
Domestic Fiction as Counter-Archive: Rethinking Marital Happiness in South Asian Literature

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Abstract:

Contemporary sociological discourse frequently advances the claim that marriage enhances women’s happiness, often citing survey data that correlates marital status with higher levels of reported well-being. Such findings, widely circulated by family advocacy institutions and policy think tanks, have consolidated what this paper identifies as the “Marriage Myth,” a narrative that frames marriage as both emotional fulfilment and social remedy. This study interrogates that claim through a literary lens, positioning South Asian domestic fiction as a counter-archive to statistical optimism. Through close readings of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Vivek Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar*, Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé*, Mahasweta Devi’s *Hajar Churashir Ma*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, this paper argues that marriage in these texts functions less as intimacy than as regulation. It secures caste continuity, middle-class respectability, migratory adjustment, and patriarchal stability, often at significant psychological cost to women. By foregrounding interiority, emotional labour, and structural coercion, these novels reveal forms of loneliness and alienation that remain unmeasured in quantitative happiness studies. The analysis demonstrates that literary narratives do not merely offer anecdotal resistance to empirical claims; they expose the epistemological limits of measuring happiness without accounting for gendered power structures. In doing so, this paper calls for a shift from marital status metrics toward structural analyses of caste, class, and patriarchy in assessing women’s well-being.

Keywords: marital happiness, South Asian literature, domestic fiction, caste and patriarchy, emotional labor, gendered regulation

Introduction

In recent decades, a steady stream of sociological reports has circulated the reassuring claim that marriage increases happiness, particularly for women. Policy institutes and family advocacy organisations such as the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute frequently publish surveys suggesting that married women, especially mothers, are more likely to describe themselves as “very happy” and less likely to report loneliness. These findings often migrate from academic journals into popular media, where they harden into common sense. Marriage is framed as an antidote to isolation, financial instability, and emotional dissatisfaction. The repetition of this conclusion has produced what social psychologist Bella DePaulo terms a culture of “singlism,” in which unmarried lives are subtly cast as deficient (DePaulo 45).

Yet the institutional contexts in which many pro-marriage studies emerge merit scrutiny. Organisations devoted to “strengthening marriage and family life” approach the subject with normative commitments already in place. Their language often presumes marriage as a social good and treats statistical correlation as moral validation. Such scholarship rarely accounts for the structural pressures that shape women’s self-reporting of happiness within patriarchal societies. What is measured as contentment may also be compliance, security, or social approval.

In my paper, I refer to this persistent narrative as the “Marriage Myth,” a discourse that equates marital status with emotional fulfilment while overlooking the gendered labour, caste anxieties, and class negotiations embedded within domestic life. To interrogate this myth, I turn not to survey data but to South Asian domestic fiction. Literary texts offer what I call a counter-archive, a repository of interiority that records silences, ambivalence, and psychic fracture.

My guiding question is direct: How do South Asian literary texts complicate, destabilize, or contradict statistical claims that marriage enhances women’s happiness? Through close readings of novels such as *The God of Small Things*, *Ghachar Ghochar*, *Hajar Churashir Ma*, and *Wife*, I argue that marriage in South Asian fiction emerges not as an emotional fulfilment mechanism but as a regulatory institution that secures caste, class, and patriarchal continuity, often at the cost of women’s psychological autonomy. Literature does not simply contradict statistical optimism. It exposes the affective economies that such optimism leaves unmeasured.

Theoretical Framework: Marriage, Gender, and Social Regulation

In order to interrogate the “Marriage Myth,” my analysis distinguishes between marriage as intimacy and marriage as institution. While liberal discourse often frames marriage as a private arrangement rooted in companionship and love, feminist scholarship has consistently argued that marriage functions as a public regulatory mechanism. As Carole Pateman observes in *The Sexual Contract*, the modern social contract rests upon a “sexual

contract” that secures male authority within the domestic sphere (Pateman 2). Marriage, therefore, cannot be understood merely as emotional union. It is also a structure that organises gendered power.

Adrienne Rich’s formulation of “compulsory heterosexuality” further sharpens this distinction. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich argues that heterosexual marriage operates as a political institution that “has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women” (Rich 637). What appears as personal choice often emerges from cultural coercion. Within this framework, the celebration of marriage as a route to happiness obscures the disciplinary expectations attached to womanhood.

In the South Asian context, the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, articulated by Uma Chakravarti, illuminates how marriage sustains caste hierarchy alongside gender hierarchy. Chakravarti contends that control over women’s sexuality is central to maintaining caste purity and lineage continuity (Chakravarti 28). Marriage thus functions as a reproductive economy. It regulates inheritance, ensures endogamy, and stabilises social order. My paper situates marital happiness discourse within this larger matrix of caste governance and kinship control.

Respectability politics further complicates the equation between marriage and well-being. In many middle-class South Asian households, the married woman embodies familial honour. Her conformity produces social legitimacy. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s notion of “emotional labor” also proves crucial here. In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild defines emotional labor as the management of feeling to create publicly observable displays (7). Within marriage, women are frequently tasked with sustaining harmony, absorbing conflict, and performing contentment. What surveys record as happiness may reflect this gendered labour of affect.

Taken together, these theoretical interventions enable me to conceptualise marriage not as an isolated personal milestone but as governance. It is a social stability mechanism that reproduces caste, class, and patriarchal order under the guise of intimacy. By foregrounding these structures, my analysis prepares the ground for reading South Asian domestic fiction as a counter-archive that documents the emotional costs embedded within this regulatory institution.

Marriage as Caste and Social Control

South Indian Context: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

If contemporary happiness surveys present marriage as emotional security, *The God of Small Things* presents it as social containment. In my reading of *The God of Small Things*, marriage does not operate as intimacy fulfilled but as caste consolidated. Roy situates Ammu’s marriage within the Syrian Christian milieu of Kerala, a community deeply invested in lineage and status. The union is less romantic culmination than calculated alignment.

Marriage becomes a mechanism for preserving social respectability, even when it corrodes the woman who enters it.

Ammu's decision to marry Baba can be read as an attempted "social upgrade," an escape from paternal authority and economic precarity. Yet what appears to be mobility quickly curdles into entrapment. Roy writes that Ammu "lived in a world with too many rules" (Roy 33). The rules are not abstract. They are embedded in caste codes, gendered expectations, and family surveillance. Her husband's alcoholism and moral cowardice culminate in his willingness to barter her dignity for professional advancement. Marriage here is revealed as transactional. It protects male reputation while exposing female vulnerability.

Female desire in the novel is marked as dangerous excess. When Ammu later enters into a relationship with Velutha, the transgression is not merely adulterous. It is caste-defying. Roy underscores this by invoking the "Love Laws" that dictate "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy 33). These laws are enforced not by the state but by the family. In this framework, marriage functions as caste discipline. It ensures that intimacy remains endogamous and reproductive.

Divorce does not liberate Ammu. It intensifies stigma. Upon returning to her natal home, she is reduced to a cautionary figure, a divorced woman whose presence unsettles the moral equilibrium of the household. Roy describes her as a "millstone around her mother's neck" (Roy 45). The language of burden replaces the language of companionship. Emotional abandonment becomes routine. The domestic space contracts around her, transforming into claustrophobia rather than comfort.

In my analysis, Ammu's life demonstrates how happiness is subordinated to family honour. Her suffering is tolerated so long as public respectability remains intact. The tragedy of the novel does not arise from a failed romance but from the violent enforcement of caste and patriarchal order.

This literary depiction complicates the optimism of survey-based claims that married women are more "very happy" or less lonely. Roy's narrative records interiority, humiliation, and suffocation that quantitative metrics cannot capture. Where statistical discourse measures satisfaction, fiction exposes regulation. Marriage in Roy's South India is not a guarantee of happiness. It is an instrument of social control, calibrated to secure lineage and silence dissent.

The Middle-Class Marriage and Emotional Surveillance

Urban South India: Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*If marriage is often defended on economic grounds, the urban middle-class home becomes its showcase exhibit. Stability. Salary. Structure. The argument is familiar.

Financial security, we are told, translates into emotional well-being. Yet in *Ghachar Ghochar* and *Ladies Coupé*, prosperity does not soothe. It suffocates.

Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* stages the middle-class joint family as a tightly wound system where money circulates but autonomy does not. The narrator's family ascends economically after the success of a spice business, yet this upward mobility only intensifies control. The household becomes financially interdependent, then psychologically entangled. The very title signals this condition. "Ghachar Ghochar" evokes something hopelessly tangled, impossible to separate. Marriage within this environment is not companionship. It is absorption into a pre-existing economic organism.

Anita, the narrator's wife, enters the family as an outsider. Her presence threatens the equilibrium of shared income and shared obedience. What unsettles the household is not conflict but independence. Her quiet refusal to dissolve into the joint family rhythm marks her as disruptive. Emotional surveillance becomes routine. Every gesture, every purchase, every silence is observed. Stability begins to resemble containment.

In *Ladies Coupé*, Anita Nair presents a different but equally revealing configuration. Akhila, a forty-five-year-old unmarried woman, boards a train and begins to interrogate the assumption that marriage is necessary for fulfilment. Through the stories of other women in the compartment, Nair exposes the hidden economies within marriage. Wives manage tempers. Wives suppress ambition. Wives negotiate desire. One character reflects that marriage demands "adjustment" as its central virtue. Adjustment here is not compromise. It is erasure.

Both texts dismantle the economic stability argument embedded in contemporary happiness studies. Surveys may record that married middle-class women report higher satisfaction due to shared income or social legitimacy. But these novels reveal the invisible labour underwriting that satisfaction. Emotional harmony is maintained through self-surveillance. Financial security is purchased with autonomy.

The joint family in *Ghachar Ghochar* demonstrates how dependency can masquerade as belonging. The women in *Ladies Coupé* illustrate how respectability can masquerade as contentment. The middle-class home promises protection from precarity, yet it polices female behaviour with remarkable precision.

My claim here is direct. Middle-class security does not equal emotional well-being. The language of stability often obscures the mechanisms of control. If statistical discourse equates marriage with economic resilience, these novels ask a sharper question. At what psychological cost is that resilience maintained.

Bengali Households and the Politics of Respectability

Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

If the South Indian middle-class home polices through surveillance, the Bengali bhadralok household governs through respectability. In both *Hajar Churashir Ma* and *The Lowland*, marriage is not merely a personal arrangement. It is a credential. It signals conformity to a cultural script in which education, refinement, and domestic order converge. Yet beneath that script lies a quieter truth. Loneliness does not vanish within marriage. It deepens.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma*, Sujata Chatterjee occupies the archetypal position of the respectable wife and mother. Her marriage situates her securely within the middle-class moral order. She has performed her duties. She has raised children. She has maintained decorum. Yet the novel begins with rupture. The identification of her son's corpse as "No. 1084" destabilises the very foundation of her domestic identity. As Sujata confronts her son's political life, she also confronts the emptiness of her own. The marriage that once guaranteed social legitimacy now appears as containment. Conversations within the household are marked by evasion and silence. Political dissent is unwelcome. Emotional depth is discouraged.

Sujata's alienation is not the alienation of a single woman excluded from society. It is the alienation of a married woman embedded within it. Her husband remains emotionally distant, invested in status and propriety. The domestic sphere, far from offering companionship, enforces insulation. Respectability requires quiet. Quiet becomes complicity. In my reading, the novel demonstrates how marriage sustains political silence by prioritising family reputation over ethical engagement.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* extends this interrogation of marital respectability into diasporic space. Gauri's marriage to Subhash initially appears protective. It rescues her from the scandal surrounding her first husband's radicalism and death. It restores social order. Yet this restoration demands self-effacement. In Rhode Island, Gauri inhabits a domestic routine that isolates her intellectually and emotionally. Motherhood intensifies this solitude. The expectations of care and presence gradually eclipse her philosophical ambitions.

Lahiri's prose often registers this withdrawal in spatial terms. Gauri retreats into study rooms, into thought, into abstraction. The marriage remains intact. The loneliness persists. The novel quietly insists that physical proximity does not guarantee emotional intimacy. A married household can be a site of profound solitude.

This is the crucial intervention my paper makes. The claim that married women are less lonely assumes that companionship is structurally built into marriage. These novels refuse that assumption. They depict loneliness not as the condition of unmarried life but as a feature of respectable domesticity. The bhadralok ideal promises stability and honour. It does not promise recognition.

In both texts, marriage secures class continuity and social legitimacy. It does not secure emotional reciprocity. By foregrounding interior estrangement within socially successful marriages, *Hajar Churashir Ma* and *The Lowland* destabilise the statistical narrative that equates marital status with diminished loneliness. Literature here exposes what surveys cannot measure. Silence within togetherness. Isolation within legitimacy.

Psychological Fragmentation and Migratory Marriage

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

If marriage within the nation secures respectability, marriage in migration promises reinvention. In *Wife*, Bharati Mukherjee dismantles that promise with unsettling precision. The novel follows Dimple Dasgupta, whose arranged marriage to Amit Basu is framed as upward mobility and transnational opportunity. America represents escape from provincial constraint. Marriage appears as the vehicle. Yet migration does not dilute patriarchal expectation. It intensifies it.

Dimple enters the United States carrying cinematic fantasies of romance and transformation. Instead, she encounters confinement in a small apartment, financial dependency, and emotional isolation. Immigration severs her from familiar networks of kinship and language. Marriage becomes her only sanctioned identity. Without community, without work, and without intellectual engagement, Dimple's interior life contracts. Mukherjee renders this contraction through fragmented interior monologue. The narrative voice slips between fantasy and resentment, between longing and paranoia.

Domestic violence in the novel is not always spectacular. It operates through belittlement, dismissal, and control. Amit's expectations are conventional. He demands adaptation, patience, obedience. The subtlety is the point. The marriage does not collapse publicly. It corrodes privately. Dimple's growing detachment culminates in catastrophic violence, an act that shocks precisely because it emerges from sustained psychological erosion.

In my analysis, *Wife* functions as counter-data to celebratory accounts of marriage as emotional protection. Survey instruments may record marital status. They cannot register migratory isolation, racial marginality, or the claustrophobia of dependency in a foreign land. Mukherjee's narrative exposes how marriage can concentrate vulnerability when all other social anchors are removed.

The diasporic setting sharpens this insight. Migration magnifies the asymmetries embedded within the marital contract. The husband often retains greater mobility and social interaction. The wife absorbs dislocation. Emotional labour expands even as recognition diminishes.

Marriage here does not mitigate alienation. It intensifies it. By foregrounding psychological fragmentation rather than statistical satisfaction, *Wife* compels us to reconsider the assumption that marital status automatically correlates with well-being. The novel insists on a more difficult truth. Stability without autonomy can become suffocation, and companionship without equality can become solitude in disguise.

Literature as Counter-Data: Rethinking the “Marriage Happiness” Narrative

At this stage, the contrast becomes unavoidable. Statistical studies of marital happiness rely primarily on self-reported satisfaction. Respondents are asked whether they feel “very happy,” “pretty happy,” or “not too happy.” These categories produce clean charts and persuasive headlines. Yet such metrics measure surface affirmation, not structural context. They capture declared contentment, not the conditions under which that declaration is produced.

Literature, by contrast, enters the interior. It records hesitation, resentment, fantasy, fear, and contradiction. Where surveys flatten experience into quantifiable responses, novels linger in ambiguity. The women in *The God of Small Things*, *Ghachar Ghochar*, *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *The Lowland*, and *Wife* often perform normalcy while internally negotiating suffocation. Their consciousness does not align neatly with public compliance. This dissonance is precisely what statistical discourse cannot accommodate.

Happiness narratives frequently ignore structural coercion. They rarely ask how caste endogamy, family honour, or migration policy constrain marital choice. They seldom account for gendered labour, the unpaid emotional management that sustains domestic equilibrium. Social pressure remains unmeasured. Economic dependency is reframed as security. Within such frameworks, the married woman’s declaration of satisfaction may reflect adaptation rather than fulfilment.

My intervention is not to dismiss empirical research but to question its epistemological limits. Literature should not be treated as anecdotal embellishment to data-driven truth. It functions as counter-data. It archives affect, silence, and fragmentation that resist quantification. It reveals how governance operates through intimacy.

By positioning South Asian domestic fiction as a counter-archive, my paper challenges the authority of simplified happiness claims. The novels examined here do not merely provide alternative stories. They expose the assumptions embedded in the very act of measuring marital happiness. In doing so, they disrupt the claim that marriage, in itself, guarantees well-being.

Conclusion

Across the South Asian texts examined in my paper, marriage does not emerge as a sanctuary of intimacy. It appears instead as regulation. In *The God of Small Things*, caste is secured through the policing of desire. In *Ghachar Ghochar*, financial stability masks

entanglement and surveillance. In *Hajar Churashir Ma* and *The Lowland*, respectability generates silence and interior exile. In *Wife*, migration sharpens dependency into psychological fracture. These narratives do not romanticise singlehood. They reveal the institutional weight that marriage carries within specific historical and cultural contexts.

The contemporary claim that marriage increases women's happiness rests on metrics that flatten this complexity. By isolating marital status from caste hierarchy, gendered labour, migration, and economic dependency, pro-marriage studies risk presenting correlation as cure. Institutional affiliations that advocate for "strengthening family life" are not ideologically neutral. Their research questions, sampling frames, and interpretive language often presuppose the desirability of the very outcome they measure.

Literary narratives expose the affective costs embedded within this institutional optimism. They render visible the quiet negotiations, suppressed ambitions, and emotional performances that underwrite respectable domesticity. They document loneliness within companionship and alienation within legitimacy. In doing so, they complicate the assumption that marriage is inherently emancipatory.

Future research must move beyond marital status as a solitary variable and toward structural gender analysis. The question is not simply whether married women report greater happiness. It is under what conditions such happiness is articulated, sustained, or performed. Until scholarship accounts for the regulatory frameworks that shape marital life, the "Marriage Myth" will continue to circulate as common sense. The more urgent inquiry, then, is not whether marriage makes women happy, but what women must relinquish in order to appear so.

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