
Beyond the Bridal Chain: Literary Explorations of Women Who Reject Marriage

Neha¹

(M.A English Research Scholar)

Sapna Mishra²

(Bachelor's Degree in Mass Media)

Author Affiliation:

1 Meerut College, Meerut, CCS University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, 250004

2 BK Birla College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Kalyan,

Article Received: 12/06/2025

Article Accepted: 14/07/2025

Published Online: 14/07/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.07.286

Abstract: This paper resists the ancient cultural presumption that marriage is a necessary milestone in a woman's life, instead advocating a more liberated and independent attitude toward life choices. Drawing on feminist theory, common sense, and emotional reality, the essay laments the coercion women must endure in order to marry, referencing the emotional, psychological, and physical toll of coercion. It asks why society is still giving more importance to traditional norms than a woman's sense of self, autonomy, and value. The paper argues that happiness and accomplishment are not dependent on marriage and that women should be free to make their own choice—whether or not marriage is involved. Influenced by prominent feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, the work promotes a change in culture to a woman's right to decide her own course of action without judgment or enforcement. It finally promotes a world where women are worth more for who they are rather than whether they are married.

Key Words: Marriage and Women, Feminist Theory, Women's Autonomy, Freedom of Choice, Social Norms and Marriage, Emotional and Psychological Coercion, Marriage and Identity, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Gender and Cultural Expectations, Women's Empowerment, Independence and Happiness, Patriarchy and Marriage, Redefine Women's Success, Women's Rights and Liberation, Personal Fulfilment, Marriage Pressure on Women, Self-worth and Marriage

Introduction

In today's world, the institution of marriage remains firmly embedded in most societies, particularly in nations such as India. Marriage has remained a rite of passage, a sign of achievement, and a sign of acceptance by society for centuries.

Women have tended to have to see marriage as the ultimate achievement, the benchmark to attaining individual and societal acceptance. Such a notion, however, is founded on archaic convention that does not take into consideration the extent to which women have come of age in everything from education to professional achievement and increasing independence.

Women all over the world have been encouraged to strive for a single defining goal: marriage. This societal construct, especially in patriarchal cultures like India, throws its dark shadow on a woman's self-worth, independence, and identity. Women are reminded, subtly and explicitly, that her existence is incomplete without a husband and that marriage is the greatest measure of respectability and achievement.

But literature of all ages and cultures has always defied this idea. In the words of rich female characters, we find that marriage is not the sole nor the final route to identity and fulfilment. Most literary heroines find themselves not in union with a man, but in taking back their space, their decisions, and their voices.

Virginia Woolf's "a room of her own" is a metaphor for this much-needed independence—both literal and symbolic. It represents the wishes of a woman to be independent, creative, and free from the imposition of patriarchy (Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1929). This essay addresses such issues from the perspective of feminist theory and literary critique, arguing that a woman's worth is not in marriage, but in living her own life.

The truth is that marriage cannot be thought of as a necessity or a social requirement for women. Rather, the institution of marriage needs to be transformed so that women are free to decide what they desire, require, and wish out of their marriage. This essay aims to explore why the belief that women must get married to be successful or fulfilled should be dismantled, and how coerced social expectations hurt a woman's identity and constrict her potential. Marriage is lovely if it's a choice and out of love. But it is risky if it's by compulsion because of societal expectations and fear of being judged.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist literary theory gives us the prism through which we look at women's representation and agency in literature. Feminist criticism at its most basic level asks the questions how literature represents, reifies, or resists patriarchal values. Virginia Woolf, in her groundbreaking research "A Room of One's Own," maintained that women require economic independence and her own space in order to create and flourish (Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1929). She insisted that the material conditions of women's lives have to shift if they are to produce literature or live complete lives.

Simone de Beauvoir, in "The Second Sex," wrote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011). Her book revealed the way feminineness and women's lives are created by society and dictated by a patriarchal one. De Beauvoir's arguments force us to acknowledge the subtle pressures upon which women base their decisions, such as marriage. Modern feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Judith Butler developed these notions further, showing how gender roles are enacted and made authentic and how liberation is an issue of reclaiming one's self from the limitations of social conventions. Such theory provides the ground from which to examine female literary protagonists who subvert or realign the definitions of marriage. (hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000; Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990).

Literary Analysis

a) Edna Pontellier in The Awakening by Kate Chopin Edna is a married woman with children who begins to question her domestic life. Her journey is one of awakening to her desires, her dissatisfaction with societal roles, and her longing for artistic and emotional freedom. Edna's refusal to conform, even at the cost of her life, shows the high price women often pay for autonomy in a restrictive society.(Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899).

b) Jane Eyre in Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë Jane Eyre's story is not a rejection of marriage, but a redefinition of it. She only accepts Mr. Rochester when she is financially independent and emotionally self-assured. Jane's journey shows that love should not come at the cost of self-respect and freedom.(Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co., 1847.)

c) Jaya in That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande Jaya, the protagonist, navigates the silence forced upon her by marriage and patriarchy. Her internal monologue reveals a lifetime of suppressed thoughts and sacrifices. Her story gives voice to countless women who compromise their identities in the name of marital harmony.(Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988).

d) Characters from Ismat Chughtai's Works Ismat Chughtai portrayed bold, rebellious female characters who often questioned the need for marriage. In stories like "Lihaaf", Chughtai also exposed the hypocrisy and repression within conventional marriages. Her characters often found freedom in rejecting norms rather than adhering to them.(Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt and Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi, Kali for Women, 1996).

Historical Context of Marriage for Women

Historically, the institution of marriage served as a form of protection and survival for women. In an era when physical strength determined one's ability to work, women were often seen as dependent on men for their livelihood. Women's primary roles were confined to homemaking, childbirth, and caregiving. In these circumstances, marriage was essential for survival. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963)

Historical Dependency Was Created, Not Natural. For centuries, economic systems were designed around physical strength — agriculture, hunting, construction, and later, industrial labour. These were male-dominated domains, not because women were incapable, but because patriarchy excluded them. Women were deliberately denied access to education, property, and formal employment. As a result, they were forced into economic dependency. Marriage, then, wasn't about romance — it was about survival. A woman needed a man not to feel whole, but simply to stay alive. 19th- and early 20th-century literature quietly discloses that marriage is the sole choice for a woman's future, not a love issue but a survival one.

The stereotypical picture of the 'ideal woman' was built to meet the social and economic demands of patriarchy. She was the silent caretaker — a homemaker, a caregiver. She was valued not in terms of her ideas or abilities but in terms of how effectively she played wife and mother roles. Literature throughout cultures — from Sita in the Ramayana to numerous dutiful wives in Victorian fiction — perpetuated this image. Feminist authors and characters who challenged this role were frequently portrayed as rebellious or tragic, not free. But their resistance laid the groundwork for rethinking womanhood. (Das, Kamala. *My Story*. Sterling Publishers, 1976. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988).

These Beliefs Still Exist in Society

Despite modern advancements, the ghost of the old model still haunts us. In Indian society, particularly, a woman's life is still evaluated through the lens of marriage: "Is she married?" "Does she have children?" "Is she adjusting well?" These questions overpower any inquiry into her happiness, ambitions, or mental health. Women who challenge these norms — by choosing to stay single, by divorcing, or by prioritizing careers — are still whispered about, pitied, or even condemned. Literature by writers like Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, and Shashi Deshpande captures this tension vividly — women who dare to "be" rather than simply "belong."

The Role of Women Today

Modern World Doesn't Need Physical Strength to Succeed. Today, the world values ideas, intellect, innovation, and emotional intelligence — qualities that are gender-neutral. Whether it's coding software, performing surgery, writing a novel, or running a business — success no longer depends on brute strength. Women now have access to education, technology, financial freedom, and networks of support. The very conditions that once made marriage a necessity no longer exist. Yet the societal script hasn't changed — it still pushes the same outdated narrative, despite the reality around us evolving dramatically.

Women Don't Need a Man — They Can Choose One the difference is subtle, yet radical: *need* has turned into *choice*. A woman may choose to marry — for love, companionship, or shared dreams — but she no longer *needs* to. She is no longer bound to a man for survival. And if the relationship fails to offer respect, equality, or peace, she has every right to walk away. Modern literature honours this shift — with characters who leave abusive relationships, delay marriage for self-

growth, or reject it altogether in pursuit of passion and purpose. The narrative is changing, and it must. Social attitudes are lagging behind the lived realities of women. Even as women break glass ceilings in the workplace, travel solo, write bestsellers, lead protests, or build empires — they are still expected to fulfil age-old roles at home. It's time for a collective rethinking. This paper, in its essence, is not just an academic analysis — it is a call to society to evolve. It urges us to stop measuring women through outdated metrics and to start honouring their individuality, choices, and freedom.

Historical Women Who Proved Marriage is Not the Only Path to Greatness

Queen Elizabeth I of England is a shining example. She never married and famously said, "*I am married to England.*" She reigned for 44 years during what's now called the Elizabethan Era — a golden age of English culture, literature, and global influence. Her decision not to marry was revolutionary in a world that expected queens to marry for political gain. She proved that a woman could lead, rule, and inspire a nation without a man beside her. (Ridley, Jasper. *Elizabeth I: The Shrewdness of Virtue*. Viking, 1988)

Along with Indian examples, including her gives your paper a global and historical depth. It shows that this isn't a "modern-day rebellion" — it's a centuries-old choice made by wise, courageous women.

Methodology:

Literary analysis with feminist theory, intersectional critique, and cultural commentary.

The Pressure to Conform to Societal Expectations

For centuries, society has viewed marriage not just as a milestone, but as a woman's ultimate destiny. A girl is raised with the idea that her life's purpose is to marry and bear children. In many cultures, especially traditional ones, her worth is measured by her roles as a wife and a mother. These roles are often imposed rather than chosen. Cassandra's refusal of Apollo's affections upon being granted a vision of the future represents the independence of female agency. But in doing so, she invites upon herself her curse, wherein her prophetic advice was ignored and disregarded. Cassandra's case represents how women who refuse conformity with societal norms, even when they operate in awareness and prudence, are silenced or neutralized by patriarchal systems. Being 'voiceless' but having something to say is one that resonates so strongly with the examination of women in literature who transgress traditional paths set before them but are reciprocated with societal exclusion and erasure. (Neha, and Dr. Sachin Kumar. *Cassandra: The Cursed Prophetess of Troy*. 2025)

In 19th-century literature, this expectation is deeply embedded. Novels by authors like Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters often revolve around finding suitable husbands, reflecting a time when a woman's survival and social standing depended on marriage. Even when these stories end in love and union, they carry the heavy undertone of societal necessity. (Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.,

1847; Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813. Penguin Classics, 2003).

Marriage as Limitation vs. Freedom

Many women characters in books are trapped in marriage. Marriage is a reflection of societal influence, a prison that limits one's freedom and kills individuality. In *The Awakening*, the conflict of Edna Pontellier is manifested clearly—her motherhood and marriage are not sufficient to satiate her soul (Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899). Nora exits her home life in *A Doll's House* seeking selfhood. (Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. 1879). Likewise, *Wide Sargasso Sea* speaks for the silenced "madwoman" of *Jane Eyre*, making us see how marriage can push a woman into despair. (Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 1966. Norton, 1999; Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co., 1847) Remaining unmarried—or abandoning a marriage—is a powerful statement of defiance. It's not about denying love, but claiming one's autonomy and making freedom to achieve personal goal.

Emotional Fulfilment Doesn't Require Marriage

Unlike in the past, emotional depth does not depend on romantic relationship. Fiction more and more features women who achieve satisfaction through self-discovery, intellectual pursuits, friendships, creativity, or spirituality. These stories provide alternatives to the "happily ever after" narrative. In Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, the heroine finds healing and meaning outside the framework of marriage (Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love*. Riverhead Books, 2006). In *The Colour Purple*, Celie's transformation is not at the hands of a man, but through the development of her inner strength and friendships with other women (Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt, 1982). These tales demonstrate an increasing awareness: emotional and personal development can thrive without being bound to a spouse.

The Concept of "A Room of One's Own"

Virginia Woolf's powerful metaphor of "a room of one's own" goes beyond literal space. It signifies mental clarity, financial independence, emotional solitude, and creative freedom. To have a room of one's own is to have the liberty to grow, think, and exist without patriarchal interference. (Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1929.). Woolf's emphasis on the need for personal and intellectual space for women can be tied to broader discussions on women's autonomy. (Neha, and Dr. Sachin Kumar. *Subverting the Patriarchy: A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own..* 2025)

In the context of marriage, this room becomes even more vital. It represents the idea that a woman should first know herself, support herself, and define herself before being merged into someone else's life. It's about creating a life that is self-driven, not dictated by social expectation.

The Stigma and Strength of the Unmarried Woman

The unmarried woman has long been cast as the "spinster," a lonely, bitter figure in literature and culture. But modern narratives challenge this outdated stereotype, presenting powerful, self-sufficient single women who thrive.

Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* is an example of the negative trope—frozen

in time and misery. Yet, characters in contemporary literature break this Mold (Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Chapman & Hall, 1861). They are portrayed as complete individuals, not defined by their relationship status but by their ambitions, compassion, intellect, and resilience.

Being unmarried is not a lack; it is a valid, dignified choice that many women embrace as a means to protect their autonomy and peace.

Cultural and Regional Perspectives

In Indian literature, the stakes of marriage are entangled with tradition, honour, and silence. A woman's duty is often prioritized over her desires. Yet, voices of rebellion have emerged. Writers like Ismat Chughtai questioned the sanctity of marriage and depicted bold, unmarried women challenging societal norms (Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt and Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi, Kali for Women, 1996). Kamala Das explored female sexuality, longing, and independence (Das, Kamala. *My Story*. Sterling Publishers, 1976). Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* reveals the quiet rebellion of women who start questioning the roles imposed upon them (Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988). Mahasweta Devi wrote of women whose struggles transcended domesticity, seeking justice over submission.

Western literature often frames autonomy through individualism, while Indian literature reflects collective duty. Yet, both contexts show how women navigate—and disrupt—the structures that bind them.

Silence, Escape, or Expression

Women's paths to autonomy vary. Some escape physically, like Edna in *The Awakening*. Others choose silence as a form of resistance, like Jaya in *That Long Silence*. Some, like Jane Eyre, assert their voice and values before entering a partnership. (Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899; Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988; Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co., 1847)

Each choice, however subtle or bold, is an act of agency. Even when society punishes them for these choices, their inner transformation stands as testament to personal strength. Literature offers a spectrum of resistance — from quiet introspection to explosive confrontation.

Intersection with Feminist Theory

Feminist thinkers have long questioned the narrative that ties womanhood to marriage. Simone de Beauvoir's statement—"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"—exposes how society manufactures femininity (de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.). Betty Friedan spoke of "the problem that has no name," describing the dissatisfaction of women confined to domestic roles. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963)

Virginia Woolf advocated for financial and creative independence. Today, scholars like bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explore

intersectionality, identity, and the need for choice in defining womanhood (hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000; Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990; Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Anchor Books, 2015). These frameworks support the idea that women deserve to shape their own destinies.

Literature as Liberation

Contemporary literature reframes the idea of a woman's life. It celebrates the self as the centre — not the marriage, not the man. Stories now highlight self-love, mental health, career aspirations, social justice, and identity.

Personal Autonomy and Consent (The Importance of Choice)

As we move into the 21st century, the role of women in society has evolved dramatically. Today, the idea of marriage as the ultimate goal for women is increasingly being questioned. Women now have access to education, financial independence, and careers that do not require them to rely on a partner for survival. The feminist movement, coupled with global shifts in gender roles, has empowered women to explore and fulfil their potential without the constraints of traditional marriage.

This evolution challenges the belief that marriage is necessary for fulfilment or success. Women, equipped with intellectual and emotional strength, have begun to redefine success on their terms. They do not need a man's support to flourish in their chosen fields, whether it's politics, business, science, or the arts. Women like Oprah Winfrey, Marie Curie, and Greta Garbo have become symbols of women's power to succeed and achieve greatness without adhering to societal expectations of marriage.

Marriage Should Be a Choice, Not a Social Obligation

The assumption that marriage is the woman's ultimate achievement runs deep in patriarchal societies, particularly in nations such as India. But coercing women into marriage without taking their wishes into consideration is not only a step backward but also detrimental. Literature has consistently highlighted this injustice — showing women trapped in marriages that served everyone but themselves (Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. 1879; Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988.). In today's world, where women are equally capable of earning, leading, and thriving independently, the idea that marriage is a necessity must be questioned. Choice is central to feminism — and the right to choose *not* to marry is as important as the right *to* marry.

True Love and Healthy Partnership Deserve Celebration

This is not a rejection of the institution of marriage but a questioning of its motivations. Marriage born of respect, love, and understanding is worthwhile and worth celebrating. However, marriage driven by compulsion, tradition, or fear does not. Characters like Jane Eyre show that love can be real and transformative, but only when chosen freely and on equal terms. Literature, like real life, honours partnerships that are built on equality — not coercion. (Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder

& Co., 1847).

Society Pushes Women toward Marriage but Abandons Them When It Fails

While society is quick to push women into marriage, it fails to support them when those marriages collapse. Abused or unhappy women are often met with judgment instead of empathy. The character of Jaya in *That Long Silence* is a mirror of this reality — her silence becomes both a shield and a wound, shaped by a society that doesn't listen to women when they speak of suffering. This hypocrisy reveals a deep flaw in the social structure: the concern is not the woman's well-being but the preservation of appearances. (Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988).

The Double Standards Women Face

A woman's life is scrutinized through a contradictory lens. If she waits to marry, she is "too picky." If she marries early, she is "immature." If she doesn't marry, she is "incomplete." These contradictory expectations reflect a society that is more concerned with control than care. Feminist theory and literature alike have exposed this — from Virginia Woolf's paper to modern memoirs — all echo the sentiment: a woman is expected to "behave," but her happiness is rarely the concern. (hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000; Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963)

The Pressure to 'Settle' Often Leads to Unhappy Marriages

In cultures where 'settling down' is more important than 'settling well,' many women are encouraged to marry anyone who seems "good enough." This rush leads to emotionally unfulfilling or even abusive marriages. Literature like *A Doll's House* reflects this — where Nora, once the "perfect wife," realizes she was only performing a role society gave her. Choosing solitude over settling becomes an act of bravery. (Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. 1879).

Choosing not to marry is not a Rejection of Love

The decision to stay single is often misunderstood as a denial of love or companionship. But for many women, it is a conscious decision to honour their growth, mental peace, or sense of freedom. It is not rooted in bitterness but in self-awareness. Such characters — like Edna in *The Awakening* — seek emotional richness outside the boundaries of traditional roles. Their solitude is not loneliness; it is liberation. (Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899).

Society Must Redefine Success for Women

The definition of a "successful woman" must evolve. Instead of measuring success through marriage or motherhood alone, society must acknowledge accomplishments like self-awareness, compassion, financial independence, and creative contribution. Literature, too, is shifting — portraying women as leaders, artists, thinkers, and change-makers. The unmarried woman is no longer the tragic figure; she is the author of her own story.

Marriage and Respect: The Dangers of Forced Unions

Despite the growing independence of women, societal pressures to marry persist. Family and friends, and even complete strangers, have opinions about a

woman's marriage status, thinking that marriage is the key to a successful, happy life. Women choose to remain single or focus on improving and building themselves are ostracized, with society questions their choices and assumes that there must be something wrong with them.

This societal pressure is typically obstinate, with women being overwhelmed with the idea that they are incomplete or maybe insufficient as individuals, if they don't get married and have a husband. This idea leads to internalized shame and blame, as many women are forced to conform to these roles in order to become accepted and accepted. Encouragement of women to marry tends to result in women feeling as though they are not permitted to create their own identities outside of these established norms. (De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990).

Powerful Women in History Who Did Not Marry and Still Redefined Success

1. Queen Elizabeth I (England)

Ruled England during a golden age. Her unmarried status became a **symbol of her independence and power**. Famously said: *"I have already joined myself in marriage to a husband, namely the Kingdom of England."*

2. Florence Nightingale (England)

Revolutionized modern nursing and hospital sanitation. Declined marriage to dedicate her life to public health and service. Her legacy lives in medical institutions around the world.

3. Jane Austen (England)

Iconic novelist who challenged social norms about love and marriage. Chose writing over marriage — her novels critiqued the idea of marrying for convenience or status.

4. Simone de Beauvoir (France)

Philosopher, feminist, and writer. Never married, though she had a lifelong relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. Wrote *The Second Sex*, a groundbreaking work in feminist theory.

5. Oprah Winfrey (USA)

Built a global media empire. Never married, by choice. Focused on self-growth, philanthropy, and empowering millions worldwide.

6. Greta Garbo (Sweden)

Hollywood legend, known for her intense performances. Lived a fiercely private and independent life — never married. Once said, *"I never said, 'I want to be alone.' I only said, 'I want to be let alone.'"*

8. Emily Dickinson (USA)

One of America's greatest poets. Lived a reclusive life and never married.

Autonomy over One's Life and Decisions

The most fundamental of human rights is the right of self-determination. Women should have the right to make their own decision on whether they want to marry or not, and if they do, with whom they would like to marry. Autonomy of one's

body, identity, and destiny is pivotal to the creation of an equal society. Feminist theorists including Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler opine that gender and marriage are not necessarily the same thing, and that a woman is not defined by whether or not she is in a romantic relationship.

De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, severely criticizes the idea that women are defined by their marital roles, and contends that historically marriage has served to confine women to submissive positions. Autonomy is essential to equal standing, and women must be allowed to decide on the basis of their own values, and not society's dictated ones. (de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990).

When Society Becomes a Cage

Pleasing Society vs. Pleasing the Self. Society is always changing — what was once taboo becomes trendy, and what was once respected gets rejected. So why are we trying so hard to impress something so inconsistent?

If we live only to please society, we lose ourselves in the process. We stop asking what *we* want. We silence our own voice just to hear claps from a crowd that doesn't know us — and may never truly accept us. But when we live to please the self — from a place of authenticity, integrity, and truth — we find peace. Even if it looks different from what others expect.

Following Rules Without Question Their Origin

Traditions are not always sacred. Some are outdated survival mechanisms. Once upon a time, women had no legal rights. No economic freedom. No physical safety unless they were married. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton&Company, 1963)

So marriage became *necessary*. But today, women can: – Earn. – Lead. – Adopt. – Create safety and joy for themselves. Yet society still clings to the old rulebook, as if nothing has changed.

Questioning these rules isn't disrespectful — it's essential. Because no one should live by a system built for a world that no longer exists. (Rich, A. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976).

The Pressure is Real — and Unjust

The emotional weight placed on girls is heavy and cruel. They're told to think of their family's "reputation," not their own peace. They're shamed for dreaming differently. Labelled selfish, rebellious, "too modern," just for saying *no* to something that doesn't feel right.

But real selfishness is asking someone to live a life that doesn't belong to them. Real courage is choosing truth over tradition. And every woman who chooses herself over pressure is not a problem — she's a pioneer.

Statistical Data

Aspect	Statistic / Fact	Source & Year
Child Marriage in India	23.3% of women aged 20–24 were married before 18	NFHS-5, 2021
Domestic Violence (Married Women)	29.3% experienced spousal violence; only 14% sought help	NFHS-5, 2021
Education Dropout After Marriage	Married girls are 10x more likely to drop out of school	UNICEF India, 2020
Urban Women's Attitude Towards Marriage	40% of urban women (25–34) don't consider marriage essential for success	YouGov India, 2021
Rising Average Age of Marriage	Increased from 19.3 years (2005) to 22.1 years (2021)	NFHS-5, 2021
Number of Single Women	71.4 million unmarried/divorced/widowed women in India	Census of India, 2011
Women in Workforce	Only 24% of Indian women are in the formal labour force	World Bank, 2023
Mental Health Impact of Forced Marriages	Higher rates of depression, anxiety, identity loss in forced marriages	NIMHANS Report, 2020
Low Divorce Rate	Approx. 1% — due to stigma and social pressure, not happy marriages	IJLS, 2022

Data on Violence and Crime Related to Marriage

Issue	Statistical Insight	Source & Year
Dowry Deaths in India	6,589 dowry deaths reported in 2022 (approx. 18 per day)	NCRB, 2022
Cruelty by Husband or In-laws	1 in 3 cases of crimes against women fall under Section 498A (domestic cruelty)	NCRB, 2022
Honor Killings	145 cases officially reported in 2021 — actual numbers may be higher due to underreporting	NCRB, 2021
Rape by Husband During Separation	Over 3,000 cases filed under Section 376B (rape by separated husband) in 2021	NCRB, 2021
Marital Rape Still Not Criminalized	Despite protests, Indian law still doesn't recognize marital rape	Legal Status,

Issue	Statistical Insight	Source & Year
Forced Marriages and Trafficking	(unless separated)	2024
	NGOs report hundreds of women trafficked into forced marriages annually, especially from poor regions	Human Rights Watch, 2022

Fitting In is Not the Goal

Fitting in often means shrinking yourself — hiding your truth, your voice, and your dreams.

But what if the majority is wrong? What if the system is broken? Change never came from those who blended in — it came from those who stood out, spoke up, and chose differently. Instead of asking, “How can I fit in?” Ask, “How can I live fully, honestly, and freely?”

Because real power isn’t in pleasing others. It’s in being at peace with yourself.

The Consequences of Forced Marriage (Emotional, Physical, and Psychological Harm)

Marriage is not integrally bad, but when it is forced or coerced, it undoubtedly cause huge emotional, physical, and psychological damage. Women who are pushed into unprepared marriages, or who marry because of societal pressure instead of a personal choice, can suffer feelings of resentment, suffocation, and despair. In extreme situations, forced marriages can end in physical violence, emotional trauma, and regret that lasts a lifetime. (UN Women. (2020). Ending Violence against Women and Girls)

If a woman marries solely to meet society's expectations, she can become stuck in a miserable or worse, abusive marriage. Divorce remains stigmatized in many cultures, as it is even in India, and thus, it becomes more difficult for women to escape from toxic relationships. So, then, why must women marry to appease society, only to be abandoned once the relationship is toxic?

The Violation of Personal Space and Autonomy

Picture, for a moment, being shoved into having to share your space, your body, and your life with someone you don't know, don't like, or don't trust. For far too many women, this is not merely awkward — it's traumatic. The notion of intimacy without real consent, without emotional security, or without a feeling of personal agency, is a violation. But sadly, society rarely acknowledges this. In the rush to get women “settled,” we forget to ask the most important question — does she even feel safe or ready for this? Consent and comfort aren’t luxuries; they are basic human rights. And when they’re ignored in the name of tradition or timeline, what remains is not a relationship — it’s a prison. (Amnesty International. *My Body My Rights: The State of Sexual and Reproductive Rights around the World*. 2021).

The Pressure to Accept What's Chosen for You

There's an enormous pressure on women to say yes — yes to someone chosen by the family, yes to a bond that society has already declared as 'perfect,' yes to a relationship that may not be emotionally ready. Four months of polite conversation or occasional meetings are expected to bloom into lifelong love. But real love doesn't come with a deadline. It's not built in haste or forced through rituals. It takes time, trust, shared values, and genuine understanding. Yet the world demands that a woman adjust, compromise, and embrace someone based solely on external approval. Why don't we pause and ask — is she emotionally aligned with this choice, or just obeying because she's expected to?

The Fear of Disrespect or Betrayal

The fear no one wants to admit — what if the chosen partner turns out to be disrespectful, controlling, or unfaithful? Can anyone guarantee that won't happen? Society often paints marriage as a solution, a goal, or an achievement, but what if it becomes the source of a woman's deepest wounds? What if her emotional or mental well-being is constantly being attacked in the name of adjustment? Should she still stay silent because "divorce is shameful" or because "women should tolerate a little"? No woman should have to sacrifice her dignity just to fulfil society's checklist. Marriage, at its core, should be about respect — and if that's missing, no tradition can justify staying. (UNFPA. Child Marriage in India. 2018).

The Guilt of Question Traditional Norms

When a woman questions marriage or expresses discomfort with these imposed expectations, she's often labelled as selfish, too modern, or even "damaged." The guilt that follows can be suffocating — not because her choice is wrong, but because the system around her refuses to evolve. She's made to feel like she's the problem, when in fact, she's just brave enough to ask the right questions. Why should a woman trust a structure that doesn't centre her well-being? Why should she be pressured to follow a path that may never feel right? The real issue isn't her resistance — it's society's rigidity.

The Core of the Matter

At the heart of everything lies one powerful word: *consent*. Consent is not just about intimacy — it's about life, choices, and the freedom to say yes or no. No relationship, no cultural expectation, no social tradition has the right to override a woman's autonomy. Her body, her mind, and her life are her own. Until society truly respects that — not just in words but in actions — we will keep failing women. Because real empowerment starts where forced expectations end. (Rich, A. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976).

Marriage Is Not the Only Path to Fulfilment

Marriage cannot be viewed as the sole route to fulfilment for women. Rather, women must be encouraged to derive purpose in their lives through their profession, hobbies, friendships, and self-enrichment. Feminists such as Betty Friedan and Adrienne Rich have long established that women need to reclaim their independence and strive to meet their own objectives, and not conform to old models that set

restrictions on their potential.(Rich, A. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976; Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* contends that women feel acutely unfulfilled when they are relegated to domesticity at the expense of personal and career development. Women, she says, are by no means beyond being able to find self-expression through channels other than marriage. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

The Need for Societal Change (Questions on Old Structures and Norms)

Society's insistence on marriage as the ultimate goal for women is rooted in centuries-old traditions that no longer benefit women or society at large. These outdated assumptions must be challenged and deconstructed, making way for the establishment of a society where women can choose their own paths without fear of condemnation or judgment. The shift in attitudes towards marriage will enable women to shatter the chains that enslave them and will enable them to live richer, truer lives.

The Case for Marriage as a Personal Choice, Not a Requirement

Women need to be empowered to choose their own destiny in marriage. The option has to be personal, not under pressure from society or coercion. Women marrying should do so out of love, companionship, and respect for one another, not out of a sense of duty to satisfy an expectation of society. We need to provide a society where marriage is understood to be one of many options among the life choices that one makes and not the ultimate determinant of a woman's value or self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion that women must marry to be fulfilled is outdated and harmful. Women should have the freedom to decide their own futures, whether that includes marriage or not. True liberation lies in allowing women to make choices that align with their own values, goals, and desires. As we work towards creating a more equitable society, it is essential to redefine success and happiness in a way that empowers women to live their lives on their own terms, free from societal constraints. This concludes your paper with a powerful argument for the rights of women to decide for themselves whether marriage is the right choice. It offers a comprehensive view of the societal, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the issue, making a strong case for change.

References

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Anchor Books, 2015.
- Amnesty International. *My Body My Rights: The State of Sexual and Reproductive Rights around the World* (2021).
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Bostridge, Mark. *Florence Nightingale: The Woman and Her Legend*. Viking, 2008.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co., 1847.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
- Brown, B. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Gotham Books. (2012).
- Census of India, 2011; updates from NSSO surveys.
- Chopra, D. *The Path to Love: Spiritual Strategies for Healing*. Harmony. (2018).
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899.
- Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt and Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi, Kali for Women, 1996.
- Das, Kamala. *My Story*. Sterling Publishers, 1976.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 1988.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Chapman & Hall, 1861.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.
- Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love*. Riverhead Books, 2006.
- hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.
- Human Rights Watch, 2022
- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. 1879.
- Legal Status, 2024
- Indian Journal of Law and Society, 2022
- Neha, and Dr. Sachin Kumar. *Subverting the Patriarchy: A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own*. *International Journal of English and Studies*.2025
- Neha, and Dr. Sachin Kumar. *Cassandra: The Cursed Prophetess of Troy*. *International Journal of English and Studies*. 2025
- National Crime Records Bureau, 2021
- National Crime Records Bureau, 2022
- National Family Health Survey-5, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2021
- NIMHANS Mental Health Report, 2020
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 1966. Norton, 1999.
- Ridley, Jasper. *Elizabeth I: The Shrewdness of Virtue*. Viking, 1988.
- Rich, A. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (1976).
- Norton. Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard University Press. 1974.
- Somerset, Anne. *Elizabeth I*. Knopf, 1991.
- Tomalin, Claire. *Jane Austen: A Life*. Penguin Books. 1998.

UNICEF India, 2020.

UN Women. Ending Violence against Women and Girls. (2020).

UNFPA. Child Marriage in India. (2018).

Walker, Alice. The Colour Purple. Harcourt, 1982.

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. Hogarth Press, 1929.

World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023.

You Gov India, 2021