



Small Conflicts, Deep Fractures: A Critical Study of Rising Marital Disputes and the Growing Preference for Solitary Living

Dr. Santosh Kumar

B.Sc. (Maths), LL.M., NET, JRF, SRF, Ph.D. (Law)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords :

Marital Conflict, Emotional Alienation, Solitary Living, Family Transformation, Individualism

ABSTRACT

Marriage has traditionally been regarded as a foundational social institution ensuring emotional security, social stability, and continuity of family life. However, contemporary societies are witnessing an unprecedented rise in marital conflicts, often triggered by seemingly minor disagreements that gradually escalate into deep emotional fractures. This study critically examines the increasing fragility of marital relationships and the parallel growth of preference for solitary living among married and formerly married individuals. It seeks to understand why everyday conflicts—related to communication, expectations, autonomy, and emotional labour—are no longer being resolved within the marital framework but instead lead to disengagement, separation, or emotional withdrawal.

Drawing upon sociological, psychological, and socio-legal perspectives, the paper analyses how modern individualism, changing gender roles, economic pressures, digital influence, and declining tolerance for compromise have reshaped marital expectations. The study further explores how emotional alienation within marriage often precedes physical separation, creating a paradox where individuals experience loneliness despite being in intimate relationships. The preference for solitary living is examined not merely as a lifestyle choice but as a response to persistent relational stress, emotional exhaustion, and the perceived failure of marriage to provide psychological safety.



By engaging with existing empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary debates on family transformation, this paper argues that the crisis of modern marriage is not rooted solely in moral decline but in structural and emotional mismatches between traditional marital ideals and contemporary lived realities. The study contributes to ongoing discourse on family instability, emotional well-being, and social change, highlighting the urgent need for reimagining marital relationships through empathy, communication, and adaptive social frameworks

Doi - <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18165456>

1. Introduction

Marriage, across cultures and civilizations, has functioned as a central institution regulating intimacy, reproduction, socialization, and economic cooperation. In many societies, it has been viewed not only as a personal relationship but also as a moral and social contract embedded within collective norms and expectations. However, the contemporary marital landscape reveals a significant departure from this traditional understanding. Increasingly, marriages are characterised by frequent conflicts, emotional disengagement, and a declining capacity to absorb stress and disagreement.

Recent sociological studies indicate that marital disputes today are often triggered by minor, routine issues—communication gaps, domestic responsibilities, financial management, emotional neglect, or digital intrusion—yet their cumulative effect is profound (Giddens, 1992; Amato, 2010). Unlike earlier periods where conflict resolution was facilitated by extended family structures, shared economic dependence, and social stigma attached to separation, modern marriages operate within a framework of heightened individual autonomy and reduced external regulation.

This shift has coincided with a growing preference for solitary living, not only among divorced individuals but also among those who remain legally married yet emotionally detached. Scholars describe this phenomenon as “emotional divorce,” where the relational bond erodes long before any formal separation occurs (Cherlin, 2004). The paradox of modern marriage lies in the coexistence of unprecedented personal freedom and deep relational dissatisfaction.

The present study seeks to critically examine this paradox by addressing two interconnected questions: why do small conflicts increasingly result in deep marital fractures, and why is solitary living emerging



as a preferred alternative to marital coexistence? The analysis situates marital conflict within broader transformations in social values, emotional expectations, and individual identity formation in late modern society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

2. Conceptualising Marital Conflict in Contemporary Society

Marital conflict is neither a new nor an abnormal phenomenon. Disagreement and negotiation are inherent to intimate relationships. However, what distinguishes contemporary marital conflict is its intensity, persistence, and emotional impact. Researchers argue that modern marriages are burdened with heightened emotional expectations—partners are expected to be lovers, friends, caregivers, and sources of personal fulfilment simultaneously (Giddens, 1992).

This emotional intensification means that even minor conflicts acquire symbolic significance. A disagreement over household chores, for instance, may be interpreted as a lack of respect or emotional investment. Over time, repeated unresolved conflicts contribute to emotional fatigue, resentment, and withdrawal (Gottman, 1994). Unlike structural conflicts of the past, modern marital disputes are deeply psychological, rooted in unmet emotional needs and identity validation.

Individualism plays a crucial role in this transformation. Contemporary culture prioritises self-realisation, autonomy, and personal happiness. While these values empower individuals, they also reduce tolerance for compromise and sacrifice within intimate relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Marriage is increasingly evaluated through a cost–benefit lens, where emotional dissatisfaction legitimises withdrawal.

Moreover, digital technology has reconfigured communication patterns within marriage. Constant connectivity paradoxically coexists with emotional disconnection. Studies suggest that excessive digital engagement reduces face-to-face interaction, weakens emotional attunement, and amplifies misunderstandings (Turkle, 2011). Small conflicts, when mediated through digital silence or passive aggression, deepen rather than resolve.

3. Emotional Alienation and the Breakdown of Intimacy

Emotional alienation refers to a state in which partners coexist physically but remain emotionally distant. This condition often develops gradually, making it less visible yet more damaging than overt conflict. Scholars note that emotional alienation frequently precedes separation and divorce (Amato, 2010).

In contemporary marriages, emotional labour—the work of maintaining emotional harmony—often falls disproportionately on one partner, leading to imbalance and resentment (Hochschild, 1989). When



emotional needs remain unmet, individuals may disengage as a coping mechanism rather than confront conflict directly. Silence, avoidance, and indifference become strategies of self-preservation.

This disengagement is reinforced by social narratives that normalise emotional withdrawal as self-care. While psychological well-being is essential, the framing of relational discomfort as intolerable discourages sustained effort toward reconciliation. As a result, small conflicts accumulate into deep fractures, eroding trust and intimacy.

4. The Growing Preference for Solitary Living: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

The growing preference for solitary living in contemporary society cannot be understood merely as a rejection of marriage; rather, it reflects a deeper transformation in how individuals perceive intimacy, autonomy, and emotional safety. Sociological research indicates that solitary living is increasingly viewed as a legitimate and even desirable life choice, particularly in urban and post-industrial societies (Klinenberg, 2012). For many individuals, living alone represents control over personal space, emotional boundaries, and daily routines—elements often perceived as compromised within conflict-ridden marriages.

Psychologically, solitary living functions as a coping response to chronic relational stress. When marital interactions become sites of repeated conflict, criticism, or emotional neglect, withdrawal offers temporary relief and a sense of self-preservation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals experiencing emotional alienation within marriage may find solitude less distressing than constant interpersonal tension. This shift reflects a redefinition of well-being, where peace and predictability are prioritised over companionship.

Importantly, the preference for solitary living is not synonymous with social isolation. Many individuals who live alone maintain active social networks, professional engagement, and digital connectivity. What is being rejected is not intimacy per se, but emotionally draining relationships that undermine self-worth and psychological stability (Klinenberg, 2012).

5. Individualism, Selfhood, and the Reconfiguration of Marital Expectations

Late modern societies are marked by the rise of individualism, where personal identity, choice, and self-fulfilment occupy a central position. Marriage, once anchored in duty, permanence, and collective responsibility, is now evaluated through the lens of individual satisfaction (Giddens, 1992). This cultural shift has significantly altered marital expectations.



Partners increasingly expect marriage to provide emotional validation, personal growth, companionship, and psychological security simultaneously. While these expectations reflect legitimate human needs, they also place immense pressure on marital relationships. When expectations remain unmet, disappointment is often personalised, leading to blame and conflict (Cherlin, 2004).

Individualism also reshapes conflict resolution patterns. Compromise, patience, and endurance—once considered virtues within marriage—are now frequently perceived as threats to self-respect or personal autonomy. As a result, small conflicts that might earlier have been absorbed within the relationship now escalate into existential questions about compatibility and selfhood (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

This shift explains why contemporary marriages are more emotionally intense yet structurally fragile. The marital bond is sustained not by social obligation but by continuous emotional satisfaction, making it vulnerable to disruption.

6. Changing Gender Roles and Power Dynamics within Marriage

One of the most significant contributors to contemporary marital conflict is the transformation of gender roles. Increased educational attainment, economic participation, and legal empowerment of women have redefined marital power structures. While these changes represent progress toward equality, they have also unsettled traditional role expectations, creating new sites of conflict (Hochschild, 1989).

Disputes over domestic labour, childcare, career prioritisation, and decision-making authority frequently emerge as “small conflicts” but carry deeper symbolic meanings related to recognition, respect, and fairness. Research suggests that unresolved role ambiguity often leads to chronic dissatisfaction and emotional withdrawal (Amato, 2010).

Men, too, experience role strain as traditional notions of masculinity—provider, authority figure—are challenged. The inability to adapt to egalitarian expectations can manifest as defensiveness, withdrawal, or aggression, further intensifying marital discord (Connell, 2005).

Thus, marital conflict is not merely interpersonal but structurally embedded within broader social transitions. Without adequate cultural and emotional tools to negotiate these changes, couples often find separation—emotional or physical—easier than sustained adjustment.

7. Economic Independence and the Fragility of Marital Bonds

Economic independence has historically functioned as a stabilising force within marriage, particularly for women. However, in contemporary contexts, financial autonomy also enables exit from unsatisfactory



relationships. Scholars argue that the decline of economic dependency reduces tolerance for persistent marital conflict (Amato, 2010).

While economic independence empowers individuals to escape abusive or oppressive marriages, it also lowers the threshold for disengagement from relationships characterised by emotional dissatisfaction rather than overt harm. Minor but recurring conflicts—financial planning, spending habits, career choices—gain heightened significance when partners no longer rely on marriage for economic security.

Moreover, economic stress itself contributes to marital conflict. Job insecurity, long working hours, and financial uncertainty reduce emotional availability and increase irritability, making conflict resolution more difficult (Conger et al., 2010). In such contexts, solitary living may appear as a strategy to regain control over limited emotional and material resources.

8. Digital Culture, Communication Breakdown, and Emotional Distance

Digital technology has profoundly reshaped marital communication. While technology enables constant contact, it often undermines emotional depth and attentiveness. Studies show that excessive smartphone and social media use is associated with reduced marital satisfaction and increased conflict (Turkle, 2011).

Digital distractions fragment shared time and weaken emotional presence. Small conflicts—ignored messages, delayed responses, online comparisons—accumulate into feelings of neglect and inadequacy. Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate emotional alternatives, reducing the perceived necessity of working through marital difficulties.

In this environment, solitude is not experienced as isolation but as relief from constant emotional demands. The digital age thus paradoxically normalises both hyper-connectivity and emotional withdrawal, intensifying the crisis of marital intimacy.

9. Socio-Legal Implications of Rising Marital Disputes

The increasing frequency of marital disputes has significant socio-legal implications, particularly for family law systems that were designed around assumptions of marital permanence and reconciliation. Contemporary legal frameworks, while progressive in recognising individual rights and autonomy, often struggle to address emotional alienation that does not neatly fit into categories of cruelty, desertion, or abuse.

In many jurisdictions, including India, marital conflict increasingly manifests in prolonged litigation, mediation fatigue, and emotionally draining legal processes. Scholars argue that family law has become a



reactive mechanism rather than a preventive or restorative one (Basu, 2015). Small but persistent conflicts, when left unresolved, escalate into legal battles that further entrench hostility and emotional distance.

The growing preference for solitary living also raises questions about the adequacy of existing legal norms governing marriage, maintenance, custody, and cohabitation. Legal systems remain largely oriented toward formal marital status, while emotional separation and solitary living operate in a legal grey zone. This mismatch often leaves individuals—particularly women—navigating emotional autonomy without adequate legal recognition or protection (Agnes, 2011).

10. Indian Context: Marital Conflict, Changing Values, and Social Transition

In the Indian context, marital conflict must be understood against the backdrop of rapid social transformation. Urbanisation, education, women's workforce participation, and exposure to global cultural narratives have significantly altered marital expectations. Traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution—joint families, community mediation, and social pressure—have weakened, leaving couples to negotiate conflicts largely on their own.

Empirical studies in India suggest that many marital disputes arise not from extraordinary circumstances but from everyday issues such as household responsibilities, financial decision-making, and communication breakdowns (Desai & Andrist, 2010). While divorce rates in India remain lower than in many Western societies, emotional alienation within marriage is increasingly reported.

Importantly, solitary living in India often carries social stigma, particularly for women. As a result, emotional withdrawal frequently replaces physical separation. Individuals remain legally married yet psychologically detached, reinforcing the paradox of loneliness within relationships. This phenomenon underscores the need to rethink marriage not merely as a legal bond but as an emotional and social institution requiring sustained support.

11. Global Perspectives and Comparative Insights

Globally, the rise of solitary living has been documented across diverse societies. Studies from Europe, North America, and East Asia indicate that living alone is no longer viewed as a transitional phase but as a stable lifestyle choice (Klinenberg, 2012). Comparative research shows that societies with strong social welfare systems and cultural acceptance of individual autonomy exhibit higher rates of solitary living with lower associated stigma.

However, cross-cultural evidence also suggests that solitary living does not eliminate the human need for connection. Rather, it reflects a shift toward selective intimacy—relationships chosen for emotional safety



rather than social obligation (Bauman, 2003). This insight challenges simplistic narratives that frame solitary living as social decline, instead positioning it as a response to relational insecurity.

12. Implications for Policy, Counselling, and Social Intervention

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for preventive and restorative approaches to marital conflict. Policy interventions must move beyond legal remedies to include accessible counselling, emotional literacy education, and community-based support systems.

Premarital and marital counselling, when normalised and destigmatised, can equip couples with communication and conflict-resolution skills necessary to address small disagreements before they escalate. Educational institutions can also play a role by integrating emotional intelligence and relational ethics into curricula.

From a legal perspective, family law must evolve to recognise emotional well-being as central to marital stability. Mediation frameworks should prioritise emotional repair rather than mere legal settlement. Recognising emotional alienation as a serious relational condition may help bridge the gap between lived experience and legal categorisation.

13. Conclusion

This study has examined the paradoxical reality of contemporary marriage, where minor conflicts increasingly produce deep relational fractures and solitary living emerges as a preferred alternative. The analysis demonstrates that this phenomenon is not the result of moral decline or individual selfishness alone but reflects broader transformations in social values, emotional expectations, gender roles, and economic structures.

Small conflicts acquire disproportionate significance in emotionally intensive marriages that demand constant fulfilment and validation. When these demands remain unmet, emotional withdrawal becomes a rational strategy of self-preservation. Solitary living, in this context, represents not a rejection of intimacy but a reconfiguration of it.

Reimagining marital relationships requires a shift from rigid ideals toward adaptive frameworks grounded in empathy, communication, and shared emotional responsibility. Addressing the crisis of modern marriage thus demands not nostalgia for the past, but thoughtful engagement with the realities of contemporary life.



References

Agnes, F. (2011). Family law and constitutional claims. Oxford University Press.

Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 650–666.

Basu, S. (2015). Law, gender, and family. Oxford University Press.

Bauman, Z. (2003). Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds. Polity Press.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.

Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). Individualization. Sage Publications.

Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(4), 848–861.

Connell, R. W. (2005). Masculinities (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Conger, R. D., et al. (2010). Economic stress and marital quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 685–695.

Desai, S., & Andrist, L. (2010). Gender scripts and age at marriage in India. *Demography*, 47(3), 667–687.

Giddens, A. (1992). The transformation of intimacy. Stanford University Press.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). What predicts divorce? Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hochschild, A. R. (1989). The second shift. Viking.

Klinenberg, E. (2012). Going solo: The extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone. Penguin Press.

Turkle, S. (2011). Alone together. Basic Books.