

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman*, Random House, Inc. New York, 2003, 224 pages: **A Book Review**

The book, which is set in contemporary America, attempts to investigate the social climate in which the demands of work, the rise of cohabitation, the disappearance of courtship, and their own high standards are leading educated women to stay single longer and to find the search for a mate even harder when the time is right. The narrative is drawn from conversations with young women willing to discuss their romantic plight, enabling the author to convey firsthand experiences that give credibility to her propositions and arguments. Whitehead's focus, it must be recognized, is the West, especially the United States, and very early in the present millennium. Her theory and findings would need to be tested for applicability almost two decades later, and in a social, economic, and cultural context like Kenya.

The challenge of a dearth of knowledge and social support systems to enable the young single woman to succeed in finding a marriage partner is described. Whitehead tries to restore faith in the possibility of finding lasting love in a manner that is compatible with individual career achievement. Furthermore, she seeks to demonstrate, and rightly so, how professional skills can be applied to love.

The author explains at the onset that most young women want to be married, yet it is difficult to find the right man at the right time. There is also a lack of clarity or consensus on the rules and conventions or accepted dating practices. She shows that finding/selecting a mate requires the participation of interested 3rd parties; it is both a social and individual pursuit. She argues that today, however, it is more of an individual pursuit.

Two social changes are discussed: the new kind of single woman, with a new timetable for adult years; a delayed entry into marriage, coming more often than in the past after education and early career development. Her priorities are personal independence, economic self-sufficiency, career advancement...and then finding a mate. Higher education is to cushion her from divorce and economic vulnerability (a type of divorce insurance). What she needs is a contemporary courtship system that fits her timetable and supports her efforts to make a successful choice of a life-mate.

The second social change is the upheaval in the mating system; college used to be a marriage market, and college years were a prime time to find a partner. Now young women are prepared for adult lives of economic self-sufficiency, social independence, and sexual liberation; independent adult lives founded on higher education and early career development, rather than marriage. The author parallels two mating systems, namely, the *established system* and the *emerging system*, to show how the courtship practices differ accordingly. The former is more conventional and is founded on a *communitarian* philosophy, that is, society's need for lasting marital unions especially when they include dependent children. Conversely, the emerging system is founded on a *libertarian* philosophy and bases commitment on individuals' private understandings and mutual consent. The prominence she gives to the community's role and the place of the communitarian ethic can attract readers beyond the Western context to her thinking since this ethic has long been cherished in the East and Africa.

The emerging mating system has no comprehensive standards for romantic courtship. Moreover, there are few studies on the dating and mating behavior of today's single young women and so they lack knowledge and guidance on how to understand the new dating environment and how to go about finding a life partner. Family, social and institutional supports for a system of youthful courtship have weakened over time as shown in changes in sexual mores and behavior, high rates of divorce, increased unwed childbearing, recourse to new reproductive and matchmaking technologies, the rise of cohabitation as an opposite-sex union, and decline of college-based courtship.

Cohabitation is a characteristic feature of the emerging mating system with its unpredictable courtship practices. Cohabitation is presented as a great source of deception, confusion, and uncertainty, due to its ambiguous nature. Its meaning, purpose, and duration are not clear and it clouds judgment about the nature and the future of the partnership. Whitehead shows how it deters efforts/chances to know character, conduct, and intentions, especially of men who, unlike the woman, consider themselves single until they are married, whereas the woman sees him as a "husband in the making". The author's emphasis on the need for academic research as a plausible means to pursue knowledge backed by scientific evidence is noteworthy. For example, the appraisal of cohabitation based on scientific evidence adds to the authenticity of the discussion that follows. Psychology and sociology, it should be noted, are among the key disciplines in addressing these issues.

The author decries the evident ignorance of the new single woman on how to find a suitable marriage partner, coupled with a lack of useful advice, social support, and plausible models. She depicts the situation (both opportunities and challenges) faced by the "Searcher", the single woman in her late 20s or older, who is looking to marry and have children. She cautions her on the need to be time-conscious in her search for love.

The 1995 bestseller book *Rules* is lauded for discerning and responding to the needs of the new single woman in her search for lasting love. It enables her to apply professional skills to the pursuit of love. The author does well to make tangible reference to contemporary manifestations or influencers of the romance landscape; apart from books, she includes popular television shows, magazines, and newspaper columns. Furthermore, she discusses existing resources that seek to acknowledge and respond to this disenchantment with the dating scene.

Innovative social practices that have become influential in our times and potentially as effective as the traditional approaches are highlighted. These include friendship groups, the internet, and speed-dating. These modern practices must fit her timetable and offer much-needed social support.

The author creates awareness of the gaps in the study of mate selection and marriage, pointing out that this is a multidisciplinary academic endeavor. While acknowledging the objective and somewhat irreversible trends that the modern single woman encounters, she sheds light on the contemporary resources that could, to some extent, make up for the weakened traditional support systems, without replacing them altogether. Importantly, she boosts hope in the possibility of finding a marriage partner, provided that one is selective and time-conscious.

Whitehead's realism is also commendable; she casts a positive light on the internet and the advantages it offers for today's single woman. She demystifies, to a certain extent, the nature and purpose of dating apps, showing how they relate to time-tested practices like advertising for a spouse, and the pressing need for a timetable that makes love and work compatible. The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 has taught us that there are yet unexplored spaces and platforms for social interaction. Online dating, if well managed, offers great potential for fruitful matches that begin, but do not end, on the virtual platform.

Perhaps lacking is the male point of view of the romantic plight of women. There also seems to be a failure to deal with the situation of women who are not in the "sexually liberated" category, and yet have genuine challenges finding a lifelong partner. Furthermore, if the number of males in higher education is dwindling, then the college mating market is gradually offering fewer chances of meeting a future husband there; would this tweak the argument somewhat? It would be necessary to test the argument about higher education as divorce insurance; it may be true for some, but the education of the girl-child has also nurtured a lot of ambition in this gender.

The growing number of Kenyan single women, many of whom continue to search for love well into their 30s and 40s, makes a book like this a near-compelling read. Its arguments and conclusions could be tested against their lived experience.

This work is important because of society's perennial need for strong and stable families, more so in times when women are more and more educated and career-minded, often ignorant of matters of lasting love, and yet still strongly desirous of marriage and children.

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