment. According to Hadas, if one would simply bother to ask single women about their lives, one would discover narratives which do not necessarily adhere to the cultural script of the aging and miserable single old maid. Here, she pinpoints how single women find themselves subject to reductive and essentialist representations, and underscores how the lives of single women are much more diverse than the prevailing representations.

The next account, taken from a different column, also attempts to challenge the stereotypes and pathologization of single women as they age:

Recently, I read an article about the different remedies that are supposed to cure the single disease for people above the age of thirty-five. While reading the talkbacks, I couldn't help but notice that one of them exclaimed: "Anyone that is single above the age of thirty is damaged goods." I smiled to myself; how lucky I am to be only thirty-two. My damage is considered to be light; I am safe for the time being. But the thought hasn't really disappeared. (Resnik 2007c)

In fact, the reading of the texts reveals how the struggle against common-sense assumptions concerning thirty-plus single women is often expressed through a complex interplay of power and resistance, compliance, and confrontation. Merav relates to how her age and single status are perceived as a disease, an individual and social pathology. Like many single women writing on the *Ynet* portal, she relates to these attitudes with an ironic tone, which allows for a self-reflexive critical distance. That is, her humorous readings, like most of the other texts quoted here, also reflect a relational and situated understanding of how singlehood is constructed according to idealized and rigid types of femininity.

At one level these texts can be read as acts of resistance, but at the same time they also accept and endorse hegemonic definitions of age, gender, and the required

course of life. The ironic tone also assists us in recognizing the polysemic nature of the texts, in which the tenets of an ageist, heteronormative culture are both resisted and endorsed.

Most of the accounts analyzed in this chapter criticize the stereotypes associated with the category of the old maid. Yet, it is important to note that the objective, natural, and scientific qualities of age, as well as the downward mobility associated with aging, are reluctantly acknowledged. As Merav Resnik discloses in the above account, the troubling thought about her aging as a single woman refuses to disappear. Merav's experience reflects how these beliefs are internalized by those who are stigmatized, leading to stress and anxiety. I would like to propose that the ways in which these skeptical stances are generated and divulged demonstrate the discursive power of age, and the powerful authority it bestows, as well as the pejorative qualities assigned to midlife (Gullette 1998) and old age (Hazan 1994). This concurs with Hazan's (2006) contention that the disciplinary power of age scarcely provokes any criticism and protest. The discussion about single women stresses the need to transform existing conceptions about age, aging, and feminine subjectivities. Hence, in order to pave a way for forming a new counter-discourse about women's expected life trajectory, more scholarly attention should be given to questioning the perception of fixed and stable age identities, and how these are culturally constituted and reproduced.

Both popular and scholarly literature often refers to "the thirty-plus single women" as a collective and worrisome phenomenon. Single women are categorized according to their age cohort, and are denoted accordingly with essentialist attributes and collective behavioral patterns. In this chapter, I have attempted to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the discursive construction of the "aging single woman" and singlehood in general. My intention has been to dispel current pervasive opinions, and to call for more scholarly research into how shared beliefs on female singlehood and aging are endorsed and followed.

In contemporary discourses on single women, age appears to be the crucial reference point—albeit one often taken for granted uncritically—with which women are measured and evaluated. Age categories crystallize biological and social qualities into unquestioned roles and norms. The discursive analysis of singlehood in this study demonstrates how far we are from living in what Michael Young and Tom Schuller (1991) term as an ageless society. The symbolic language of age and family life as an archetypal collectivity carries with it a system of meanings through which women are defined, express themselves, and interact with others. Therefore, rethinking the discursive formations of the category of the old maid, family, aging, and age reveals prevailing conceptions of an essential and normalizing social order, which rest upon allegedly objective and valid inferences. From this perspective, couplehood and family life represent the promise that order, coherence, and meaning will be bestowed upon one's life trajectory, while singlehood is stripped of such, leading one to social isolation and loneliness.

We can now see the various forms through which age, gender, and marital status categories intersect. Age defines, regulates, and produces knowledge, and occupies a central place in the socially contingent discursive formations of singlehood. Moreover,

the present research emphasizes that the social construction of age and ageism are relevant not only to carriers of the cultural tag of old age (Hazan 2006).

This chapter also attests to a still relatively under-researched process through which, as Ronai (2000) observes, aging is separated from old age. In this vein, the ubiquitous presence of age in the discourse concerning singlehood reveals, among other things, a fascinating social course of action which demonstrates how aging and ageism are not only confined to the further end of the life-course spectrum, but also solidify, through regimes of horror, shame, and guilt, the naturalized and insoluble categories of young female adults.

To conclude, one of the key puzzles that emerges from this chapter is the question "What turns age into such a potent social category, so resistant to criticism and deconstruction?" This question is particularly relevant given the growing concern within the academic discipline of Women's Studies with deconstructing gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientations as absolute and natural categories. To elaborate, over the last few decades, social critiques have demonstrated how allegedly pure analytical categories guiding social inquiry and the popular imagination are situated and contingent. Furthermore, while postmodern social inquiries attempt to critically dissolve existing boundaries of social categories, the prominence of age and personal status reflect some of the boundaries and margins of these very attempts. Both still operate as core constitutive categories of age and gender-bound social and normative orders. Consequently, feminist age and singlehood studies are yet to occupy a central—and much deserved—place in current feminist theory. Thus, an additional question which begs to be asked is: "Why is personal status, as age, so resistant to deconstruction?" Based upon these observations, I suggest that conceptualizing single women as carriers of the cultural tag of singlehood can illuminate more discursive dimensions, and can open up new avenues for social analysis, both for critical feminist age studies and for the feminist study of singlehood and women's lives in general.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was written together with Haim Hazan.
- 2 For my discussion of singlehood and the need for compromise, see Lahad (2013).